

Objects of Purpose—Objects of Prayer: Peyote Boxes of the Native American Church*

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Abstract: Peyote boxes are the containers that members of the Native American Church use to store and transport the ritual and personal objects used by participants in the night-long religious services of the Church. Peyote boxes can be classified into two basic forms; boxes specifically produced for use by Peyotists and a wide range of containers adapted for such use. In addition to their functional value, Peyote boxes also provide an additional arena for the expressive culture of Peyotism through the various media and methods employed to decorate and embellish their exterior surfaces. Through a lifetime of use, Peyote boxes become highly intimate, portable records of personal experience, both spiritual and secular. Peyote boxes provide a rich context for an examination of the criteria used by museums to collect objects and the potential for biased representations of the material world. [Keywords: Native American Art, Plains, Southwest, Oklahoma, Native American Church, Peyote, Woodworking, Painting, Material Culture Studies, Collections]

Introduction

In January 1999, the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma (USA), working in collaboration with a group of community advisors from Oklahoma's Native American communities, opened the exhibition *Symbols of Faith and Belief: The Art of the Native American Church*. The exhibition focused on the traditional, folk, and fine arts practices associated with the manufacture and decoration of ritual instruments, accoutrements, and accessories used by Peyotists (Native American Church participants) in religious worship.¹ The exhibition, its associated publications, and public programs provided an opportunity for Peyote artists to share their life histories and to discuss the various way in which religious participation and experience inspire and influence their work. In this contribution to the journal's "Object Studies" section, I want to discuss the boxes that are used to store and transport many of these objects and items. Referred to as "Peyote boxes," "kits" or "grips" by members of the Native American Church, these containers are an interesting element in the material culture of Peyotism.² Peyote boxes perform utilitarian functions, present an additional platform for aesthetic expression, and, when considered with their contents, provide insight into the personal experiences and practices of individual members of the Church. The history, diversity, and collectability of Peyote boxes are well illustrated by examples drawn from the collections of Gilcrease Museum and other institutions.³

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Almost every participant in the Peyote religion uses some type of container to store and carry the various objects, items, and materials that worshippers need during the all-night ceremony, or “meeting,” as these ritual gatherings are called by members.⁴ The first containers associated with Peyotism to gain mention in the anthropological literature are satchels or bags used to house and transport the ritual instruments of Roadmen, or leaders, of religious services (Figure 1). Referred to as kits, these containers of cloth, carpet, and leather were later replaced by valises and commercially made wooden boxes (Slotkin 1952:589; Bittle 1969:74; Spindler and Spindler 1971:102; La Barre 1989:66). Omer Stewart (1989:344-45, 358) found these “paraphernalia satchels” to be universal among the tribal communities included in his comparative study of the religion, its ceremonies and material attributes. A Menominee Peyotist has provided a description of the precursors of the Peyote box and the clear rationale for its introduction:

The instrument bag where they kept their sacred tools, as far back as I can remember—I used to see my old folks—it was made out of some calico goods... it had a string on the top so it could draw together... And then they used to make it out of cedar wood; they just made kind of a box... carved it by hand. And sometimes they used a stiff rawhide leather, formed it into a box with a sort of lid... They used to have it wrapped up... in the form of a bag... ‘till they started getting these instrument cases, you know; they’re handier. [Spindler 1952:589]

Thus Roadmen, or leaders of the Peyote religion, were among the first individuals to use musical instrument cases, valises and small suitcases to house the expanded set of ritual objects and ceremonial materials required to “run” a Peyote meeting (Figure 2). A similar logic would suggest that the use of Peyote boxes in general became more widespread as the customary rules governing the use of personal fans, gourds, and other ceremonial items by congregants became more relaxed over time. Museum collections and associated documentation suggest that boxes constructed from wood for the specific use of Peyotists were common by the late 1940s, with examples of decorated boxes appearing early in their history (Denver Art Museum nd.).

Peyote boxes are generally of two types, either commercially made containers adapted for use by Peyotists or boxes of wood or leather that are constructed for such use. The former type includes musical instrument cases, toolboxes, small valises, and commercially manufactured wooden boxes of various types.⁵ Boxes constructed specifically for use by Peyotists have a distinct history that can be reconstructed through a combined examination of ethnographic narrative and museum collections, with their associated documentation.

Peyote boxes spend most of their functional lives “put up” in closets, bureaus and other domestic storage areas where they provide a safe and secure place for an individual’s personal ceremonial objects. In the context of their source communities, the “use” of Peyote boxes is generally restricted to services and events of the Native American Church. Among their most important contents are gourd rattles, prayer feathers, fans, drumsticks, botanicals, and other ceremonial items. Boxes are also used to store an array of non-ceremonial items that are useful throughout the nightlong services of the religion. These include jewelry, neckties, combs, mirrors, handkerchiefs, and other personal items. It is also usual for a box to contain a pen or pencil and some notepaper, important for the exchange of names and addresses with newly made friends

and to record the dates and locations of future meetings, with invitations commonly extended at the close of services. Peyote boxes also serve as repositories for personal mementos, photographs of friends and family members and other objects of individual significance and meaning. Among such objects are baby moccasins, Christian medals and crosses, military ribbons and insignia, personal letters and important documents (Figures 3-4).

