

# Horse Masks of the Plateau

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Many of the first horses encountered by American Indian people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were dressed in elaborate armor by their conquistador riders. This protection often included fantastic masks of wrought iron, steel and leather designed both to protect the horses and to make them appear more fearsome. In 1542, the expedition led by Francisco Vázquez de Coronado took armored horses into present-day Kansas, where they met, and no doubt impressed, groups of Plains Apache (Winship 1896). In 1601, another Spanish expedition led

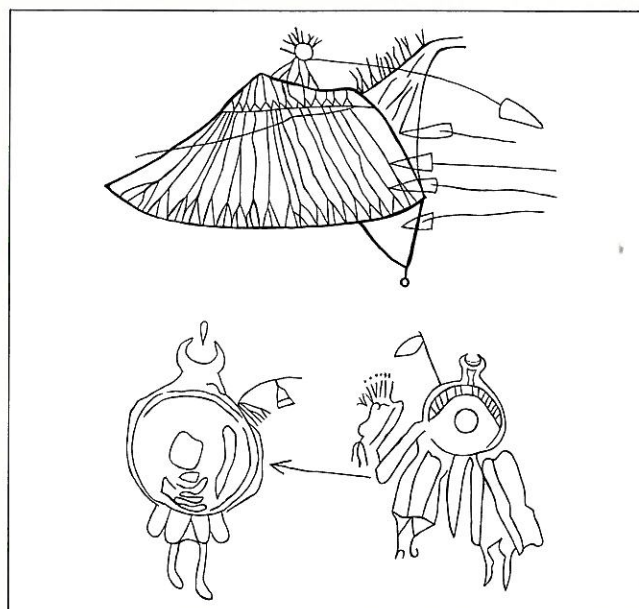


1. Horse mask, Nez Perce (Nimíipuu), c.1865. Canvas, wool and cotton, glass seed and pony beads, brass hawk bells. 21" x 24" (53.3 cm x 61 cm). Courtesy of the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Cat. No. 091386.000. Photograph by NMN Photo Services Staff.



by Governor Juan de Oñate brought 700 horses from the area of present-day Santa Fe, New Mexico to the vicinity of present-day Wichita, Kansas, where they had a battle lasting four to five hours with more than 1,500 warriors identified only as "Escanxaques." The Spaniards prepared their mounts with armor, including horse masks, but were met with clouds of arrows. Most of the men and their mounts were wounded outright, and the Spaniards were forced to withdraw.

On this trip, somewhere between the Canadian and Arkansas Rivers, Oñate's men lost several hundred animals (see Hammond and Rey 1953:746–760, 793–794, 836–877, 858). Within a few decades thereafter, these *cimarrónes* had produced herds numbering in the thousands, which fueled the expansion of horses across western North America. Initially captured by Jicarilla and other Plains Apache groups, these feral horses were traded north to allied Utes, and thence on to the Shoshone in southwestern Wyoming. By 1650 at the latest, a regular conduit of horses was reaching the Shoshone. By 1700, the animals had been traded to the Bannock, Nez Perce, Cayuse, Umatilla and other tribes along the Snake and Columbia Rivers in present-day Idaho, Oregon and Washington.<sup>1</sup>



2. Drawings of petroglyphs depicting Plains Indian horse armor, eighteenth century. Top: probably Shoshone, Nordstrom-Bowen site, southern Montana (after Keyser and Klassen 2001:Fig. 14.13). Bottom: probably Shoshone, Goffena Rockshelter, Musselshell River Valley, Montana (after Lewis 1983:Fig. 4).



3. Painted figures on elk skin (detail), Shoshone, c.1900. Tempera in a binder of animal-skin glue on a commercially tanned elk skin. Note that the horses are dressed for battle with masks of buffalo hair and horns. Courtesy of the Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Acc. No. 89.140.





4. *Grizzly Bear's Heart Parading (Nez Perce)*, c.1900. Photographer unknown. The horse mask on the horse on the right is shown in Figure 5. Note the cluster of sage grouse tail feathers affixed to the forehead of the mask, and the absence of mirrors, most sequins, bells and eagle feathers. Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, University of Idaho Library, Moscow. Neg. No. 38-0444.



5. Horse mask, Nez Perce (Nimiipuu), 1870s. Wool, glass seed beads, metal sequins and spots, brass shoe buttons, mirrors, feathers. This treasured family heirloom is still owned by the great-grandson of its maker. Leroy Seth collection. Photograph by Ned Martin.

