

## Shield Bearing Warriors at Bear Gulch and Atherton Canyon & Apsáalooke (Crow) Perspectives Regarding Shields



Bear Gulch and Atherton Canyon are in the foothills of the Little Snowy Mountains approximately 30 miles southeast of Lewistown, Montana.

**For a contemporary perspective regarding shields and their importance, this publication includes Apsáalooke cultural perspectives to provide a relevant tribally specific context.**

- There are over 3,200 rock art images at Atherton Canyon and Bear Gulch, and they hold one of the largest concentrations of shield bearing warriors images in North America.
- Some of these images are over 1,000 years old. The majority of these images are petroglyphs, an ancient carving on a rock. Approximately 800 images are pictographs, which is an ancient drawing or painting on a rock wall.
- A distinguishing feature at both sites is their small size with most of them being between 4 – 12 inches in length.
- Blackfeet and Crow designs are both present at the site.
- The images and symbols created by these ancient warrior artists reflected a profound cultural and spiritual way of life and they provide us with a glimpse into how they lived and what they valued.

*There was a time when most men of the tribe owned a shield. These shields represent the power of the creator and the fortitude of the individuals who owned them. They also represent the covenant that the Apsáalooke will always be protected and that we will always hold what is ours.*

- Aaron Brien, Crow Tribal Historic Preservation Office





Most of these detailed images show shield bearing warriors.

This pictograph shows a warrior holding a shield with what appears to be a medicine wheel design.

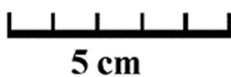
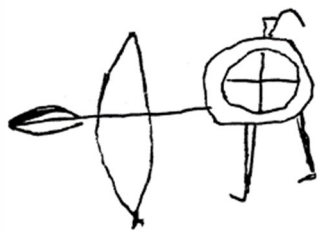


This is an image of a hand print. Other rock art images show bears, birds, bighorn sheep, deer, elk, and moose.

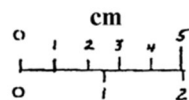
This series of petroglyphs shows warriors carved into the rock wall. If you look closely, you can see they are standing behind their shields. You can see warriors with a headdress, bustle, and weapon. The pictures below show how small many of these images are. You can also see the diversity of symbols on their shields. (SBW is the acronym for shield bearing warrior used by archaeologist to catalog images.)



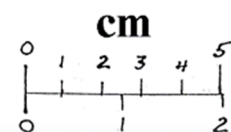
**SBWA005**



**SBWA006**



**SBWA008**



This is an enhanced perspective of how shield bearing warriors may have looked when they were originally painted.

## ENHANCED PHOTOGRAPH



**SBWA028**

**SBWA029**

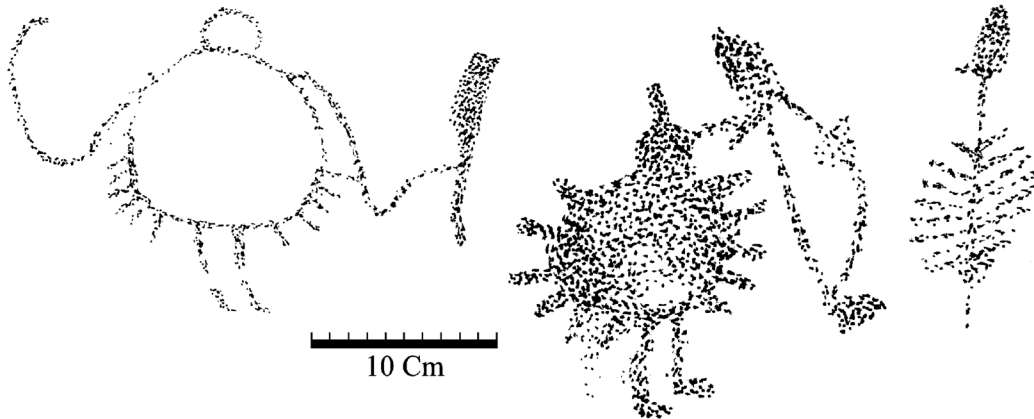
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## Apsáalooke Perspectives Regarding Shields

Now, let us look at some Apsáalooke shields to help us understand Apsáalooke cultural perspectives regarding these significant cultural items. This is a photo taken in the 1920s of Apsáalooke elder Plain Owl and Jasper Long Tail. Plain Owl is carrying his war shield and is wearing contemporary clothes, a reservation hat, and moccasins. This image gives us an idea of how the shield bearing warriors at Bear Gulch may have looked holding their shields thousands of years ago. The images and objects on Plain Owl's shield hold significant cultural and spiritual representations to Apsáalooke people just as those rock art images of the shield bearing warriors from a long time ago at Bear Gulch and Atherton Canyon displayed important cultural and spiritual symbols.



National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (N32356)



Plain Owl (Crow) is holding his war shield. He is wearing contemporary clothing and moccasins.

Picture on the right is from Bear Gulch.

This gives us a perspective of how the ancient warriors who made the pictographs at Bear Gulch may have looked holding their shields thousands of years ago.



National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (N32355)

Apsáalooke Women and Warriors was a recent exhibit featured at the Field Museum in Chicago and at the Museum of the Rockies. A significant part of the exhibit is a display of Apsáalooke shields. Nina Sanders, a member of the Apsáalooke tribe, curated the exhibition, and she is the first Indigenous curator for an exhibition of this scale at the Field. The exhibit features the shield below which is an Apsáalooke shield owned by Wraps Up His Tail.