Today, almost all Peyote boxes are constructed from red cedar and are available for purchase in stores and galleries in and around Indian Country and over the Internet.⁶ In the 30 years that I have attended religious services of the Native American Church, and in my personal relationships with Peyotists, I have only encountered three or four decorated boxes in current use. This is in sharp contrast to the boxes found in museum collections, which are almost all highly decorated with carvings, paintings, and appliques effected in a variety of media and techniques. My review of relevant collections and their associated documentation indicates that the Peyote boxes contained in museum collections were largely purchased from the artist or through an intermediary retailer and do not exhibit any indications of use or wear. While it is clear that Peyotists have in the past used such decorated boxes, and that they continue to do so today, I would suggest that undecorated boxes have always been more common. My impression is that in Oklahoma, decorated boxes, and the artists who created them, were at their greatest number in the 1940s and 1950s, a period of general florescence of Peyote arts in Oklahoma. More recently, the Native American Church and its associated arts have been particularly vibrant on the Navajo Nation (since the late 20th century) and it is here that the production of decorated Peyote boxes is currently (ca. 2010) most active.

Peyote boxes are also interesting in context, for the ways in which they are used in connection with religious services. It is the common practice for worshippers to gather together prior to the service for a supper provided by the host or sponsor of the meeting. As people finish eating, they socialize and complete final preparations for their participation in the nightlong ceremony. This is when the cushions and blankets upon which the people will sit are unloaded from cars and trucks and taken into the tipi or other place of worship. Peyote boxes are also transported into the ceremonial space at this time where they are placed behind their owners' seats. Many women, particularly elders, continue to use a variety of satchels and bags to carry shawls, blankets, fans and a range of practical objects into religious services. Participants access their boxes just prior to the beginning of the service and then infrequently during the religious ceremony, until after midnight, when it is appropriate to use individual gourds, fans, and drumsticks. The approaching dawn is also a time of more intense accessing of Peyote boxes as participants sometimes change to feather fans that employ the feathers of "morning" birds, including macaws and scissortails.

The religious service generally concludes in early- to mid morning with a ritual breakfast. This is then usually followed by a noon meal attended by participants, family members, and other members of the community. The time between the close of the service and the meal is spent in casual conversation, with men often staying in the tipi or other places of worship while the women generally retire to the shade outside or to a nearby residence. It is during this period that the participants put feathers, fans and other materials away in their boxes. This is also the time when individuals might offer an object for examination by others. In this casual environment it is appropriate to inquire as to the maker of a particular piece and to learn of the circumstances through which it was acquired. Stories accounting for the gift of a particular object within the

context of close personal relationships between individual participants are a common part of such discussions.

On a special occasion, based on nothing other than individual decision, someone will share his box with another member of the congregation, most often the one that he sat beside during the meeting. This event is a quiet moment spent between friends as one shares the memories of relatives, the story of a fan or drumstick, and events and friendships from the past. The contents of a box provide material testament to a life spent in religious fellowship and spiritual devotion. They are very personal assemblages treated with humility and interpersonal respect, strong virtues in the doctrine of the Native American Church. As objects, and as assemblages of objects, Peyote boxes thus are examples of what Janet Hoskins (1998) has characterized as “biographical objects.” Among their other characteristics, they both prompt and shape autobiographical reflection and facilitate autobiographical narration.

Finally, Peyote boxes provide a good example of the ways in which museum collections can sometimes fail to adequately reflect the multiple contexts in which objects are created, used and collected. As curators we tend to overemphasize the context of the collector, which in this case focuses on the aesthetic of decorated boxes to support the goals of a public exhibition of Peyote arts. While decorated Peyote boxes are certainly important pieces in the larger context of the expressive culture of the religion, we must remain mindful of their narrow range and distribution given the demographic and geographic breadth of the Peyote religion over the past century. It is in their functional contexts that boxes provide the richest sources of meaning and interpretation. In addition to the external patina derived of age and use, Peyote boxes gradually mature into material assemblages of a life devoted to religious participation and spiritual pursuit. The richness of such assemblages is reflected here most clearly in the collection presented as Figures 3-4. Non-decorative but complexly assembled and richly curated by its former owner, examples such as this one (discussed in more depth below) are extremely rare in museum collections but extremely common in the lived experience of members of the Native American Church.

Portfolio

A portfolio of 26 figures begins below. Notes, references cited, and other materials follow this collection of images and annotations. Higher resolution versions of these images are being made available as supplementary data via the *Museum Anthropology Review* website.

Figure 1



Roadman's Kit
Ute, Colorado, United States, ca. 1937
University of Colorado Archive
Omer Stewart Papers

This is the earliest image of a Peyote box that I have located to date. It belonged to Ute Roadman, Juddy Long Hair (Stewart 1948:13). Displayed with the commercial valise are his ritual instruments, botanicals, and other ceremonial and personal objects.