There was a strict Indian appreciation that horses were a new kind of animal. Elaborate strategies were developed to control, breed and preserve them. It is clear that this included a wholesale adoption of horse armor, modeled on the Spanish patterns. Since Indian armorers lacked the Spanish materials, they improvised with whatever they had available, usually blankets of leather, often laced together in several layers. For the first 200 years of Indian horse usage in North America, circa 1600 to 1800, tribes from Texas to Canada employed horse armor, including protective masks. Although no actual Indian horse armor has survived, we have a general idea of its appearance thanks to the survival of Indian self-portraits showing armor in use (Fig. 2).

The Indians continued to use such armor until the early nineteenth century, for the Lewis and Clark expedition found it among the Shoshone in August 1805:

They have also a kind of armor which they form of many folds of antelope's skin [and] unite with glue and sand. With this they cover their own bodies and those of their horses. These are sufficient against the effects of the arrow (Lewis and Clark 1904-1906, Vol. 3:21).

It was the increasing availability of European firearms toward the end of the eighteenth century that made leather horse armor obsolete soon after 1800. Although the body armor was dispensed with, horse masks were retained as war accouterments among Plains tribes until the 1880s. After Indian people were confined to reservations, the masks were reserved for parades and other celebratory occasions.

In trying to discern tribal styles of Plateau horse masks, it is important to remember that all of these groups had been closely allied and intermarried for several centuries prior to the arrival of horses. Social customs and items of material culture such as horse masks were widely shared, passing among the tribes at celebratory events such as weddings and memorial giveaways. It is pointless, therefore, to try to establish very rigid boundaries between different tribal styles. In most cases, we have no information about the maker of a particular mask. A group of stylistically related horse masks found among the Cayuse might actually have been created by an Umatilla woman married into the other tribe. In what follows, therefore, tribal styles have been discerned only on the basis of the historical photographic evidence and collection history for some of the masks.

#### Nez Perce (Nimiipuu) Horse Masks

The earliest direct reference I have found to a Plateau horse mask was among the Nez Perce in January 1844:

If we had not known their customs and ways we might have been afraid, for it had the appearance of war. At a distance we saw a large body of them coming. We heard their drums, & reports of their guns. Upon a near approach they began to yell and sing, and make all manner of noises & their horses [were] prancing and running in every direction & they were the most fantastically dressed of any I have ever seen. The chiefs had considerable red about them. Their horses were also dressed to





6. David Young Chief, Cayuse, 1900. Photograph by Lee Moorhouse. The mask in the photograph is similar to those in Figures 7 and 8. Courtesy of the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Neg. No. 06500800.

suit their liking, no two alike. One horse I noticed with a Buffalo's scalp, horns and all, on his head; another with Blackfeet scalps flying in the air, etc. etc. In this manner they came into our yard, when a part alighted & commenced drumming, yelling & dancing. After going over this performance they left us, and went around [circled] the village, at the same time their wives were erecting their lodges (Henry Brewer in Boyd 1996:66–67).<sup>2</sup>

This description could as well apply to Shoshone buffalo-head horse masks depicted on a painted elk skin (Fig. 3). Just as horses and the use of horse armor traveled from the Shoshone to the Nez Perce and thence on to other tribes on the Plateau, it seems likely that the Nez Perce may have been the conduit through whom the idea of decorative horse masks was introduced to the tribes farther west. By 1876, extravagant horse masks were being reported among the Nez Perce. Emily Fitzgerald, wife of a doctor assigned to Fort Lapwai, Idaho, wrote to a friend:

I wish you could have seen them. You never saw such style... One of them who did the most talking had a headpiece for his horse that covered the horse's whole head. It was just covered with beads. There were holes for the eyes, and it really was very showy (Fitzgerald 1962:223–224).

