

Warnock Snowshoes WC0409001

Materials: wood, babiche (rawhide)

Crafted by the Montagnais of Québec, the fine workmanship and attention to detail of these small snowshoes suggest that they were created as scaled-down versions of an adult form and thus were intended for the tourist market. Furthermore, despite their being an appropriate size for a child, most Montagnais, Naskapi and Cree children of the Québec-Labrador area wore the more comfortable and easier to use “bear paw” snowshoes which have rounder heels, lack the second cross piece behind the heel, and have coarser netting.

Still used by natives and outdoor enthusiasts for both necessity and pleasure, snowshoes once comprised the main means of transportation on snowy trails and trap lines during the long northern winters. The wooden frames, preferably of birch or tamarack, are made by the men, first by hewing and shaping the wood, then bending the prepared piece -- which has been steamed -- around a frame and tying it. Once the wood has dried and removed from the form, the semi lunar crosspieces for toe and heel are fitted into place. Using a bone needle and strips of babiche cut from meticulously scraped untanned rawhide, the women fill in specified areas of the snowshoe with netting of varying degrees of coarseness. The toe area, laced with narrow babiche, often incorporates symbolic images in the fine netting. The middle area or “foot”, designed to support the foot and distribute the weight of the wearer, is woven with a wider and thicker strip of babiche rendering the finished appearance coarser. A gap is retained at the junction of the toe and foot areas to allow free action of the wearer’s toes while walking. The narrowest and thinnest strips of babiche cut from the belly area of the hide are used to produce the finest netting of the heel area. In the past, beaver hides were considered as the preferred source of babiche for snowshoes; however, caribou and moose hides have long been used as readily available alternatives. Tightening as it dries, babiche from all sources has proven to be an exceptionally versatile lacing material. The completed snowshoes are strapped to moccasin-clad feet with a length of tanned hide¹, the toes fastened securely to prevent lateral movement while the heel is allowed to move freely.

The variety of extant snowshoe shapes and sizes reflects ethnic preferences, age, gender, size, terrain and snow conditions. For example, the round types such as this Montagnais one are felt to be more effective in deep and/or soft snow while the long narrow types of the Cree and Ojibwa allow easier travelling on wind-hardened snow. Snowshoes were often rubbed with red ochre for practical and sacred purposes, the red color easily spotted in the snow. In a similar practice among the more northerly groups, red and blue yarn tassels are attached to the edges of the snow shoes to provide both visual recognition and to prevent the snowshoes from clicking together as the wearer strides along.

The functional aspects of snowshoes render them an expedient means of transportation for traveling, hunting and socializing during the winter. However, snowshoes also serve as the tangible expression of the complementary roles husband and wife in native cultures. As noted

¹ With the introduction of oil lamps by traders, wide lamp wicks were preferred for binding the foot to the snowshoe as wicking is less prone to slackening and stiffening when wet and drying.

above, the husband carves and shapes the wood into a well-formed frame, which is then filled with netting by his wife. During this netting process, the babiche line is not only transformed into a web-like support enhanced with protective designs, it also incorporates intrinsic cultural metaphors of protection and provision which are bound up in the metaphysical and symbolic properties of lines and knots. Through these combined efforts of man and woman, the finished product thus provides both the necessary support on the snow to facilitate hunting and trapping, and the protection from any negative spiritual forces emanating from the ground.

As with the marking of other “firsts” in a native child’s maturation process, the first venture on snowshoes is acknowledged with appropriate rituals. When a child is deemed to be old enough to travel on snowshoes, the grandparents prepare the first bear paw snowshoes. Following in the mythical footsteps of Grandfather Bear, the child makes a clockwise path around a tree and/or tepee before walking with his or her parents along the path towards the new camp. Once in camp, the occasion is celebrated with a feast in honor of the child’s first snowshoe walk. As the child continues to grow and mature, the symbolic aspects of snowshoes will continue to protect the wearer while ensuring the practical aspects of acquiring life-sustaining provisions.

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