Figure 2



Weaving
Navajo, Ya-Ta-Hey, New Mexico, United States, ca. 1955
Wool, aniline dyes
Gilcrease Museum 97.277

A Navajo woman wove this textile for her husband, a member of the Native American Church. He used the weaving to transport his personal items to Peyote meeting by rolling them in the weaving to form a bundle. The weaving is decorated with a range of symbolic elements from the Peyote religion, including the tipi as the place of worship, the ritual instruments and the iconographic Peyote bird. The weaver included the American flag in her design to recognize her husband's service during World War II as a Navajo Code Talkers (Michael Cottingham personal communication to the author, June 19, 2000).

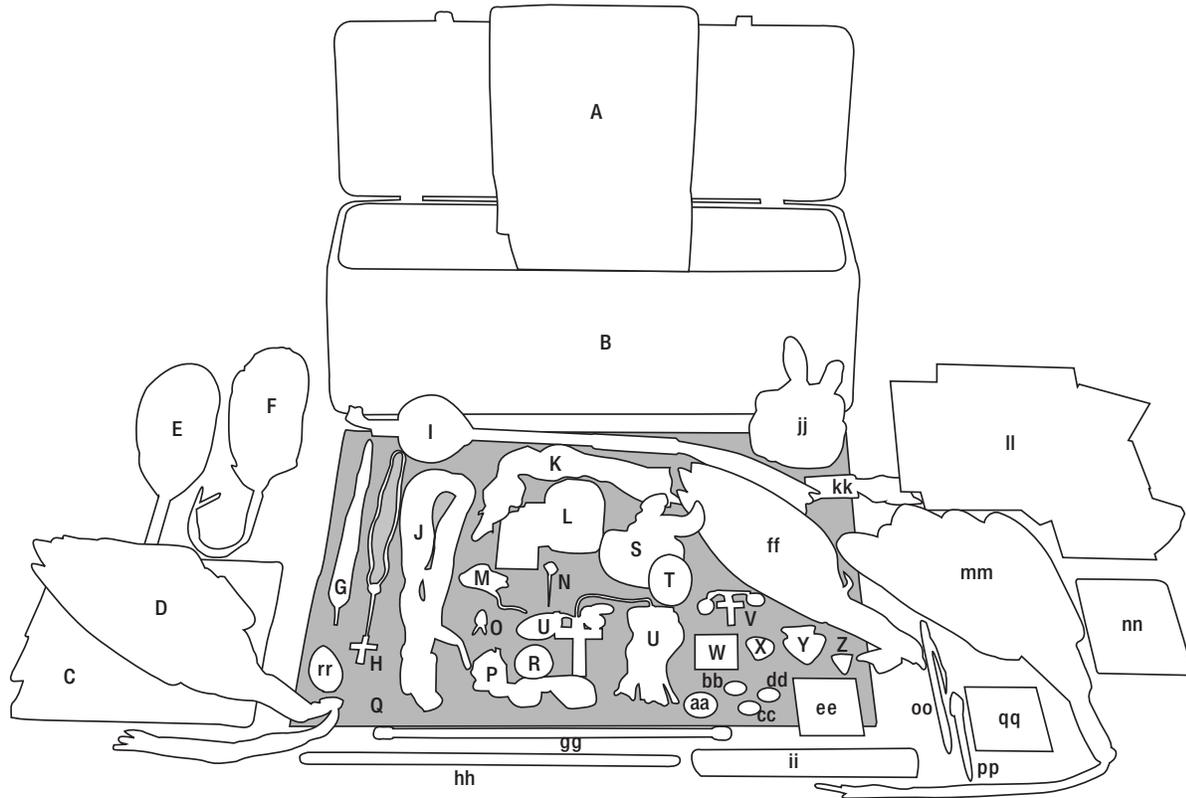
Figure 3



Peyote Box and Contents
Osage, Oklahoma, United States, ca. 1940-1960
Gilcrease Museum 84.1166.

This Peyote box is from the original, founding collections of the Gilcrease Museum. It includes much, if not all, of the content assembled by its owner, a member of the Osage Indian community of Osage County, Oklahoma. The box was in active use in the 1940s and was acquired by Thomas Gilcrease prior to 1963. This kit provides an excellent example of the numerous Peyote boxes that I see in use among older members of the Native American Church. The box itself is a commercial valise with heavy brass fittings, a satin lining, and a pocket on the inside of the lid. The kit includes a combination of ceremonial instruments, religious materials, and personal items that characterize the functional, spiritual, and personal attributes of Peyote boxes. I have seen a number of older members of the church use their Peyote boxes as safe repositories for important documents and correspondence. The specific contents of the kit, as curated by the Gilcrease Museum, are enumerated in the table and diagram (Figure 4) that accompany the photograph.

