BULL HEAD’S ROBE

Bull Head’s Robe  HK459
200 cm x 220 cm
Buffalo Hide
Donated by Edmund Morris to the ROM 1913

Background on Chief Bull Head

Born around 1833, Chief Bull Head belonged to the Tsuu T’ina tribe, formerly called the Sarcee. During a time when inter-tribal warfare reached high intensity, Bull Head became the leading warrior of his tribe. His war deeds are recorded on the painted buffalo hide displayed in the case. Soon after his brother was killed in 1865 Bull Head became chief of the tribe. He would remain chief of the Tsuu T’ina until his death in 1911.

In 1877 Bull Head signed Treaty Seven on behalf of his people, who numbered at that time, 255. Several years later, the Tsuu T’ina settled on a reserve located 12 KM (7.5 miles) from the centre of present day Calgary. Despite several devastating social and health problems, and great pressure to sell parts of their land, Bull Head ably led the Tsuu T’ina into the Twentieth Century united as a people with their reserve intact.

Robe Illustration

In the summer of 1908 Edmund Morris brought a buffalo hide, formerly used as a carriage robe, from Toronto to the Sarcee Reserve. He commissioned the reserve Interpreter and Farm Instructor, George Hodgson, to have Bull Head’s war history painted on it which was completed in November of the same year. Bull Head described his deeds in Sarcee to “Two Guns” who executed the painting. “Young Charlie Crow Chief”, among the first graduates of the reserve school, probably translated Bull Head’s words into English. Hodgson’s daughter transcribed the text, much of which is quoted below. A letter to Morris dated 18 November 1908 from Katharine Hodgson reveals that Morris paid twenty dollars to have the robe painted, ten dollars going to Bull Head for giving information.

“Two Guns” was born around 1861, too young to have been a warrior. Yet his painting vividly evokes the high drama of Plains Peoples’ warfare. He recorded six of Bull Head’s exploits along with a tally of the horses, weapons and scalps taken from the enemy. Unlike more traditional war exploit paintings, thick lines were drawn to distinguish the events and English names and numbers were inscribed to key into the written explanations. He painted the enemy Cree in black and blue, with the Tsuu T’ina in red and green.
Translation Scene I (upper left corner of robe):

In the same year 1860, one winter day, at Battle River near Dried Meat Lake, the Sarcee had driven a large band of Buffaloes into a “Buffalo Pawn” [pound]. (A Buffalo Pawn [pound] is an enclosure built of logs by the Natives for capturing Buffalo).* And while butchering the animals they had just killed, aided by the women and children a party of Cree surrounded them. In an instant they were prepared to fight. Many managed to reach camp, which was nearby. **Bull Head**, who had reached his tepee, shot and killed one of the enemy. The Cree were defeated and fled. Four of the Sarcee were killed.

*See Paul Kane’s Painting and sketch “Buffalo Pound” presently in the gallery, for visual reference

Paul Kane/The Artist/Wilderness to Studio
Kenneth R. Lister
ROM Press
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Pages 234-235

Translation Scene 2 (upper right corner of the robe):

In the month of May 1865, one bright morning, “Riding on the Side Hill” started off alone to hunt intending to return that day, but next day, when he had not returned, his friends became alarmed and the chief “Little Chief” (**Bull Head**’s brother) ordered a party of men and women to go and search for him.

Some of the men were on foot and when they were some fifteen miles from camp they saw a man standing on a high hill waving his blanket. Thinking he was their lost comrade they began to ascend the hill, but they were mistaken for this man was an enemy signalling to the Cree who were on the other side of the hill. When they discovered this they turned and fled with the enemy in hot pursuit.

During the chase one of the Sarcee women fell off her horse and her husband who was too frightened to turn back called to **Bull Head** to save her. He, without hesitation, turned and leaping from his horse aided her to mount hers. Many men were killed and seven women captured by the Cree.

“Little Chief”, who had run all the way, was shot and instantly killed on reaching their enemy camp.

“Eagle Rib” had everything in preparation in camp having heard the reports knew they were in danger.

**Bull Head** who had arrived in safety, upon hearing of his brother’s death rushed out amongst the enemy followed by his wife and pulled one of them back into the enclosure by the hair. They cut his throat, scalped him and took his gun.

This battle was fought at Vermillion Creek lasting all day and was one of the bloodiest battles fought amongst the Native tribes.

