



### Moccasins

Plains Region, n.d., (acquired 1858).

10.5in x 4in x 3.5in, Moccasins: Brain-tanned deer hide, rawhide, beads, sinew (?)

Catalog number 1935.49, a+b

Provenance: Denver Art Museum (gift) 1935; Gen. Thomas Williams Collection, J. W. Douglas

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ARTH6939, Spring 2017

University of Colorado at Boulder

## Introduction and Overview

The objects held by museums are not just physical things, they are embodiments of and windows into the past. They carry the stories of the places and people they have encountered during their journey from production within a source community to their eventual placement onto a museum shelf. Many times such museum objects are accompanied by information purporting to tell their story, but no catalog card can ever truly capture the full history of a piece. Take for example the object cataloged as number 1935.49 a+b at the Denver Art Museum, a pair of beaded moccasins from the Plains region. They were donated to the museum in 1935 by J.W. Douglas, as part of the General Williams collections of ethnographic objects. The catalog information for the moccasins states that General Williams acquired the moccasins in 1858, “southwest of Cheyenne,” a city which did not exist in 1858, indicating this description was written years after the fact. The catalog card identifies the moccasins as Sioux in origin.

With this history, tracking the movement of the moccasins through time and space seems relatively simple. In this paper, I contribute to the known history of these moccasins by tracing the value of the moccasins as they moved through different social contexts, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. I will outline the value ascribed to the moccasins not only by their Indigenous source community, but by the Euro-American who traded for them in the dead of winter at an army camp, and the museum curator who brought them into the museum context. Because “The value of moccasins to one person from one viewpoint does not always match that of another,” this object history allows to not only understand the value of the moccasins, but also provides insight into the people and communities they interacted with. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul Lucavic, “Southern Cheyenne orthodoxy: A study in materiality,” PhD Diss. (Tulsa: The University of Oklahoma, 2012), 100.

## Object Histories

Telling the object history of the moccasins based on the value placed on them by different groups will offer context and deeper understanding about those groups. Values are "conceptions of the desirable," conceptions which influence the choices people make between different courses of action, in this case around these moccasins.<sup>2</sup> Value is about measure or meaning in an object, and multiple or hybrid forms of value occur simultaneously and vary between groups, based on perception and context.<sup>3</sup> As these moccasins moved between different social spheres and contexts they were valued and perceived differently, which gives insight into the social values of the different groups. Use, economic, artistic, and community value and others are all enveloped into these moccasins.

## Methodologies

My approach draws on the works and methods of several historians and theorists, focusing on cultural biography and object histories. This includes Igor Kopytoff and his work on cultural biographies based on commoditized values, and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's close examination of single objects to create cultural insight.<sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup> My research is also influenced by the methods of Chris Gosden and Chantal Knowles and their work on object histories in the context of colonialism, as well as the work of Ruth Phillips, from her work on the transformation of meaning as objects circle through different cultures and settings.<sup>6</sup> In my research I also

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<sup>2</sup> Lucavic, "Southern Cheyenne orthodoxy," 102.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth E. Ferry, *Not ours alone: patrimony, value, and collectivity in contemporary Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 18.

<sup>4</sup> Igor Kopytoff, "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process" in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (London: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The age of homespun: objects and stories in the creation of an American myth* (Vintage, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Chris Gosden and Chantal Knowles, *Collecting colonialism: Material culture and colonial change* (Oxford: Berg Publishers Inc., 2001); Ruth B. Phillips, "Re-placing Objects: Historical Practices for the Second Museum Age," *The Canadian Historical Review* 86, no. 1 (2005): 83-110.

prioritized native voice and indigenous sources where possible. The projects described by Linda Tuhiwai Smith were a key source, including the critical re-reading of history and deconstruction of accounts of the West to see new narratives and meanings, sharing knowledge as a collective benefit to a larger community, and a reframing of old questions. In this paper, I seek to reframe old questions about Indigenous material culture, and ask: What is the value of a pair of moccasins? Why are they important?<sup>7</sup> By utilizing these approaches and methods, the answer becomes clear: it depends on who you ask.

