

Cadzi Cody, Wind River Shoshone, 1866-1912
Scenes of Plains Indian Life, c. 1880
Elk hide, pigments
H.68 x W.79 inches
Gift of funds from Bruce Dayton, 85.92

Theme

Cadzi Cody (KAD-zee KO-dee) painted this elk hide at approximately the same time as Fournier's painting of Minneapolis but it represents a different attitude towards nature—one that reflects the ancient traditions of the Shoshone (sho-SHO-nee) people. The elk hide also speaks of the conflict between two cultures when Native Americans and Euro-Americans came into contact.

Background

When the first European explorers arrived on the shores of North America 500 years ago, the continent was populated by several million culturally diverse people speaking hundreds of languages. Archaeologists believe that native people migrated approximately 20,000 years ago across the Bering Strait from Asia into present-day Alaska and Canada. When Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492, he mistakenly believed that he had landed in the East Indies, and he called the people he encountered "Indians." This misnomer has prevailed into the 20th century, although many native people of America today prefer to be called Native Americans or American Indians.

After their original migration, native people gradually populated the entire continent, evolving lifestyles in accord with the climate of the areas in which they lived. The Shoshone people once inhabited the Great Basin region (Nevada, Utah, and portions of surrounding states) of North America. They were a migratory people who lived off the natural resources of the land. They fished, gathered wild plants and berries, and hunted with bow and arrows. Some Shoshone people moved into the Central Plains to hunt bison. In general, the Shoshone shared many of the cultural characteristics of the Plains tribes, for example, great respect for the bison, the tradition of painting on hides, and the practice of the Sun Dance.

The bison was central to the existence of the Plains people. They hunted only as many animals as they required for food, respectfully offering prayers of thanks and utilizing every part of the animal for multiple purposes.¹ The introduction of the horse into America by the Spanish in the 1500s probably changed the lives of the Plains bison hunters to a greater extent than the invention of the automobile changed the lives of people in the 20th century. So amazed were the Plains tribes by this strong, swift animal that they called it the Sacred Dog and believed it to have been a gift of the Great Spirit. Prior to having the horse, the Plains people hauled their belongings on travois pulled by

1 For example: hides were used to make moccasins, saddles, clothing, and containers; ribs were used to make sled runners; bison chips served as fuel; tails made good fly swatters; gallstones taken from a bison's gall bladder were used to create a yellow pigment that was used for painting; and hooves were boiled to make a glue-like substance.

dogs and hunted bison on foot. Horses greatly improved their ability to hunt and allowed them to become increasingly nomadic. Regarded with great esteem, the horse became the most valued possession of the Plains people, and its image appears on many of their art objects, including this elk hide.

Because the Plains tribes had a nomadic lifestyle, their art developed in a wholly different manner from that of Euro-Americans or of the more sedentary Native Americans living in other areas of the country (for example, the Pueblo). Whatever they made had to be relatively portable. The everyday objects of their lives were richly decorated with pigments, quills, beads, and other ornamentation. Every object was both useful and a work of art.

The use and decoration of bison, elk, and deer hides have a long history with Plains tribes. For a people who did not weave cloth, the hides provided a useful material for the construction of clothing, tipis, moccasins, and many types of containers. Painting on hides was one more way of honoring the animal for giving up its life. It was also a way of recording history for a people who depended mainly on oral tradition for record keeping. Hides were used in making “winter counts.” Each winter, designated members of a tribe painted a pictorial symbol documenting the most important event of that year on a hide. Additionally, the men displayed pictorial records of their personal achievements—their *coups* (acts of bravery), accounts of battle exploits, and numbers of horses they owned—on their hide robes and tipis.

Contact with Europeans brought changes in the tradition of hide painting, as it did to most other aspects of Native American culture. The conflict that developed between native people and Euro-Americans was largely due to two entirely different philosophies of life. Native Americans had lived in harmony with the land for thousands of years, believing that the Great Spirit had provided abundance for all. Europeans arrived in America with concepts of land ownership and usage that were unthinkable to native people. Prompted by a belief in “manifest destiny,” Euro-Americans felt it was their God-given right to tame and populate the “wilderness.” But Native Americans did not view the land they had lived on for millennia as wilderness. They feared, and rightly so, that they were being forced from their homeland.

More than a century of conflict ensued, and by the late 19th century most Native Americans had been forcibly confined by the U.S. government to reservations. The Shoshone people were placed on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming in 1868. Later, the Arapaho, their age-old enemies, were also confined there. During the reservation period, Shoshone men, deprived of their traditional way of life, continued to paint battle scenes and past glories upon their tipis and robes. They also painted on muslin sheeting issued by the government and on ledger paper obtained from army posts. The Shoshone were attempting to maintain their cultural values at a time when a foreign culture was being imposed upon them.² They carefully and accurately painted the details of their weapons, clothing and sacred objects, leaving a remarkable record of their way of life.

² The government attempted to assimilate Native Americans by teaching them skills like farming which had not been a part of their culture. Children were taken from their parents to be educated in “white” ways in boarding schools. In general, Native Americans were discouraged from practicing their own traditions.

