

# THE PEDIGREE OF THE HUGGING BEAR TIPI IN THE BLACKFOOT CAMP

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Traditional paintings on tipi covers, once widely used among all Plains Indian tribes, are nowadays largely restricted to tribes in Canada: the three Blackfoot tribes, the Sarsi and the Plains Cree. These paintings are of a sacred nature, having their origin in visions and associated with medicine bundles and their rituals. The right to use such a painted design is restricted to the ritual owner, i.e. either the first individual to acquire the design in a mystic experience or somebody to whom the rights were ritually transferred. The study of these paintings reveals distinct tribal art styles, though a stylistic tradition may be shared with another tribe with whom there existed intimate cultural ties of great age. Such is the case with the Sarsi, who patterned their Plains adaptation upon the culture of the Blackfoot, only to maintain their Athapascan language as a reminder of their different origin.

Within the Blackfoot tradition we recognize five basic types of tipi paintings (Fig. 4a-e): 1) the so-called *All-Over* designs, individually referred to by the predominant and usually monochrome colour of the cover; 2) the *Night and Day* designs, in which the left and right sides of the tipi cover are of different monochrome colours; 3) the striped designs, consisting of a number of parallel red bands encircling the tipi cover; 4) the *Hailstone* or *All Stars* designs, in which a coloured background is covered with a white pattern of dots; 5) the *Framed* designs, in which conventional decorations of top and bottom serve as a frame of the vision-derived pictures

in the central part of the cover. Most Blackfoot and Sarsi tipi paintings are of this framed type.

Anyone who claimed the ritual rights to more than one tipi design could have these combined in one composite painting. It should be noted that practically all these painted tipis, whatever their type of design, have either a cross, a disc or a crescent design unit painted at the back of the top (Fig. 8). Similar design units were painted on the same spot by many other Plains tribes. Blackfoot informants agree that these designs authenticate the spiritual origin of the painting. The absence of these design units on several painted tipis of the Sarsi is for the Blackfoot merely another indication that the Sarsi always imitated them without much understanding.

Photographs and other pictures allow us to trace this art tradition back as far as the 1840s, and native informants had never heard of tipis painted in a different style by their ancestors.

In addition to the formentioned patterns there are, of course, a few aberrant paintings about which I here present some information which suggests that one of these designs is of non-Blackfoot origin and possibly a survival of an earlier stage in this art tra-

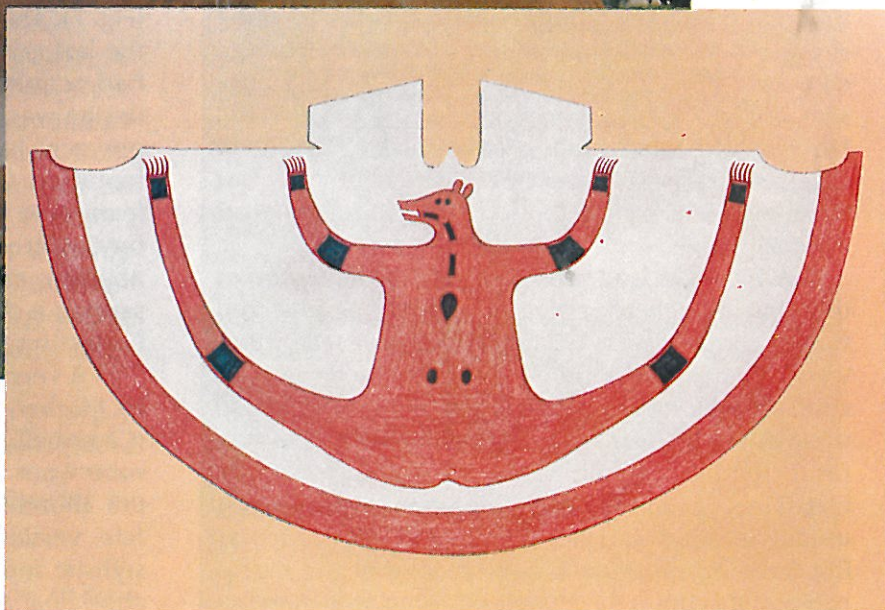
1. *Hugging Tipi in the North Blackfoot camp, southern Alberta, 1971. Two years later this old worn tipi cover was destroyed in a summer storm.*

2. *Layout of the Hugging Tipi design, North Blackfoot. In addition to elements shown in painting, a bunch of feathers used to be tied to the bear's head. Photograph and drawing by author.*



