

**ANTROPOLOGICAL PAPERS OF  
THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF  
NATURAL HISTORY, VOL. I, PART  
II. SOME PROTECTIVE DESIGNS  
OF THE DAKOTA**

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Antropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, Vol. I, Part II. Some Protective Designs of the Dakota by Clark Wissler

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**CLARK WISSLER**

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**American Museum of Natural  
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SOME PROTECTIVE DESIGNS OF THE DAKOTA.

BY

CLARK WISSLER.

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## INTRODUCTION.

The decorative art of the Dakota has been treated in a preceding paper, in which brief mention was made of religious art, or that art in which there was a definite, unmistakable motive on the part of the artist to represent mythical or philosophical ideas. In this more serious art, a large number of designs may be characterized as "protective designs," because their presence or possession is in part a protection. The idea in a protective design seems to be a symbolical appeal to the source or concrete manifestation of a protective power. It is not easy to get the point of view and the spirit of the faith that make these designs significant, but from the detailed explanations of them some general idea can be formed. The descriptions given in this paper are based upon the statements of Indians, in most cases the executors of the designs. The attitude of the reader toward such a study as this is often that of concluding that the points of view set forth by a writer are universal in the tribe. This leads to a great deal of superficial criticism. In the opinion of the writer, any rejection of such study because one or two or several Indians deny all knowledge of some or all of the specific native accounts upon which conclusions are based, is absurd. We might as well test the artistic sense of a city by calling in one or two persons from the street. As a case in point, the reader is referred to the remarks of J. Owen Dorsey on the authenticity of Bushotter's *Double Woman*.<sup>1</sup> A great deal of the information received from Indians relative to religion is largely individual, and every ethnological field-worker must take the best of his material from the brightest men of a tribe. The object of this study has been to bring together ideas expressed by various individuals more or less eminent among their people, because all of these individual conceptions seem to have much in common. The data were secured by the writer when on Museum expeditions to the Teton and Yankton divisions of the Dakota.

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<sup>1</sup> Dorsey (Eleventh Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, p. 480).

## SHIELD-DESIGNS.

The circular shield was distributed over a large part of North America. A conspicuous part of the arms of Mexican warriors was "the round, small 'target' worn by the 'brave' on his left arm, and made of canes netted together and interwoven with cotton 'twofold,' covered on the outside with gilded boards and with feathers, and so strong that a hard cross-bow shot could alone penetrate them;"<sup>1</sup> but "merely ornamental shields [were also] used and carried by warriors and chiefs on festive occasions only."<sup>2</sup>

According to the same author, in Pre-Columbian times some of the Pueblo Indians used a thick disk of buffalo-hide as a shield. On the Plains, from the Rio Grande to the Saskatchewan, the circular shield of buffalo-hide was, until the extinction of the buffalo, a part of the regalia of every warrior. These shields usually bore symbolic designs. In many cases the designs were painted upon the rawhide itself, and protected by a buckskin cover; while in other cases the designs were painted upon the cover. Practically no shields of buffalo-hide are to be found in the hands of the surviving Dakota; but in social and religious ceremonies, models or shield-covers of buckskin or cloth, upon which are painted the designs formerly placed on shields, are often used. For purposes of study the writer secured such models of shields, with explanations of the designs and with other shield-lore, from persons who formerly owned buffalo-hide shields.

When the enemies of the Dakota were armed with native weapons, the shield had some value in itself, because few arrows could get through it, and it was of sufficient strength to ward off a blow from a club or an axe; but even at that time the designs and medicine objects tied to the shield seem to have been regarded as of greater importance than the mechanical properties of the shield itself. It was the power represented by the design to which the owner of the shield looked for protection. Naturally, with the introduction of fire-arms, shields ceased to have a real protective value; but their designs were still looked upon as capable of affording protection against evil. According to the statements of some old men who still have faith in protective designs, the ancient shield manifested its power upon the mind of the enemy by influencing them to shoot at the shield rather than at the exposed parts of the body of its bearer. But when fire-arms were introduced, experience demonstrated that the shield was no longer a desirable object in battle, because the same influence

<sup>1</sup> Bandelier (*Reports of the Peabody Museum*, Vol. II, p. 109).