Before native people were confined to reservations, hide painting was a way to recount personal exploits and record historical events. As Native American art became increasingly popular with non-Indian collectors, however, this tradition was transformed to produce paintings for sale as a means of economic survival. Along with others, Cadzi Cody was actively involved in supplying hides for this market. As a result of the trade with non-Indians, many hides such as this one have entered the collections of museums.

Scenes of Plains Indian Life

This elk hide painted by Cadzi Cody, who was a member of the Wind River Shoshone in Wyoming, depicts a bison hunt and aspects of the most sacred of Plains Indians ceremonies, the Sun Dance.

The Sun Dance is a ceremony in which the dancers offer thanksgiving and petition the Creator for their needs in the coming year.³ It is still practiced by modern Plains tribes. In traditional times, the first step in preparation for a Sun Dance was to kill the biggest bull bison of the herd. Cadzi Cody's elk hide painting shows this step. Around the periphery of the hide are hunters on horseback moving in a circular pattern as they pursue the bison. The artist also shows us the ritual butchering of the animal. The head of the bison was prepared for the Sun Dance by severing it behind the ears but leaving it attached to the tail by a strip of hide down the back. The head was then mounted on the sacred center pole, a cottonwood found growing by a stream and cut by the young men of the tribe. We can see this pole in the painting, and above it an eagle, which represented an intermediary between earth and the spirit world.

Cadzi Cody has not included the next step of preparation for the Sun Dance—the creation of a lodge with poles extended from the center pole, covered with brush.⁴ Within the lodge, men would dance facing toward the sacred pole, continuing for four days without food or water. The Shoshone called this type of dancing “dry-standing-dance.” The resulting dehydration and physical exertion often produced an altered state of consciousness, which invited visions.

Around the pole, Cadzi Cody has depicted several dancers. The traditional adornments for participants in the Sun Dance are body paint, aprons, and eagle-bone whistles. Here, the artist has depicted the dancers in feather bustles, with bells attached to their legs. In Shoshone tradition, this type of dress would be appropriate for a nonreligious dance called the Wolf or Grass Dance. The reason for this variation is not known.

The drum was considered to be the heartbeat of the Plains people, as it still is today. Singing and drumming accompany the Sun Dance. In the painting, several men are shown drumming in the lower right area. Near them is a woman who has a baby in a cradleboard on her back. To the left, a man on horseback with a long feather bonnet is

³ The form of the Sun Dance described here is specific to the Shoshone people. The Sun Dance is practiced by many Plains tribes, and there are many variations in its format.

⁴ In Shoshone belief, the Sun Dance had its origins in the visions of two different men. In the first vision, a bison appeared and instructed the Shoshone to kill the biggest bull of the herd. The second vision involved an eagle, who instructed them to put up a cottonwood pole, affixing the bison head to it and making a nest for the eagle at the top.

an esteemed war leader. Each feather was earned by an act of bravery. To each side of the center scene are tipis. Constructed of a framework of wood poles covered with hide, tipis provided portable shelter for Plains peoples during nomadic times. The designs painted on each tipi would have had symbolic meaning specific to its occupants.

The motif of the circle recurs several places on the elk hide: in the bison hunt, in the formation of the Sun Dance, and in the shape of the tipis. The circle has sacred significance to Native Americans. It is without beginning or end, symbolizing the cycle of life and the concept of the universe. Some native people believe that the Great Spirit made everything round—the sun, sky, earth, moon. For these and many other reasons, Native Americans made their tipis circular, arranged their camps in circular patterns, and sat in a circle in ceremonies.

Cadzi Cody painted this scene from memory and imagination. Despite that, he has given us many specific details of the Sun Dance and the bison hunt. Notice the variety of horses that appear in the painting. They probably represent the range of sorrels, roans, duns, and other types of horses owned by Native Americans. In the upper left corner and in the center are spotted horses, known as pintos.

By the time Cadzi Cody painted this elk hide, the bison were nearly extinct. The Sun Dance itself had been outlawed by the U.S. government in 1881. Traditional religious practices were discouraged by the government in its attempt to assimilate the American Indian people into white culture. The Sun Dance was later made legal and now takes place in many parts of the Plains region during the summer months.

Technique

In traditional times, hide preparation was done by women. The hide was staked to the ground (see the holes around the edges), scraped to remove the hair, and bleached in the sun. At this stage, it was rawhide, stiff and ready to form into saddles or containers. To be suitable for painting or clothing, the hide had to be tanned or softened by rubbing and soaking with various substances. Then it was sun-dried, rolled for sizing, and stretched back to its original size and shape. We can see in the shape of this elk hide the four legs, the neck, and the tail of the elk.

In traditional hide painting, natural pigments were used.⁵ By the 1800s, commercial pigments were available through trade with Euro-Americans, and Cadzi Cody used them in this painting. Because some images in his paintings are so similar, scholars suspect that he may have also used stencils. For example, notice the striking similarities in the bison. The elegant and graceful horses are more individualized due to the range of colors and greater variety of stances. The rather realistic depiction of the horses indicates that the artist must have closely observed the animals.

