

Power Symbols of the Indian

Often called the greatest light cavalry in history by many military men, the Indians used their horses to carry them into battle or to hunt game. Deeply regarded by the Indians, their horses were "honored" with tribal symbols, which they painted on the animal's body. Each symbol has its own specific meaning and the purpose was determined by the nature of the dangerous job which the horse would be asked to do.

The Indian War Horse. Believing that war symbols guided his destiny, the Indian would decorate his horse with symbols intended to give him protection, indicated the troubles which lay ahead, and which spoke of the courageous heart of the horse, and symbols which told of the horse's affection for the



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A circle around the horse's eye and nostrils for alert vision and a keen sense of smell.



Arrow points in a line which brought victory.



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Thunder stripes in the horse's front legs to please the Indian's god of war.



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Arrowheads on all four hooves made the horse swift and nimble-footed.

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Fire Arrows would cause trouble for the enemy, which in turn would add strength to the warrior.



Right/left hand prints were outlined upon the horse's chest, which showed that he'd knocked down an enemy.



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Hail Stones were a prayer for hail to fall on the warrior's enemy.



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Two crossing bars meant that the horse and his rider had escaped ambush.



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Hoofprints were drawn on the horses and stood for the number of horses captured in raids.

Here are some symbols which the Indians used for war.

The horse's Battle Scars (always painted red) and the Pat Hand Print (left hand drawn on the horse's right hip) were the highest honors. The Pat Hand Print was always reserved exclusively for the horse who had brought his master back home from a dangerous mission unharmed.

While preparing himself for battle, the Indian warrior would apply his personal honors on his war horse. The symbols he painted depicted enemies killed and ponies stolen. He would weave a Medicine Bag into the bridle and Coup Feathers were braided into the horse's forelock and tail.

For the men who would be going on a do-or-die mission, the Upside-down Handprint would be used. It was the most prized symbol a warrior could place on his horse. From the Apache and Comanche tribes, legend about this handprint tells of a furious battle in which a brave was fatally wounded. Before the brave's death, he patted his horse on the right shoulder, thus leaving a bloody handprint on his horse for all his people to see his "message of death" when the horse returned to camp.

When the Indian groomed his horse for battle, he would knot up the horse's tail to prevent the enemy from taking hold of it and using it to dismount him from his horse. He would gather the mane into clusters, tying it to prevent entanglement in his bow and arrow during the combat.

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The Indian's Hunting Horse. Since the hunting horse had different duties than that of a war horse, a different set of symbols were used to aid this horse on his endeavor. Designed to help the hunter in finding the buffalo herd, these symbols also brought favor from the Great Spirit.

The Indian hunting horse obtained his speed and the stamina necessary for buffalo hunting from his Spanish and Barb breeding. He could gallop alongside an unpredictable buffalo until his rider had shot an arrow into the beast's side. The inborn courage from the Spanish breeding aided these horses with courage to "cut" the dying buffalo from the herd to prevent his being trampled by the others. An Indian hunter prized a good buffalo horse as it meant sudden death if his horse panicked in fright.

(My comment: This is a wonderful list by Beyer, the best I have found BUT remember that anything stated so definitely as in all the symbols above may not hold for every tribe or every horse. Also I would think that if the wife or mother painted the horse she *might* have done the following.)

The hunter's wife had the privilege of painting his horse, and if he was unmarried, that privilege was his mother's. She would take her honor seriously and would meditate on the meaning of each symbol before she would draw in on her brave's hunting horse. These are the some of the symbols this Indian woman would use.

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Sun of Happiness, a most important symbol, was used to insure blue skies. Indians never hunted during a rainstorm because they considered it unfair to the Great Spirit and to the buffalo.

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Circle of Vision was the symbol painted around the horse's eye to give keen sight and let him to be the first to see the distant buffalo.

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A Fence symbol was placed on the horse's jaw to help keep in the good luck.

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A symbol of the Sacred Buffalo was to show the Great Spirit that the brave was thankful for his past kills.

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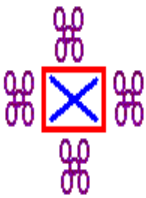
An Arrow of Swiftness was painted on the horse's legs to give him speed.



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Buffalo Tracks were painted over the horse's hips telling of other good hunting times.

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After placing her brave's symbols on the hunting horse, the woman would draw a "secret" prayer on the horse's hindquarters. This prayer was never explained prior to the hunt, and if her brave came home successful, she proudly would tell the meaning of her symbols. She would probably use this "lucky" prayer again and again. Should her brave return unsuccessful, she would be humiliated because the prayer she had painted was the wrong one. Then the other women of the tribe gossiped about her and would say that she was of little help to her brave, which would add to her embarrassment. Then the brave would sometimes spank her for drawing a bad-luck prayer, but sometimes he would feel sorry for her and share in the disgrace. If the woman's brave did the latter, he might explain that the prayer would bring double the luck to him on the next hunt.

Though tribal tradition dictated how and why an Indian painted his horse, the color preference of the horse was left to the individual. A bay horse was thought by the Sioux Indian as too common, preferring sorrels and roans. The roans they called "scorched." Most favored pintos, but when an Indian didn't have one, he might paint his white or grey horse to resemble a pinto. The special name of "freckled rump" was given to the favored mount of the Indian, the Appaloosa.

Though the Indian no longer rides against enemies or chases the great buffalo, this unique way in which he expressed himself with symbols on his dearest possession, his horse, has been captured on many of Breyer's model horses to remind us of the past.

For more information, visit:

- [Bibliography](#)