Figure 4



A diagram illustrating the contents of the Osage Peyote Kit discussed in Figure 3. Schematic drawing by Bobby C. Martin

| | | | |
|---|------------------------------|----|---|
| A | summer “blanket” | T | sacred heart medallion |
| B | commercial valise | U | pouch with Peyote, crucifix, and religious medals |
| C | silk scarf | V | crucifix with religious medals |
| D | owl wing fan | W | photograph |
| E | prayer feather | X | finger ring |
| F | prayer feather | Y | flint arrowhead |
| G | pheasant feather | Z | arrowhead tip |
| H | rosary | aa | photograph pin |
| I | gourd rattle | bb | Indian head penny |
| J | otter fur strips | cc | Indian head penny |
| K | cloth bundle | dd | Indian head penny |
| L | tobacco and cigarette papers | ee | mirror |
| M | paper flower | ff | hawk wing fan |
| N | pearl stickpin | gg | drumstick |
| O | mescal bean | hh | drumstick |
| P | cloth bundle | ii | metal comb |
| Q | Navajo rug | jj | dried cedar |
| R | cloth religious medal | kk | ribbon |
| S | dried Peyote | | |

| | | | |
|----|--|----|-----------------|
| ll | defense bond book, war ration book, bus ticket, receipt, letters and selective service card, lease | oo | pencil |
| mm | loose fan | pp | pencil |
| nn | bank book | qq | beading needles |
| | | rr | hawk feather |

Figure 5



Peyote Box

Dolores Thompson (Navajo)

Navajo, Arizona, United States, ca. 1997

Cedar Wood, Balsa Wood, Brass Hardware, Paint, Felt

Gilcrease Museum 84.2977

Between 1996 and 1998 the Gilcrease Museum undertook an acquisitions initiative to support the *Symbols of Faith and Belief* exhibition. Harding Big Bow (Kiowa) and Rod Pistokcha (Choctaw), community advisors to the exhibition and collecting project, purchased this box in

Shiprock, New Mexico. The identity of the artist who decorated the box was unknown at that time and it was one of the first pieces of Peyote art from the Navajo community to be added to the collections of Gilcrease Museum. This box is decorated with brightly painted balsa wood appliqués in the form of the iconic ritual instruments, a tipi, and a Peyote cactus, central elements in the religious practices of the Native American Church. Ready-made, plain cedar boxes are available in numerous stores and galleries in reservation and border communities in Navajo Nation. The use of red and blue felt as a lining is a common feature of Peyote boxes.

Figure 6



Detail image showing the interior of the box pictured in Figure 5.

Figure 7



Peyote Box

Dolores Thompson (Navajo)

Navajo, Arizona, United States, ca. 1998

Cedar Wood, Brass Hardware, Balsa Wood, Paint

Gilcrease Museum 84.2983

I purchased this box at a gallery in Gallup, New Mexico that specializes in turquoise jewelry. The appliqué decorations caused me to immediately recognize this as another box by the person who constructed the one collected by Harding Big Bow. Fortunately, this box contained a photograph of its maker, Delores Thompson, a Navajo woman from Arizona. The box is unusual for its octagon shape, although this is not an absolutely unique form, as I know of a similar (but undecorated) one in current use. Mrs. Thompson has embellished the lid of this box with realistic paintings of eagles and a highly symbolic interpretation of the ritual tipi, surrounded by the form of a water bird that is rendered in a patriotic theme. This painted vignette suggests the strong influence of contemporary easel paintings by Navajo artists of Peyote subjects and themes. Throughout all of the regions in which the religion is practiced in North America, the water bird

(*Anhinga anhinga*) is central to the iconography of the Native American Church (La Barre 1989:71; Swan 1999a:50, 63, 1999b:35; Tsatoke 1954:3).

Figure 8



Peyote Box

Artist Unknown

Anadarko, Oklahoma, United States, ca. 1950

Cedar Wood, Brass Hardware

Museum of the Great Plains 92.11.1912

This box is constructed of red cedar and is somewhat unique in the use of incised carving as the sole decorative technique.⁷ The designs on the lid include outline drawings of water birds, a feather fan, and gourd rattle. The front face of the box has geometric elements at the ends, and a series of three realistic vignettes of widely varied scale. At the right is a tipi, the most common site of the religious ceremony of the Native American Church. In the center is a profile view of the “Chief Peyote,” the dried cactus that is placed on the holy altar during a religious service. On

the left is a figure of a singer, iconic of the rounds of individual singing that comprises much of the all-night service. The attire and accessories of the singer are very detailed in presentation, showing the ritual instruments in use in the man's hands, the blanket wrapped around his waist, a fringed shirt, a bandoleer, and decorative shoulder fan. These are all representative of the attire worn by Peyotists of the Southern Plains tribes in Oklahoma during in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The design on the end of this box represents the crescent-shaped earthen altar or "moon" of the Peyote Religion. The line running through the altar, from tip to tip, is the "Peyote Road," interpreted by some as the course of right living and the path for a long life. At the center of the altar is the Chief Peyote. The crossed sticks represent the ritual fire that is carefully maintained by the Fireman throughout the night at a meeting. The single vertical stick is the lighter, or "smoke stick" that is kept smoldering throughout the ceremony and is used to light all prayer cigarettes.