<sup>2</sup> Bandelier, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

that drew arrows to it drew bullets also, and in this case with fatal results. From this they concluded that guns represented a mystic power superior to that of shield-designs, but that the latter were still efficacious, except where so overpowered.

This explanation is interesting, because these men seem to have grasped the idea that the shield, being a conspicuous object, would attract the attention and thus the aim of the enemy; but they confused this psychological explanation of the observed facts with a mystic conception that the magic power of the design upon the shield was the cause or force that reached out and lay hold of the attention of the enemy. Yet the introduction of fire-arms did not relegate the shield to oblivion; and shield-designs are still cherished by men of the olden time, because they represent a kind of individual totem or protective power.

The following descriptions of shield-designs are given with the interpretations of their owners.

A shield-cover decorated with feathers, bearing a design used by a chief on ceremonial occasions, and said by him to be the copy of a shield carried in his youth, is shown in Plate v. The black border on top of the shield takes the form of the new moon, which it represents. In the centre of the shield is a well executed drawing of an Indian on horseback. The horse is in blue, with zigzag black lines extending down the legs. The blue color of the horse indicates his connection with the thunder, or the powers of the sky. The background of the shield is in yellow, but the lower part has been worked over with green. Symmetrically arranged around the mounted figure are four circles of purplish color, representing a phenomenon observed in the sky, which seems to have been either the halo of the sun, or the phenomenon that passes under the name of "sun-dogs." From the description of the owner of the shield, it appears that these four circles were associated in his mind with the medicine-hoop. He stated that this design as a whole was the representation of what he saw in a dream; that the moon with its dark color was drawn to represent the night, because that was the time when he had this experience; and that in the dream he saw a horse and rider appear in the sky surrounded by the four circular objects, as indicated upon the shield. It appears from his explanation, that the association of the rings with the medicine-hoop was his own individual interpretation of the significance of his dream. In the dream he could see a shield associated with these objects as they would appear in reality; but in the design he attempted to convey an idea of what he saw in conformity with the conventional modes of representative art practised by his tribe.

Another shield-cover (Fig. 1) bears a bird-design, representing to the owner the osprey (?). One half of the background of this shield is in yel-



low; the other half, in light green.<sup>1</sup> These two colors represent the appearance of the sky at sunrise; the yellow corresponding to the region of the dawn, and the green to the dark sky above. The four stars symmetrically arranged are colored black for the night, yellow for the dawn, blue for the evening, and red for the day; or in other words the whole circle is represented. The design of the bird presents some interesting details. The



Fig. 1 (50-2970). Shield-cover with Design. Diameter, 42 cm.

lightning-symbols represent the death-dealing power conferred upon the owner of such a shield-design at the time of his dream. The red marks upon the breast of the bird, representing the national emblem of the United

<sup>1</sup> In the drawings, colors are indicated by the following devices: red, by horizontal shading; yellow, by vertical shading; green, by left oblique shading; blue or purple, by right oblique shading. Black and white have their conventional qualities. The drawings were made by Miss R. B. Howe.

States, were interpreted by the owner as symbolizing such death-dealing power in contending with soldiers. The peculiar feature upon the tail of the bird represents an additional experience, and was added to the shield about the year 1867, after a successful engagement with the United States troops, in which the owner of the shield participated. According to his account, the design on the tail of the bird is the conventional symbol of the spider-web, but is used here to represent an experience preceding the above engagement. As the war-party were moving forward, they saw a strange appearance in the sky, which took the form of this symbol. The sight of it caused the war-party to scatter; and the interpretation placed upon this by the owner was, that its manifestation of supernatural power, which was to be conveyed to them, would cause their enemies to scatter in like confusion. During the confusion into which the party fell, the stars moved rapidly through the sky and the lightning flashed in all directions. This is represented by the four corners of the design. At the top of the shield is a braid of sweet-grass and a small buckskin bag containing medicines of a supposed charm-value. Before going into battle, some of this sweet-grass was to be burnt, and ritualistic songs pertaining to the shield were to be sung. This having been done, the shield was supposed to protect its owner from his enemies. Eight feathers, arranged in pairs, are attached to the shield, and their quills are painted to correspond to the parts of the background to which they are attached.

