Tributes to a Horse Nation: Plains Indian Horse Effigies

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Maka tanhan wakilowan yelo sunkawakan oyate wakilowan yelo...
— Lone Man, Teton Sioux

Carvings in wood may not readily be associated with the nomadic Plains Indians because they lacked the resources and the settled existence for such an art to become a part of their culture. However, although they did not become renowned for their carved masks, totems, or buildings as did the Indians of the eastern states or the Northwest Coast, the Plains Indians practiced wood carving to a considerable degree, but surprisingly little has been written on the subject. Some of the less nomadic eastern Plains tribes produced the elaborate carvings found on ball-headed clubs. Many of the clubs have fine carved faces, or the ball is surrounded by delicately carved hands or claws. Tribes such as the Osage carved intricate patterns on

Fig. 1. Tobacco tamper with horse head effigy carved on the handle, Oglala Sioux (ca. 1920), Robinson Museum, Pierre, South Dakota.

the headboards of cradles and made medicine dolls for use in religious ceremonies. Wooden pipestems, flutes, quirts, and various articles that were part of the regalia of the military societies of tribal life were all carved by such Plains tribes as the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho (Fig. 1 & 2).

Because the horse was one of the most important animals to the Plains people, representations of it often appear on such items as dance mirrors and pipes. The picture of the Indian galloping across the plains, seemingly one with his horse, is so vividly a part of our image of the Plains Indian that we often forget that the horse was a latecomer to the area, an Old World introduction to the New. From seventeenth-century Spanish ranches in the Southwest, the horse, through Indian trading and adroit raiding, moved steadily north and fanned east and west, reaching the Sioux about 1760. The horse's advent on the Plains brought greater mobility and opportunity to the Plains tribes. It pervaded their life style, their culture, and their religion. It became second in importance only to the buffalo, giving tribes the ability to hunt widely over the semiarid Great Plains, to control greater territories, and to obtain greater security. For the individual, it became the measure of a man's worth; the number of horses a man owned became the gauge of his wealth, his desirability as a marriage partner, and his place in his culture. In short, an individual's wealth in horses helped "to determine both the

nature and degree of his participation in many aspects of the life of the people of his tribe." For the Sioux, the obtaining of the horse and the beginning of their control and power in the upper Great Plains territory were coincidental.

Frances Densmore, in her book *Teton Sioux Music*, offered the following speech by Brave Buffalo, a Teton Sioux, as an indication of the esteem in which the Sioux held the horse; it also indicates their treatment of and relationship to horses: "Of all the animals the horse is the best friend of the Indian, for without it he could not go on long journeys. A horse is the Indian's most valuable piece of property. If an Indian wishes to gain something, he promises his horse that if the horse will help him he will paint it with native dye, that all may see that help has come to him through the aid of his horse." It is not surprising, then, to see horses carved on pommels for pack and rid ing saddles, on dance mirrors, pipe tampers and pipes, and other objects.

Among the Oglala and Hunkpapa Sioux, horse effigies were carved for use in reenacting coup in victory dances, or to be carried by successful horse stealers, or as memorials to certain horses killed in battle. Boasting of past deeds or the reenactment

4. Ibid., p. 20.
Chief Crazy Bear holds a carved wooden gun in this photograph taken before 1892.
of counting coup was a common practice among most tribes. These exploits formed an important part in dances, probably, in early days, to stimulate warriors in war and, later, to keep alive the memories of past acts of courage. Often for these displays, carved replicas of weapons were used, such as wooden models of guns or lances and clubs\(^8\) (Fig. 3), so it seems reasonable that this may have been one reason for the carving of these horse effigies. Other Plains tribes also used these objects, the majority of which resemble clubs with a horse’s head at one end (Fig. 4).

This writer has traced many of these clublike horse stick effigies and two complete horse carvings of a similar type. Among the collections of the Robinson Museum in Pierre, South Dakota, is the finest example of a complete carving, depicting a warrior’s horse in its death throes (Fig. 5). It was collected by Mary C. Collins, who was a missionary to the Sioux at Oahe Mission, Dakota Territory, from 1875 to 1884 and on the Standing Rock Reservation from 1885 to 1910. The horse was bequeathed to the museum on her death in 1920.\(^9\)

The carving shows a horse with back legs extended, front legs tucked beneath the body, and an erect horsehair tail. It is

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9. Early in 1977, this horse had the distinction of being flown to London, England, where it became one of the many memorable and much photographed items in the “Sacred Circles” exhibition. It was later included in the same exhibition at the Atkin Museum of Art in Kansas.
Friend,
my horse
flies like a bird
as it runs.
— Brave Buffalo,
Teton Sioux

Fig. 5. Sometimes called the Flying Horse, this carving was collected by missionary Mary Collins and is part of the permanent Sioux exhibit at the Robinson Museum, Pierre.