### Materials and Meaning: Creating the Moccasins

The production of works such as these moccasins begins with the hunt. The production of clothing in traditional contexts on the Plains was the role of women, but the procurement of materials, particularly the animal products, was the role of men. In this way, both genders participated in traditional structures of production.<sup>8</sup> A woman more than likely prepared a deer hide into the leather that was used to create these moccasins. Much of our modern understanding of leatherworking techniques of the past comes from the revival movement in traditional arts; today indigenous people throughout the United States and Canada tan hides using their own recipe and methods, adapted and handed down through generations.<sup>9</sup> Through their teachings, an understanding of the leather in these moccasins can be developed.

The act of tanning leather is and was not only a physical act, but has a powerful spiritual side as well, and protocol had to be followed. Offerings were often made to the animals that gave

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<sup>7</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (New York: Zed books, 2007) 142-162.

<sup>8</sup> David W. Penny, "Expressions of Ethnicity: Nineteenth Century Dress," in *Art of the American Indian Frontier: The Chandler-Pohrt Collection*, 28-54 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992) 29-31.

<sup>9</sup> Morgan Baillargeon and Ruth McConnell, *North American Aboriginal Hide Tanning: the act of transformation and revival* (Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2010) 5.

their lives for the production of vital materials, thanking them for what was given. Throughout the tanning process, songs and prayers were often recited. Brains-tanning requires energy, spiritual and physical. This comes from the songs, prayers, and poems recited.<sup>10</sup> Brain-tanning refers to the use of animal brains in the tanning process; this was not only an effective means of tanning, but a spiritual, transformative act, as many Plains tribes believe the spirit resides in the head. By brain-tanning, the life and spirit of the animal is restored into the leather piece if the animal's own brain is utilized. Prayers said during the process restore the power of the animal to the hide and everything made of the hide retains this power and life. This gives the moccasins a materiality, an agency and power of their own.<sup>11</sup> A modern moccasin maker noted that "Objects within the material world, such as moccasins, are not lifeless, but rather they require the energy from Maheo (the Great Spirit) to live, and that energy comes into the material objects through prayer, fasting, and religious ceremonies."<sup>12</sup>

A Cheyenne legend relates the story of a man who failed to care for his moccasins properly and allowed them to break: the moccasins then admonish the man for not taking better care of them. "This story reveals a simple, yet profound message that gets to the core of orthodox views related to moccasins: moccasins have agency. From a Cheyenne perspective, the spirit within the moccasin—that is the moccasin—can protect you both physically and spiritually, but has the ability to be vengeful when not respected."<sup>13</sup>

Women performing tanning followed family or tribal recipes and procedures, including skinning, soaking, stretching, fleshing, dehairing, applying the brain-tanning solution, smoking,

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<sup>10</sup> Baillargeon, *North American Aboriginal Hide Tanning*, 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> Morgan Baillargeon and Ruth McConnell, *North American Aboriginal Hide Tanning: the act of transformation and revival* (Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2010), 4-6.

<sup>12</sup> John Paul Lucavic, "Southern Cheyenne orthodoxy: A study in materiality," PhD Diss. (Tulsa: The University of Oklahoma, 2012) 81.

<sup>13</sup> Lucavic, "Southern Cheyenne orthodoxy," 79.

softening [in water], wringing, drying, softening [physically], and a second smoking. Rawhide is complete before the full tanning process, and produces a material that is not as supple as true leather, but is still and hard and can be used in other ways, including the soles of the moccasins. Knowledge was shared during this process, such as that from Plains tribes which taught that hides cannot be tanned on hot days, as it dries too quickly and becomes brittle.<sup>14</sup> Because the act of tanning was generally a women's task, she owned the finished pieces, and retained not only economic power, but social prestige gained from her abilities to produce technical pieces.<sup>15</sup>

These moccasins are made in the side-seam style, where a single piece of leather is cut to the right shape, then folded over and stitched up the interior side and up the heel to create the moccasin. This type of moccasin was most popular on the Central and Northern plains.<sup>16</sup> The rawhide soles were added as a secondary piece. Hard rawhide soles were adopted on the Plains in the mid-eighteenth century and probably derived from Apache footwear or European boots.<sup>17</sup>