The oldest known surviving Nez Perce horse mask, from the 1860s (Fig. 1), gives us a close idea of what had so impressed Mrs. Fitzgerald. In the 1844 description quoted earlier, the Nez Perce were parading as they arrived to visit friends, a tradition as old as the possession of horses. A historic photograph shows Grizzly Bear's Heart, a distinguished Nez Perce warrior, parading his masked horse, circa 1900 (Fig. 4). His horse mask is still owned and in use by his descendants, although it has been further embellished over time (Fig. 5). Reflective

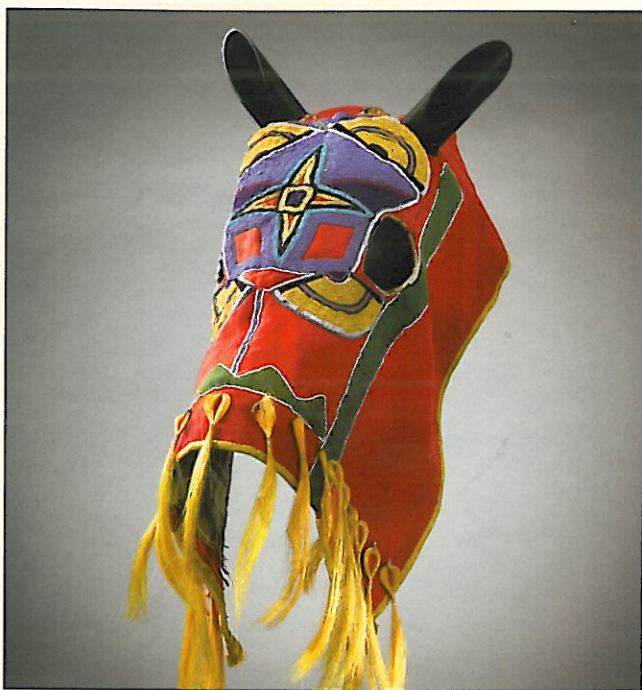


7. Cayuse-style horse mask, attributed to the Umatilla, late nineteenth century. Wool and muslin, glass seed beads, feathers, human hair. 23½" x 32¼" (59.7 cm x 83.2 cm). This mask and the masks in Figures 6 and 8 all appear to have been made by the same woman. Courtesy of the Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture/Eastern Washington State Historical Society, Spokane, Washington. Cat. No. MAC-3939.1A. Photograph by Ned Martin.

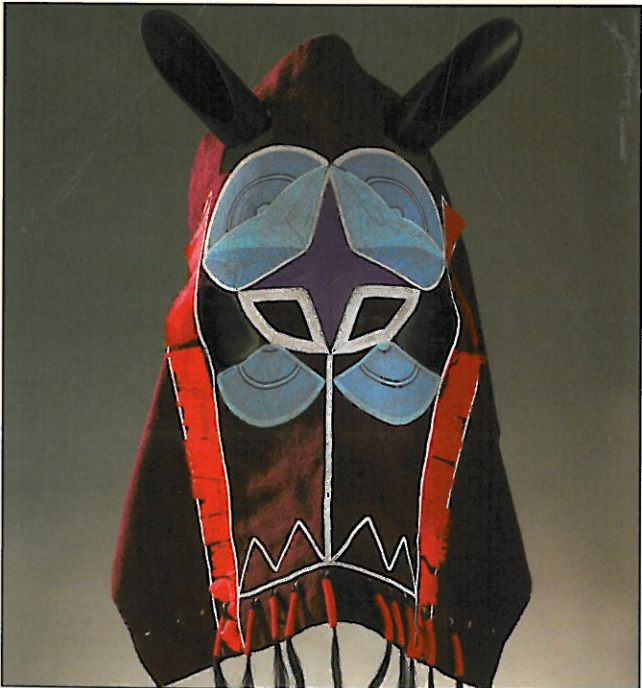


8. Horse mask, Cayuse, late nineteenth century. Wool and muslin, glass seed beads, feathers, human hair. 25½" x 23" (64.8 cm x 58.4 cm). The three starlike designs on the nose of each of these masks (Figs. 6–8) might represent the belt stars in the constellation Orion. The imitation sage grouse tail feathers simulate those seen on David Young Chief's mask in Figure 6. Private collection. Photograph by Ned Martin.





9. Horse mask, Cayuse, late nineteenth century. Wool and cotton, glass seed beads, horsehair. The designs and colors are emblematic of the Washat or Dreamer religion developed by the prophet Smohalla in the 1860s. The central design represents the North Star, which, like the heart of Smohalla, is always in the same place. This mask, also associated with the family of David Young Chief, is seen in Figure 11 on the horse second from the right. Private collection.



