

WC 8308077

Garter Pendants, Ojibwa, pre-1780

Two fingerwoven strips of black woolen yarn, forming a pair in view of their identical decoration. White beads interwoven in geometric designs, except for a short part at one end of each strip. In this part, the width is reduced by means of bringing the warp stands together. At the end of these parts is a fringe of ten braided warp strands, quill wrapped, and terminating in tin cones holding tassels of red-dyed deer hair. The opposite ends of both strips are sewn on to small panels of netted quillwork. Both panels show the image of a thunderbird in white outline on a red background. Along the bottom of each edge of each panel are short fringes, terminating in tin cones holding red-dyed hair tassels.

Total length of each strip is 30 in.; 76 cm.

This fingerwoven set was acquired, as part of a larger collection, by Charles Alston Messiter ((1841-1920), an Englishman, during one of his travels in North America in 1862-1874. These artifacts were already antiques when Messiter acquired them, most probably while he was in Quebec or Toronto in 1862. The Messiter collection was sold at auction at Sotheby's New York auction, April 24, 1982.

Fingerwoven sashes, straps, and garters, usually monochromatic, and interwoven with white beads were common throughout the Eastern Woodlands during the eighteenth century. Short strips of this type pictured here are preserved in several museum collections; though only one other pair has been located that has quillworked panels at one end. The latter also picture thunderbirds, though in loom-woven instead of netted quillwork (Phillips & Idiens, 1994, p.29). These comparable examples date from pre-1760 to c. 1780, and circumstantial evidence suggest their origin from the great Lakes Indians, particularly the Ojibwa, Ottawa and Potawatomi.

The manufacture of netted quillwork appears to have been largely restricted to the regions around the upper Great lakes in the 18th century. Loom-woven quillwork is well known from the more eastern Huron, the more northern Cree and the more western Cree-Métis. This distribution suggests that also some of the intermediate Ojibwa bands may have been acquainted with this technique. In fact, that is what Ojibwa people told in the 1920s (Densmore, 1929, p.192).

Images of thunderbirds executed in netted quillwork are known from the Ojibwa, Sauk & Fox, and the Eastern Sioux (Brasser, 1999:49). In view of this survey a pre-1780 Ojibwa origin of the pictured set is most likely.

Neither this set nor any of the comparable examples have their function documented, though it is generally assumed that they are drops or pendants that were tied on to garters, worn around the men's leggings just below the knees. The garters covered the narrow undecorated parts commonly observed near the ends of such pendants. This implies that the garters were not much wider than these undecorated parts. Surviving quillworked garters from the 18th century Great Lakes region are indeed narrow.

Most probably the identification as garter pendants is correct, though I am not aware of any descriptive or pictorial evidence. Reliable pictures of the late 18th and 19th centuries show the use of fairly wide garters, occasionally terminating in long fringes, but never with a separate pendant tied on. Fur garters terminating in decorative pendants were popular in the western Woodlands and eastern Prairie, but those were quite different from the separately attached pendants discussed here (Feder, 1974). A well known portrait of the Iroquois chief, Joseph Brant shows him wearing such western fur garters (Penny, 1992: 47).

This overview leads to the conclusion that, at least the Ojibwa, used narrow garters with separate pendants before c. 1780, when wider garters became more popular in the Great Lakes region.

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