Deep cultural value was embedded in the ability to create things. The sense of a connection between a woman's worth and her creative ability was shared by many Plains tribes.<sup>18</sup> This is expressed in not just the production of the leather, but in the beadwork on the uppers of the moccasins. The ability to create beautiful beadwork was a mark of social status and value for women in the tribe, similar to the value of the hunt or war for men.<sup>19</sup> Unlike most Western notions of aesthetic in an object, "Native artists often place more emphasis on the

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<sup>14</sup> Baillargeon, Morgan, and Ruth McConnell. *North American Aboriginal Hide Tanning: the act of transformation and revival*. (Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2010) 97.

<sup>15</sup> David W. Penny, "Expressions of Ethnicity: Nineteenth Century Dress," in *Art of the American Indian Frontier: The Chandler-Pohrt Collection*, 28-54 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992) 29-34.

<sup>16</sup> Ted J. Brassler, *Native American Clothing: An Illustrated History* (Ontario: Firefly Books, 2009) 170.

<sup>17</sup> Brassler, *Native American Clothing*, 170.

<sup>18</sup> Penny, "Expressions of Ethnicity: Nineteenth Century Dress," 28-29.

<sup>19</sup> Penny, "Expressions of Ethnicity: Nineteenth Century Dress," 29.

*process* itself rather than fetishizing the object,” giving materials such as these moccasins multiple meanings at once.<sup>20</sup>

Quillwork was originally used to decorate materials on the Plains. Pony beads (named from the pony pack trains who brought them to the interior of the country), made of china and usually white, black, and sky blue, were available to Plains tribes since about 1800. These beads, generally Venetian or Bohemian, grew in prevalence on the Plains throughout the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup> Pony beads, seen in the geometric pattern around the moccasin seams and on the ankle flap in 1935.49, are irregular and larger than the later beads seen in the geometric pattern on the uppers of these moccasins. The geometric design stitched onto the uppers, or vamps, is another indication these moccasins were produced by women.<sup>22</sup>

The beaded motif on these moccasins is done in seed beads, a small, Venetian bead that entered the trade in 1840 and was available in more colors than the pony beads.<sup>23</sup> Beading applied to buckskin is generally done with sinew rather than cotton thread; consequently, these beads were most likely stitched on using lane-style beading, with deer sinew.<sup>24</sup> Plains tribes, including Western Sioux, Cheyenne, Crow, and Arapahoe, used a method suited to straight line beading called lane stitch (sometimes called hump stitch by the Sioux and lazy stitch by early collectors).<sup>25</sup> The beads are only sewed down at the end of each row, with 7-11 beads per stitch.

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<sup>20</sup> John Paul Lucavic, “Southern Cheyenne orthodoxy: A study in materiality,” PhD Diss. (Tulsa: The University of Oklahoma, 2012) 146.

<sup>21</sup> Carrie Alberta Lyford, *Quill and beadwork of the western Sioux*. “Education Division, U.S. Office of Indian Affairs,” ed. by Willard W. Beatty, Director of Education (Lawrence: Haskell Institute: 1940) 67, 56.

<sup>22</sup> Carrie Alberta Lyford, *Quill and beadwork of the western Sioux*, “Education Division, U.S. Office of Indian Affairs,” ed. by Willard W. Beatty, Director of Education (Lawrence: Haskell Institute: 1940) 69, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Lyford *Quill and beadwork of the western Sioux*, 57.

<sup>24</sup> Lyford *Quill and beadwork of the western Sioux*, 64.

<sup>25</sup> David Dean, *Beading in the Native American Tradition* (Loveland: Interweave Press, 2002) 35.

The rows done in this style tend to arch a little between stitches, resulting in a ridged effect.<sup>26</sup>

The rows of parallel ridges make it easy to identify this beadwork as Plains production.