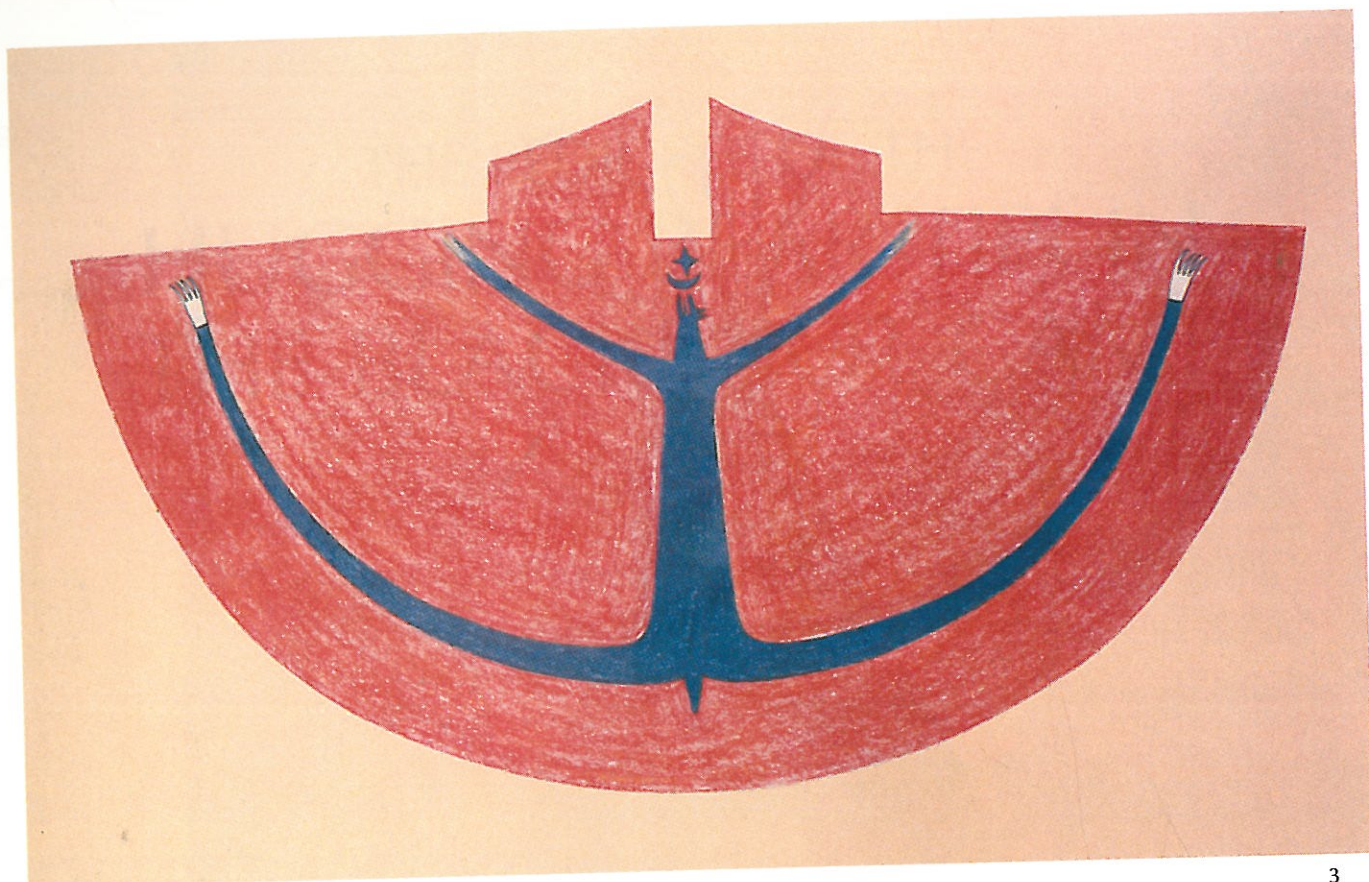


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dition. As such it throws some light on far-ranging intertribal relationships at an early date.

In addition to several Bear tipis of the "framed" design type there was, until 1973, a Bear tipi referred to by the Blackfoot as the Hugging or Embrace Design (Figs. 1-2, 10). The white cover of this tipi showed a huge red ochre bear sitting at the back, embracing the lodge with its front and hind legs. Apart from the red ochre band along the base this tipi painting showed none of the conventional Blackfoot design elements. Particularly the absence of the cross design is remarkable. The indication of the lifeline, kidneys and joint marks was a normal feature in Blackfoot representation of spiritual beings, but these elements can be found as well in religious art from all native North America.