Figure 9



Detail image showing one end of the box pictured in Figure 8.

Figure 10



Feather Box
Artist Unknown
Oklahoma, United States, ca. 1955
Plywood, Paint
Gilcrease Museum 73.250

Although not necessarily a Peyote box, boxes of this type are used to store a single fan, most often a loose Peyote fan. The box is constructed of plywood with a sliding lid. Feather boxes have considerable antiquity in Indian communities from the eastern and southwestern regions of North America. The single decorative element is a painting of a scissortail fan that has the outline incised into the wood. There is also an indentation carved at one end to facilitate movement of the lid. A box with an identical design element, with a hinged lid, is in the collection of the Denver Art Museum and is attributed to Kiowa artist George “Dutch” Silverhorn.

Figure 11



Peyote Box

Artist Unknown

Osage, Oklahoma, United States, ca. 1940

Cedar Wood, Brass Hardware, Leather, Glass Beads, Paint

University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology 59.14.59

This box exhibits a high degree of craftsmanship in its construction and decoration. The handle and clasp would appear to have been salvaged from a suitcase or valise and the handle is beaded with the gourd stitch technique. The design layout and carving techniques exhibited in the decoration of this box resemble those of a box in the collections of the Denver Art Museum that is attributed to Lew Brace, a Kiowa from Carnegie, Oklahoma.

Figure 12



Peyote Box
Gus Mac Donald (Ponca)
Ponca, Oklahoma, United States, ca. 1954
Plywood, Brass Hardware, Drawer Handle, Paint
Milwaukee Public Museum 65024a
James H. Howard Collection

The maker of this box, Gus Mac Donald, was well known for his early contributions to the development of the Oklahoma “fancy dance” style and his career as a champion of numerous powwow dance competitions (Milwaukee Public Museum nd.). The ends of the box are decorated with images of a tipi, representing the place of worship and the American flag—understood by many Native American people as a symbol of patriotism and service to one’s country. The handle, a commercial drawer pull of red plastic, sits atop a raised water bird. The lid is further decorated with an image of a pine tree, iconic of the cedar incense used during the ceremony and a Peyote plant, the holy sacrament of the Native American Church. The front panel is decorated with traditional geometric elements similar to those found in beadwork and parfleche paintings from the Plains region.

Figure 13



Peyote Box

George “Dutch” Silverhorn (Kiowa)

