CHEYENNE SHIELDS
and Their Cosmological Background

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Until the past decade, different areas of specialization in the study of Plains Indian art and culture were generally separated. Ethnographic research and art studies were conducted in separate departments and by different scholars (Schneider 1980). The results of their research were published independently, and the conclusions of ethnohistorians and ethnographers had little influence on historians and scholars of Plains Indian art. As Native American art studies have challenged earlier interpretations of material culture objects, and art history has become a history of visual expression, the depth of the research has increased. Some art historians have called this development "new art history" (Vastokas 1986-1987:13; Phillips 1989:5-13), while others note that there is nothing especially new about it (Penney 1992:25). New art history avoids the dichotomy between formal and iconological analysis, thus emphasizing the relationship between form and context.

This paper illustrates the utility of combining classic art historical typology and iconography with the sociocultural approach of new art history, and applies this method to a single Plains Indian tribe, the Cheyenne. My purpose is to illustrate that by employing both art historical methods and ethnographic data we will be able to understand the meanings of some "visual representations." More strictly speaking, I shall explore the layer of "decoration" on some selected objects of material culture that the English art historian Ernst H. Gombrich has called the "dominant meaning, the intended meaning or principal purpose of the picture" (1972:15-16). A comparative analysis of tribal myths and legends, as well as rites and ceremonies, may help us to reconstruct the intricate web of a complex belief system and its visual manifestations. I make no claim at all to reveal what was in the Cheyenne artists' minds, but only what is expressed graphically, and occasionally verbally. Doubtless, the artists' intentions were broader than we can ever appreciate, but this does not prevent us from recognizing the general content of their work.

Before considering our subject in detail, it will be helpful to summarize Cheyenne cosmological beliefs briefly. The Cheyenne worldview has been discussed in detail by Peter J. Powell (1969), John H. Moore (1974, 1984, 1986) and Karl H. Schlesier (1987). Here follows a condensed form of this cosmology after Moore (1984:294-301): The Cheyenne universe might be arranged along a vertical axis and two horizontal axes, each perpendicular to the other. At the zenith of the vertical axis, within Otabwoom, the Blue Sky-Space, is the spiritual realm of Me'ho'o, the All-Father, while the nadir within Ne'hoo, the Deep Earth, embodies Ne'hesta; the female principle. The female principle is emphatically not spiritual, however, for the vertical dialectic of cosmology is played out between spiritualness at the zenith and matter/feminaleness at the nadir. The spatial zones between zenith and nadir are tiered, and all witness, in various ways, the interaction between male energy and female substance. Male energy is represented by such spiritual entities as Atowz, the Sun; Amoenito, the Moon; Nimevoto, the Rain; Noomono, the Thunder; and Vovatas, the Tomato. The material manifestations of feminaleness include not only the sterile Deep Earth, Ne'hoon, but also the zone of fertile soil, Votostoom.
next tier above Voltoostoom is Tadavoom, the atmosphere, then follows Setoowoom, the Nearer Sky-Space, and Otaataow, the Blue Sky-Space, at the very top of the cosmos. All entities of the universe, except Ma heo o (all spirit) and Nethoam (all matter or substance) represent some organic composition of spirituality and substance. Entities within zones are entitled to more or less respect depending on how much spirit and how much substance they embody. For example, three categories of birds occupy the three upper zones of the universe — the Atmosphere, the Nearer Sky-Space and the Blue Sky-Space — depending on their sacredness and role in Cheyenne cosmology (Moore 1986:179-187).

The horizontal axis of the universe, the four directions, are related to respective colors, social structure and personal ritual paraphernalia, so the symbols related to these directions are more ambiguous than those of the vertical axis.

Several previous scholars have presented graphic charts of the Cheyenne view of the cosmos (Comba 1987-19; Moore 1974:147; 1984:295; Schlesier 1987-5), but none of these serves our purpose. I offer another graphic schema which is applicable to most Cheyenne heraldic images. This chart (Fig. 5) provides a place in which we can place all of the biological and spiritual entities that appear in Cheyenne heraldic art.