A bearskin was used to cover the entrance of this tipi, though all native informants emphasized that the use of a bearskin for this purpose was rather weird. Convinced of the fearsome character of bear spirits Blackfoot were extremely hesitant in the use of anything of bear origin. Only the wife of a man protected by bear spirits was allowed to prepare a bearskin. Even in speaking about them the Blackfoot usually referred to bears with taboo names, such as Big Bobtail or Muddy Mouth. Note that the native name of this tipi is the Hugging Design, *not* Hugging

Bear Design. This tipi was an unusual one in the Blackfoot camp as well as among all other Plains Indian tribes. In my files on this subject there is only one comparable example, plus a few others which share the embracing feature of the design.

The idea of a spiritual being embracing the lodge was found in an anthropomorphic thunderbird design on a Plains Cree tipi from Saskatchewan (Fig. 7). The original owner, Loud Voice, was one of the last great shamans among these people and he had acquired his powers from Thunder. The tipi design was used until c. 1930 (interview Dan Ochapowace, July 1975). Thunderbirds are frequently found on Cree tipis but none had this embracing feature. In addition to this feature, the white discs on the breast of this Cree thunderbird are shown nowhere else but in the Blackfoot version of representing a thunderbird (Alberta Provincial Museum Collection No. 66.394.1).

A very similar tipi design was used in the 1920s by Mother-of-Bull-Weasel, a Montana Crow Indian (Campbell 1927). This design once decorated his robe worn in warfare, giving him the protection of the thunderbird (Lowie 1922:319). Although this late version betrays considerable Euro-American stylistic influence there is no reason to doubt its aboriginal ancestry (Fig. 5). Yet, impressive designs



such as this one were most unusual among the Crow who did not use many painted tipis during the historic period.

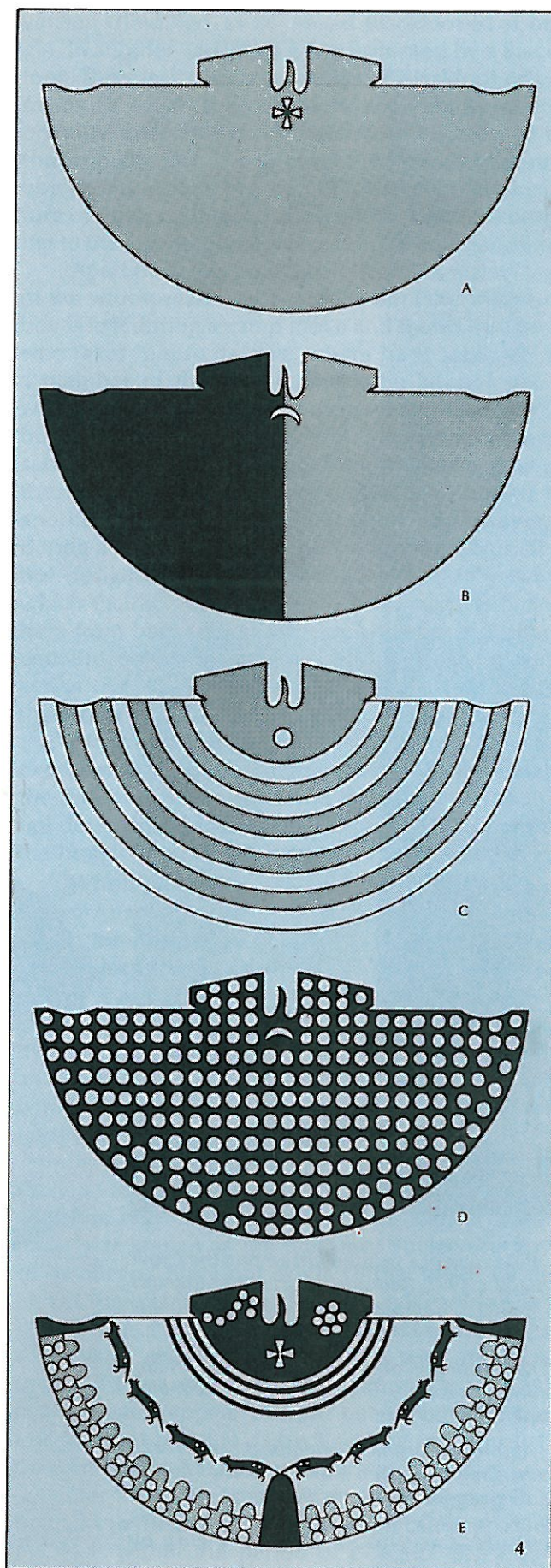
The only design fully comparable to the Blackfoot Hugging Design is baffling in its similarity (Fig. 3). This is a bear tipi on the southern Plains, formerly in the camp of the Kiowa-Apache, a small Athapaskan tribe, culturally united with the Kiowa in an even more intimate fashion as were the Athapaskan Sarsi with the Blackfoot. This Bear design excepted, Kiowa-Apache paintings clearly conform to the stylistic tradition of the Kiowa, as illustrated in the catalogue published by Ewers (1978). The red ochre cover of this tipi shows a huge blue bear sitting at the back and embracing the lodge with its front and hind legs. Above the bear's head is painted a small blue crescent, surmounted by a blue star (Ewers 1978:42). A bearskin was used to cover the entrance to this tipi, which is another unusual similarity to the Blackfoot Hugging Bear tipi.

