

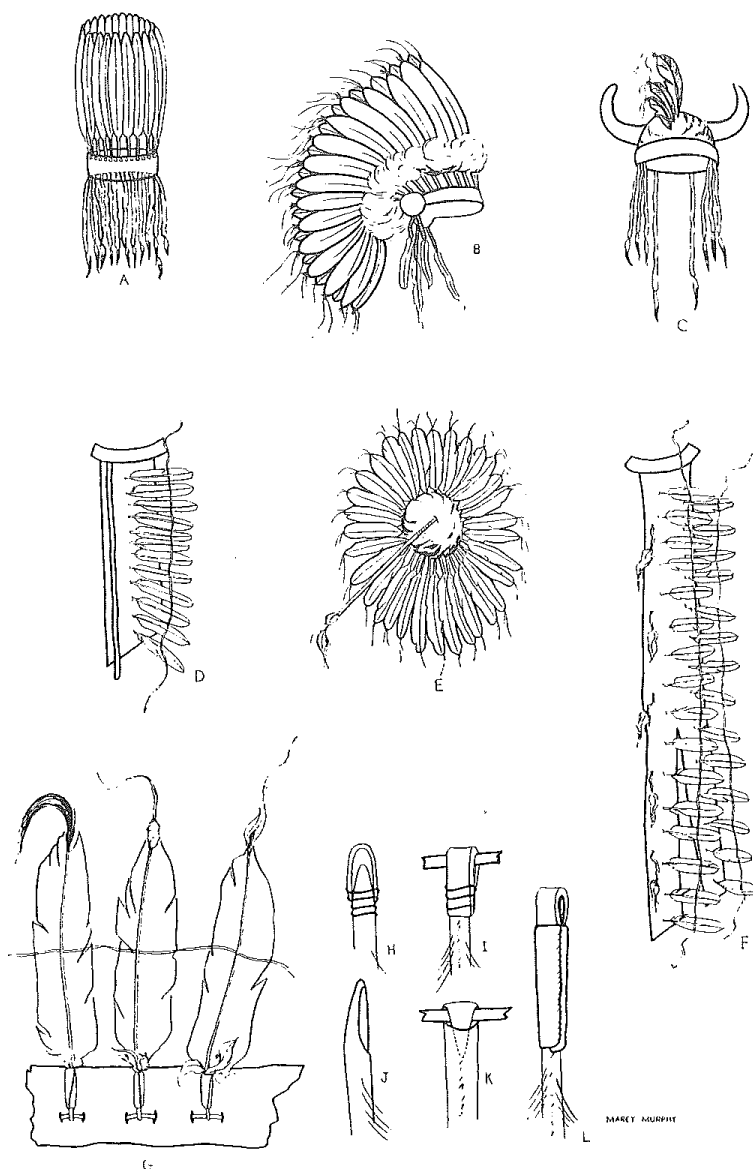
# DENVER ART MUSEUM

1300 LOGAN STREET, DENVER, COLORADO

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## WAR BONNETS

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**1. INTRODUCTION.** This leaflet is concerned with a brief discussion of the large eagle feather headdress worn by the Plains tribes, and commonly known as the "war bonnet."

**2. HISTORY.** The historical development of the war bonnet has been almost completely neglected so that the suggestions in this section are highly tentative and not much better than likely guesses.

The oldest definitely dated picture of a war bonnet is a colored sketch made between 1732 and 1735 by A. deBatz of a Choctaw in Louisiana. This sketch is now in the Library of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. The oldest definitely dated specimen is one collected at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1838 and now in a New York museum. Drawings and paintings by Whites and Indians made on the Plains in the early 1830's show the war bonnet fully developed.

A positive statement can only be made, therefore, that the war bonnet existed in the mid-1700's; and was fully developed and widespread by the 1830's.

It is suggested that the war bonnet is descended mainly from the feathered brow band worn by many tribes along the Atlantic coast in the period of discovery (16th century) as shown in contemporary pictures. It is known that tribes speaking Siouan languages lived in the East and later moved west, reaching the Plains several hundred years ago. Possibly combining this head band with a skin skull cap used by the Plains Apaches of the period, the Sioux developed the war bonnet, especially after the horse was introduced in the late 1600's. The treeless prairie was ideal for the wearing of a huge feather crown; and also was perfect for the use of horses. Thus it is suggested that the combination of all these circumstances led the Sioux to create the full-blown war bonnet. It is certain that the Sioux were the center from which the war bonnet spread to other tribes.