In the collection of the Rochester Museum and Science Center, Rochester, New York, is a decorated war shield attributed to the Sioux (Fig. 8; illustrated in Bergs 1968:3, and Rose 1983:back cover). As I have noted elsewhere (Nagy 1984), we have every reason to doubt this attribution, since the shield was collected by George H. Brodhead at Camp Supply, Indian Territory, hundreds of miles south of Sioux country. Since the fort was abandoned in 1865, the shield has been attributed to Lilita Berge to that year or earlier (1968:3). Besides being collected far from any Sioux people, the design categories employed by the shield’s Native American artist suggest a reappraisal of its origin. According to my Cheyenne shield typology this design fits into the category of “four spots, with a central element,” within which element is represented by the eye of the buffalo. In this case the head of the buffalo is represented by a pair of long, slender, upward-directed horns, a little above the center of the shield. The four spots are represented by dots. Between the horns is a red disc also surrounded by dots, and there are four dark discs evenly distributed near the border of the shield. These discs are the basis for the four directions; the disc below the horns is the moon; the disc between the horns and the sun is the star; the disc below the horns is the sun, and the disc above the horns represents the animal that took flight on Whistling Elk and taught them how to make this shield. The moon is the spirit that during the night protected the brave who carried the shield; and the sun protected him during the day. The upper round spot to the left of the horns represents the wind which comes from the setting sun. The upper spot at the right of the horns represents the wind from the north, the lower spot on the right, the wind from the east, and the lower spot on the left, the wind from the south.

From Grinnell’s description we can conclude that the four spots on the shield collected by Brodhead (Fig. 8) also represent the four directions. Additional features of the origin story which deserve attention are the “rocky point running into a lake,” “a buffalo-skull” and “a buffalo from the water,” all of which shall be addressed below.

The next motif on the Brodhead shield that can firmly be placed on my cosmological chart is the bordering row of buffalo hoof prints, representing the buffalo herds. The buffalo’s role in Cheyenne cosmology is related to the earth, to food and to shelter (Moore 1974:247), so we can place the row of buffalo hoof prints firmly on the level of the middle world. The common appearance of the hoof prints and the directional spots, however, refer to another important Cheyenne belief. According to several Cheyenne tales, the buffalo originate and live in great caves (hezov) underground (Grinnell 1909:154-157, 161-167, 244-252), and they present themselves to be killed whenever Ma heo o wants to bless the Cheyenne (Moore 1974:163). That the four red circles are bounded by perimeters of contrasting color (white and black) suggest that these four spots refer not only to the four directions...
The design on the tip model is unique. It features a bird perched on a branch, with the bird's wings spread wide, and a turquoise background. The bird is depicted with detailed feathers and a strong sense of movement. The turquoise color is vivid and gives the model a vibrant look. This design, along with the use of symbolic elements like the bird and the branch, suggests a deep connection between the artists and the culture of the Southwest. The use of turquoise in the design also reinforces the cultural significance of this stone in the region.
color visually represents Mar'heo o, the Supreme Being, from whom emanates exhausto, the cosmic power that permeates and maintains the world (Schlesier 1987:7). This permeating force is again expressed visually on a third shield, which also has a black arc on the upper perimeter. In this instance, the entire surface of the shield is spotted by pale green dots, each tracing a short green line, indicating that they are falling through the Nearer Sky-Space, the domain of raptors. These tiny dots may symbolize green hail, which the Cheyenne believe to be the active agent that stimulates new life each spring (Moore 1974: 154-159). Thus short blue lines ending in red circles on the Brodhead shield may also refer to exhausto, the primary source of energy, coming down from the blue lode of Mar'heo o, at All Fath, bringing power and protection for the bearer of the shield. Further examples emphasize that these lines ending in dots really are the visual expression of this Cheyenne theological concept. The first is an unattributed Ghost Dance dress from the Southern Plains (Fig. 2). Because of the iconographic characteristics of the decoration on this dress, I consider it to be of Cheyenne manufacture, and I shall interpret its design accordingly. The upper three-quarters of the dress is painted blue, with five-pointed white stars covering the field. A bright green border lines this blue field on the skirt of the dress, and the remaining quarter is painted yellow. Sixteen green lines, each ending in a green dot, hang down from this border. Just above the fringe, a red line runs along the bottom of the skirt, with small red triangles projecting above, and bordered by a thin green blue line. The upper blue field with the stars symbolizes the night Blue Sky-Space; the yellow field, the Nearer Sky-Space; the red line with the red triangles indicates Ats'oaman, the Deep Earth; and the greenish blue line above them symbolizes Vostosot, the Fertile Soil. It was recently written that "the little lines with the balls on the ends may be a way to note time" (Joseph, Thomas and Eldred 1990:57). This is possible true, but I think a more plausible explanation is that they represent cosmic power emanating from the Blue Sky-Space to energize all living matter on Mother Earth. In discussing cosmic power, John Moore writes: "In Cheyenne, there are a multitude of expressions for this kind of energy, the most formal being Exhausto, which I translate as "cosmic potency. All forms of power, life, and energy in the universe, however, are of the same sort, and are transmutable one from the other" (1974-1975, emphasis added). This suggests that we might expect to find power symbols radiating from sources other than the Blue Sky-Space. As one example, a shield cover in the collection of the National Museum of the American Indian features a strange animal (Cat. No. 16/2489). At first glance this appears to be a buffalo, but it is very probably a depiction of the Ats'oaman (a four-legged monster with no legs). Its springs. It is described as being like a bull. Offerings are made at springs supposed to be inhabited by such a monster" (Grinnell 1923, Vol. 2:98-99). In his dictionary, Petter gives the name as Arxieo, and further says that not only do the Cheyenne make offerings to them, "but also make images of them, which they worship. The five lines ending in dots on either side of the Ats'oaman could represent the inherent potency with which he protects the shield bearer. In a second example (Fig. 9), these lines appear like a corona around a snapping turtle's shell. In both form and function, a turtle's shell is analogous to a shield. These examples suggest that deciphering the short lines with dots on the shields means to perceive cosmic power seems to be the correct choice, and this interpretation is in total accord with Cheyenne theological concepts. In conclusion, I would like to summarize the powers invoked in the painting of the Brodhead shield (Fig. 7). Following Erwin Parzousky's iconographic-ideographic classification (1985), it becomes clear that Cosmic Power, the Thunder and the Guardians of the four directions are the primary forces involved, which in a metamorphizing system of associations means that the bearer of the shield is capable of repelling the thunders and bullets of his enemies throughout the four corners of the world. Our analysis of the Brodhead shield and other heraldic objects suggests that Cheyenne religious concepts are expressed artistically. The figures and designs on Cheyenne heraldic objects (shields, painted tips and figurative parfleches) are arranged hierarchically, as models of the universe. Circular shield designs can be seen as overviews of sacred space, whereas other Cheyenne heraldic objects are equally interpreted as reflections of the cosmos. Certainly they serve not only as indicators of social status for the individual, but also fulfill a mnemonic and tutorial function, reflecting cosmological traditions for the entire community. Footnotes 1 Laman has so far been unable to confirm the existence of this cosmological structure with current Cheyenne speakers (Glenmore and Laman 1984:216-221; Laman 1994). He has, however, found current pre-1885. Paint on leather, horse hair locks, brass hawk-feet. Collected by George H. Brodhead at Camp Sigulgy, Indian Territory.Courtesy Rochester Museum and Science Center, Rochester, New York, Cat. No. RM 9536. AE 6952.