Though different from the Blackfoot in the range and combination of design elements, most tipi designs in the Kiowa tradition fit the same range of basic patterns as that mentioned for the Blackfoot. Yet, the Kiowa had another tipi design of an embracing character (Fig. 6). The latter showed two separate human arms and two separate human legs painted around the cover (illustrated, Ewers 1978:29). In my opinion, however, neither the embracing features of this design nor that of the Cree and Crow thunderbird tipis are sufficient to explain the close similarity of the Blackfoot and Kiowa-Apache Hugging Bear designs in terms of independent development. My suggestion at this point is, therefore, that the two Bear tipis resulted from some form of contact between the two tribes in the past. I shall now review data gathered in the field and from the literature which seems to support my suggestion.

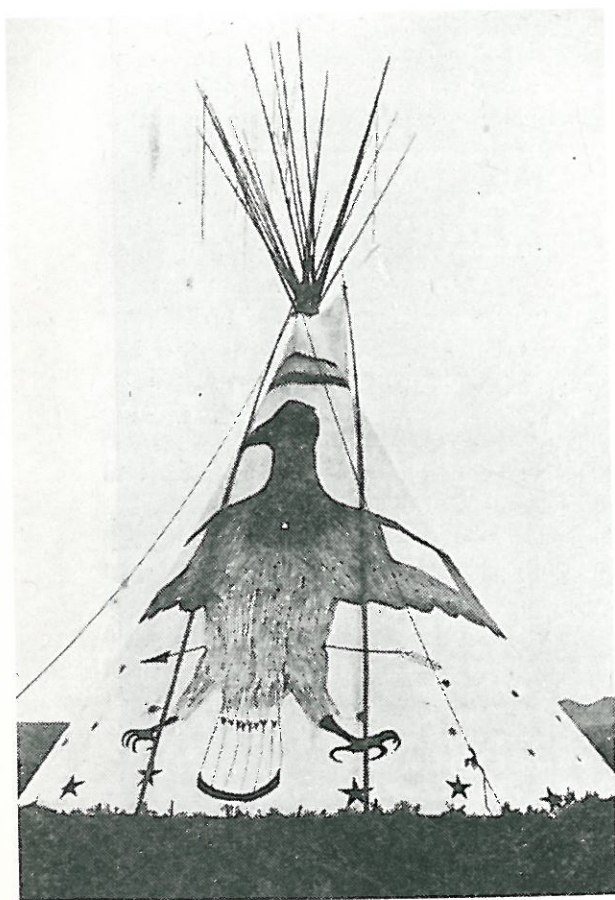
It was at Fort York on Hudson Bay, of all places, that the Blackfoot entered history. In 1743, Cree middlemen introduced the local trader, James Isham, to a Blackfoot visitor. Isham acquired from this man two wordlists, which turned out to be Blackfoot and an early form of Crow (Rich 1949:35). Probably this visitor at Fort York was not the only bilingual Blackfoot. In the 1780s, David Thompson found it to be a good Blackfoot custom for young men to spend some time among other tribes so as

3. Layout of the Kiowa-Apache Bear tipi; one of a large series of models made by Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache Indians for the ethnologist James Mooney in the 1890s. Smithsonian Institution, Coll. No. 229,906. Drawing by author.