**3. VARIETIES AND DISTRIBUTION.** Most war bonnets are of the "swept back" type with the feathers on the cap leaning toward the rear (B). This is the type of the central and southern Plains. Among the Blackfoot to the Northwest is found the "straight-up" type which lacks a cap and has the feathers standing upright from a wide head band (A). A third variety, seemingly found mostly among the eastern Apache, is one on which the feathers slope out evenly all the way around (E).

The main added feature is the trail, a strip of skin or cloth hanging down the wearer's back from the rear edge of the cap. It may have one row of feathers, the "single trail" (D); or two, the "double trail" (F). The trail is often entirely absent. The trails are used on bonnets all through the Plains area.

A related headdress is the "doctor's bonnet" (C) which has a trail but no row of feathers on the cap, substituting a pair of horns on the cap sides, and often a fan of feathers running from front to back. The "doctor's bonnet" is mostly a Central Plains trait.

**4 USE.** The war bonnet was worn only as a symbol of recognition of skill and success in war: not by any man, and never by a woman except under certain rare ceremonial circumstances. It was often considered to have magic protective power.

A warrior was customarily awarded a war bonnet by action of the tribe or band. Sometimes a boaster would be given a bonnet by the women and thus forced to back up his claims by action. Sometimes, also, a youth would make himself a bonnet, then prove his right to it by warlike deeds.

The bonnet was worn during battles or raids, and also as part of the full dress costume on peaceful occasions.

Space does not permit discussion of the symbolism of the feathers beyond making the general statement that they stood for war honors of either the wearer, or of all the men who awarded him the bonnet.

### CONSTRUCTION

5. **BASIC PARTS.** A war bonnet—except the “straight-up” type—consists of a skull cap, a decorative brow band, large eagle feathers, a trail—sometimes omitted—and various decorative accessories.

6. **THE CAP,** in former times, was made of deer skin or buffalo skin, but for at least 100 years a commercial felt hat, with the brim cut off, has often been substituted. If of skin the cap may be made of several pieces sewn together.

The top of the cap, within the outer circle of feathers, may be decorated with down, single feathers, or strips of fur or cloth, alone or in combinations. A long feather, stripped except at the tip, is often attached to the crown of the cap and rises above the outer row of feathers (E). This is usually called the “commander” feather.

7. **THE BROW BAND** is a strip of skin or cloth, 1 to 2 inches wide, sewn to the edge of the cap above the forehead and reaching back to the ears. It is usually trimmed with beads sewn in a pattern. Rarely porcupine quillwork is used for trimming and in one case, a bonnet collected in 1865, the brow band is a strip of buffalo skin with the hair in place.

At the ends of the band, over the ears, there may be attached small beaded circles, ribbons, strips of red cloth, strips of ermine or other fur, thimbles, little bells, single large feathers, or buffalo horns, one on each side. A rare early Sioux type has four horns, one each at front, back and sides.

8. **THE TRAIL** is a band of skin or cloth, usually red wool, 8 to 12 inches wide and of varying length. A “half trail” (D) reaches to the waist; a “full trail” to the ankles, or even to the ground (F). A “single trail” (D) has one row of eagle feathers from top to bottom, or near the bottom. A “double trail” (F) has two such rows parallel. Usually a double trail is split in the lower half or more of its length.

In addition to the main row or rows of tail plumes single smaller feathers are frequently attached to thongs tied to the trail, generally along or near the edges. Hawk, owl, dove, raven, magpie and prairie chicken feathers are used in this way, among others. Occasionally there are ribbons, beaded edgings or small units of beadwork on the trail.

9. **MAIN FEATHERS.** Around the edge of the cap are attached (as described in section 10) a row of large eagle feathers. Twenty-four is the average number, but in 200 bonnets the range was 16 to 38. The most favored plumes are those from the tail of the golden and bald eagles. Sometimes the long slender, dark, primary and secondary feathers from the ends of the wings are used. There are rare references to the use of other feathers, raven, hawk and turkey, for example.

