



Buffalo Robe, 1850-1875,
Northwestern Plains Artist

Peabody Essex Museum
Salem in History, 2006

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Buffalo hide, paint

Gift of Stephen Wheatland, August P. Loring,
Thomas Barbour, and Lawrence Jenkins, 1945

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HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For many tribes of the Plains, buffalo provided essential sustenance, for food, clothing, and shelter. Also, buffalo hide robes have been important symbolic and practical articles of ornamented clothing for western Native Americans.

As settlers and traders moved westward, however, they consumed buffalo through market and sport hunting. Market hunters made use of a still-hunting technique to systematically slaughter buffalo for their tongues (a delicacy) and hides that were shipped east for use as carriage robes or blankets. As many as 100 buffalo might be killed by a single hunter in a day, and, using railroad transportation, ship as many as 5,000 hides at a time for about \$3 per hide by the 1880s. By that time, commercial hunters had slaughtered 5 to 6 million buffalo in about a decade, had all but exterminated the animal. For Native Americans in the region (some of whom had participated in the trade), the loss of a primary source of material sustenance also destroyed the important cultural traditions that relied on the buffalo.

ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During summer months, the robes would be worn with the fur-side out, and during the winter, with the fur inside, for warmth. With the fur inside, the decorated hide would be revealed. Robes for Native American women were typically painted with geometric patterns; robes for men were painted with pictorial scenes that described events or visions experienced by the wearer. This particular robe features a series of hills, tethered horses near a tepee frame, a group of men shooting from an enclosure, and more. Each time the person who wore this displayed the visual representations of courageous acts in battle, it re-established his social status within his community. Contemporary Native American Plains artists continue to employ some of the same aesthetic conventions, but on the new media of paper and canvas.

This painted robe was revealed when a cloth lining wore away; it had been used for many years as a carriage robe by the Saunders family in Salem.

SAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Describe the various vignettes painted on the hide of this buffalo robe.
- What kinds of activities or experiences are captured there?
- What does this suggest about what is important for Native Americans to preserve and display?
- What does this suggest about their values and traditions?
- Considering the history of this robe, how did Native Americans and eastern consumers value this robe differently?

SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Compare this buffalo robe with one of the portraits in this guide (perhaps Pepperell, Derby, or Waldo). All express individual experiences and cultural values. Ask the class to discuss these similarities and also different traditions in expressing identity.
- For lower levels, ask students to compare the buffalo robe and different portraits as ways to understand important ideas about the person who owned them. Ask students about other ways we can express our identities and experiences to others. Ask students to use one of these methods to create an expression about experiences that are important to them.

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