The Sarcee had camped near a slough and after the battle it was like a pool of blood.
Translation Scene 3 (bottom centre):

In the summer of 1886 a party of Sarcee met a few Cree who seeing the Sarcee outnumbered them, fled.

The Sarcee killed nine of them and wounded one.

**Bull Head** sprang from his horse and taking a knife from the wounded man stabbed him and took his scalp.

This took place at Long Lake.

Translation Scene 4 (centre of the robe):

In the year 1860 at Nose Hill, about 100 KM east of Edmonton, as Cree were engaged in building a fort, when all unexpectedly a Sarcee war party came upon them, in which chief “Little Chief” was leader.

The Sarcee immediately attacked the Cree. A fight followed lasting a few hours. One of the Cree bolder than the rest, rushed out of the fort carrying a Holy item and a gun. He was shot in one foot by “Many Horses”. “Blood” also fired at him. He made an attempt to escape but **Bull Head** shot and afterwards scalped him, taking the scalp and gun.

Translation Scene 5 (lower right of the robe):

A few weeks after “Little Chief” was killed while the Sarcee were camping at Battle River some of their horses were stolen.

Suspecting where their horses were taken to, **Bull Head** gathered a few men and rode away.

They soon came upon a party of Cree building a fort. One of the Cree came to meet them asking to be friends but **Bull Head** who had not forgotten his brother’s death jumped from his horse and sprang at the Cree with the intention of killing him but ended up only taking his gun and giving it to “Heaven Fire”.

The others made no attempt to fight so they parted in peace.

Translation Scene 6 (bottom centre of robe):

In 1866 a party of Sarcee made ready to go to Edmonton to trade. While on the way, **Bull Head**, “Going to the Cree” and “Little Boy” who were following at a distance hunting for game, thought they saw a wolf on a hill and decided to try and kill it. As they approached near, **Bull Head** hesitated telling his companions that he thought the object on the hill was a man and not a wolf, but they would not believe him and finally persuaded him to follow.
When they reached the summit they not only saw one man but a number of Cree who instantly fired on them.

Bull Head who was so taken by surprise could not run. He walked a few steps then the fright seemed to leave him and running he soon joined his companions who had reached the bottom of the hill again. The main party of Sarcee, hearing the firing, fled also. “Little Boy’s” arrow case was shot off his back, but he was not hurt. “Going to the Cree” was killed.

After running five or six miles with the enemy following close firing all the time they were met by Bull Head’s wife with two horses. Then the two men mounted one horse and they soon outran their pursuers who were not mounted.

The five horses that were painted on the side are the horses that Bull Head had stolen from other tribes, also the tomahawks, scalps and bows and arrows.

Photograph caption:

Bull Head was extremely tall, broad-shouldered and spoke in a loud booming voice. He lost his right eye after contracting smallpox during the epidemic of 1837-38. In this photograph, taken by Alex J. Ross around 1885, he wears an ermine-trimmed, beaded war shirt. [Public Archives of Alberta]

Illustration of robe caption:

Illustration of Bull Head’s robe (cat. No. HK459)
Information on these data sheets is based on text labels by Arni Brownstone for the exhibit.

*Note – in some cases in Morris’ notes and the Hodgson letters, Bull Head is referred to as well as “Bull’s Head”. For clarity Arni Brownstone has indicated that Bull Head is the proper usage.

The English has been amended in grammar, punctuation and spelling from the original documents for the purpose of these data sheets.

Additional source material:

**War Paint**

Blackfoot and Sarcee Painted Buffalo Robes in the Royal Ontario Museum
Arni Brownstone
ROM Press
1993

*Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*

[http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?id_nbr=7282&terms=created](http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?id_nbr=7282&terms=created)

Link recommended by Arni Brownstone

The Smithsonian Handbook of North American Indians
Chapter on the Sarcee starting page 629
Hugh A. Dempsey
Link recommended by Arni Brownstone

[http://books.google.ca/books?id=koQZmtDMbX8C&pg=PA636&dq=smithsonian+handbook+of+north+american+indians+sarcee+dempsey&hl=en&ei=wFmLTqCfHsb30gGY0ZXNBA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CD4Q6AEwAg#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.ca/books?id=koQZmtDMbX8C&pg=PA636&dq=smithsonian+handbook+of+north+american+indians+sarcee+dempsey&hl=en&ei=wFmLTqCfHsb30gGY0ZXNBA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CD4Q6AEwAg#v=onepage&q&f=false)

Ellen Gordon
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