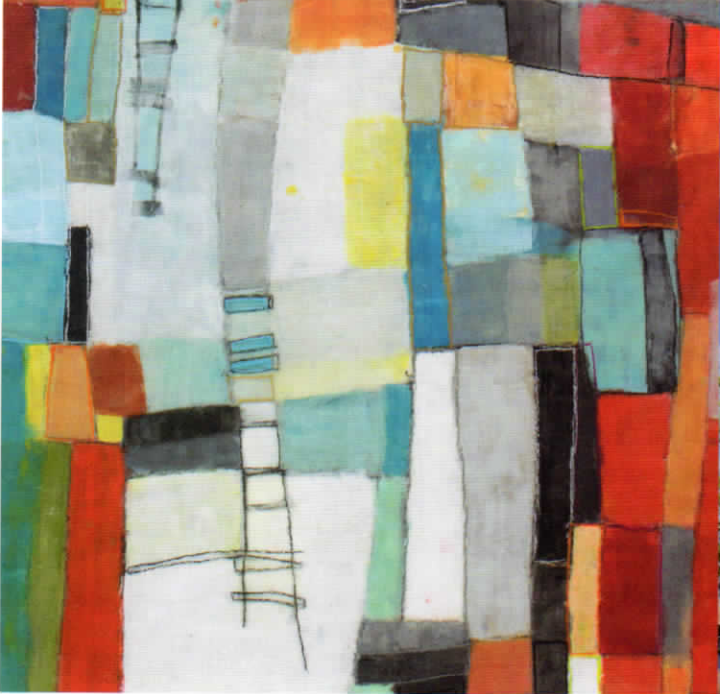
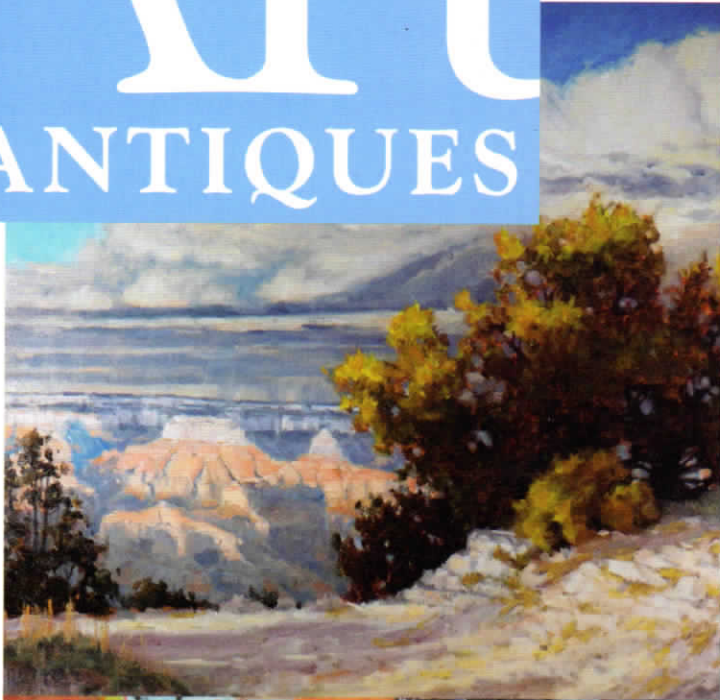


Art & ANTIQUES

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



ROBERTO MATTA | MARINE PAINTING | WILLIAM MERRITT CHASE | CAR AUCTIONS



SANTA FE SCENE

War Wear

Among the Native American warriors of the Great Plains, there was no system of military rank. In order to lead in battle, a soldier had to convince his comrades to follow him, to persuade them that he had the best plan and was the most competent to carry it out. Consequently, the tribes' military clothing was not a uniform adorned with generic stripes but a highly individual expression of personal valor and achievement.

The war shirt shown here, an exceedingly rare example from a very early period (circa 1800–30), speaks eloquently of the deeds of its long-ago wearer—most likely a member of the Hidatsa tribe of the Upper Missouri River region. On the chest are pictographs of four bear paws, above which is a group of human heads being lanced. The heads speak for themselves; as for the paws, “associations with bears were not lightly given,” says Tom Cleary of H. Malcolm Grimmer LLC, a Santa Fe dealer specializing in antique American Indian objects, which is offering the shirt for sale. “Bears were highly revered, because they were the hardest animals to kill.” On the sides of the shirt are pictographs of pipes, signifying war parties led, while on the back is a series of X-shaped tally marks, one for each coup counted or horse stolen. Measuring 34 inches long and 44 inches wide, the war shirt is constructed like a poncho of antelope hide or deer hide, with decorative strips of porcupine quills mixed with vegetal fibers to cover up the seams.

This shirt, one of about a dozen of its type extant, was found recently in a barn in Montana. According to Cleary, such a provenance, so close to where the object was made, is very unusual today. Most artifacts of this level of quality that enter the market



come from castles in Europe, to which they were brought by aristocratic scions who traveled through the American West in the 19th century. The dating of the shirt is also unusual: “This is very early, from around the time the equestrian warrior culture was emerging on the Plains,” says Cleary, “before the railroads, before Manifest Destiny was a sure thing.” He points out that shirts like this can be seen in the paintings of pioneering ethnographer-artists such as George Catlin, Karl Bodmer, and John Mix Stanley. Cleary says, “This is from the first generation of material culture being recorded. This is first contact.”