By the time this painting was done, Native American artists had assimilated some of the conventions of Euro-American painting. They did not simply mimic them, but rather selectively used what was of advantage to them, often adapting new materials to their

⁵ Natural pigments were derived from the following: red from hematite (iron ore), green from lake algae; blue from blue clay; yellow from bison gallstones.

traditional style. Here, Cadzi Cody has used the new commercial pigments, but in the tradition and style of Plains painting. Some Euro-American influence may be indicated by the overlapping of forms to indicate depth and by the “humpbacks” of some of the hunters, perhaps an attempt to show foreshortening.

While Native American art was widely and avidly collected by Euro-Americans during this early period, it exerted little noticeable influence upon the style of Euro-American art. That changed in the 20th century. One of the most important figures in modern American art, Jackson Pollock, was inspired by Southwestern sand painting, and the Surrealists in the 1940s were influenced greatly by Native American art and cultural practices. Native American art is one of the many threads of artistic heritage that contribute to the rich tapestry of American art.

Artist

Because the hide painting is unsigned, it is difficult to make a positive identification of the artist. The style of this painting is similar to other existing hide paintings thought to have been painted by a Shoshone traditionally known as Katsikodi. That name, however, cannot be found in any official records. It is believed that Katsikodi was actually a Wind River Shoshone man named Codsigo (co-SEE-ko), who was given the “white” name *Cadzi Cody* in 1900. The name *Codsigo* means “mountain flower” in Shoshone. Codsigo died on October 22, 1912, at the age of 46.

Suggested Questions

1. What material is this picture painted on? Judging from the size, what animal do you think this might be from? What different parts of its body can you see?
2. What animals do you see in the painting? How many human figures do you see? How many of these are women? How can you recognize the woman?
3. Why do you think the artist used hide to paint on instead of paper or canvas? Where do you think he got the hide? What in this painting gives you a clue to that question? (*Bow and arrow hunters and a slit in the hide where an arrow might have penetrated—in the green horse.*) **Discuss the tradition of painting on hides.**
4. What is happening around the outer section of the painting? What weapons do the bison hunters use? Imagine that you are on horseback beside a huge bison. How do you feel? Do you think the hunters were in danger? Find one in particular that may be in danger.
5. How many bison were killed in this hunt? **Explain that Native Americans only killed as many animals as they could use.** Why was the bison so important to Native American people? How would they use bison parts in addition to food?
6. How many colors of horses do you see? They represent different kinds of horses. (*Blue roans, red sorrels, yellow buckskins.*) Why might he have painted some of

- the horses pink and blue even though horses are not these colors? (*These were the colors he had available; they add visual interest to the picture.*) Why do you think he did not paint any of the horses black? (*He had to make them different from the bison.*) Plains people also had spotted horses called pintos. Find two pintos in the painting. How does the artist show us that they are pintos? Why do you think horses were so important to the bison hunters?
7. On this hide, Cadzi Cody painted aspects of an important Shoshone ceremony of thanksgiving. By looking at what he painted on this hide, what might be some of the things the Shoshone were thankful for? What might they ask for? What are you thankful for in your own life?
 8. Where do you see a woman in the painting? Are there men other than the hunters? What are they doing? **Explain that only men danced the Shoshone Sun Dance, and that women participated by singing and in other ways.** Why do you think the man in the center mounted on a horse wears a long feather bonnet? What might that tell you about him?
 9. The Shoshone had portable houses called tipis, which they used while traveling in search of bison. What is a tipi made of? Where do you see tipis in the painting? Why would it be an advantage to have a house that was easy to move? Why did the Shoshone move around so much? Do you think they carried a lot with them when they moved? How do you think the Plains lifestyle affected the type of art that they made? In what ways might their art have been different from that of other Native Americans, such as the Pueblo, whose lives were less mobile? (*Art had to be portable, easy to move around; art had to be durable to withstand being moved around.*)
 10. Is this painting active or still? How does Cadzi Cody give the figures and animals on the hide movement and energy? (*All of the figures circle around the central scene; the gestures, poses, and movements of the hunters and animals suggest action; figures move in different directions; the black bison and colorful horses keep one's eyes moving across the hide surface.*)
 11. Look carefully at the human figures painted on the hide. Did Cadzi Cody paint them as they might have really looked? What parts of the human figures did he show? What parts did he leave out? Does each person look different or do they all look the same? Look at the horses painted on the hide. Does each horse look different, or do they all look the same?
 12. Do you think Cadzi Cody was more interested in showing how things looked or in telling a story? What makes you think so?
 13. When Cadzi Cody painted this hide, the bison were nearly extinct, the government had outlawed the Sun Dance, the Shoshone Indians were confined to a reservation, and their traditional way of life had all but vanished. Why do you think he continued to paint traditional aspects of Indian life? (*It was his artistic tradition; it helped the people to remember their past; the paintings were admired by non-Indian tourists and could be sold for much-needed income.*)

14. How did the environment shape the lifestyle of the Shoshone people? (*The existence of abundant bison herds provided a means of survival, the Plains Indians became nomadic because they followed the bison, tipis were developed to meet the needs of these nomadic people.*) How does your environment shape your life? How would your life be different if you lived in Alaska or Mexico or California?