

THE ART OF RAWHIDE

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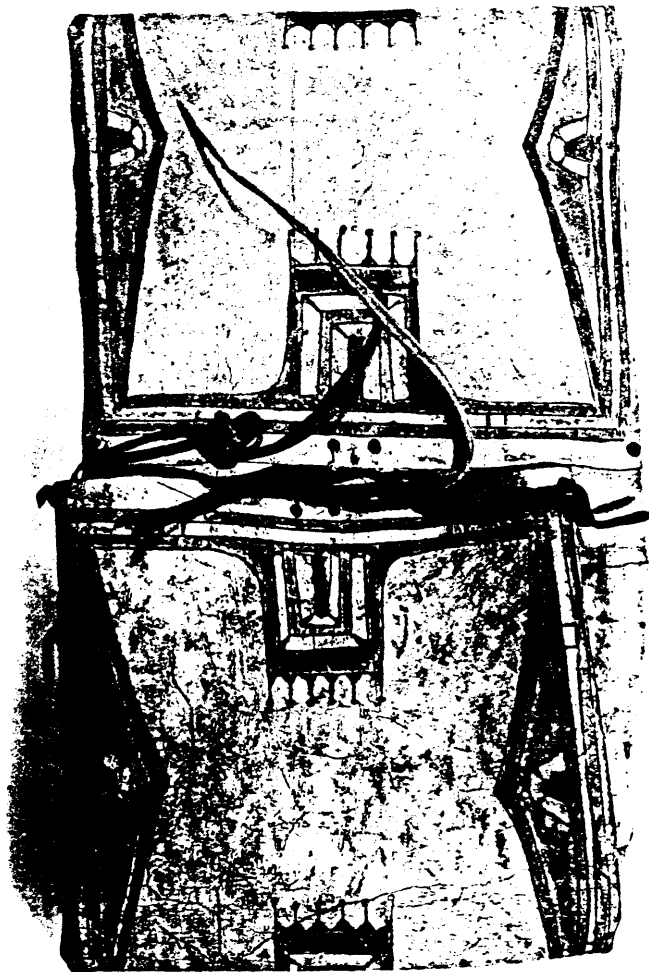
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PREFACE

The explanation I am using to describe the preparation of the hide is taken mostly from Mable Morrow's book Indian Rawhide. It became apparent during my research that only limited information concerning the preparation and making of rawhide artifacts is available. It would be a valid area of research for a doctoral student to look into if indeed it is not already too late. As the old grandmothers die so does their way of life and a descriptive knowledge of that life.



A Cheyenne parfleche made before 1890 from buffalo hide, used for the storage of clothing. The design is outlined in brown; the other colors are delicate. Green bands across the back connect the designs on the upper flaps. (United States National Museum)

HOLES: single, pair, single. SIZE OF PARFLECHE: 54 x 13 1/4 in. SIZE OF DESIGN: 14 1/4 x 13 in.

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THE ART OF RAWHIDE

To understand and appreciate a folk art, it is necessary to understand the people who produced it and to have some awareness of their culture.

That they created beautiful as well as functional objects is a reflection of their cultural heritage and their skill.¹

I have for the past several months tried to understand a little better the American Indians and their culture. Through reading about and viewing their crafts, all functional, and through researching the materials used for their crafts, I have begun to see the Indian culture as fragile, their craft enduring. This I feel is represented through the quality of Indian craftsmanship and the materials chosen to create the crafts.

The rawhide the Indians used was exceedingly durable, acquiring an aged beauty through use, becoming softer and more pliable with time. The artifacts they made were respected and cared for by the people who possessed these treasures.

Rawhide is a hide that is untanned or partially tanned. It was used by the American Indian for at least two centuries. The articles made of it were functional and ceremonial. Its use and quality were at its peak in the late 1800's. With the slaughter of the buffalo the use and creation of rawhide artifacts went into a decline and never fully recovered.

I first saw an Indian parfleche (container) at the Denver Museum of Natural History.² My interest in the parfleche and other rawhide articles increased with a need for a new material for my own self expression.

There is very little written about the complete process of working with rawhide. Most books have bits and pieces about it but not complete studies. I have found Mable Morrow's book the most adequate. Joyce Herold of the Denver Museum of Natural History agrees.³

The buffalo was the most revered source for rawhide. Other animals were used but evidently did not offer the quality needed to produce durable, fine grained articles.⁴

When I see the multitude of rawhide objects, more specifically the containers such as the parfleche, I realize how ordered and selective the Indians lives were. This was especially true of the nomadic tribes. All their possessions had to be easily moved, often quickly, so they made containers to encourage order and easy

movement. The parfleche were most often used for food such as pemmican and for other highly valued things such as medicine bundles, paint, and headdresses.