In moccasins such as these, the beading would have been stitched onto the uppers of the piece before it was folded over into its side-seam shape. The design here is known as a “keyhole” motif, common on Plains moccasins. The image is meant to be viewed from the wearer’s perspective, and may represent a bison pound, an important piece of cultural knowledge in a society so dependent upon the bison for their way of life.<sup>27</sup> Early researchers noted that “We can recognize the early period of seed bead work as the work was still in long narrow bands with solid triangles point to point making hourglass shapes, with circles, crosses, and oblongs. The newer design styles appeared around 1870.”<sup>28</sup> A native beader recorded “The second lane-stitch design phase lasted about 1840-1870. The same older blocked elements in geometric patterns were used, but smaller and more complicated designs dominated as smaller, more uniform beads were available.”<sup>29</sup> With all of this information in mind, an educated speculation would place the production of these moccasins in the late 1840’s, or 1850’s.

### Value of Moccasins in Source Community

Amongst their source community, moccasins had multiple layers of value. As an object they had intrinsic economic value, however, contemporary Plains tribal members relate that “Within tribal communities it would be unthinkable to ask for more in return than the moccasins’ supplies are worth, because you can’t do that in our culture. That is just our ways and that was a

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<sup>26</sup> *Quill and beadwork of the western Sioux*, 61-62; Dean, *Beading in the Native American Tradition*, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Bernadette Brown, “From Artifact to Art Object: Redefining American Indian Works,” in *Splendid Heritage: Perspectives on American Indian Art*, ed. by John Warnock et al. (Salt Lake: University of Utah Press, 2009) 19; Ted J. Brasser, *Native American Clothing: An Illustrated History* (Ontario: Firefly Books, 2009) 170.

<sup>28</sup> Carrie Alberta Lyford, *Quill and beadwork of the western Sioux*, “Education Division, U.S. Office of Indian Affairs,” ed. by Willard W. Beatty, Director of Education (Lawrence: Haskell Institute: 1940) 67.

<sup>29</sup> David Dean, *Beading in the Native American Tradition* (Loveland: Interweave Press, 2002) 43.



gift that was given to us and it's an art."<sup>30</sup> Moreover, evidence suggests that these were not produced for trade but for use in the source community; a study of worn and unworn moccasins in museum collections resulted in the author's conclusion that he "assumes the moccasins that have been worn were more likely to have been worn by natives than by whites, who wanted them for keepsakes or very occasional use, rather than hard every day wear."<sup>31</sup> As the moccasins examined here show definite wear, they were not likely made purely for trade to European Americans but for use within the source community.

Within the community, moccasins have cultural value. For example, moccasin-making is full of social obligations, including obligations to perpetuate the knowledge associated with moccasin materiality and designs, and the protocols surrounding moccasin-making. These obligations are heavily influenced by duty to family, tribe, and culture.<sup>32</sup> The use of moccasin designs is also tied to cultural value. Many of the designs were used as teaching tools for cultural lessons. The purpose of decorative moccasins was not simply for aesthetic value, but even more importantly, for cultural value. The wearer of a pair of beaded moccasins, if taught their meanings, used the designs as reminders of a variety of cultural/religious lessons.<sup>33</sup> For example the bison pound motif on these moccasins may have been a reminder of the high respect Plains groups held for the spirit of the bison.<sup>34</sup>

Use value is also inherent in these moccasins. Both plain and heavily beaded moccasins were used for ceremonial purposes; beaded to show skill, technique, and the owner's economic

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<sup>30</sup> John Paul Lucavic, "Southern Cheyenne orthodoxy: A study in materiality," PhD Diss. (Tulsa: The University of Oklahoma, 2012) 116.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas P. Myers, "An Examination of Central Plains Moccasins: Evidence of Adaptation to a Reservation Economy," *The Plains Anthropologist* 32, no. 115 (1987): 37.

<sup>32</sup> John Paul Lucavic, "Southern Cheyenne orthodoxy: A study in materiality," PhD Diss. (Tulsa: The University of Oklahoma, 2012) 149.

<sup>33</sup> Lucavic, "Southern Cheyenne orthodoxy: A study in materiality," 150.