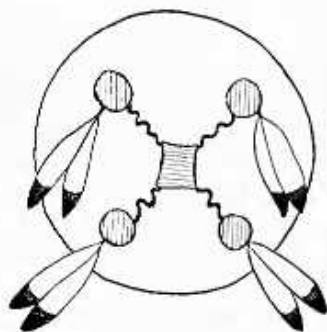


Fig. 2. Shield-design, from a Drawing by a Native.

There is one interesting feature connected with this shield-design, and that is the fact that some of the old men disapproved of the owner placing the spider-web design upon the tail of the bird, because it was a mixing of supernatural manifestations. The incident connected with this design was regarded by them as most extraordinary, and as having been worthy of distinct and separate representation. According to the accepted modes of interpretation, this experience should have been represented upon a new shield.

The specimen shown in Plate VI is not a shield-cover, but was nevertheless spoken of as a shield; and the design upon it is an old shield-design. The specimen is a cape (made of cotton) worn around the shoulders in such a way that the design could be seen upon the back of the wearer. Here

are represented the rainbow, the thunder-bird (possessing in this case characteristics which indicate that it was copied from the national emblem of the United States), the new and full moon, and the stars. It will be

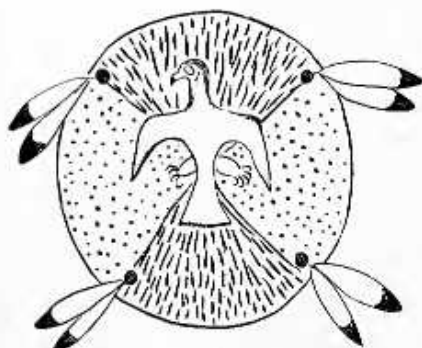


Fig. 3. Drawing, by a Native, of a Shield-cover.

observed that the stars in this case are four-pointed, similar to the design of the spider-web, and they are regarded by the Indians as an example of the old original method of representing them.

As a great many Indians who formerly owned shields do not now possess shield-covers, the writer secured drawings made by them of their former shields. Such a sketch is reproduced in outline (Fig. 2). In the centre is a design of the spider-web filled in with red. The ground of the shield is in blue, representing the sky. Above and below are circular areas in yellow, representing clouds or heaven. Lightning-symbols in red connect the yellow cloud-symbols with the four corners of the spider-web design. As a final suggestion relative to this interpretation, the informant said, "The spider is the friend of the thunder."

The manner in which the owner secured the shield-design represented in Fig. 3 is as follows. Once when a war-party of which he was a member were about to take the war-path, it was predicted by an old man that he would be killed in the first battle. Before leaving with the party, he went to an old medicine-man for help, and this man made him a shield bearing the design described below. The bird represented is the hawk, — flying from the sky, protected by the thunder from the hail-stones that fly thick and fast about him, — and symbolizes the manner in which the owner of the shield will pass safely through the hail of lead from the enemy. Four pairs of hawk-feathers are arranged symmetrically on the circumference of the shield.

In the shield-design in Fig. 4, we find a large circular area in the centre

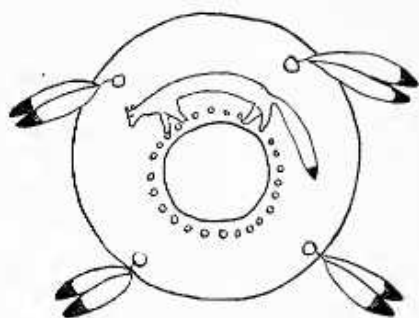


Fig. 4. Shield-design, from a Drawing by a Native.