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Moccasins Into Slippers: Traditions And Transformations In Nineteenth-Century Woodlands Indian Textiles

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Towards the middle of the nineteenth-century a swift and dramatic transformation occurred in textiles and other kinds of art made by Woodlands Indians in northeastern North America. This transformation was accomplished in part by a wholesale replacement of indigenous materials with Euro-American manufacturing--cloth for hide, glass beads for porcupine quills and silk ribbon for paint. It also encompassed the introduction of entirely new object types and the substitution of a new vocabulary of floral imagery for older iconographic traditions.

It is not, of course, coincidental that this change in iconography and materials occurred simultaneously with the rapid growth of the tourist trade in the northeast. Although Native Americans had begun to make innovative types of souvenir items for Euro-American consumers in the eighteenth century, it was perhaps during the mid-nineteenth century that the tourist trade assumed much greater economic importance in most areas after about 1810. (Phillips 1985) Following the defeats of the British-Native military alliances in the American Revolution and the War of 1812, Indian lands in the northeast were suddenly opened up to European settlement. Deprived of their traditional subsistence base, Native people turned increasingly to the production of commercial items in order to survive. Tourism in the northeast grew in tandem with the pace of settlement. By far the most important site was Niagara Falls, and Iroquois peoples living nearby began early to sell a wide range of items to the travellers who were attracted there. By the mid-century these items included beaded and embroidered domestic ornaments and clothing accessories as well as decorative splint-woven baskets and birch bark containers. The objects were made not only by Iroquois, but also by Micmac, Maliseet, Huron, and Abenaki people living from the Lake Ontario to western New York state. They were circulated throughout a wide area by efficient intertribal trading networks that had been in existence for many centuries. These networks also ensured that new artistic ideas spread quickly throughout the northeast, bringing about an overall similarity of object types in the region. (King 1985)

The first sustained publication and discussion of the new textile and garment types occurs in Lewis Henry Morgan's classic work, the "League of the Iroquois" of 1851. The plates clearly illustrate the abruptness of the transition between older and newer types, depicting both the traditional forms of linear-patterned, quill-embroidered moccasins (Fig. 1) and the more innovative garments and embroidered domestic ornaments and clothing accessories as well as decorative splint-woven baskets and birch bark containers. The objects were made not only by Iroquois, but also by Micmac, Maliseet, Huron, and Abenaki people living from the Lake Ontario to western New York state. They were circulated throughout a wide area by efficient intertribal trading networks that had been in existence for many centuries. These networks also ensured that new artistic ideas spread quickly throughout the northeast, bringing about an overall similarity of object types in the region. (King 1985)

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The intellectual challenge presented by objects such as these was eloquently expressed by Morgan himself:

The fabrics of a people unlock their social history. They speak a language which is silent, but yet more eloquent than the written page. As memorials of former times, they commune directly with the beholder, opening the unwritten history of the period they represent, and clothing it with perpetual freshness. (1862: 351)

This paper will trace several object types through a series of transformations of both form and function worked on them during the nineteenth century. Some of the changes resulted from adaptations of Native and Euro-American prototypes; others occurred when the objects were contextualized by their turnover of tourism and souvenir items for Euro-American consumers in the eighteenth century, or perhaps even the seventeenth, the tourist trade assumed much greater economic importance in most areas after about 1810. (Phillips 1985) Following the defeats of the British-Native military alliances in the American Revolution and the War of 1812, Indian lands in the northeast were suddenly opened up to European settlement. Deprived of their traditional subsistence base, Native people turned increasingly to the production of commercial items in order to survive. Tourism in the northeast grew in tandem with the pace of settlement. By far the most important site was Niagara Falls, and Iroquois peoples living nearby began early to sell a wide range of items to the travellers who were attracted there. By the mid-century these items included beaded and embroidered domestic ornaments and clothing accessories as well as decorative splint-woven baskets and birch bark containers. The objects were made not only by Iroquois, but also by Micmac, Maliseet, Huron, and Abenaki people living from the Lake Ontario to western New York state. They were circulated throughout a wide area by efficient intertribal trading networks that had been in existence for many centuries. These networks also ensured that new artistic ideas spread quickly throughout the northeast, bringing about an overall similarity of object types in the region. (King 1985)

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One type of cap made for the nineteenth-century tourist trade in the by the Micmac, Maliseet and Iroquois is constructed according to a similar pattern. An example in the York Castle Museum displays typically, extravagantly beaded floral designs. It is not clear whether the tourist who bought caps such as these intended them for use. A fastened with the pins along the top edge with Russia. Having arrived at the time the man smoking caps modelled after the pillbox shape of the Oriental fez and often decorated with floral embroidery. The Native American examples are particularly heavy and dense, and there is no direct evidence that they were worn. It appears more likely that these items were regarded as exotic trophies, or 'markers' of touristic experiences in MacClelland's phrase (1974: 41).

