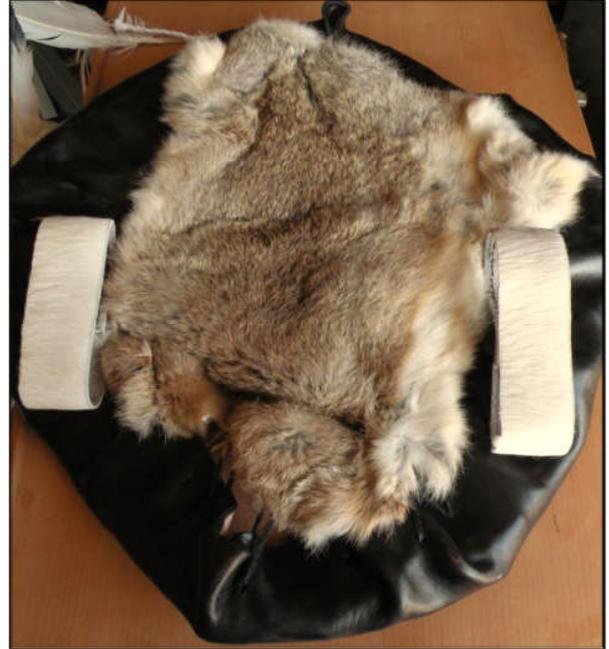


The War Shield



FRONT VIEW



REAR VIEW

Introduction and Materials

The Native American War Shield is made of willow branches, rawhide, sinew, vegetable-tanned leather, hair-on cowhide and a rabbit pelt. It is decorated with braided leather, bear claws made of resin, beads and feathers.

Meanings and Symbolism

The front of the war shield is covered with a variety of symbols and colors which convey specific meaning, primarily life, death, and strength. The center diamond represents the wind, which represents Life and Protection. The circular sun symbol above the wind again represents Life. The Bear tracks in the southeastern corner and decorative bear claws symbolize the Warrior Spirit and Bravery, while the Large Cat tracks in the northeastern corner symbolize Patience, Leadership, Strength, Courage, and Power. The Deer/Elk Tracks in the northwestern corner symbolize Speed and Peace, and the Bison Tracks in the southwestern corner symbolize Strength and Stability. The large field of Black conveys the idea/threat of Death from the warrior bearing the shield. Similarly, the Red in the diamond

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represents Wounds, Blood and War. Likewise, the White of the tracks again symbolizes Death. Finally, the Yellow of the sun represents Day, Dawn and Life.

Making the War Shield

The frame for the shield starts with willow branches. Ideally you would use green wood, but dried branches can be used, and were used in this case. The first step is to soak the willow branches in water in order to enhance their pliability. When the branches are sufficiently wet so that they bend without breaking, cut rawhide into strips 1 inch to 1.5 inches wide. Put these to soak in the same water where the willow branches are soaking. This will soften the rawhide and make it pliable. Once the rawhide is soft, take two willow branches and overlap them. Take a rawhide strip and wrap the over overlap, pulling the rawhide tight as you go. Secure the rawhide with sinew. As it dries, the rawhide will shrink and become hard, forming a secure binding for the willow branches. Continuing putting willow branches together in this fashion, bending them and using their natural contours to form a circle or oval frame for the shield. Set the frame aside and let the willow branches and rawhide dry. It's wise to use weights, braces and clamps to help prevent the branches warping so that the final frame lies more or less in a single plane.

Select a heavy weight cowhide large enough to cover and wrap around the frame. Layout the design on the grain side of the leather and tool it. If you plan to include a center claw or feather, be sure to punch the hole in the center of the shield at this time. Layout and punch a series of lacing holes around the edge of the cowhide. The holes should be roughly one inch in from the edge and set so that an even number of holes are made and evenly spaced around the edge of the cowhide.

Place rawhide lace and the tooled cowhide in clean water. Wet the cowhide thoroughly, waiting for air bubbles to cease releasing from the cowhide. Drape the tooled cowhide over the willow and rawhide frame, centering the design on the frame. Push the edges over the sides of the frame, starting to stretch the cowhide taut.

Hold the cowhide in place and flip it and the frame over as a unit onto your work surface, exposing the back side. Take the wet and now pliable rawhide lace and thread through one of the holes, then through the hole on the opposite side of the frame. Bring the lace back across the frame to the hole to one side of your starting point. Continue lacing in this fashion until all holes have been filled. Carefully begin pulling the lacing tight, stretching it and the cowhide shield taut. Once this has been completed tie-off the rawhide lace and set the entire assembly to the side

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to dry. Again it is wise to use weights, braces and clamps to help prevent the assembly warping so that it continues to lie more or less in a single plane.

Once the shield dries determine where additional decorations will be added and punch the necessary holes. To do this may require the use of wooden blocks to back the shield leather while punching the holes.

Proceed to color the shield using the methods and colors of your choice. Once the coloring agents dry, treat and seal the leather. For the shield shown in the picture, I used alcohol based dyes (Black, Red, and Yellow), plus an acrylic white paint diluted with water. Once everything was dry I applied neatsfoot oil to restore the leather, then sealed the piece with Tan Kote.

Leather lacing is then strung through the holes in the shield and over the rawhide lacing in the back, used to attach the decorative resin bear claws and/or beads, then round braided for decorative purposes and to hold the feathers. Arm straps are made from hair-on cowhide and attached to the back of the shield to provide handles for using the shield. Finally, a rabbit pelt is sewn onto the back, attaching to both the rawhide lacing and the shield leather to protect the user's arm from the rawhide lace in the back.

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