The Indian woman, like the Dakota woman, believed they were helped in the tanning and designing of the hides by Double Woman. The Arapaho had "Whirlwind Woman" or "First Woman" just as the Navahos had "Spider Woman" to help them weave.⁵

The quality of the rawhide articles was often a way tribes could determine the well-being of another tribe. High quality parfleche were used in give-a-ways,⁶ passing from tribe to tribe.

It is early on a summer day on the high plains. The sky's crisp blueness will later be filled with massive thunderheads. A young Indian woman waits for her work to begin. Already perspiration beads on her forehead, partly from heat, partly from anticipation. Some of her tribe have moved closer to the great herd. She can hear the animals' breathe and stomp, breathe and stomp. These giants offer her people food, shelter, clothes and danger.

It is time. The hunters, who now have horses, move swiftly, riding around the magnificent creatures, picking their target, felling their game.

Rawhide was at its best in dry country and could be adapted to the needs of people on the move.⁷

Buffalo hide was different from the hide of any other animal. It was thicker and became soft with use, having a texture somewhat like felted cloth.

The Indian rawhide was whitened and softened by the method used in removing the hair, pounding it off with a stone.

Indian women preferred a summer hide from a fat buffalo cow which had not produced a calf in the spring. This hide would be in good condition and very even in thickness throughout. It was large, light in weight, thinner during the summer, and more pliable and easier to handle through the different processes than a winter hide.⁸

Rawhide made from large animal hides, sized with materials such as cactus juice and folded into a portfolio-like case were filled with

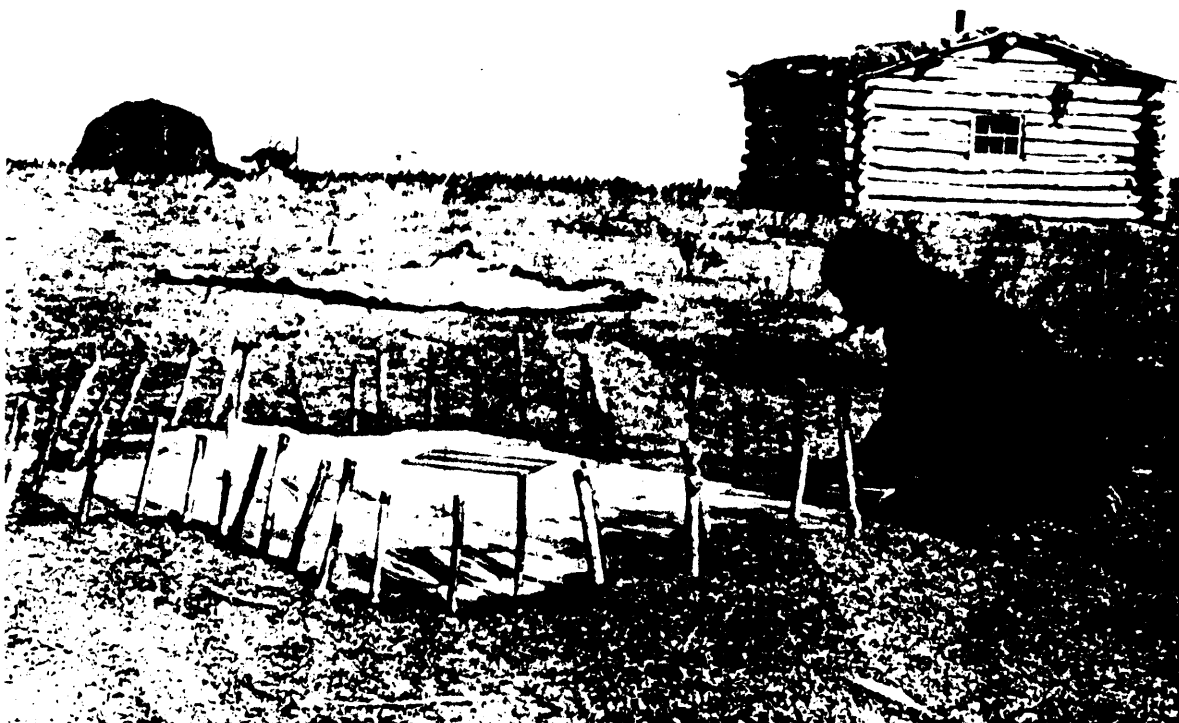
dried meat and other dried food. When these cases were cached in a well drained spot the meat would keep for several years.⁹

Parfleche is a term probably applied by the French to Indian rawhide shields, and then by extension to any article made from rawhide. Only Indians who lived near the French or inter-married with them used this term.