<sup>34</sup> Ted J. Brassler, *Native American Clothing: An Illustrated History* (Ontario: Firefly Books, 2009) 145.

position, and plain to showcase humility and reserve. These moccasins are neither, and are what is known as “partially beaded.” My own informed speculation, including that the owner was willing to trade them away, indicates these were intended for more frequent use than purely ceremonially, yet less than completely undecorated moccasins.<sup>35</sup>

## Context of the Plains in 1850’s

An understanding of the conditions of Plains tribes and their relations with local settler communities and Euro-American soldiers gives a better understanding of the context of the moccasins. The period between the late 1850s and the 1880s is known as the treaty period. The Bureau of Indian Affairs was established following the Horse Creek treaty of 1851 to oversee the terms of the treaties and manage the distribution of goods, allotments, promised to tribes in these treaties.<sup>36</sup> The reports sent back to Washington from these agents detail some of the interactions and relationships on the Plains.

Thomas Twiss was the Indian Agent for the Upper Platte River Agency from 1853-1860, an area of land containing groups from the Northern Cheyenne, the Western Sioux, Arapahoe, and Ute (and the site of these moccasins were traded), although treaty boundaries did not stop tribes from travelling as they wished across the Plains.<sup>37</sup> In his report back to Congress and the head of the BIA in 1855, he “begged” that the allotment of goods promised to tribes in his agency be delivered, and trade with tribes, suspended by government decree during what they called the Sioux Wars, be restored “for they are suffering and starving.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Carrie Alberta Lyford, *Quill and beadwork of the western Sioux*, “Education Division, U.S. Office of Indian Affairs,” ed. by Willard W. Beatty, Director of Education (Lawrence: Haskell Institute: 1940) 69, 157; Josephine Paterek, *Encyclopedia of American Indian Costume* (Denver: ABC-CLIO, 1996) 113.

<sup>36</sup> David Dean, *Beading in the Native American Tradition* (Loveland: Interweave Press, 2002) 5.

<sup>37</sup> JNO Whitfield, “Report 29, September 1854.” *Executive Documents of the Senate of the United States for the second session of the thirty-third Congress, 1854-1855*.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Twiss, “Report No. 25, August 1855.” *Executive Documents of the Senate of the United States for the first and second sessions of the thirty-fourth Congress, 1855-1856*.

The withheld allotment was not the only concern for the tribes of the Plains; later in the year Twiss wrote that:

“It is evident to me, from my short experience, that the bands of the plains [sic] suffer greatly... The Buffalo are becoming scarce and it is more difficult year to year for the natives to kill a sufficient number to supply themselves with food and clothing. The old and children suffer the greatest. Thousands die annually [from the cold and starvation]. The certain gradual disappearance of the buffalo is followed by the rapid, quick disappearance of the Indian. I would recommend an increase in the annuity to the tribes of this agency in the coming year. There will be the greatest suffering than at any other period without these goods.”<sup>39</sup>

Twiss reported similarly in 1859 that wild game was “...their only natural means of subsistence. When it disappears they shall perish.” By this time the herds of bison were almost gone, along with deer, elk, antelope, and mountain sheep, and the annuity, or allotment, had been withheld from the tribes for over three years, on one pretext or another.<sup>40</sup>

Tribes of the Plains, Twiss reported, lived in great fear of the wave of white men who they accused of invading their lands, and worried that they might, like the Eastern tribes, be forced to give their lands to the “white father.”<sup>41</sup> Another Agent on a neighboring tract wrote that the Natives were “very wary of American military” after the encounters that came to be known the First Sioux War.<sup>42</sup> While trading posts had previously been established for safer commerce between natives and white populations, very often of army outposts, in his agency Thomas Twiss obstructed this practice, writing “I would protest in the strongest terms to the practice of

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Twiss, “Report No. 28, August 1855.” *Executive Documents of the Senate of the United States for the first and second sessions of the thirty-fourth Congress, 1855-1856.*

<sup>40</sup> Twiss, Thomas. “Report No. 38, August 1859.” *Executive Documents of the Senate of the United States for the first and second sessions of the thirty-fifth Congress, 1859-1860.*

<sup>41</sup> Twiss, Thomas. “Report No. 38, August 1859.” *Executive Documents of the Senate of the United States for the first and second sessions of the thirty-fifth Congress, 1859-1860.*

