

Tribes Often Used Bison Skulls In Ceremonies

In the pre-photography 1800's, when wealthy Europeans or Americans wanted to hunt or tour in the West, they often brought their own resident artists along to help document the adventure. Several of these artists, including Karl Bodmer and George Catlin in the 1830's. Later, Thomas Moran, Alfred Bierstadt and others, left us a priceless visual record of both the landscape as it existed before Euro-American settlement and, sometimes, the cultures of its native people. For example, both Bodmer and Catlin document-ed the ceremonial use of buffalo skulls, including



1830's Bodmer Painting of a Ceremonial Use of a Buffalo Skull

Bodmer's rendering of a skull and rock monument and Catlin's painting of large rings of skulls created by the Hidatsa tribe.

During the 1970's excavations at the Vore site, a segment of a similar skull circle was unearthed. Had the entire circle been exposed, it would have measured about 30' in diameter and included dozens of skulls. This is clear information of ceremonial activity at the VBJ and it might be a clue as to some of



Catlin's Painting of Skull Circles Created by the Hidata

its users. It is likely that many tribes used skulls in some fashion, but it's interesting to note that the Hidatsa tribe and the Crow tribe that developed from it, created skull circles. It's not conclusive proof that the Hidatsa-Crow group used the VBJ, but it's interesting to speculate about.

The photo at below was taken by archaeologist Dr. Charles Reher during the original 1970's excavations at the Vore Buffalo Jump. The view is straight down into a 3 meter by 3 meter excavation unit that was the only vertical shaft that has yet penetrated to the bottom of the VBJ cultural material. Part way down, Reher and his crew found a group of bison skulls that they believe was a segment of a much larger circular arrangement of skulls. Note that the noses of the skulls

are all pointed toward the center of the circle. This is clearly not a random distribution of the skulls, and the likelihood is that it was a segment of a ceremonial skull circle similar to the one documented in Catlin's 1834 painting. The rest of the circle that, based on the segment is probably 30' in diameter, remains buried and awaiting excavation at the VBJ. It's inferential evidence like this that helps integrate the archaeological record with oral, written and visual history of Native American cultures.



A Segment of a Ceremonial Circle of Skulls at the Vore site