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bleeding from five wounds, which are indicated by the traditional holes and triangular blood paths. The front legs and mouth are dyed red to represent blood from the open wounds. The carving is 37½ inches long, 10½ inches high, and 5½ inches thick. The ears are made of leather painted blue and are attached to the head with metal tacks. They slant backwards suggesting the animal's fear and pain as well as a sense of motion. The rawhide bridle, with brow band, cheek pieces, and throat strap, has a metal ring bit to which red-painted leather reins are attached. A red-dyed horsehair "scalp" hangs from the reins, and a horsehair mane runs the length of the horse's extended neck. The carving has been rubbed with yellow paint, possibly to indicate that the living animal was a dun or buckskin in color.

Fig. 6. Pictographic drawing from a ledger book painted and written by Red Hawk. The book was collected at Wounded Knee in 1891 and is now in the Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
Fig. 8. Representing the year 1858-1859, this detail from a Hunkpapa Sioux winter count indicates that a white buffalo was killed that year. Robinson Museum, Pierre.

This realistic sculpture must have been made as a memorial to a horse that was killed, and the rider, presumably, survived to immortalize his brave mount. The object has a crude delicacy about it with finely carved feet and a long slender body, which give an undeniably realistic appearance of the last headlong dash of a dying animal. The sculptor was obviously a man of considerable talent and feeling and was probably also an able artist with brush or crayon.

The carving is similar to the horses in Figures 6 and 7, which show pictographic drawings by Sioux Indians in the late 1880s. The similarity of the body shapes (Fig. 6) and the wound marks (Fig. 7) can readily be seen. In early days, such drawings were
emblazoned on a warrior’s shirt to depict the details of his battle honors and hunting and horse stealing prowess, or they may have been drawn on the lining of the family teepee. Similar drawings, depicting outstanding events of the seasons, were used to make the winter counts of the Plains peoples (Fig. 8). Later, reservation Indians or prisoners were given drawing and painting materials and scraps of paper, often from ledger or account books, so that they could produce pictographic records. These items were sought after as souvenirs and curios.

The other complete horse carving known to this writer is well documented as being the work of a Hunkpapa Sioux Indian by the name of No Two Horns. This fine specimen (Fig. 9) is 32 inches long with a white horse hair tail bound with red ribbon. Again, the carving emanates a feeling of agony and death in the outstretched body, with the cleverly carved front legs pressed to the animal’s body and the red rawhide tongue hanging from one side of the open mouth. The whole carving has been rubbed with blue earth paint, the fetlocks are painted white, the ears are rawhide, and the mane is white horsehair. The rawhide bridle has tin decorations, and the reins are of tanned buckskin. A scalp lock, backed with old red trade cloth, hangs from one of the bit rings. Seven wound marks are shown, four on one side and three on the other. This horse, part of the Paul Ewald collection, was acquired by the Gold Seal Company of Medora, North Dakota, in the late 1960s and is catalogued as a “Horse Memorial Carving.” It was carved by No Two Horns to commemorate his horse’s death during the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876.

10. West, “Plains Indian Horse Sticks,” p. 65.
No Two Horns lived between 1842 or 1852 and 1942. He was renowned as a wood carver, and several horse effigy sticks are attributed to him. One of his grandchildren remembers how he carved horse effigies, which he colored "with various clays and fruit juices." He also carved dolls and miniature weapons for his grandchildren as well as bows and arrows, spears, pipes, and traps for small game and fish. He gave many of these things to his friends as gifts. He was also the "author" of a winter count, originally secured by Colonel A. B. Welch from No Two Horns in 1922 and now in a private collection in North Dakota. Therefore, it seems possible that No Two Horns could have been the sculptor of the specimen in the Robinson Museum. It is known that the collector of the Robinson piece, Mary Collins, was a friend of Sitting Bull. No Two Horns was a cousin of Sitting Bull and fled with his band to Canada after the Battle of the Little Big Horn. He later returned with Sitting Bull and his people when they came back to the United States to surrender at Fort Buford in 1881. These facts give further credence to the possibility that he may have been the carver of this fine example of Plains Indian art.