<sup>42</sup> JNO Whitfield, “Report 29, September 1854.” *Executive Documents of the Senate of the United States for the second session of the thirty-third Congress, 1854-1855.*

permitting, although quite common in our Indian affairs, of large bands of Indians or even small parties, to come into our military posts to transact in business or for any purpose whatsoever.”<sup>43</sup>

In this period there was deep distrust between tribes and Euro-Americans, particularly government representatives, on the Plains; denied their promised allotments, many were starving, and their traditional food sources had been decimated by the newcomers. This is also substantiated by the accounts of a member of the Federal government’s Utah Expedition forces in 1857; at Fort Bridger the wagon-master noted that the land between there and Laramie was desolate, and strewn with dead and rotting livestock and horses from the war with the Mormons. When local natives offered to sell the soldiers salt, they demanded an exorbitant amount of meat and supplies in exchange. At the winter encampment at Cheyenne Pass in modern Wyoming, the author remarked the natives were “in every way pitiable, despite their notorious hatred of the white man.”<sup>44</sup>

## The Act of Exchange

At this same winter military encampment, General Thomas Williams, another member of the federal forces sent west to quell the Mormon uprising, acquired these moccasins from an unknown native source. In the socioeconomic climate they were exchanged in, the moccasins took on a new value; the ability to provide for their owner, perhaps for a family. Their economic value, previously not a realized value, was brought to the forefront. The procurement of rations, or ammunition, may have made the difference in making it through the season. While the

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<sup>43</sup> Carrie Alberta Lyford, *Quill and beadwork of the western Sioux*, “Education Division, U.S. Office of Indian Affairs,” ed. by Willard W. Beatty, Director of Education (Lawrence: Haskell Institute: 1940) 5; Twiss, Thomas. “Report No. 25, September 1856.” *Executive Documents of the Senate of the United States for the third session of the thirty-fourth Congress, 1856-1857*.

<sup>44</sup> Williams, G. Mott. “Letters of General Thomas Williams, 1862,” *The American Historical Review* 14, no. 2 (1909): 2; “The Utah Expedition; Containing a General Account of the Mormon Campaign, With Incident of Travel on the Plains & Accounts of Indian Tribes From its Commencement to the Present Time, By a Wagon Master of the Expedition.” (Cincinnati, *Safety Fund Reporter, Office Print*, 1858) 10-12.

moccasins were not, as discussed, originally intended for trade, the desolate landscape devoid of food and dotted with European Americans who did not necessarily view the tribes as friends, transformed the moccasins' value into one of survival.

## Value in a Private Collection

While we may never be able to know General Williams' exact intent in acquiring these moccasins, we know he assigned some type of personal value to ethnographic objects. He accumulated a collection of his own while traveling across the country during his military career. Generally speaking, military collectors were not uncommon in the nineteenth century. Many collectors "viewed their activities as the accumulation of and preservation of a material record of the romantic past of the Indian people they believed to be vanishing;" military men often felt this was happening before their eyes as they moved about the West.<sup>45</sup> Beyond this, men used traded goods as souvenirs, as proof of their travels and as story-telling pieces on their return to the cities of the East. Pieces could be sent as exotic gifts to friends and family, and had a prestige value as an uncommon gift compared to more common Northeastern native handicrafts.<sup>46</sup>

After General Williams' death in 1862, the trail of the moccasins goes cold until 1935. At some point in the intervening years they made their way from the Williams family to J.W. Douglas, a local businessman of Denver. The moccasins were donated by Douglas to the Denver Art Museum in 1935. In the context of the museum, the moccasins took on an entirely new value. Upon their arrival at DAM (Denver Art Museum), the moccasins became valued as "art," and as a tool for classifying and describing people of the Plains.

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<sup>45</sup> Shepard Krech III, and Barbara A. Hall, ed. *Collecting Native America, 1870-1960* (Washington DC: Papers of the Smithsonian Institution, 2014) V.

<sup>46</sup> Ruth B. Phillips, "Jasper Grant and Edward Walsh: The Gentleman-Soldier as Early Collector of Great Lakes Indian Art," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 21, no. 4 (1987): 60-61.

