

Segesser Hide Paintings: An Overview

Taken from exhibit brochure

Though the source of the Segesser Hide Paintings is obscure, their significance cannot be clearer: the hides are rare examples of the earliest known depictions of colonial life in the United States. Moreover, the tanned and smoothed hides carry the very faces of men whose descendants live in New Mexico today.

How they came to be at the Palace of the Governors is as circuitous as it was fortuitous. Perhaps both paintings illustrate military expeditions dispatched from the Palace of the Governors, when it was called *las casas reales*, the royal houses.

The hides found their way back to the Southwest—and eventually to the Palace—more than 200 years after Philipp von Segesser von Brunegg, a Jesuit priest, sent them to his family in Switzerland in 1758. It is believed that he acquired them in Sonora, Mexico, between 1732 and 1758, from the Anzas, a family that was prominent in military and civil affairs in both New Mexico and the Sonoran village where Father Segesser's mission was situated.

The existence of the hide paintings had long had been known, but their availability came to light in 1983 when another museum wanted to borrow them, only to discover that the von Segesser who then owned them wanted to sell rather than lend. Enter the interest of the Palace of the Governors, which purchased in 1988 the hide paintings designated Segesser I and Segesser II.

Hide Paintings

Segesser I and II were painted on hides, likely bison, that had been tanned to make them supple, pumiced so that the grain was no longer visible, and sewn together to form a large canvas. The hides do not exhibit any distinctive ground or gesso layer under the paint.

Some scholars believe that the Segesser Hide Paintings were created in New Mexico, where imported canvas was rare and processed hides were used for a variety of purposes, including paintings on hide, or *reposteros*, that were exported to Mexico. There is documentary evidence that hides were painted in workshops in Santa Fe. Because the Segesser renderings include several distinct styles, some scholars suggest that as many as three artists painted specific

elements of the overall rendering. We believe that the artists were indigenous New Mexicans with tribal affiliation who had the benefit of eyewitness descriptions and were taught European painting techniques. Yet the Segesser paintings were not rendered in a traditional European style typical of military paintings of that era; rather they are more characteristic of indigenous or folk-art paintings.

The late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were the final great period of European battle tapestries. These textiles or Spanish leather wall hangings imported to the New World might have influenced the commissioned Segesser hides. The hides contain wide, broadly painted flower and leaf borders that simulate carved or gilded frames, which also was typical of European tapestries from the same era.

Segesser II

Throughout the Spanish Colonial period, officials at the Palace of the Governors routinely dispatched troops to patrol and explore beyond the colonial boundaries. Hearing of encroachment by the French, New Mexico Governor Antonio Valverde y Cosío dispatched Spanish troops and Pueblo Indian auxiliaries to verify the rumors. Led by New Mexico Lieutenant Governor and Commander-in-chief Pedro de Villasur, the military expedition also was charged with locating a suitable site on the remote eastern plains for a Spanish military post, requested by the Spanish Viceroy in Mexico City.

The Villasur expedition headed north from Santa Fe to Taos, turned east, then northeast into present-day Kansas. They followed a Pawnee route to the Platte River, moving north into eastern Nebraska. Beyond the junction of the Platte and Loup rivers, they encountered a large Pawnee Indian encampment. Villasur initiated a dialogue and asked Juan de Archibeque (Jean l'Archévêque), a Frenchman and expedition interpreter, to write a letter in French to a European within the Pawnee camp. The efforts failed and sensing a potentially hostile situation, the expedition retreated and camped at the confluence of the Loup and Platte rivers.

The Segesser II painting can be pinpointed to the August 13, 1720, skirmish at the expedition camp. After daybreak, the Pawnee and their Oto Indian allies—illustrated throughout the painting by their painted and unclothed bodies and shaved or close-cropped heads—ambushed the Villasur party. The painting also includes thirty-seven French soldiers, identified by their

European-style clothing—conical hats, coats, breeches, cuffs and leggings—firing long arms at the Spanish military expedition.

Composed of 43 royal troops, three Spanish civilians, 60 Pueblo Indian auxiliaries and several other Indian allies, the Villasur expedition was caught off guard, and the pitched battle left many of them for dead in the tall prairie grass. The attack was a major catastrophe for New Mexico and casualties amounted to a third of the province's best soldiers. The center of the painting portrays French soldiers with Pawnee and Oto supporters surrounding the camp. At the right of the painting, Villasur expedition members who were guarding the animals are shown running to assist their Spanish comrades.

Interestingly, oral and written accounts of the battle do not mention French soldiers in the area of the encounter. Several Villasur survivors reported a volley of musket fire, but in the confusion of the battle, they did not know who was attacking them. It is possible that French traders took part in the ambush. Governor Valverde y Cosio, perhaps in an effort to defend the actions of Villasur, reported “two hundred Frenchmen had fired, supported by a countless number of Pawnee allies.”

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