4a-e. Basic patterns of Blackfoot tipi paintings. a. All-Over b. Night and Day c. Striped d. Hailstone or All Stars e. Framed. Drawings by Gail McKnight.



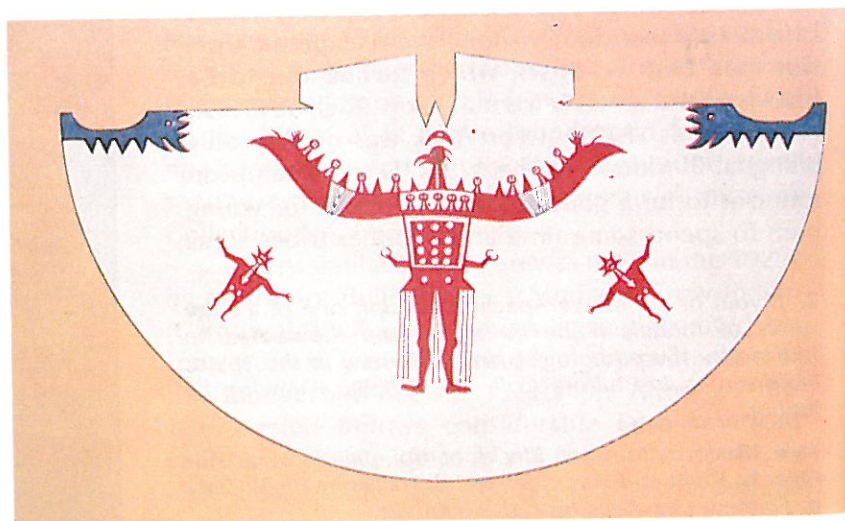




5. Rear view of a painted tipi among the Crow Indians, c.1927. Reproduced from photograph by Walter S. Campbell, *American Anthropologist*, 29(1927):102.

6. Kiowa, model of the Leg Picture tipi. Smithsonian Institution, Coll. No. 245,024. Photograph by author.

7. Anthropomorphic thunderbird design on a Plains Cree tipi cover, Saskatchewan. The design represents the guardian spirit of Loud Voice, the tipi's first owner. Glenbow-Alberta Institute, Cat. No. AP-2563. Drawing by author.



"to learn their languages and become acquainted with the countries" (Glover 1962:266). At that time, Blackfoot acquaintance with the country already extended southward as far as the Spanish settlements on the southern Plains. Mules and horses with Spanish-Mexican horsegear brought back by the Blackfoot, as well as their description to Thompson of the dark-skinned Spaniards leave no doubt in this regard (Glover 1962:50-51). While on the South Saskatchewan in 1802, Peter Fidler had a Blackfoot chief make some maps for him. These maps, now in the Hudson's Bay Archives in Winnipeg, reveal a detailed knowledge of the country and location of tribes as far south as the Pawnee in southern Nebraska. Warfare between the Blackfoot and Pawnee in the early nineteenth century was remembered by both tribes as late as the 1890s (Grinnell 1892:164). According to the Arapaho and Cheyenne their migration to the southern Plains was stimulated by the abundance of game and horses there, reported by Blackfoot Indians returning from the south in 1826 (Grinnell 1923:40).

Throughout the nineteenth century there are many records of Blackfoot escapades on the central and southern Plains as well as in Utah and along the Columbia River to the Pacific Ocean. In his history of the Blackfoot, John Ewers devoted a whole chapter to the extravagant wanderlust of the early Blackfoot (Ewers 1958). Supported by these and other historical records there is a fair amount of Blackfoot oral tradition as evidence that they acquired much of their ritual paraphernalia and some of their society rituals from the Arapaho, Mandan, Cree and Crow. I consider it significant that practically all Blackfoot myths and legends prove to be versions of an intertribal, widespread Plains Indian literature. Yet, all Blackfoot informants insist that the Hugging Bear tipi is one of their most ancient tipi designs. They are at a loss to explain, however, why there is no design at the back of the top authenticating its mystical origin, despite legends to this purport.

By means of photographs we can trace the Blackfoot Hugging Design tipi back to the 1880s, but detailed native traditions place its origin before or during the first introduction of horses, the early eighteenth century. According to the Blackfoot the design originated somewhere up north, more specifically somewhere north of present Calgary, that is, in the old Sarsi territory. A Sarsi origin of this design would indeed explain the absence of a cross or crescent design in its composition: several of the oldest Sarsi painted tipis do not follow Blackfoot tradition in this respect.