A third type of hat, the beaded Glengarry bonnet, was perhaps the most popular type of Native-made hat sold in the tourist trade. (Fig. 7) It illustrates yet another type of inter-cultural configuration. Here the overall form is derived from a European rather than a Native tradition, probably familiar by military uniforms worn by British soldiers in Canada. By dressing her son up in Scottish costume in the 1850s, Queen Victoria started a fashion for Glengarrys in Britain and the colonies. I know of no evidence, however, that either the white purchasers of beaded Glengarrys or Native makers ever wore them. They, too, were probably objects of display. As such we regard them as effigies of hats---or hats raised to a higher power by the exotic flavour of the glittering headwear that covers them.

Huron Beaded Bags

Among the earliest Woodlands peoples to seek an accommodation with Euro-American culture were the Huron of Lorette, on the outskirts of Quebec City. This community had arrived at the Catholic missions in Quebec as refugees at the end of the seventeenth century. They were converted to Christianity and the women were taught a variety of arts by the Ursuline nuns, including the art of embroidery. Huron material culture was transformed not only by this teaching but also, undoubtedly, by exposure to the artistic styles of neighboring Quebec Cree-speaking peoples like the Montagnais. The original styles of Huron moccasins would have had full ankle cuffs and the vamps and bands were probably decorated with woven porcupine quillwork and quill embroidery in geometric patterns. The smaller bags that Native women began to make during the second quarter of the nineteenth century would have had full ankle cuffs and the bands were often outlined in embroidery, but the ornament on the toes and large red dotted borders have an ancient nature of Native costume in that period more fully. (Fig. 11) A late-nineteenth century style of flower-decorated moccasin is worn by most of the men, but the woman seated at the right wears a pair of European boots similar to the pair imitated in hide and moosehair some decades earlier. The group portrait demonstrates that individual wearers, like individual artists, configured the elements of Native and Euro-American dress in different ways. For dress occasions, however, Indians throughout the Woodlands maintained a distinctive form of costume that both insisted on continuities with the past and accepted the currency of the modern. The Huron collection of English textiles also preserves an object which perhaps represents the ultimate recontextualization of an Iroquois souvenir hat. (Fig. 6) It is a pelmet, or shelf valance, made of dark-coloured velvet embroidered in multicoloured or translucent white glass beads in flower and leaf motifs. Native-made bags are so similar to their Victorian prototypes that many still go unrecognized in European and American costume collections.

The dress accessories sold to tourists in the greatest numbers were beaded bags and purses. These also present the most striking contrast to earlier Native prototypes. Decorated pouches and shoulder bags were an important article of male ceremonial dress in the Woodlands during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Men's pouches partook of the sacred; they held personal medicines and important accoutrements of hunting and warfare and were embellished with quilled and painted designs that represented or symbolized the owners' visionary experiences of personal guardian spirits. The smaller bags that Native women began to make during the second quarter of the nineteenth century were entirely new in type. (Fig. 2) In size and shape they replicated popular patterns for the flared and flapped chatelaine bags and reticules published in Victorian ladies' magazines during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. (Fig. 12) (Foster 1982: 46-52) The most common was made of woven porcupine quillwork and quill embroidery in geometric patterns.

Bead-embroidered bags also present a contrast with the hats discussed previously because they were certainly made to be used by both Natives and non-Natives. Their closeness to European prototypes and the European fashion for the exotic in dress accessories made them valued accessories to a Euro-American woman's dress. Examples in museum collections still sometimes have small articles inside as well as other signs of use. Nineteenth-century photographs of Native people also provide evidence that beaded bags formed part of Native formal dress. (Fig. 13) From Bandolier to Handbag

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Other Native-made bags, however, display quite different styles of beadwork that resemble more closely the northeastern Algonquin linear and 'double-curve' designs analyzed by Speck early in this century. (1914) This style, which can probably be attributed to the Algonquin, is particularly interesting because of the iconographic continuities it displays with earlier northeastern Native beaded art. A recurrent beadwork motif represents the all-powerful sun, and it is often accompanied by patterns of curving lines suggestive of vegetation. This motif complex occurs in the sacred, ritual art of the eastern subarctic. It is also seen on an early nineteenth-century quill-decorated Algonquin man's neck pouch that was probably used to hold medicine. The more radical transformations than those also occurred in response to new ideas and demands from tourists. These changes, together with the later, more naturalistic style of floral embroidery, are illustrated by an elegant pair of Huron-maded slippers in the Victoria and Albert Museum. (Fig. 9) But perhaps the most remarkable example of inter-cultural exchange in the area of footwear is the pair of moccasin-embroidered Huron boots in Exeter. (Fig. 10) The maker has carefully studied a pair of lady's boots and transformed them into moccasins- or has she transformed a pair of moccasins into boots? Stamped leather designs and holes for the bootlaces have been meticulously outlined in embroidery, but the ornament on the toes and large red dotted borders have an ancient lineage in indigenous subarctic textile traditions. A photograph taken at Lorette toward the end of the nineteenth century illustrates the inter-cultural nature of Native costume in that period more fully. (Fig. 11) A late-nineteenth century style of flower-decorated moccasin is worn by most of the men, but the woman seated at the right wears a pair of Euro-American boots similar to the pair imitated in hide and moccasin some decades earlier. The group portrait demonstrates that individual wearers, like individual artists, configured the elements of Native and Euro-American dress in different ways. For dress occasions, however, Indians throughout the Woodlands maintained a distinctive form of costume that both insisted on continuities with the past and accepted the currency of the modern. The dress accessories sold to tourists in the greatest numbers were beaded bags and purses. These also present the most striking contrast to earlier Native prototypes. Decorated pouches and shoulder bags were an important article of male ceremonial dress in the Woodlands during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Men's pouches partook of the sacred; they held personal medicines and important accoutrements of hunting and warfare and were embellished with quilled and painted designs that represented or symbolized the owners' visionary experiences of personal guardian spirits. The smaller bags that Native women began to make during the second quarter of the nineteenth century were entirely new in type. (Fig. 2) In size and shape they replicated popular patterns for the flared and flapped chatelaine bags and reticules published in Victorian ladies' magazines during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. (Fig. 12) (Foster 1982: 46-52) The most common was made of dark-coloured velvet embroidered in multicoloured or translucent white glass beads in flower and leaf motifs. Native-made bags are so similar to their Victorian prototypes that many still go unrecognized in European and American costume collections.