## Early Value Within Museum Context

From the late nineteenth century until the late 1920's, museums entered a period of energetic collecting of native materials, sending people into the field and buying from private collectors.<sup>47</sup> However, these collections were more about the tastes and opinions of the collectors than they were about native cultures. The objects collected were seen as pristine examples of native production, archetypes rather than examples, and exhibits and research focused on classifications.<sup>48</sup> Presentation of the objects tended toward the perception of the exotic, the Other.<sup>49</sup> To do this, museums broke native groups down into distinct, defined Others by tribe. Objects such as the moccasins helped to do this, but only if they could be properly labelled.

These moccasins were identified as Sioux in their catalog information; however nothing in the production, design, or history of the piece rules out their creation by another neighboring tribe, including the Cheyenne, Arapahoe, or Crow. It is possible General Williams kept a record indicating from which tribe his trading partner came, but that still begs the question of whether a man on the Plains for the first time could tell which tribe was the Sioux at all. In the nineteenth century, most tribes lived in partnership with other nearby groups, with frequent intermarriage. It was common to find Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and Sioux peoples intermarried, and many of their aesthetics and production methods, including beaded designs, were almost the same.<sup>50</sup> However, when the moccasins entered the museum there was little interest in presenting these intricacies: "Painting, beadwork, quillwork were all displayed separately organized by media, gender, or tribe with an emphasis on technique. There was little attempt to show difference in tribal styles

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<sup>47</sup> Krech, *Collecting Native America*, V.

<sup>48</sup> Bernadette Brown, "From Artifact to Art Object: Redefining American Indian Works," in *Splendid Heritage: Perspectives on American Indian Art*, ed. by John Warnock et al. (Salt Lake: University of Utah Press, 2009) 17.

<sup>49</sup> Shepard Krech III, and Barbara A. Hall, ed. *Collecting Native America, 1870-1960* (Washington DC: Papers of the Smithsonian Institution, 2014) 22.

<sup>50</sup> David Dean, *Beading in the Native American Tradition* (Loveland: Interweave Press, 2002) 10.

or to recognize the role of the individual artist, or explore deeper cultural meanings.”<sup>51</sup> However, researcher Clark Wissler attempted to define beaded moccasins by geographic distribution and “failed to reveal tribal types of moccasin decoration as characteristic,” and noted “the beaded art of the plains is an affair of the entire area, rather than of the tribe.”<sup>52</sup>

Based on informed speculation I argue that, upon receiving a collection of material from the Plains, either J.W. Douglas or the DAM assigned a Sioux affiliation to works without any; not only were the Sioux seen as the prototype Plains tribe and assumed to be the most numerous, but they were also the most well-known to European Americans, thanks in part to the Sioux Wars. The moccasins only had value to the museum if they could be used to categorize and define a particular native group.

Native-made objects only came to be seen as art in the 1920’s, but when they did, exhibits usually did little to contextualize culture, and had no input from native peoples.<sup>53</sup> In many native cultures, there is no true word for art, and certainly not for artifact, but for art museums native art was another way to define the Other. In the 1930’s and for decades after, the ideas of difference and similarity, unity within “Indian art” and separateness from without, defined what native art could be.<sup>54</sup> In the late 1930’s Frederick Douglas, curator of the American Indian collections at DAM, used the trope of regional and chronological distinctions for the exhibition of native “art.” Objects like the moccasins were utilized to show how native art

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<sup>51</sup> Krech, *Collecting Native America*, 25.

<sup>52</sup> Clark Wissler, “Distribution of moccasin decorations among the Plains tribes,” *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* 21, no.1 (1927): 23.

<sup>53</sup> Shepard Krech III and Barbara A. Hall, ed. *Collecting Native America, 1870-1960* (Washington DC: Papers of the Smithsonian Institution, 2014) 24.

<sup>54</sup> Krech, *Collecting Native America*, 30-51.

differed from European art. While classifications within Indigenous-made arts were important, the most important was “different than us.”<sup>55</sup>

The value of the moccasins when they arrived at the DAM, and for many of the following decades, was to categorize the tribes of the Plains, and to be displayed as “art,” a way of describing native groups as uniformly different from European Americans. However, more recently the value of the moccasins has again been renegotiated.

