Mounting Pipe Bags: A Case Study

The Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian’s exhibition “Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations” documents the history of treaty making between Native Americans and the United States, from the days of the early republic, when treaties were considered by both sides to be serious, diplomatic agreements based on the recognition of each nation’s sovereignty, to the U.S. government’s use in the 19th century of coercive treaties to dispossess Native Americans of their lands, to the 20th century, when Indian Nations successfully fought court and legislative battles for federal recognition of their treaty rights. The pipe bag and mount discussed in this poster are displayed in this exhibition along with eight other pipe bags and associated pipe stems and pipe bowls.

One of the stories in the “Serious Diplomacy” section of the exhibition is about the Horse Creek Treaty. In September of 1851, the U.S. invited all the Native Nations of the northern Great Plains to gather for a treaty council at the mouth of Horse Creek, near Fort Laramie, where Nebraska and Wyoming now meet. It was the largest gathering of Plains Nations in U.S. history: around fifteen thousand people attended. Two negotiators from the U.S. Office of Indian Affairs met with delegations representing nine Native Nations that spoke different languages but shared common concerns.

This case is designed to represent the Horse Creek Treaty gathering of 1851, sometimes known as the “Great Smoke”. A pipe bag, pipe stem and pipe bowl from nine of the tribes in attendance are mounted together on individual posts to visually demonstrate that all three pieces are from the same nation. The objects are viewed in the round and at a nearly vertical angle in order to fit into the shallow case. The unstructured, fragile, culturally important pipe bags offer the mountmaker a distinct challenge. Successful support is achieved through use of a variety of interior and exterior support techniques and materials. One example, the mount for the Northern Inunaina (Arapaho) pipe bag required many of the techniques and is detailed below.

The Mount

Since there is no one area on the pipe bag that is robust enough to carry the full support weight, the mounting system for this pipe bag is designed to spread the carrier mechanisms in ways appropriate for each area of opportunity. A padded Dibond insert reinforces the internal structure of the bag. Coated brass carries the fringe and back support. Soft ties with internal brass structure keep the beadwork in place. Magnets and embroidery floss along with a ten degree tip back support the top of the bag. Everything is held together against an acrylic back support on an adjustable steel and brass pole structure.

The Internal Support

The Magnet Connection

The Tied Supplemental Supports

The Brass Fringe Support

The Back Support

The Five-Part Support Strategy

The Northern Inunaina (Arapaho) pipe bag