

WC8411004  
Moccasins  
Huron, c. 1830

One of the most remarkable developments in the Native arts of North America was the introduction and spread of floral art styles, in which a small group of Huron women played an important role. Some outstanding examples of their creativity are preserved in the Warnock Collection.

The Huron Indians of Georgian Bay, Ontario, converted to Christianity shortly before they were attacked and scattered by the Iroquois in the 1640s. Some of the residents fled to the French colony on the St. Lawrence; in 1697 they established Lorette or Wendake, their present village near Quebec City.

At the time, the decorative art style of the regional Indians consisted predominantly of geometric patterns of straight lines, squares and triangles. However, double curves, circles and half circles were becoming popular, originating from embroidery courses given by French Catholic nuns for the local Indian women. Due to the lack of silk thread, these nuns adopted the native use of dyed moose hair in their embroidery. By the 1740s, this curvilinear art had been adopted by the regional Indians in their quillwork and paintings on skin garments. Evident of the French origin of this work is indicated by its restriction to the Indians in, and closely around, French Canada.

Some of this curvilinear art suggested plant forms, but the adoption of a truly floral art style by the Indians significantly coincided with the development of folk art in the expanding European settlement after the American Revolution. Floral designs in the American folk art and floral paintings on the calico cotton of the fur traders inspired Great Lakes Indian women by the 1770s.

Floral designs were now also adopted by the Huron women in their hair embroidery on black-dyed skin. Initially the designs were highly stylized and combined with earlier patterns: borders of geometric designs in quillwork and curvilinear patterns in hair embroidery. A fine example of this is the shoulder bag in this collection, WC 9506005, probably dating back to c. 1800-1820. Bags, moccasins, and mittens of this early type are edged with hair tassels in small metal cones. The hair tassels were often dyed in alternating groups of red, white and blue colors. These three colors also predominate in the quillwork and hair embroidery.

By c. 1830, hair tassels were no longer fashionable, but the floral hair embroidery of the Huron was entering its golden age. Their creativity was unsurpassed by any other Indians in the incredible skill and exuberant complexity of the increasingly naturalistic designs. All the design elements were built up of parallel lines, comparable to contour beadwork. Aesthetic effects were achieved by the subtle graduation of colors. Undoubtedly, this art was a source of pride for the Huron women, as well as serving as a respected expression of their cultural identity. Excellent examples are these moccasins (WC 8411004) and a second pair (WC9605008), both dating back to the 1830s.

Floral hair embroidery decorated moccasins, mittens, caps and other items, were made in large quantities by the Huron women. Some of it was used by their own people, but from the very beginning this production was stimulated by the demand from European travelers and army officers stationed in the region. After the war of 1812, and the decreasing fur trade, this souvenir production became of major economic importance in the Huron village. Due to the additional market outlet at Niagara Falls the Huron women learned to become more economic in their artwork. After c. 1840, their embroidery gradually became less elaborate, though their great skill endured to the end of the nineteenth century. A good example of c. 1850 is the pair of children moccasins, WC9506004.

Drs, T.J. Brasser  
November 2006

Literature:

Phillips, R.B., *Trading Identities, the Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast*. University of Washington Press, 1998.

Turner, G., *Hair Embroidery in Siberia and North America*. Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, 1955.