

WC8401024

Métis Sheath and Knife

Métis is the Canadian-derived name given to the children of, usually, white fathers and Native mothers. In Indian societies, kinship defined a relationship to one's group, and fur traders often married Native women in order to establish a family relationship with the people with whom they wished to trade.

This sheath demonstrates the extraordinary quillwork skills of the woman who made it. She combined various techniques of applying quills to a skin: wrapping of the fringes, insertion on the body of the sheath, and plaiting on the flaps, demonstrating complete mastery of her art. The design is a careful balance between overall patterning that completely covers the underlying material, combined with a sparse arrangement that uses the background color of the leather as part of the design. The motifs are a creative blend of geometric and organic forms. The curving lines reaching across the width of the lower portion of the sheath echo the pronounced curves of the top of the sheath. The motifs range from the strict linearity of the flap to the more organic curvilinear pattern of the body, topped by double curves at the top of the sheath. The abundant long quill-wrapped fringes add elegance, color, and movement to the sheath.

The knife is a superb example, and is both a useful tool and an elegant status symbol. The knife has an elaborate handle that at first glance seems simplistic, but the blade and handle combine in an elegant minimalist form that unifies the texture of metal and horn. The darker horn used to make the handle is offset by light-colored inlays that provide a vivid contrast. Knives like this one were primarily carried on war expeditions and used for hand-to-hand combat.

The great care taken in the creation of this sheath and its decoration is evidence of the importance of the man who wore it. It was unquestionably made to impress any viewer with the status of its owner and the talents of his wife. This sheath is an example of the artistic impulse that led to the ornamentation of what would otherwise be a simple utilitarian object. The sheath and knife demonstrate the merging of women's and men's spheres of work, the woman responsible for the sheath and the man for the construction and decoration of the knife.

Bernadette Brown