### Current Native Relationships with Museum Objects

Today, many museums, including the DAM, do not see themselves as a repository of objects made by people from the past. Today, they strive to be “places of people and ideas about societies and cultures, a place of living, active objects.”<sup>56</sup> Museums have entered what is sometimes called the “collaborative period,” with a commitment to working with native peoples to “address complex issues of representation and interpretation” in exhibits and collections.<sup>57</sup> In this modern context, ethnographic pieces in museum collections reconnect native peoples with their living past. This is practiced at the DAM, in presentation and practice; videos in the American Indian Arts galleries show native people reconnecting with various objects, as well as performing ceremonies for the objects in collections spaces, and the website reiterates that “visitors are reminded that American Indian art is a vibrant and continuing tradition advanced by individual artists and craftspersons.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Krech, *Collecting Native America*, 54; Bernadette Brown, “From Artifact to Art Object: Redefining American Indian Works,” in *Splendid Heritage: Perspectives on American Indian Art*, ed. by John Warnock et al. (Salt Lake: University of Utah Press, 2009) 18.

<sup>56</sup> Lucy Fowler Williams, William S. Wierzbowski, and Robert W. Preucel, eds, *Native American voices on identity, art, and culture: Objects of everlasting esteem* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, 2005) XIII.

<sup>57</sup> Fowler et al., *Native American voices on identity, art, and culture*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Denver Art Museum: American Indian Art. Official website: <http://denverartmuseum.org/collections/american-indian-art>



The moccasins, in their modern context, are valued because of their ability to enrich and enliven important issues today, by their accessibility to source communities, which, through sensory experiences with the objects, allows for those communities to experience a social healing and reconnection with their heritage.<sup>59</sup> Despite not being on display, the moccasins are a vital part of the museum's mission to restructure the relationship and power balance between native communities and museums, and allow native peoples to teach museum professionals about the objects. This can also be a process of renewal for tribal members, as making objects accessible within indigenous communities' can create connections and reaffirm or create relationships between participants and ancestors.<sup>60</sup> The moccasins' value is in their ability to embody and share the history of their makers.

## Conclusion

These moccasins contain a complex and multi-layered history of value and meaning, espousing John Lucavic's finding that "during the life of a moccasin, any number of values may find expression in any order, because of the limitless potential of moccasin values, and because there exists no set path for the conversion of values."<sup>61</sup> As the moccasins moved through multiple social contexts, they have embodied different values for different groups that came into contact with them. For the source community on the Plains which created them, they held cultural knowledge and spiritual meanings, and when traditional lifeways were disrupted by the arrival actions of European Americans, their economic value took precedence, as trading the

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<sup>59</sup> Laura Peers, "'Ceremonies of Renewal': Visits, Relationships, and Healing in the Museum Space," *Museum Worlds* 1, no. 1 (2013): 141-142.

<sup>60</sup> Laura Peers, "'Ceremonies of Renewal': Visits, Relationships, and Healing in the Museum Space," *Museum Worlds* 1, no. 1 (2013): 141, 143-144.

<sup>61</sup> John Paul Lucavic, "Southern Cheyenne orthodoxy: A study in materiality," PhD Diss. (Tulsa: The University of Oklahoma, 2012) 109.

moccasins became a way of providing for the tribe. As a collector's item, the moccasins held prestige value, and marked the owner as a travelled and experienced man.

Once in the DAM, the moccasins were valued as a means of describing tribes of the Plains, and were more than likely assigned the affiliation of "Sioux." This value is significant in the modern context that moccasins have entered, because, as one native researcher notes, "The data associated with museum's collections is not always accurate, and can influence your research of materials and objects."<sup>62</sup> The value of ethnographic objects, like the moccasins, is in their ability to reconnect native peoples with their past and heritage. When museums, like the DAM, open their collections to native peoples, they allow the objects to speak in ways they otherwise cannot and to realize their cultural value again.

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<sup>62</sup> David Dean, *Beading in the Native American Tradition* (Loveland: Interweave Press, 2002) 11.

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