Kiowa, Anadarko, Oklahoma, United States, ca. 1950

Plywood, Brass Hardware, Paint

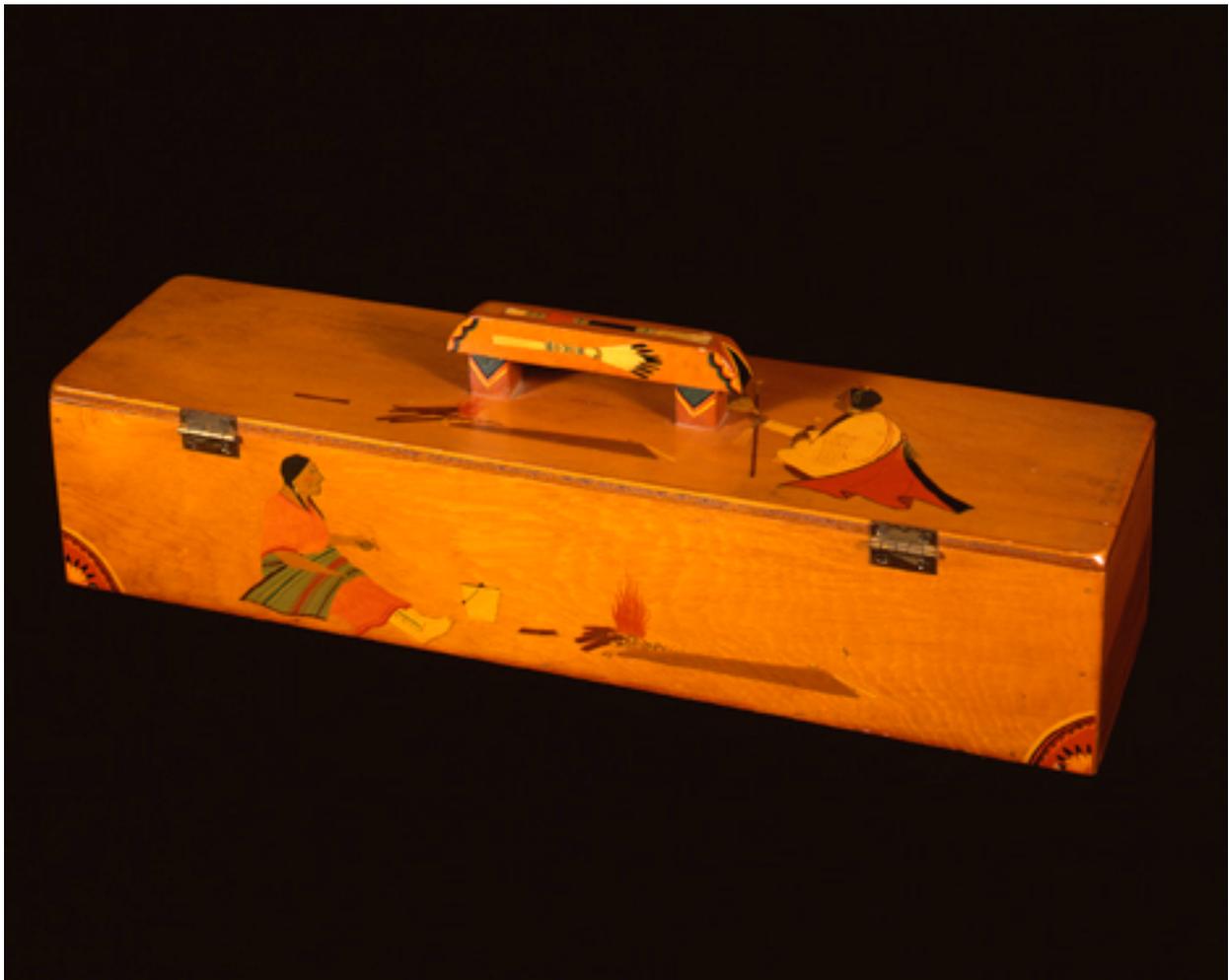
Museum of the Great Plains 92.11.1165a

Tingley Collection

George “Dutch” Silverhorn (Kiowa) was one of the most prolific Peyote artists in Oklahoma. A talented silversmith, Silverhorn also produced gourd rattles and fans. Always working with plywood, Silverhorn produced highly decorated Peyote boxes that combine paintings of narrative scenes from the religious ceremony, realistic renderings of the ritual instruments and symbolic and iconographic representations of birds and other natural elements. He also used carving techniques to enhance the outlines of design elements. This is a fine example of Silverhorn's work, which exhibits an engaging composition and sophisticated technique. This box was available for sale in Tingley's Indian Store in Anadarko, Oklahoma. The figures on the box represent the central officials of the ceremony: on the lid is the Roadman, or leader of the

service; on the front panel is the Fireman, who maintains the fire in strict accordance with ritual procedures; and on the back panel, the Midnight Water Woman is shown using a corn husk cigarette to pray for the water that participants partake of at midnight. The crescent-shaped earthen altar of the Native American Church, ritual fire, and lighter stick appear in each vignette to locate these individuals in their appropriate places during the religious service. The handle is handmade and decorated with geometric designs, fans, and rattles. This box was part of the inventory of Tingley's Indian Store in Anadarko, Oklahoma at the time of its incorporation into the collections of the Museum of the Great Plains in Lawton, Oklahoma.⁸

Figure 14



Detail image showing the back view of the box pictured in Figure 13.

Figure 15



Peyote Box

Artist Unknown

Yankton (Sioux), South Dakota, United States, ca. 1965

Commercial Pencil Box, Brass Hardware, Paint

Gilcrease Museum 84.2857a

This box is an excellent example of the adaptation of commercial wooden boxes for use as Peyote boxes. Smaller in size than is usual, the box, along with the fan and rattle that it contains, suggest its intended use by a child. The patriotic theme of the painted box is well executed, with the star and cross motifs on the lid indicative of the incorporation of Christian elements in both Peyotism and the art forms that it inspires. The ends of the box are decorated with images of the Peyote cactus, a consistent design element in paintings, jewelry and beadwork created by Peyote artists. The interior of the box has been finished with a fitted felt lining and trim, a paper American flag and wooden discs painted to resemble the Peyote plant.

Figure 16



Miniature Peyote Boxes are highly unusual and this is the only example that I am aware of in either museum or community contexts. Children typically do not possess nor carry Peyote boxes into the services of the Native American Church, as they rarely actively participate in the singing and drumming elements of the ceremony. When children do attend meetings they usually sleep on a palette of blankets placed behind or adjacent to their parents. I suggest that this box and its contents was either assembled as an aesthetic piece for sale outside the community, or more likely, was produced as an item of esteem for someone's close relative— perhaps a son or grandson. As such, it assumes inherent commemorative and display values within the community of origin. Akin to baby moccasins (see Figure 23) that are made for infants but never worn, this box may well have never been intended to be used in religious ceremonies. The use of miniature objects as gestures of love and respect is a common practice in Native American communities.

Figure 17



Peyote Box
Johnny Hoof (Arapaho)
Kiowa, Oklahoma, United States, ca. 1975
Leather, Metal Hardware, Paint
Harding Big Bow Collection
Gilcrease Museum 87.60

This box was a gift to Mr. Big Bow from his daughters. It was commissioned from this Arapaho artist through McKees Indian Store in Anadarko, Oklahoma. The artist also made belts, wallets, and purses with stamped and painted designs over their entire surfaces (Coe 1986: 182-183). The vivid colors and well-executed carving and stamp work on Mr. Hoof's boxes are unique, and his work was highly collectable. This box presents a scene from the religious service when water is brought into the tipi at dawn. Several designs of the Peyote cactus and stylized water birds are also incorporated into the decoration of the box. I have only seen one other leather box in use in Oklahoma and it was decorated with stamped designs that were not painted.