While the two complete horse carvings discussed here are the only two of this type believed to be in existence, there are several examples of similar effigies. These are usually referred to as

The Crow enemy—
if I see him,
it is my intention to take his horses.
If I do this,
it will be widely known.
—Eagle Shield,
Teton Sioux

Horse Dance Sticks\textsuperscript{14} and are not complete carvings. As stated earlier, they were used to reenact the counting of coup and were also used as personal medicine for power in battle or horse stealing raids. One specimen, actually documented as being the work of No Two Horns, is in the collection at the Fort Buford Museum in North Dakota (Fig. 10).

The writer knows of three other horse sticks that have many similarities to the Fort Buford specimen, and it is likely that they were made by this same man. One is deposited with the Heye Foundation in New York (top specimen, Fig. 2). Another is in the collection at the North Dakota Historical Society in Bismarck and is illustrated in the February 1978 issue of American Indian Art. The third is in the Museum für Volkerkunde in Vienna, Austria, and is also illustrated in the magazine mentioned above.\textsuperscript{15}

A specimen in the Heye Foundation is probably also a horse stick, but it is unusual in that it is the only one the writer has seen that has the handle end drilled for the addition of a wrist strap (Fig. 11). No information is available on this specimen, but it was probably carried as a talisman on horse stealing forays. The object is about two feet long, is elliptical in cross section, and has been painted red with six black stripes across the body. Brass nails form the eyes, run the length of the back, and are placed in a

14. The name Horse Dance Stick is misleading, however, because the carvings were used in other dances and not just in the Horse Dance, which was a dance for the exchange of horse medicines. See West, “Plains Indian Dance Sticks,” pp. 58-67.
15. Ibid., pp. 61 and 66, respectively.
Well, when I was courting,
"horses you have none"
to me was said.
Therefore,
over all the land
I roam.
—Siyaka, Teton Sioux

Fig. 12. Horse Dance stick, Museum for the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York.

group on each side of the body. The ears are of black-painted rawhide, and two quilled "dangles" with notched eagle feathers at their ends are attached to the top of the head.

Figure 12 is an interesting example of a horse carving made as a man’s personal medicine and comes from the Blood Indians of Canada. The stick is of wood, colored red and yellow. It has leather ears, and a "scalp" of black horsehair is attached to the open mouth. The mane is made from colored buffalo wool, and the tail is of horse hair. Attached in the middle are two small arrows with red leather points. According to Dr. Clark Wissler, eminent ethnologist and collector of the item, the horse was made as the result of a vision and became the owner’s personal medicine. It was to be worn on his back in battle in order to bestow the dream power. Two songs were sung with the medicine: "Then the man spoke: ‘You see my horse, it is magical.’ Then the horse spoke: ‘I am magical, I am magical.’""16

There is a possibility that some of the sticks were used by young boys as hobby horses, but this use appears to have little substantiation. However, it is a fact that when reenacting the counting of coup, a warrior might sometimes straddle his horse stick, as though riding his real horse, in order to act out the part.17 This passage from Walter McClintock’s description of the Hair Parters, the Blackfoot version of the Grass Dance, il-

17. West, “Plains Indian Horse Sticks,” pp. 59, 62.
Crow Indian,
you must watch your horses—
a horse thief
often
am I.
—Two Shields

Horse Effigies

Pictograph from Grand River Mission, Helen Meigs Collection, South Dakota Historical Resource Center, Pierre.

Iustrates another way in which the carvings were used during a dance: “One of these dancers, named Rides To The Door, carried the carved wooden figure of a horse to remind people of his bravery and skill in raiding enemy horses.”¹⁸ Finally, one other possible use of the horse sticks is suggested by McClintock’s observation of a prominent Blackfoot Horse owner, who “in his speech urged the Grass Dancers to give away horses. Holding in his hand a stick which he said represented a good horse, he walked across the dance-circle and handed the stick to a visiting Sioux warrior.”¹⁹

While it is not surprising that horses appear in the carvings and symbolic representations of a people who used them as a measure of wealth and as a means for dominating and maintaining a vast hunting territory, our understanding of the exact usage and provenance of the horse effigies is still tentative and incomplete. There are more photographs of these old carvings than there are actual carvings in the museums and private collections around the world. Further research is needed to discover more examples of them that can give us greater clues to their meaning. With the evidence presently at hand, however, it is safe to say that the silent beauty and grace of the horse carvings give ample testimony to the Plains Indians’ love and respect for their ally, the Horse Nation.

¹⁹. Ibid., p. 15.
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