Chíschipaaliash Koo Ishbínnaachick/The war shield owned by Wraps Up His Tail

Rawhide, pigment, eagle feathers, sandhill crane head, image of Spring Boy and a star

Ca. late 1800s

Made and owned by Wraps Up His Tail

Chíschipaaliash/Wraps Up His Tail is a name that many of us (Crow) know: he led a rebellion against the US government in the 1880s in response to restrictions on intertribal warfare and free movement.

(Text label from the Field Museum)

Photo by John Weinstein, Field Museum

These shields are sacred, and they are powerful. The Apsáalooke warriors who made them followed long held ceremonial and cultural traditions and their unique designs reflect deep spiritual meaning. The image on the shield made by Wraps Up His Tail depicts one of the divine twins who are significant heroes in Apsáalooke culture, and they hold a special place in Apsáalooke oral traditions. Many of the sacred images on shields, such as this one from Wraps Up His Tail, are connected to the stars. You can learn about the twins and their exploits in a [Apsáalooke star story referred to as The Twins and The Hand Star](#), which is a part of the Montana Skies Crow Astronomy curriculum that features Apsáalooke tribal members sharing traditional star stories.



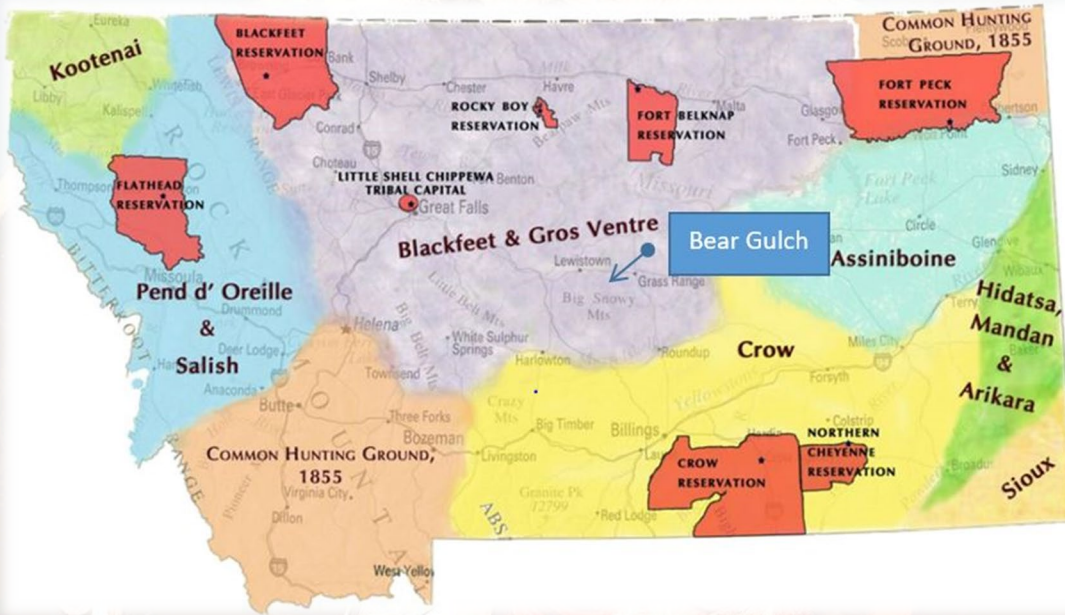
For more information about how shields were constructed and how the images and designs were chosen, watch this [OPI interview with Aaron Brien](#) from the Crow Tribal Historic Preservation Office. Aaron shares cultural knowledge and perspectives about shields, and he discusses the story of the divine twin depicted on Wraps Up His Tail's shield.

This additional [video clip of Aaron Brien](#) is from the Extreme History Project, where he provides a lecture about the Apsáalooke war shields housed at the Field Museum in Chicago. This presentation has numerous images of Apsáalooke war shields, and you can learn more about their cultural and spiritual significance to the Apsáalooke people.

To learn even more about the Apsáalooke Women and Warriors exhibit be sure to watch this [video of Nina Sanders](#) from the Montana Historical Society where you can hear about her experience working with the exhibit and learn about some of the items that were displayed in this powerful exhibit.

*Although not many people know about Apsáalooke shields, the information is still there. These sacred objects have been out of our possession for over a century, but they have never left our memory. It is up to the Apsáalooke people to learn more about them. The first step is to create an environment where shields are the centerpiece, the source of the physical and spiritual protection of the home.*

- Aaron Brien



Map shows tribal territories defined at treaty time by non-Indian officials and does not necessarily accurately reflect traditional tribal territories during the 1850s.

To see more images of the rock art at Bear Gulch check out this remote learning lesson plan. [Learning About Ancient Art - Bear Gulch and Atherton Canyon](#)

We hope this information provided you with a better awareness of the [Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians – Key Concepts](#), in particular Essential Understanding 3.

The ideologies of Native traditional beliefs and spirituality persist into modern day life as tribal cultures, traditions, and languages are still practiced by many American Indian people . . . Additionally, each tribe has its own oral histories, which are as valid as written histories. These histories predate the “discovery” of North America.

### Acknowledgements and References

Brien, Aaron. Shield Stories Through Biiluke Eyes. *Apsáalooke Women and Warriors*. Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society. (University of Chicago Press, 2020).

Thanks to the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society and the Field Museum for permission to the use the photograph of the shield made by Wraps Up His Tail.

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Special thanks to Aaron Brien from the Apsáalooke Tribal Historic Preservation Office for sharing his cultural knowledge regarding Apsáalooke shields.