This Peyote Box provides a great opportunity to examine the issues associated with the tribal attributions for Native American objects in museum collections. The documentation for these collections often lacks critical information regarding an objects provenience, the chain of transmission that includes the multiple contexts of manufacture, use and acquisition. Traditional approaches to the scholarly assessment and subsequent exhibition and publication of such objects have generally failed to incorporate this multi-vocality. In this inaugural installation of MAR Object Studies we have incorporated two domains for tribal attribution—one for the artists who create objects (when they are known) and another for the context in which the object was used and/or collected. This box thus bears the identification of Arapaho for the tribe of its maker, Johnny Hoof, and Kiowa in the object attribution line, for its owner, and primary user, Harding Big Bow. According to Harding's wishes his widow, Pearl Big Bow, a member of the Kiowa and Wichita tribal communities, donated the box and its contents to Gilcrease Museum upon Harding's death in 1997.

Figure 18



Detail image showing the back view of the box pictured in Figure 17.

Figure 19



Peyote Box
Artist Unknown
Oklahoma, United States, ca. 1955
Pine Wood, Paint, Steel Hinges
Gilcrease Museum 7327.249

This is a beautiful box, probably a commercial wooden box that has been adapted for use as a Peyote box. The outside surfaces are painted green with a wooden appliqué of a Peyote bird on the top of the lid. The box is decorated with a combination of iconic and realistic representations of birds on both the top and front. Each end has a water drum painted on it and the back includes a male figure drumming and another singing, with a realistic rendering of a scissortail in the middle. The use of abstract designs to frame the front and back panels is quite effective and original. The attention to detail and execution in the painted motifs and vignettes on this box are in sharp contrast to its interior, which consists of raw, roughly finished wood with no further treatment. There is no indication of use or wear or that this box ever had a handle or clasp. Although lacking in the museum's documentation, these attributes suggest that this box was made for sale to the museum.

Figure 20



Detail image showing the back view of the box pictured in Figure 19.

Figure 21



Peyote Box

Artist Unknown

Plains (Oklahoma?), United States, ca. 1960

Wood, Aluminum, paint, commercial hardware

Gilcrease Museum 84.3100

This is a highly unusual Peyote box for both medium and decorative techniques. A simple wooden box of thin, rough finished pine has been clad with thin-gauged sheet aluminum. The metal cladding has been worked in two distinctive ways, with ritual vignettes and decorative elements rendered first using a repoussé technique and then over-painted in dense, opaque paint. The non-decorated areas of the metal cladding have been pierced throughout in a pattern that flows outward from the central design elements. The lid on this box includes a realistic rendering of the water drum and drumstick that are used to accompany the ceremony's singers. The other end of the lid presents the crescent moon altar that is constructed from clean soil inside the tipi. The Chief Peyote sits on a bed of sage in the center of the altar and the Peyote Road. A stylized bird is placed within the altar with the sticks of firewood forming its tail. This design represents

the ritual practice of forming the ashes that have accumulated over night in various shapes (commonly birds) in the morning as the service approaches its conclusion. The ends of the box contain front and back images of a “Peyote man” attired in a black felt hat, a dark shirt, a red and blue prayer blanket and a mescal bean bandolier. He holds a golden eagle fan in his hand. This is highly typical of the general attire for Peyote meetings in Oklahoma in the first half of the 20th century.

Figure 22



Detail image showing the top of the box pictured in Figure 21.

Figure 23



Peyote Box and Contents

Shawnee, Anadarko, Oklahoma, United States, ca. 1940-1970

Wood, paint, commercial hardware

Oklahoma Historical Society 83.124.1, 3-15, 17-18

This box was donated to the Oklahoma State Museum of History collections when I worked as an Ethnologist in the Central Services Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society. The donor was the spouse of the original owner of the box. This box and its basic contents provide a great example of a personal Peyote box. The nicely fitted wooden box has a heavy coat of varnish and is unfinished inside. The contents include a gourd rattle, feather fans, a prayer feather, drum sticks, drum tools (for loosening the ropes used in a water drum during disassembly) and a personal dried Peyote. These are indicative of an experienced member, an active singer, and someone with the skills to assemble or “tie” the water drum used in the ceremony. The donor removed and kept a few of the photographs of family members attached to the inside lid. This is the common method that Peyotists use to place photos of family and friends in their boxes. The photographs that remain are of the owner’s family, including the donor, and of the owner and

friends in South Texas where licensed dealers provide members of the Native American Church with Peyote, the Holy sacrament of the church. A comparable assemblage is pictured in Young (2001:1006-1007).