Parfleche were made in pairs since two could be cut from a large hide. The parfleche was the most useful of all rawhide containers made by Indians. It was distensible and a large amount of provender or goods could be packed into it. Mice could rarely chew through and moisture rarely penetrated it.

Rawhide was considered a woman's craft.

The buffalo was skinned and butchered where it was killed, the butcher knife being of stone (obsidian or flint), bone, or other



A Teton Dakota woman painting a parfleche with a porous buffalo bone. This photograph was taken on the Rosebud Reservation by John A. Anderson about 1890. The hide has been staked out with the hair side down. The woman has finished painting one parfleche and is working on the second flap. Her position is the typical one taken by a craftswoman while painting a wet hide. The designs are alike, as is customary on a pair of parfleches. The hide in the background has been painted and dried, and the stakes have been removed. It has not been dehaired. The hair was pounded off before the painted containers were cut from the hide.



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material such as a Beaver's tooth.
The green hide was carried to camp
and staked out and fleshed as soon as
possible.¹⁰

When all is over, the hunt finished, the young woman moves in with the other women to begin skinning the giants. It is now hot. Bugs swarm. She quickly has blood up to her elbows, and is soaked with animal membrane of various kinds as well as her own perspiration. Her back aches and her fingers are stiff from the fierce labor and the dried blood.

She drags her hide back to the hunting camp and begins stretching it by pounding stakes into dry ground with a stone found near the river. She has taken little nourishment, for she knows she works against time and the elements.

When the hide is staked she and her mother take their stones and begin pounding away unwanted residues of flesh. They work for hours while the heat dries both their skin and that of the buffalo.

The hide was washed, worked-down to a uniform thickness and sized while still wet. The designs were laid-out on the hide. The paints were applied. A second sizing was applied and the hide was allowed to dry slowly. When it was thoroughly dry, the stakes were removed and it was turned over, hair side up, on a layer of clean grass.¹¹ The hair was removed by pounding with a stone, a process which lightened the parfleche.¹²

A hoeing or slipping method could also be used but stoning was preferred. Hoeing tended to gauge the hide. Slipping was a mixture of ash and water. Like hoeing it had to be done before painting and neither method whitened the hide like stoning.

Extra rawhide was used for toys, knife sheaths, small bags, or moccasins among other things.¹³

At last the mother brings out the tools for painting that have been kept safely in rawhide containers-- containers made by the mother's grandmother and her grandmother before. The mother lays out the bone tools and the varnish and resins used to size the rawhide. She puts clam shells and turtle shells on the ground. They are containers for mixing the pigments. The daughter has cut willow sticks for rulers and chewed the ends of some for brushes. The mother begins mixing the pigments, all from nature. They are as valuable as gold to these people. As the mother begins to make her first stroke of black outline paint the grandmother begins to sing. She sings to help the lines go on straight, for the paints to be the right color, for the work to be easier. They are working late into the summer day, and the sky is still clear. The thunderheads did not come today.

They finish just as dusk comes. The daughter goes to the river to get water so her grandmother and mother can cleanse themselves. She then goes back to the river with her friend. They lie down in the shallow, sandy-bottomed river, clothes still on, and allow the movement of the stream to cleanse away the remnants of a day of necessary labor. The two young women hold hands and enjoy the soothing effects of the water.

The grandmother, now in the tepee, lies down slowly, allowing her ancient body to adjust to her

changing position. She sleeps inside where it is warmest. Under the blankets she touches a treasure. It is a parfleche made by her grandmother. It is dark with age and soft from use. The designs on it were done with a sharp tool rather than with a brush. The marks tell us something of her history: family, tribe, and home. She goes to sleep with a vision of her mother before her.

In order to make incised parfleche you had to have a brown or browned epidermis (hide or skin).

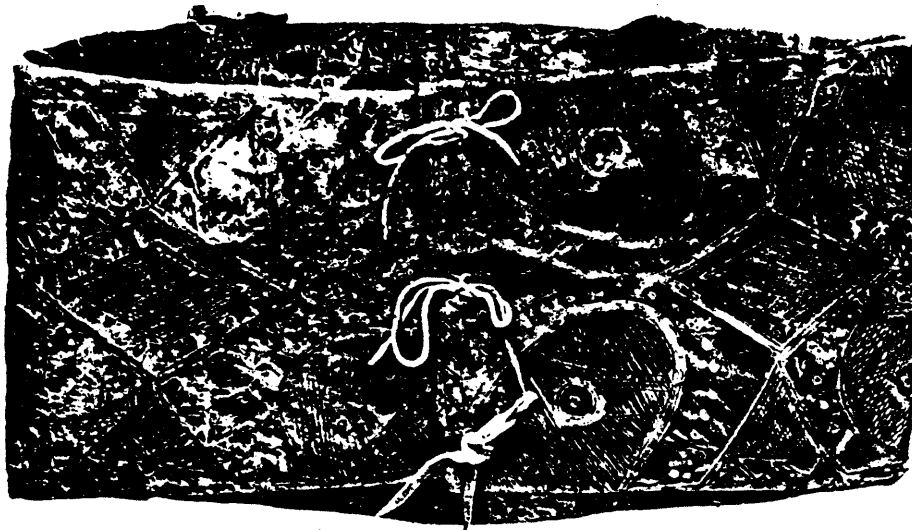
The decoration was made by carving and peeling off small pieces of the dark outer layer of brown pigmented skin.