A suggestion of Sarsi origin is also preserved in the origin myth of the Blackfoot Hugging Bear tipi. The story deals with the adventures of a boy, in one

version identified as of mixed Blackfoot-Sarsi origin, in another version as a Sarsi adopted by a Blackfoot. There exist more examples of Blackfoot origin myths in which the non-Blackfoot identity of the principal character is understood as a reference to the non-Blackfoot origin of the ritual or sacred object in question. We should not expect the literature of other cultures to convey information according to the conventional rules of our literary tradition.

Apart from this Sarsi detail the myth is a version of the widespread Bear Foster Parent tale: the small boy is lost during a camp move and found by a bear who takes him to its cave, where he is accepted as a member of the bear family. After several years, when his people are again camped in the area, the boy is returned to them after receiving several sacred and magical presents from the bears. One of these presents is the Hugging Design, though in another version of the story he received this design during a later encounter with his foster parents. The tipi design is associated with the magical powers which Plains Indians normally associated with the help from bear spirits: ferocious bravery in warfare and the power to cure wounds received in such action (Fig. 9). The same powers were ascribed by the Kiowa-Apache to their Hugging Bear tipi.

Although native traditions hardly can be expected to satisfy our demands of historical detail, the indications of a Sarsi role in the genesis of this tipi design seem to provide a link with the origin of the hugging bear tipi among the Kiowa-Apache.

When James Mooney visited the Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache in the 1890s he found these people still in the possession of detailed traditions of their former location in southeastern Montana and the nearby Black Hills; and this tradition was corroborated by those of several other Plains tribes. While living there, according to these traditions, the Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache had been in frequent contact with the Blackfoot and Sarsi. In confirmation of this tradition, Mooney's informants introduced him to several people who had Sarsi individuals among their ancestors (Mooney 1896: 155-160,248). In addition, one of the Kiowa-Apache warrior fraternities was known as the Blackfoot Society because of its alleged Blackfoot origin (Bittle 1962). By the end of the eighteenth century, when invading Sioux forced the Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache to retreat southwards, these intimate contacts with the Blackfoot and Sarsi appear to have come to an end. All later contacts appear to have been in the form of less pleasant horse raids by Blackfoot individuals in Cheyenne and Arapaho war parties.

The Kiowa-Apache traced their hugging Bear tipi back to the end of the eighteenth century, which places it within the period of peaceful Blackfoot-





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8. Rear view of the Mountain Sheep tipi in the camp of the Blood tribe, Blackfoot nation, southern Alberta, c.1920. The cross-shaped design at the neck is symbolically associated with the moth and the morning star, and refers to the dream origin of the tipi painting. Courtesy of Smithsonian Institution, Neg. No. 55,991.

9. "Medicine Man Performing." In 1832 George Catlin saw and painted this Blackfoot bear shaman performing his curing ritual. Courtesy of Smithsonian Institution, USNM Coll. No. 386161.

10. Side view of the Hugging Tipi, standing beside an Elk tipi, North Blackfoot. Photograph by author.



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## Bibliography

Sarsi contact. The Kiowa-Apache claim that their bear design originated from a dream of one of their own people (Ewers 1978:42) is one of those confusing reminders of the fact that oral traditions do not serve the same cultural functions as our records of "factual" history. Even if true, this claim does not undermine my conviction that the two hugging bears are historically related. Dreams are made up of impressions received from one's environment.

There remains the question whether this Bear design is of Sarsi, Blackfoot or Kiowa-Apache origin. Without going here into more detail, but referring to a considerable amount of ethnographic evidence, I want to emphasize that bear ritualism has a distinctly northern flavour, having its center of intensity in the circumboreal forest regions. The survival of the embracing feature in other tipi paintings of northern Plains people suggests the possibility that the hugging bears were survivors of a protohistoric phase in the regional art tradition. The absence of conventional Blackfoot stylistic features and the role of the Sarsi in its mythical origin tends to exclude the Blackfoot from the originating candidates. It may be significant that there was another design with embracing features in the Kiowa camp - the arms-and-legs design - but here the ice is getting too thin for me. For the time being I admit defeat at this point, though it appears that we have in this fine bear picture a fitting symbol of the protohistoric Plains Athapascan Corridor, proposed by George Hyde some twenty years ago (Hyde 1959:27). Even though archaeological evidence indicates that the major route of Athapascan migrations southward ran west of the Rocky Mountains, small bands seem to have sojourned for a long time all along the eastern foothills as well.

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