Figure 24



Peyote Box
Delbert Blackhorse (Navajo)
Navajo, Utah, United States, 2010
Commercial steel toolbox, paint, felt
Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History E/2010/6/1

Delbert Blackhorse is a Dine artist from Crow Springs, Utah. He was raised in the traditions of the Native American Church and is well known for his painted water buckets, breakfast bowls, and other objects used in the services of the Church. Blackhorse is also a renowned musical artist, composing and recording numerous works in the Peyote and other genres of Native American music. This is a commercial steel toolbox that has been painted using airbrush and traditional painting techniques. The designs employed include ribbon work patterns derived from the use of overlaying strips of ribbon or cloth that have been cut and folded to create intricate geometric patterns and designs. Ribbon work has a very recent history among the Navajo, introduced through their exposure to its use in Oklahoma and other regions to decorate Peyote blankets, ties and shawls (Swan 2008a:51). The hummingbird seen here is an important figure in Navajo cosmology and a common design element in Navajo painting, sculpture, jewelry and other art forms.

Figure 25



Peyote Box

Comanche, Lawton, Oklahoma, United States, ca. 1950

Plywood, Paint, Commercial Hardware

Gilcrease Museum 84.2858

The painted scenes on this box incorporate stylized designs common to easel paintings executed in the Peyote tradition (Swan 1999a). The vignette on the front of this Peyote box presents the ritual objects, earthen altar, Chief Peyote, and water drum in elevation at ground level. The ritual instruments are oriented as they appear when placed on the altar cloth behind the earthen altar during specific points in the religious service. The beadwork designs on the staff, rattle, and fan are executed in a painterly manner and accurately reflect the mid-century preference for a light blue background and subtle design elements. The Chief Peyote that sits on the earthen mound appears as a stylized form of exaggerated height, with multi-colored radiating lines referencing its sacred status. The scene on the back of the box is of a tipi as the place of worship with two “beams” of light emanating from the tipi with a gliding bird figure at the height of each beam. I interpret this design as an extension of the generalized role of birds in Peyotism as messengers of

prayers and conveyors of blessings (La Barre 1989:69-72). The top of the lid is decorated with a depiction of the Chief Peyote on its bed of sage. The Chief Peyote exhibits the swirl pattern produced by the increased segmentation and white, fibrous tufts that develop as the plant matures in age and grows in diameter.

Figure 26



Detail image showing the back view of the box pictured in Figure 25.

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Notes

1. Referred to as Peyote art, this important genre of Native American art subsumes a wide range of media, techniques, and forms, ranging from the metalsmithing of jewelry to easel paintings. Peyote arts often incorporate multiple media and a wide range of techniques. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the gourd rattles and feather fans that are emblematic of the religion and its expressive culture. Their design and construction incorporates carving, bead working, leatherworking and the cleaning, preparation and decoration of the natural materials utilized. See Wiedman (1985), Ellison (1993) and Swan (1999a).

2. The name “Native American Church” is used in contemporary American Indian communities as both a generic term for the religion of all Peyotists and in reference to the numerous, chartered organizations that provide formal representation for their members. Today, these organizations include the Native American Church of Oklahoma, the Native American Church of the United States, the Native American Church of North America, the Azeé Bee Nahgha of Diné Nation, the Native American Church of South Dakota, and numerous other state and tribal organizations and hundreds of local chapters. For the history of these see Slotkin (1956), Stewart (1987), and La Barre (1989). For background on the arts, practices and beliefs of the Native American Church, see Swan (1999a). An ethnographic and historical overview of the Native American Church is available in Swan (2008b).

3. Descriptions and photographs of decorated Peyote boxes can be found in Feder (1967), Fintzelberg (1969), Coe (1976, 1986), Ellison (1993), and Swan (1999a).

4. Individuals without boxes utilize a variety of methods to protect prayer feathers and fans in storage and transport. These include thin cardboard sleeves and tie boxes. Women often bring canvas tote bags into meetings to carry cardboard feather sleeves, shawls, and other personal items.

5. One of my favorite boxes of this type is one used by a Church member from South Dakota whom I met at a meeting in Hominy, Oklahoma. It is a red enameled metal toolbox from the Craftsman product line manufactured and marketed by the retail firm Sears. The box, in the style with a hipped lid, has been customized by adding red and blue felt as a lining for the box and lid. A single photograph of the owner's brother, who was serving in the U.S. Navy, was secured at the center of the lid on the box's inside.

6. Similar cedar and other wooden boxes are also used by powwow dancers and participants in the modern Gourd Dance to house feathers, fans, jewelry, sashes, rattles, and other items.

7. James Howard (1965: 51) suggests that Peyotism is largely responsible for the continuation of several traditional art techniques, and in particular bas-relief carving as seen on Peyote boxes,

drumsticks and other items.

8. Tingley's Indian Store was an important outlet for Indian arts from ca. 1903 until it closed in the 1980s. Many museum collections benefited from acquisitions made at the store. In the 1940s, the Denver Art Museum, under the leadership of Curator Frederick Douglas, built an excellent collection of Peyote arts through Jake Tingley, the original proprietor of the store. The contents of the store as they existed in the early 1990s were acquired by the Museum of the Great Plains in Lawton, Oklahoma. The majority of the inventory, fixtures and furnishings from the store were installed in an interpretive exhibition at the museum.

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