10. Horse mask, Cayuse, late nineteenth century. Wool and cotton, silk ribbon, glass seed beads, horsehair. Made by the same artist as the mask in Figure 9. The identical, complex pattern has been reinterpreted in an entirely different palette. The central figure would again symbolize the North Star. The surrounding quarter rondels are characteristic of similar arcs seen on Cayuse beaded blanket strips. Courtesy of the Tamástslikt Cultural Institute, Pendleton, Oregon. Photograph by Ned Martin.

brass sequins, small circular mirrors, brass hawk bells and small eagle feathers have been added to the simple beaded embellishments visible in the circa 1900 photograph.<sup>3</sup> Other historic photographs, not included here, document that these beaded elements all were in place by circa 1920 (Cowdrey, Martin and Martin 2006:81).<sup>4</sup>

#### Cayuse Horse Masks

There was a florescence in the use of horse masks in the Plateau area after 1880. By 1900, several series of stylistically similar horse masks were in use by the Cayuse. These are typified by the spectacular horse mask shown in a 1900 photograph of David Young Chief (Fig. 6). While the whereabouts of that particular mask remains unknown, I know of two very similar examples, both clearly made by the same artist (Figs. 7, 8). Since we know that in photographs made prior to circa 1910, red often photographed much darker than any shade of blue (Holm 1985), Young Chief's horse mask was probably made of bright scarlet wool, with zigzag borders and four-point stars cut out of dark blue wool, all accented with outlines of white glass seed beads (Fig. 6). A cluster of sage grouse tail feathers adorns the mask's brow and locks of either human hair or horsehair fringe its muzzle.<sup>5</sup>

The example seen in Figure 7, while a close variant of Young Chief's mask, has the colors reversed, so that the pattern of red stars appears on what might be intended as the dark blue night sky. The pattern of three stars vertically down the nose of the mask might represent the belt stars in the constellation known to Euro-Americans as Orion, which is the most prominent triple asterism visible in the Northern Hemisphere. A rosette of white and orange feathers adorns the forehead portion of the mask, while locks of black human hair fringe the muzzle.

The mask in Figure 8 has a variant of the same basic pattern, with a slightly different arrangement of the star figures. Here, the three astral symbols down the nose segment of the mask are worked in glass seed beads rather than as wool cutouts. The original cluster of forehead feathers has been lost, and has been replaced with an imitation of the sage grouse feathers on the Young Chief mask.

Another pair of spectacular horse masks are also associated with the family of David Young Chief (Figs. 9, 10).<sup>6</sup> It is impossible to say whether the same artist who designed the masks in Figures 6 through 8 also made these two, but the composition is entirely different. The prominent, four-pointed star on the forehead of the mask shown in Figure 9 and the selection of colors are emblematic of the Washat or Dreamer religion founded in the 1860s by a prophet named Smohalla. Related to both the Sinkayuse and the Nez Perce, Smohalla had wide influence across the central Plateau in the second half of the nineteenth century (Relander 1956). The North Star and crescent moon were primary symbols of this visionary belief. Smohalla designed his own flag, a yellow ban-



ner representing the dried grasses along the Columbia River, bordered by strips of green representing the moist hilltops. In 1884, he explained:

This is my flag and it represents the world. There are four [directions] in the world...I have been all those ways. This is the center. I live here...The star is the North Star. That star never changes; it is always in the same place. I keep my heart on that star. I never change (Mooney 1896:725–726).

The vibrant colors symbolizing the rich Plateau world along the Columbia River, which Smohalla imparted to his followers as the focus of devotional meditation, have been incorporated by the artist who created this mask. The star on the forehead of the mask is the same star that “never changes,” on which Smohalla taught his followers to set their hearts. The entire composition is a psychic shield, framed to protect a world that was being changed by outsiders who daily marginalized the Cayuse people and their neighbors.

This mask is shown in a photograph of the Round-Up parade on the streets of Pendleton, Oregon in 1924, on the horse second from the right (Fig. 11). At that date, the locks of yellow horsehair around the muzzle of the mask were not present. However, similar locks of hair are seen on this mask in a 1900 photograph (Cowdrey, Martin and Martin 2006:Fig. 7.21). As with any other type of horse trapping, maintenance and repair of horse masks is ongoing. Also, personal and community artistic tastes change over time. Another mask, adorning the horse on the left in Figure 11, combines the zigzag borders and starburst eye surrounds of Figures 6 through 8, with the North Star of Washat belief centered on the forehead of the mask.

