



Painted Buffalo Robe
Unknown Mandan artist
ca. 1845
Ht: 103": W: 86"
T0050

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/708/buffalo-robe?ctx=d5470206fa315dd521a23e66dbb4c3315b39efaa&idx=0>

By Kristine Ronan



This buffalo robe carries what is commonly referred to as the sunburst motif (Fig. 1), or a “feather cap, under the image of a sun,” in the words of German explorer Maximilian WiedNeuwied.¹ Wied recorded this description in 1834 during his extended stay at Fort Clark (now in present-day North Dakota), near what was known as the *Awatikihu* (“Five Villages”): an alliance of five Mandan and Hidatsa earthlodge villages along the Knife and Missouri Rivers that lasted from roughly 1781 through 1837.² The alliance created a common decision-making council, and provided a military agreement between the various villages.

The two circles of the central sunburst consist of feather elements, symmetrically arranged to resemble the sun and an aerial view of a Plains warbonnet.³ Four smaller single circles of feather elements appear near each of the robe’s limbs (Fig. 2). On both the central and smaller circles, zig-zag lines radiate from the outer ends of each feather element. These may represent the tufts often attached to the ends of a warbonnet’s golden eagle feathers. Such lines could also connote the power of the sun and related natural phenomena, such as sunflowers, sundogs, or rainbows. Old-time Hidatsa medicine men, for instance, could use their powers to bring sundog circles around the sun when on a war party.⁴ In Wied’s time, the robe’s design may have been worn by individual *Awatikihu* leaders, as well as their kin.⁵

Such robes, largely manufactured by women, were enormously time consuming to produce.⁶ The local colors seen on this robe came from clays gathered along the Missouri River and its

¹ This quotation comes from Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Early Western Travels 1748–1846*, vol. 23 (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1904) 261, and has subsequently been cited in much of the literature on sunburst robes. The Thwaites volume is a reprint of Maximilian WiedNeuwied’s published atlas, as it appeared in the 1843 English translation; the publication had first appeared in German in 1838. Wied’s original chapters on the Missouri River earthlodge peoples appear to have been drafted at Fort Clark over the winter of 1833–34; see the translation of these drafts in Volume 3 of Stephen S. Witte and Marsha V. Gallagher, eds. *The North American Journals of Prince Maximilian of Wied* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press with the Joslyn Art Museum, 2012).

² This is the Hidatsa term for the alliance, as given by Hidatsa elders Wolf Chief and Hairy Coat when interviewed by ethnologist Gilbert L. Wilson in 1909 and 1911, respectively; see Volumes 8 and 10: Hidatsa-Mandan reports, 1909 and 1911, Gilbert L. and Frederick N. Wilson Papers, Minnesota Historical Society. Hairy Coat was born in the Five Villages, and spent his early childhood there.

³ For more on the Plains warrior warbonnet and the sunburst motif, see George P. Horse Capture, “The Warbonnet: A Symbol of Honor,” in Evan Maurer, ed., *Visions of the People: A Pictorial History of Plains Indian Life* (exh. catalog, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1992–3) 61–7.

⁴ From “Genesis of the Hidatsas,” as told by Butterfly [Hidatsa], Volume 9: Hidatsa-Mandan reports, 1910, Gilbert L. and Frederick N. Wilson Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁵ Author’s research, based on Wied’s descriptions of these robes in addition to the portraits and sketches done by Wied’s expedition artist, Karl Bodmer. At least one robe was described by Wied as worn by the wife of one of these leaders.

⁶ Maxidiwiac [Buffalo Bird Woman; Hidatsa] painted a miniature hide for Gilbert Wilson in 1910, and her recorded commentary forms the basis of my description [“Hidatsa Bed,” Volume 9: Hidatsa-Mandan reports, 1910, Gilbert L. and Frederick N. Wilson Papers, Minnesota Historical Society]. This commentary also formed the basis of John Ewers’ description of hide painting in his treatise, *Plains Indian Painting: A Description of an Aboriginal American Art* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1939). While women seem to have done most of the geometric paintings done on hides, I have found an exception: when Good Voice [Hidatsa] was painting a Sacred Child adoption robe for Gilbert Wilson in 1911, she could paint the thunderbird elements but had to call her husband Butterfly [Hidatsa] to paint the buffalo elements of the design. Once the buffalo elements had been added, certain prescriptions for the robe’s usage (such as not wearing it to urinate) were in place. This episode suggests that power elements associated with certain power creatures remained the jurisdiction of men, and could only be painted by them. See “Description

surrounding buttes, which Mandan and Hidatsa peoples continued to use for their painting through the 1910s.⁷ The clays were dried, then ground and mixed with water, fats, or oils.⁸ Such colors did not permanently set by themselves, and scrapings from the hide would be boiled to create a glue size; this size was then painted over a design's colors in order to set them.⁹ The size was also applied to the outlines of the design (seen in Fig. 3), which had first been pressed into the hide using a small peeled stick. These "like a piece of glass" sized lines would continue to appear whitened as the hide aged.¹⁰

The Otsego Institute for Native American Art History pushed me to think holistically about materiality: Native-made objects, as well as the very materials used in their making, reflect the historical, social, and cosmological systems of the group from which such expressions stem.

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Figure 1. Detail of T0050.

Figure 2. Detail of T0050.

Figure 3. Detail of T0050.

of the Sacred Child's Robe," Volume 10: HidatsaMandan reports, 1911, Gilbert L. and Frederick N. Wilson Papers, Minnesota Historical Society. The painted robe is in the collections of the American Museum of Natural History, #50.1/6021.

⁷ In 1910, Maxidiwiac stated that "white man's paint, is very good for painting the face, for it washes off easily. But our paint is better for skins. We also use black ink, that we make ourselves. When it is used, glue liquor is not necessary" ["Hidatsa Bed"]. It is not currently known when these local paints stopped being used.

⁸ See Leader's [Hidatsa] description of making Amasípisa ("earth black") in connection to object #57 in Volume 8: Hidatsa-Mandan reports, 1909, Gilbert L. and Frederic N. Wilson Papers, Minnesota Historical Society.

⁹ Wied witnessed Hidatsa women painting and selling beautifully decorated hides in these colors during his 1834 stay at Fort Clark; see *The North American Journals*, 3:117.

¹⁰ Maxidiwiac's term; see "Hidatsa Bed." A similar translated phrase was used by Leader in 1909 (see fn8).