The design showed as light and dark only: no color was used. Buffalo hide was good.

These hides were usually used to hold surplus dried food. The incising technique is probably older than painting.¹⁴

There are two theories as to the origin of the technique. One suggests that it may be an adaptation

WASCO



A very fine old Wasco incised parfleche, showing a combination of curved and straight lines. The skin is probably elk, browned with blood. (Chicago Museum of Natural History)

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of the scraped method of decorating birch bark utensils, and the second ascribes it to the influence of Spanish methods of decorating leather horse furnishings.¹⁵

In comparison to painted parfleche the number of samples of incised parfleche are few but the discussion of their origin continues.

The art of rawhide is known mostly through old grandmother stories and accounts by researchers like Mable Morrow.

Rawhide is still used by the American Indian for ceremonial purposes but it is almost never buffalo hide and women no longer make the drums and shields.

Working with rawhide is another process lost to waste, progress, and the demand for what is "Indian."

Seeing a parfleche in a museum is like finding an old trunk in an attic. Even though it appears empty it contains ghosts, remnants of the past.

I close my eyes and see a wrinkled old shaman removing his medicine bundle from the parfleche. A child is ill; the shaman is needed. I hear the shaman chant and pray, chant and pray. Bones click, seeds rattle as the shaman unfolds his medicine bundle for secrets.

CONCLUSION

The parfleche is a link between what was and what is--comparison between my life and that of my Indian sister of the past. She scraped, pounded, painted, and stitched, knowing exactly how her finished efforts would be used. Her work had respect and direction.

As I work, soaking, cutting, dyeing, stitching, I think of my sister of the past, putting some of her in my art, knotting her leathered hands into my finished piece.



Incised parfleche. (Denver Art Museum)

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NOTES

¹Mable Morrow, Indian Rawhide, An American Folk Art (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), p. vii.

²A parfleche is an envelope, made by folding in longitudinal sides of a long rectangular piece of rawhide so that they meet. The short sides of this folded hide are again folded toward each other so that they meet. This provides two flaps, each of which is nearly square, and, when these are lifted, two side flaps are revealed. Each of the front flaps is decorated, the designs being almost always identical. The side flaps are less frequently decorated. Sometimes the rear of the parfleche is bounded by a rectangle which connects the decoration of the two front flaps and the two side flaps. The whole design is laid out on the rawhide before it is folded into envelope form. Leslie Speir, Plains Indian Parfleche Designs, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1931), p. 297.

³Phone interview with Joyce Herold, Denver Museum of Natural History, Denver, Colorado, October 1988.

⁴Norman Bancroft-Hunt, The Indians of the Great Plains (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1982), p. 11.

⁵Mable Morrow, Indian Rawhide, An American Folk Art (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), p. 3.

⁶Any event in an Indian community provided the occasion for a give-away: visitors, death, honor, dance, wedding, memorial. Give-away means to give-away one's possessions, such as: a horse, a gun, a woolen blanket, cotton cloth, or a parfleche filled with dried meat. Morrow, p. 17.

⁷Morrow, p. 15.

⁸Morrow, p. 19.

⁹Morrow, p. 20.

¹⁰Morrow, p. 25.

¹¹Morrow, p. 28.

¹²Morrow, p. 38.

¹³Morrow, p. 14.

¹⁴Morrow, p. 43.

¹⁵Frederick H. Douglas, An Incised Bison Rawhide Parfleche (Denver: Denver Art Museum, Material Culture Notes, 1938), p. 25.

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89. Painted Rawhide Container

Yanktonai Dakota
L: 63 cm W: 34 cm
Yanktonai manufacture.
1881.3.24 Read no. 24

Rawhide, folded, sewn together on one side with sinew stitches; deerskin bottom and upper extension stitched with sinew lacing to include body; the skin sections are decorated with vertical and horizontal rows of purple quillwork; below the upper edge, a horizontal beaded band in blue, white-core rose, yellow, and orange; rawhide panels with painted design of vertical stripes (red on one side, blue on the other) framed by a blue border of alternating semicircles and triangles (above) and broad triangles (below) in red and yellow.