The artist who made the mask in Figure 9 employed precisely the same pattern to create a related mask (Fig. 10). It seems likely that a template was used since the two masks are so closely related. By varying the color palette, however, an entirely different effect was achieved. The two white diamond shapes below the star describe an abstract crescent moon, the two prime symbols of Washat belief. It is tempting to see this as a night version of the other mask, though that is only speculation.<sup>7</sup>

#### Umatilla-Style Horse Masks

Three horse masks characterized by rich abstract floral beadwork and cutout designs of running diamonds are associated with tribes of the Umatilla Reservation in northeastern Oregon, near Pendleton. One of these, at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (Cat. No. 1983.6.23), was collected from an Umatilla family (see Cowdrey, Martin and Martin 2006:94). Another mask was a gift to a Palouse leader, but its origin is unknown (Fig. 12). A third mask now belongs to a family of Walla Walla descent, but in 1938 it was associated with Umatilla Chief Clarence Burke (Fig. 14).<sup>8</sup> With the ancient Plateau traditions of gift giving and intertribal inheritance, it is impossible to be precise about the origins of these horse masks. What

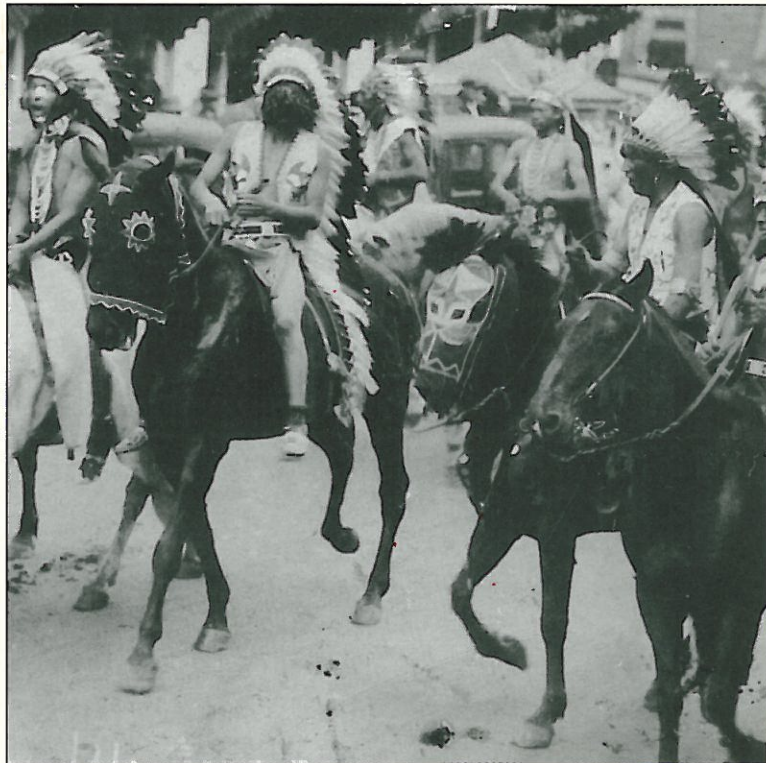
is certain, however, is that they all originated on the Umatilla Reservation; features shared among them suggest that the same woman made them all.

The mask in Figure 12 has been gracing parades in Plateau communities for more than 100 years. The owners say:

This horse mask has been in our family for at least three generations, starting in the late 1800s. This mask was handed down to us (my brother, sister and me) from our mother Eugenia Wolf. She was the great-granddaughter of the Palouse Chief Wolf Necklace, who was reputed to have owned 2,000 head of horses. Wolf Necklace's grandson was our grandfather Rufous Wolf. [The mask] was used during the Fourth of July celebrations at Cayuse, Oregon, and at the world-famous Pendleton Round-Up. There is a drape for behind the saddle made of two otter skins with fringes that went with the mask (Wewa 2006).

