

Indian Teepee Designs

Their Historical Significance

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THE CREATION OF THE VARIOUS DESIGNS OF INDIAN TEEPEES

The average observer will invariably exclaim: "What are those designs and what do they represent—why don't they paint flowers or something more exquisite?" Little does he know, that some of these designs have passed from one generation to the next, from time immemorial, and that the colors and design cannot be changed to suit individual taste.

The original design must be rigidly maintained, even to the location of the various objects on the teepee. There are three main sources from which these designs are obtained; they are as follows:

FIRST: Those that have been kept from one generation to the next, from time immemorial.

SECOND: Those that were created by individuals who copy a design given to them in dreams or by vision.

THIRD: Those that are created by war deeds. These three sources from which a design is obtained will be explained in the following article.

DESIGNS GENERALLY USED ON MOST TEEPEES

There are two designs used extensively on teepees. These are the chain of conical objects painted around the lower or bottom part of the teepee, and the seven circles painted on, or near the flaps or smoke regulators, at the top of the teepee directly above the doorway.

The former mentioned, cone-shaped paintings from a row. These start at the doorway and extend around the bottom part of the teepee to the other side of the doorway. They represent the mountains, and are a token of permanence. It is believed by the Indians, that in having this design along with the principal design on the main body of the teepee the existence of the design will last indefinitely.

The seven circles painted on the top of the teepee, near, or on the flaps, or smoke regulators, represent the Seven Stars (as called by the Indians) or generally known as the Dipper. "The seven stars of the great bear"—these are painted on the teepee, either in the form of the dipper, or painted in a group. When painted in a group, six circles are painted in a row forming a circle and one circle is painted in the centre, making the complete set of the stars. But in both cases they signify the same meaning. The belief is, that by having this design, the design on the main body of the teepee will also have the blessing of the heavens.

Another design sometimes used with the star design is the black background, in which the star design is painted when this is used, all the top part of the teepee is painted black. This represents, "night." When the seven stars display all their brightness and glory, and according to Indian belief, all things spiritual and supernatural function. It is believed that before a design can meet with the approval of both heavenly and earthly beings, it must contain among its contents certain objects representing the heavens and the earth that we live on.

The mountain and star designs may be used with any design, but in every case where this is to be done, the Indian who is adding these designs to the design he already owns must go through certain ceremonial rites. In doing this, the design as a whole meets with the approval of the tribe.

OWNERSHIP OF DESIGN AN IMPORTANT POINT

When a design is in the position of an Indian he is considered the sole owner of that design. Nobody else may use that design. He may use the design for as many teepees as he wishes. For instance, he would have the design on a certain teepee, and this teepee is destroyed by the elements, he may build another teepee and paint the design on the new one. Or he may have a very large teepee. This would be too heavy to take along with the numerous articles that he must carry with him. He may then build a smaller teepee and also paint the same design on it too.

When an Indian sells or gives a design to some other Indian, he has no further right to use that design. The design then belongs to the new owner.

When a design passes from one person to another, certain

ceremonial rites have to be performed. The ceremonial rites in all designs are the same, but the ceremonial songs are different. Each design has its own set of ceremonial songs.

The following is the typical procedure followed in all cases when an Indian wishes to purchase a design from another Indian:

The Indian will go to his own teepee, then will prepare his pipe and fill it with the necessary ingredients, then he goes to the teepee of the Indian who owns the design he wants. He goes in and makes certain gestures with his arms and hands, and at the same time offers a prayer. He then offers the pipe to the owner of the design and at the same time asks of him if he would sell the design which he desires to purchase. The owner of the design may never say a word, but if he accepts the pipe and smokes it, this is a token that he will sell. But if he refuses to accept the pipe after it is offered to him four times, this is a token of refusal. If the owner of the design accepts the Indian goes home and proceeds to have the horses and goods prepared with which he is buying the design.

The owner of a design may perform the ceremonial rites but the usual custom is to ask some former owner of the design to perform the ceremonial rites. It is then announced throughout the tribe that a design is to be transferred from the owner to the Indian who is buying it. In some cases an owner of a design may consent to sell his design, but before he parts with it, may demand a certain horse or a certain number of horses, before he will permit the ceremony to be performed. When a design is bought the teepee and poles usually go with the design, because the design is on the teepee and the owner of the teepee no longer owns the design.

As many design owners who wish, may attend the ceremony. A teepee is then put up where the ceremony is to be held. The Indians gather in there and the ceremony starts. After the complete set of ceremonial songs are sung and the ceremonial rites are performed, the Indian who purchased the design is then the authorized owner. No other Indian may use that design without suffering abuse from his tribesmen. It is considered a humiliation to use it without the consent of the owner. In a case where an Indian purchases a design and he does not get the teepee with it, he builds a new teepee and paints the design he purchased on it. An Indian may have as many designs as he desires to possess. Some Indians own as many as twenty designs. An Indian's wealth is counted by the number of horses he owns and the number of tangible goods in his possession.

