



Plains Indian Parfleche

A parfleche is a rawhide carrying case decorated with geometric designs. These "suitcases" were made and used by nomadic Plains Indians to hold clothing, valuables, personal items, and tools.

Rawhide was thin, stiff, and durable, and used for moccasin soles, drums, pouches, and parfleches. The process of making rawhide began with soaking the green (fresh) hide, removing the fleshy parts and fat, taking off the hair, and scraping the whole hide to an even thickness.

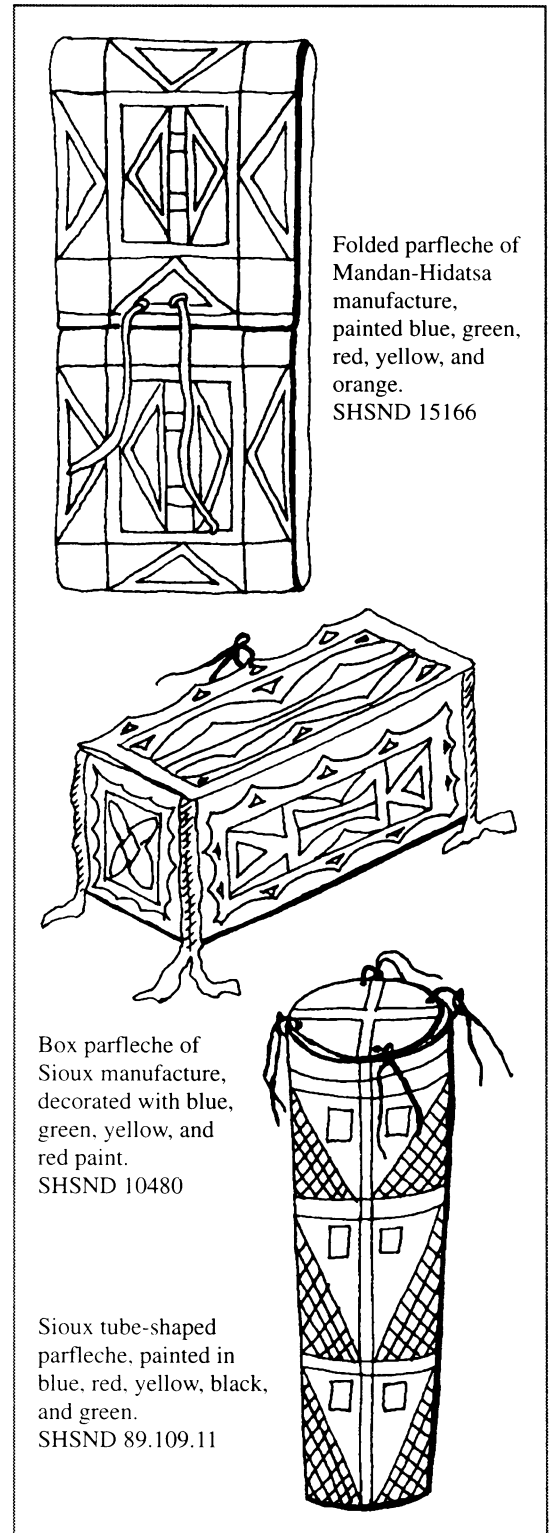
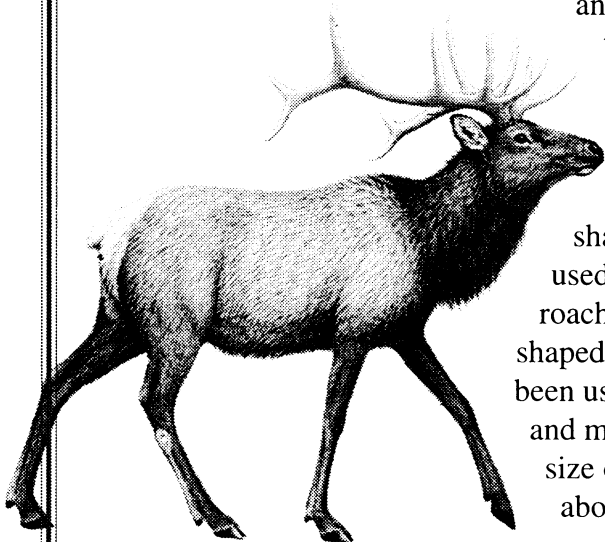
After the hide was soaked, it was stretched and staked to the ground, hair side down, or stretched very tightly on a wooden frame. The flesh was removed and the skin reduced to a uniform thickness by scraping it with a tool called a flesher. A flesher was made from bone or antler with a stone or an iron blade.

To remove the hair from the hide of a bison, elk (shown below), or moose, ashes were used. Once the hair was removed by the lye in the ashes, a scraper was used to remove any remaining hair. Ashes could not be used on deer hides, however, because the lye weakened the skin.

If an unusually thick or hard rawhide was needed, as for a shield, the skin was alternately soaked and dried over a slow smoky fire.

To make a traditionally shaped parfleche, the hide was trimmed to a rectangular shape, folded at the sides to overlap, and the ends folded towards the center.

Other shapes were also made to accommodate special items. A tube-shaped parfleche was used to store a feather or roach headdress. The box-shaped parfleche might have been used to store clothing and moccasins. The average size of a parfleche was about 1 to 3 feet long.



