

WC 8308068
WC 8308069
Burdenstraps, Iroquois

Two twined-woven and decorated bands, tapering at both ends into long braided straps.

Dimensions:

WC 8308068, length of decorated section 21.75 inches, 55 cm.; overall length 188.75 inches, 479.5 cm.

WC 8308069, length of decorated section 23 inches, 58 cm.; overall length 200 inches, 507.7 cm.

The central sections of these two artifacts are twined of string and thread made of vegetable fibers; the warp of inner-bark fibers of elm or basswood; the weft of Indian hemp (*Apocynum Cannabinum*). The latter is sometime called milkweed, though it actually a dogbane. The fine weft twined over the coarser warp created the surface of parallel ridges. Except for the outer ridges, the surfaces of these sections are decorated with dyed moose hair in a brocading technique called “false embroidery”, in which the colored hair is wrapped around the weft during the twining process. The central section of WC 8308068 is edged with white glass beads.

These burdenstraps were acquired, as part of a larger collection, by Charles Alston Messiter (1841-1920), an Englishman, during one of his hunting trips into North America in 1862-1874. Most of the artifacts were already antiques when Messiter procured them, most probably while he was in Quebec or Toronto in 1862 (Batkin, 1995; 50). These burdenstraps were sold at Sotheby’s New York auction, April 24, 1982, as lots 278 and 280.

Burdenstraps or “tumplines” were used to support heavy loads carried on the back. With the long straps tied around the load, the decorated central part was worn across the forehead. Burdenstraps were used by the native people all over the Americas, but it was only in the northeastern parts of North America that they decorated with false-embroidered moose hair. This intricate artform was used on a variety of straps, belts, and twined containers, dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries. Predominant are examples originating from the Iroquois and Huron, but similar work was created by some of their Algonkian-speaking neighbors in New England and the Great Lakes region.

The weaving of the Iroquois burdenstrap was most probably started in the middle of the band, its width at both ends reduced by means of bringing the warp strands together in the twining process. The continuing warp strands were braided to create the long straps.

More than fifty Iroquois burdenstraps have survived in public and private collections, yet each of them is decorated with a different design. Together, they represent an impressive range of the aboriginal decorative art before the adoption of floral designs derived from colonial European folk art. Almost all of the decorated burdenstraps show geometric and

abstract design units, most of them with a diagonal outline, repeated in a balanced interplay of red, white, yellow and dark brown colors. There is no significant change in these designs over time, though the color blue seems to have come in by the late 18th century. The two examples shown here are most similar to burdenstraps acquired from the Seneca-Iroquois in the period 1780-1800. Most of the surviving burdenstraps, including these two examples, are in pristine condition. Apparently, they were acquired newly made; colonial British militia liked to go home with souvenirs, and there is evidence that they commissioned Indian women to produce them. The predominance of the Iroquois in this work undoubtedly relates to their role in the colonial wars.

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Literature:

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