

WC 8308071
Wampum Wristlets
Iroquois, c. 1770-1800

A pair of trapezoidal panels, consisting of twenty-nine horizontally woven rows of purple and white tubular shellbeads. The white beads are restricted to three stepped diamond patterns on each panel, and a few white beads along the diagonal edges of one of these panels. The long twisted leather fringes along the diagonal sides are the ends of the warps in these weavings. Remnants of red paint are noticeable on these thongs.

The length of these panels is 8 3/4 inches; 22.2 cm.

These were acquired, as part of a larger collection, by Charles A. Messiter (1841-1920) during one of his travels in North America in 1862 – 1874. Most of these artifacts were already antiques when Messiter collected them, most probably while he was in Quebec or Toronto in 1862. The Messiter Collection was sold at Sotheby's New York auction, April 24, 1982. At that time, the two panels had been sewn together to form a pouch. The new owner recognized it as a pair of wristbands or cuffs, and had them separated and restored to their original form. (Akicita, 1983, fig. 68).

The tubular shell beads in these wristbands are of the type called 'wampum'. Originally made by coastal Indians of Southern New England and Long Island, their production for the Indian trade became a thriving industry of the colonial Dutch around present New York City in the 17th century. Well known was their use as wampum belts in the diplomacy of the Iroquois and neighboring tribes. Much less is known of the native use of wampum in other forms or functions. There exist several early colonial statements, indicating that the 'decorative' use of these shellbeads was restricted to the members of chiefly lineages, i.e. extended families with the hereditary rights to have chiefs appointed from their family. These families were referred to as 'nobility' by the Iroquois, and the same native term applied to wampum. The 'nobility' of these shellbeads derived from their ancient connotations of sacredness and prestige. Particularly the white shell symbolized daylight, brightness, knowledge, and an undefiled existence.

Pictures of a wampum wristband, and of Iroquois individuals (man and woman) wearing such bracelets were published in 1724. The author, Fr. J.F. Lafitau, was a French missionary among the Mohawk Iroquois. Wampum armbands are also worn by a Mohawk Indian in the background of Benjamin West's portrait of Guy Johnson, c. 1775 (Einhorn & Abler, 1998, p. 47).

Examples of this type of wampum wristband were collected as early as 1669, and eight pairs survive in museum collections. Their documentation is extremely meager, and restricted to three pairs. One pair was acquired in the late 19th century among the Oneida Iroquois, and the other two pairs were found in the 1890s and 1923 in southern Ontario, not far from Mohawk Iroquois communities. Presumably. Most of the surviving examples, including this pair in the Warnock Collection, were made in the late 18th century among the Mohawk and Oneida Iroquois.

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