Folded parfleche of Mandan-Hidatsa manufacture, painted blue, green, red, yellow, and orange. SHSND 15166

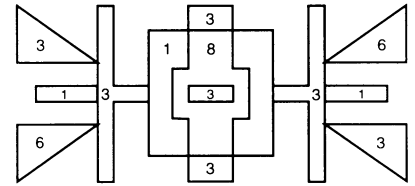
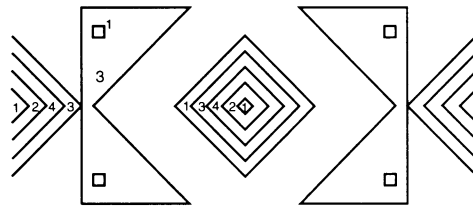
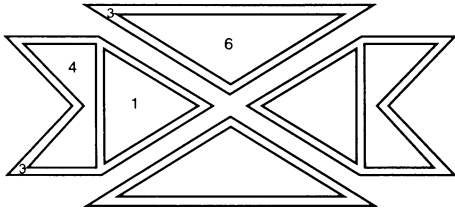
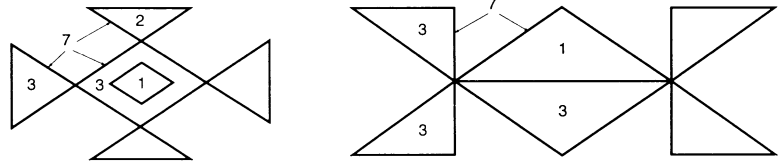
Box parfleche of Sioux manufacture, decorated with blue, green, yellow, and red paint. SHSND 10480

Sioux tube-shaped parfleche, painted in blue, red, yellow, black, and green. SHSND 89.109.11

The outside of a parfleche was painted in large, bold, geometric designs, usually in blue, red, yellow, green, brown, and black. The patterns were also symmetrical, the same on both sides.

Traditional Sioux patterns with color key:

- | | |
|---------------|----------|
| 1. Red | 5. Tan |
| 2. Light Blue | 6. Green |
| 3. Dark Blue | 7. Black |
| 4. Yellow | 8. White |



How to make a parfleche

Materials you will need:

A piece of tan-colored felt (or stiff paper) 18 by 14 inches, a piece of paper 18 by 14 inches, acrylic or tempera paints, brushes, a piece of string or shoelace, awl or paper punch, scissors, pencil, and spray starch.

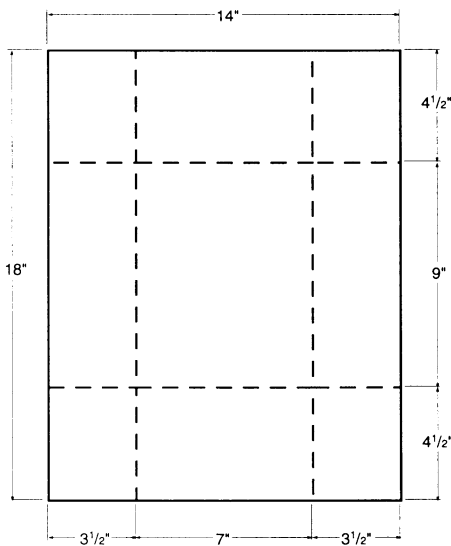


Figure 1

- 1- To stiffen the felt, spray with starch and iron it.
- 2- On the piece of paper, follow the design shown in **Figure 1**.
- 3- Fold the paper in half length-wise to find the center of the sides, as in **Figure 2**.
- 4- Draw curved sides as shown in **Figure 2**. Cut this shape out and trace it onto the piece of felt.
- 5- Cut out this shape on the felt.
- 6- Turn the piece over and decorate it as in **Figure 3**. To decorate, use the patterns shown above, or look around the museum to find other parfleche patterns, or create your own design.

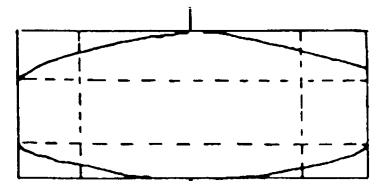


Figure 2

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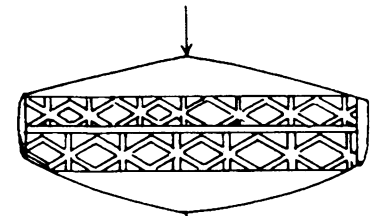


Figure 3

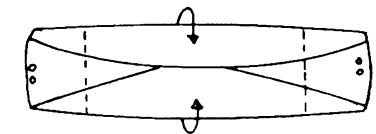


Figure 4

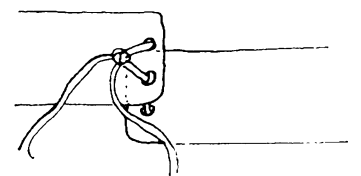


Figure 5

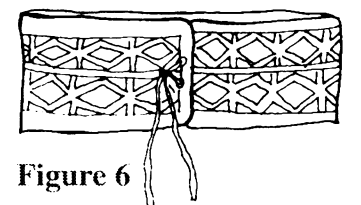


Figure 6

- 7- When the paint has dried, turn the piece over and fold the side in as in **Figure 4**.
- 8- Use an awl or paper punch to make holes in the ends as in **Figure 4**.
- 9- Folds the ends toward the center until the holes overlap as in **Figure 5**.
- 10- Put the string or shoelace through the holes and tie to hold the parfleche closed as in **Figure 6**.