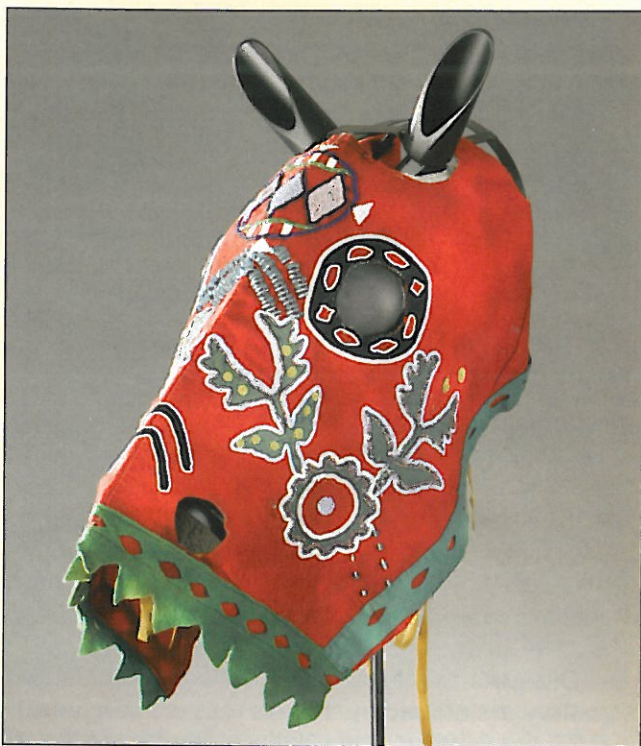
This mask is documented in a circa 1898 photograph, on the horse second from the right (Fig. 13). The rider may be Rufous Wolf, grandfather of the present owners. There is another mask on the horse at the far right, also characterized by elegant abstract floral beadwork.

Design characteristics that seem almost an artistic signature are shared by the two masks in Figures 12 and 14 and the third at the National Cowboy Museum. The diamond-shaped cutouts are a distinctive feature. Each is underlain with a contrasting color of wool cloth or silk ribbon (on the mask at the National Cowboy



11. The Round-Up parade, Pendleton, Oregon, 1924. Photographer unknown. The mask in Figure 9 is worn by the horse second from the right. Note the similarity of the mask on the horse on the left to the masks in Figures 6, 7 and 8. All are associated with the Young Chief family. Private collection.





12. Horse mask, Umatilla style(?), late nineteenth century. Wool and cotton, glass seed beads, glass basket beads, leather ties. The open nostril holes are unusual. Owned by descendants of the Palouse chief Wolf Necklace; used by his grandson, Rufous Wolf. Wilson Wewa collection. Photograph by Ned Martin.

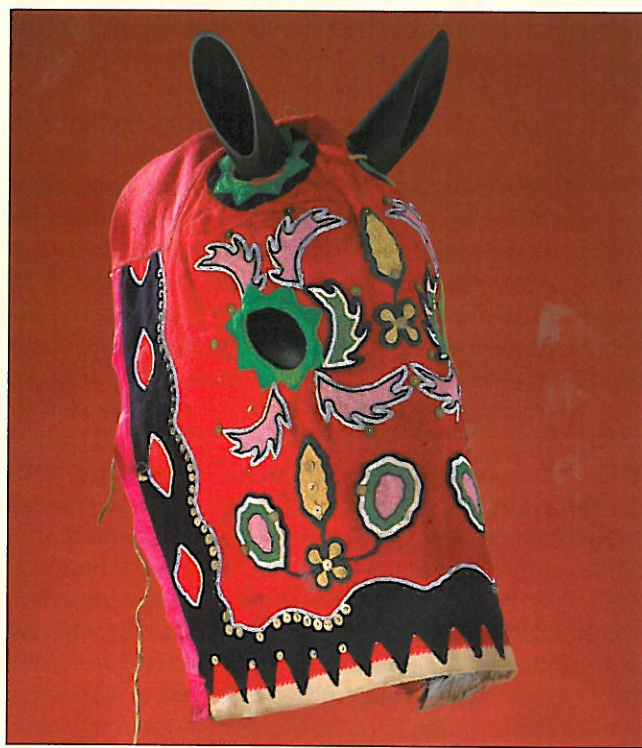


13. Men of the Umatilla Reservation parading, probably near Pendleton, Oregon, c.1898. Photographer possibly W. S. Bowman. The mask in Figure 12 is worn by the horse second from the right. The rider may be Rufous Wolf, grandfather of the present owners. Another elegant mask beaded in stylized floral motifs is seen on the horse on the right. Note the elaborate chest pieces on all of the horses. Private collection.

Museum), and some of the diamonds on each mask are outlined with seed beadwork. Brass sequins spangled over the surface of Figure 14 are mimicked by small yellow-beaded circles on Figure 12. The Umatilla mask at the National Cowboy Museum has scattered sequins, as well. The distinctive branched or palmate shapes near the eye openings are also repeated on all three masks. In Figure 12 these are cloth appliques bordered with seed beadwork, while on the masks in Figure 14 and at the National Cowboy Museum the palmate forms have been created with contour beading. It is my belief that one woman made all three of these masks.