The trails, either single or double, are commonly decorated with eagle tail feathers. A very large Sioux double trail bonnet has 116 tail feathers, 58 in each row. It has 28 plumes on the cap, making 144 in all. Ordinary bonnets have 20 to 40 feathers on a single trail, 80 to 100 on a double trail.

Bonnets with long trails were made for use on horseback. When the wearer was on foot he held up the trail with a cord, as Victorian ladies did the trains of their long formal dresses.

### FEATHER ATTACHMENT DETAILS

10. **ATTACHMENT TO CAP.** The feathers are attached to the edge of the cap as follows: a line of holes is made around the edge of the cap to receive a long skin thong. A loop is made on the butt end of each feather, most commonly by tying or lacing a narrow strip of rawhide over the butt so

that it protrudes past the butt far enough to make a threadable loop (H, J). A second method is to cut away the butt in a long slanting bevel (J), fold the remaining end on itself and insert it up in the shaft to form a loop (K), held in place by a sinew or thread binding around the shaft. The loop and end of the shaft are usually wrapped in red trade cloth for about 2 inches (L). A feather thus prepared is then placed between 2 holes on the cap rim and the thong passed through the loop (G). The process continues till all feathers are so attached. There are other uncommon methods of looping which cannot be described here for lack of space.

Feathers are fastened to the trail in the same manner. A thong passes over and under through holes in the cloth or skin and catches loops on the plumes.

Holes are then made through the shafts of the feathers, 4-6 inches from their tops. A second thong, called a spacer, is threaded through these holes (G). The thong ends are tied so that the feathers are evenly spaced and stand more or less upright. Attached in this manner the feathers can move quite freely in the wind.

Small fluffy plumes are frequently bound to the butts of the feathers under the red cloth mentioned above. On the tips of the feathers are glued thin strands of horse hair 3-6 inches long; and often small fluffs (G). The horse hair usually may be dyed red or yellow, or may be natural white or black. Small bits of short streamers of ermine fur, occasionally otter—may be pasted with rosin to the feather tips along with the horse hair.

**11. BLACKFOOT "STRAIGHT UP" BONNET.** This is not constructed as the ordinary bonnets described above. There is no cap, only a broad head band. The feathers are tied to this band so that they are fixed stiffly erect like the pickets in a fence and not movable as are those of the usual bonnets. There is no spacer thong part way up the shaft. Along the shafts of at least some feathers are sewn narrow strips of rawhide wrapped with porcupine quills. From the bottom edge of the headband, except over the face, hangs a long thick fringe of white ermine fur stripes or rolls (A). There is no separate brow band, but instead pieces of ermine are usually sewn or glued to the band.

It is suggested that this Blackfoot form is a glorified version of the simple feathered head bands of the Eastern Algonkin tribes. The Blackfoot belong to this language family and once lived far to the East in the forests of south central Canada. On their migration to the Plains they may have greatly elaborated the simple band of their ancestors, perhaps after contact with other tribes on the Plains who had already had the standard war bonnet. All this is, however, conjectural.

**12. MODERN TIMES.** So widely known and publicized has the war bonnet been that many tribes which never wore it in former times now appear in Plains war bonnets. It is worn by men and women alike without regard for the old rules, almost like an official uniform.

The war bonnet of stage, screen and the publicity drive has steadily increased in size, fanciness, use of garish color and trimming. Except for the very oldest Plains people it has lost all meaning and now is merely a vague general symbol of the Indian. An Indian has to wear one to convince tourists that he is an Indian! Tribes which never even heard of war bonnets now greet their visitors in them; and "Princesses" in war bonnets smile from every Sunday rotogravure.

Compiled by F. H. Douglas from the examination of over 300 specimens and from the following references:

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2. American Indian Costumes—H. W. Krieger. Annual Report of the U. S. National Museum for 1928, 1929.
3. The Cheyenne Indians—G. B. Grinnell. Yale University Press, 1923.
4. The Book of Indian Crafts and Indian Lore—Julian H. Salomon. New York, 1928.
5. The Indian How Book—Arthur C. Parker. New York, 1928.
6. Council Fires—Ellsworth Jaeger. New York, 1949.