DESIGNS KEPT FROM TIME IMMEMORIAL

There are only a few of these ancient designs in existence today. The rest have been lost. The older Indians still remember some of these designs but cannot use them, because the owners have died without selling them. Each separate design has its own history.

The old Indians claim that some of these designs are, at the least, three to four thousand years old. These designs have passed from one generation to the next, and are considered very sacred by the Indians. Some have been kept from generation to generation by hereditary title. The history of any ancient design is practically the same as the others, that is, the principle is the same. The only difference is in the source from where they were obtained.

One of the most important, and probably the oldest design in existence today is that of the bear design. This is now the property of "Many Fires," an Indian on the Blackfoot reserve at Gleichen. The history of it was obtained from "Red Leggings." This old Indian is one of the few Indians who keep records of Indian customs and he also keeps a record of the history of all the ceremonial rites. The story as told by Red Leggings is as follows:

The Indians of the north-western plains have always been known as a transient people, moving from one place to another, as the means of living was mostly made by hunting buffalo and other game. At the time of the story, the means of transportation was by dog and travois. There were no horses at the time. Some Indians had more than fifteen dogs and travois. Each dog and travois carried different articles belonging to the same owner, for instance, one dog and travois would carry the owner's teepee, others would carry the tepee

poles. The dogs and travois were used for carrying the children also. This period is called the dog period. The bear design was created during this period.

The bear design was obtained by an Indian who was raised by bears, from his childhood until the time he was captured by his tribesmen. How he was obtained by the bears is told in the following story.

The Indians were moving from one place to another. While they were travelling along the edge of a large forest, something in the forest attracted the dogs. These dogs were used for carrying their possessions. Some of the dogs ran into the forest. One of the dogs carried a little child. The Indians immediately followed the dogs into the forest and found every dog except the one carrying the little child. After an exhaustive search through the forest they found the dog, but it had lost the travois in which the child was carried. The Indians searched the forest for many days but failed to find the child. It was then assumed that the child must have been devoured by some wild animal.

SAW HUMAN CREATURE WITH BEARS

A few years later, a party of warriors were standing near the edge of a precipice overlooking a river, and on the other side of the river they saw a bear and her cubs coming out of the bush towards the river. With the bear and cubs they saw a human creature. The party immediately went across the river and went to the spot where they saw the bear, but could not find the bear. One of the Indians found a large hole on the side of a bank, this Indian went to the other members of the party and told them about the hole that he had found. The party then went to the hole and surrounded it. One of the Indians approached the hole and learned that the bear was in the hole. The party then proceeded to entice the bear to come out, but she could not be tempted. The party went home to the encampment and told the Indians there about the bear and the human creature they saw with it.

The next day a large party of Indians went out to try and tempt the bear to come out. The party first surrounded the hole, then one Indian went towards the hole, he stopped a few yards away and listened to see if he could hear any sound. Not hearing anything, he went up to the mouth of the hole and found that the bear was not in there, but by good fortune there were the cubs and the human creature. The Indian immediately told the rest. Then a number of the strongest Indians, after much struggle, finally captured the human creature and took him to their encampment. It is not told of what they did to their captive after they arrived at the encampment, but it was learned that he could not speak a word of any kind, all he did was make a few growling sounds from his throat.

THOUGHT THE BEARS WERE HIS PARENTS

Some years later the captive was able to speak their language, he then told them about his life and that he thought his parents were bears. It was learned later that the captive was the child who was lost in the forest by the dog. The captive became one of the most prominent Indians of the tribe. He made frequent visits to the hole where the bear lived. Every night after he visited the bear, she could be heard howling, so affectionate was her attachment to him. It was in one of his visits to the bear that she gave him the bear design, and gave him the name of "Big Bear" also.

Big Bear then painted the design on his teepee. The name of the first Indian who obtained the design from Big Bear is known as "Chasing Buffalo."

The place where Chasing Buffalo obtained the design from Big Bear is now known as the junction of the Bow and Red Deer rivers. From then until today, the bear design has passed through from one generation to the next.

THE VISION OR DREAM DESIGNS

The designs that belong to this class are the most numerous as one of this nature is created by individual Indians and medicine men. Nearly all prominent chiefs and medicine men of the past have created designs which were given to individual Indians, in dreams or in vision. Some Indians claim they were given a design by a supernatural being, while still conscious of all their faculties.

History of a Dream Design

One of the most popular designs of this nature is now the property of old Donald McMaster, of the Blackfoot reserve. This is the Thunder Bird and Horse design. It is very old. The name of the Indian who has created it is disputed, but its history has been kept by the various Indians who have owned the design.

The story of how the design was obtained is as follows:

An Indian went out on a hunting

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