7. Author's chart illustrating the three-layered meanings of each design unit of the Brodhead shield.
speakers able to understand and translate these terms to English. Claims for the historical (apparently ceremonial) usage of these terms can be found as early as Peter 1917-70.

In the unpublished Cheyenne field notes of James Mooney there is a more detailed description and identification of this lake: "Medicine Lake, alias Top Pole Trail Lake -- Wy. DeSmitt Lake?... So called because lines on rock running into lake as if made by dragging tipi poles. South of Powder river and north from Tsimshin-j OrderedDict -- Fruedak (Women) river... Fasting report for Cheyennes and other tribes." Mooney 1902-1907. MS #2531. Mooney provided two additional forms of the Cheyenne term: Moosanow and Masemian. Another form of the term appears in the unpublished Cheyenne field notes of Truman Mitchelson. He collected the lake called "Story about Other" in Cheyenne. Here we find the form as masikanow, with the meaning given as "yellow lodge" (Mitchelson n.d. MS #733).

I wish to acknowledge this idea to Wirthed Coleman, San Francisco, California, who transposed some tipi designs to shield forms in his book on Cheyenne art (Coleman 1962).

I would like to thank F. Dennis Lessard, Santa Fe, New Mexico, for calling my attention to this specimen. The small model is a circular metal base, and the painting is executed on the canvas cover. Because of the geographical distribution of the American northwest-tailed kite, we might suppose that the Birdhead shield was made by a Southern Cheyenne. I would like to thank Christian F. Feest,

University of Frankfurt, Germany, for calling my attention to an early painted buffalo robe in the collection of the Museum de l'Histoire. Paris (Cat. No. MH 78.32.134), that also depicts a stylized thunderbird head down -- that is, shining down from Heaven (Vitamin and Horse Capture 1993:120-121, pl. 14).

One of these Cheyenne shield covers is in the collection of the Colorado State Historical Society (Cat. No. E. 1890.11). This peasant location of the other example is unknown; it was stolen from a United States private collection during the 1960s.

This shield is in a private collection.

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