Of the nine nineteenth-century horse masks illustrated in this article, five are still part of the traditional life of Indian communities. The horse-masking tradition, more than 400 years old in Indian America, is vibrant and alive. New masks appear each year at the Pendleton Round-Up, the Omak Stampede Parade, the Calgary Stampede and elsewhere in the West. Blackfeet, Lakota and Crow communities also preserve their own masking traditions.

I close this survey with another horse mask that is still part of the life of a family on the Umatilla Reservation. Perhaps created as early as the 1880s, it was photographed in the Pendleton Round-Up parade circa 1900 (Cowdrey, Martin and Martin 2006:Fig. 7.30). More than a century later, the same horse mask was photographed



14. Horse mask, Umatilla style, collected from the Walla Walla, late nineteenth century. Wool, silk ribbon, glass seed beads, brass sequins. Compare the palmate designs that frame the eye openings with the similar motifs on the mask in Figure 12. Courtesy of the Tamástslit Cultural Institute, Wocatsie Family Collection, Pendleton, Oregon. Photograph by Ned Martin.





15. Woman from the Umatilla Reservation displaying her masked horse during the Pendleton Round-Up, September 2005. This same mask was documented more than a century earlier, in a circa 1900 photograph by Lee Moorhouse, also taken at the Pendleton Round-Up. Photograph courtesy of Duane Alderman.

at the same location and event (Fig. 15). Made on a base of red wool, with upper straps fashioned of green wool, this horse mask displays a very fine style of Plateau abstract floral beadwork. The zigzags surrounding the eye openings are similar to several of those on masks from the closely related Cayuse, while the forehead rosette echoes the Umatilla mask in Figure 12. A long tradition is honored whenever these icons of our history are paraded. They are last remnants of the conquistador horse armor first imported to the Americas in 1494, now recast by American Indians as an emblem of their own traditions, marching proudly into the twenty-first century.

#### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The chronology of horse diffusion in North America has largely been bungled by the historians Francis Haines (1938, 1971), Robert M. Denhardt (1947), Walker D. Wyman (1945), Frank G. Roe (1955) and John C. Ewers (1955). A re-evaluation, offering detailed evidence for more than 100 tribes, will appear in Cowdrey, Martin and Martin (2008).
- <sup>2</sup> Thanks to Nez Perce (Nimíipuu) historian Nakia Williamson for bringing this information to my attention. I had hoped to include the quote in Cowdrey, Martin and Martin (2006), but had been unable to verify the source.
- <sup>3</sup> Note that the dark blue wool encircling the eye openings appears almost white in Figure 4. This is an effect of the orthochromatic, or blue-sensitive, film emulsions in use prior to circa 1910. In earlier photographs, blues and greens tended to photograph much lighter than we might expect, while reds and yellows photographed very dark. For a fine discussion of this phenomenon, see Holm (1985).
- <sup>4</sup> University of Idaho Library, Moscow, Steve Shawley Collection, No. 38-0166; National Park Service, Nez Perce National Historical Park, No. NEPE-HI-1390.
- <sup>5</sup> While Young Chief was the son of a prominent Cayuse leader, he was also a first cousin of the Nez Perce Chief Joseph; their fathers were half-brothers. First cousins in Plateau communities are expected to give one another numerous gifts.
- <sup>6</sup> Young Chief is documented using the mask in Figure 9 in a circa 1900 photograph (Cowdrey, Martin and Martin 2006:Fig. 7.21).
- <sup>7</sup> Note that a proportional difference between these very similar masks is that the area between the beaded arcs below the forehead star and the four triangles at the muzzle is longer on the dark blue mask in Figure 10 than on the red mask in Figure 9. This difference makes it easy to distinguish between the masks in black-and-white photographs. Stern

incorrectly associates the dark blue mask with a photograph of David Young Chief (1998:398). It is an understandable error, and likely Stern was not aware of the existence of the red background variant.

<sup>8</sup> For a photograph of a family grouping where the mask in Figure 14 appears with Chief Clarence Burke, see Cowdrey, Martin and Martin (2006:Fig. 7.29d).

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Mike Cowdrey is the author of several books in the field of American Indian art history. He resides in San Luis Obispo, California. American Indian Horse Masks, from which this article is derived, received the George Wittenborn Memorial Book Award for 2007.