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The kinds of objects sold in the nineteenth-century tourist trade cannot be fully understood in terms of isolated stylistic or iconographic sequences. They must be reinserted into the larger processes of domination, resistance and adaptation. The brief analysis presented here, together with the larger study of which it is a part, suggest that a complex process of exchange was at work during the nineteenth century rather than the top-down model that is usually assumed by the term 'acculturation.'

The Native man's use of a shoulder bag to carry fire-making equipment, personal medicines and ammunition was closely associated with the male role as defined for a way of life that was under attack from assimilationists. For this reason, the continuing inclusion of shoulder bags in a late nineteenth-century Native male costume might have conveyed negative significations to Victorian observers. The resolution of the apparent contradiction was achieved by 'sanitizing' the shoulder bag iconographically by replacing the older 'pagan' imagery with floral designs. The bags worn by nineteenth-century Native men, then, represents a compromise with the program of acculturcation rather than a complete concession, for the form of the bag retains a strong memory of an older way of life.

The Significations of Floral Imagery

The wholesale adoption by Native artists throughout the Woodlands of floral ornamentation in bags as well as in other artistic genres was, as has been noted, an entirely new departure in Woodlands art. Floral imagery, it can be argued, is the central problem of nineteenth-century Woodlands art. Floral motifs, I have also concluded, were, more specifically, signifiers of fragility, passivity and femininity in nineteenth-century Victorian culture. When worn by Native Americans floral motifs thus further signed their conversion from political independence and active military confrontation to peacefulness and dependency. Finally, the adoption of floral designs with ethnic folk clothing probably symbolized the transformation of Native Americans from their former existence outside the American polity to a minority ethnic group within it.

Inter-cultural Art and "Social History"

The accusation of inauthenticity which results from the acculturation framework is particularly dangerous. It implies that the objects made for sale and home use were not 'real' Indian, that the makers were not 'real' Native people. This, of course, is not possible. If proof is needed it is abundantly supplied by the events at the Oka, Kitwike and Kahnawake reservations in Ontario and New York this summer, for these sites of late-twentieth century resistance and renewal were three of the most important centres of production of tourist arts during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Just as a people's culture cannot be 'lost' but can only undergo change, so, too, aesthetic expression cannot be more or less 'real' but can only reflect and give form to changing experiences...
of the world. Indeed, the direction of much modern scholarship has been to explore in an increasingly refined manner the ways in which Amerindian art forms do indeed order the experiences of contradiction, conflict, and repression that their makers have lived. This is the special creative power of artists that caused Morgan to say of the Iroquois objects we have been contemplating that they "commune directly with the beholder, opening the unwritten history of the period they represent, and clothing it with perpetual freshness."

NOTES

1. See Gordon 1984 for an exhaustive study of the beaded souvenirs known as 'whimseys' and detailed information about the tourist trade at the Falls. McKinsey 1985 analyses the symbolic significance of the Falls in American literary and intellectual history together with specific Indian associations with this symbolism.

2. The analysis of museum collections shows that travellers in the 1830s and 1840s bought quill and moosehair-embroidered moccasins sale while souvenir hunters from the 1850s on acquired moccasins made of commercially-tanned hide, with velvet vamps and cuffs richly embroidered in floral beadwork.


4. Public Museum of Grand Rapids, Michigan 140952. The hat was given to Frank Hodges by Indians in Elmont, Michigan in 1866.

5. Personal communication from Veronica Johnston, Curator of Ethnology at the Leeds City Museum, who gave the hat to the Museum after discovering it among her family possessions. (May 1990)


7. See Whitehead 1988: 23-25 for detailed discussions of several related cap types attributable to Maritimes peoples.

8. Sturtevant (1990) has usefully distinguished a form of 'special occasion dress' that replaced earlier ceremonial costumes and was worn in the northeast by members of diplomatic delegations, for formal family portraits, and for various kinds of staged performances.


10. For a discussion of American assimilationist policies see Horie 1984 and for parallel Canadian policies see Miller 1989

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