

WC8805006

Medicine bag, Menomini, early 19th century.

A bag made of a whole otter pelt, opening through a slit on the underside between head and front paws. Decorated with panels of porcupine quillwork affixed to the four paws and tail. Quill-wrapped fringes terminating in tin cones hang from the panels on the paws; tin cones form a fringe around the tail panel. The bag is empty, except for a small buckskin package in the head.

Length 45.5 inches; 115.5 cm.

Acquired from Alexander Gallery, New York, without information on its origin. The decoration of this bag is similar to several examples of Menomini origin.

Bags of this type were carried by the members of the Medicine Dance Society during its ceremonials. This organization, called Midewiwin by the Minnesota Ojibwa, Metaywen by the Wisconsin Menomini, instructed its members in herbal and shamanistic knowledge, used in the securing of a healthy and long life.

The Medicine Dance originated among the Ojibwa around the western parts of Lake Superior during the 18th century. With strong roots in the traditional religion this organization was a nativistic response to social and economic problems resulting from the depletion of game, epidemic disease, malnutrition and demoralization. As a regional reformation in the native religion, the Medicine Dance rapidly spread around Lake Superior, and southwestwards as far as the Missouri River. By the late 19th century, the cult had retreated to its original region and, despite revivalistic efforts, the organization is now practically defunct.

In the mythology of the Menomini the origin of their Medicine dance is ascribed to Menapos, the legendary culture hero who interceded between human beings and the spirits. The Medicine dance of the Menomini consisted of four degrees, each with increasing levels of esoteric knowledge transmitted to its members. This knowledge and associated rituals were kept secret from non-members. Membership was available to both men and women, obtained by invitation or the inheritance of a medicine bag, and by the payment of substantial fees.

During the initiation ceremony, high-ranking members approached the candidate and “shot” him, by thrusting their medicine bags toward him. Overcome by the “spirit power” transmitted in this manner, the candidate fell unconscious. In this pretended slaying and revival of the candidate, a major theme from the cult’s origin myth was re-enacted. In this myth, the culture hero is approached by four Manitos, each carrying a live otter. They transmitted their “spirit power” to Menapos by thrusting these otters at him, as medicine bags were to be handled in the Medicine Dance.

After this initiation into each degree, the candidate received a medicine bag corresponding to the degree; for the first degree this was a bag made of an otter pelt, with

red-dyed downy feathers attached to the nose. In this bag, the new member received some cowrie shells for use in “shooting”. A small bag of blue face paint, and several packages of medicine. One of these bags was placed in the otter’s skull. Any number of other charms or medicines might be added by the bag’s owner. Some of these otter bags could be made to whistle by means of air pressed through a bone tube in the otter’s throat. Members of the Medicine dance were required to attend at least one meeting each year for the renewal of their “spirit power”. The two social divisions of the Menomini tribe were reflected in the position by the cult members in their ceremonial lodge: those carrying bags made of mammals took their seats on one side, opposite the higher degrees carrying bags made of bird skins. Due to the high cost involved, few members advanced beyond the second degree.

Among the surviving otter bags, those of the Menomini stand out by their elaborate quillwork decoration. By the 1830s, the old geometric designs were replaced by floral patterns; beadwork on cloth panels became fashionable in the 1860s. This particular example was probably created well before 1830.

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Literature:

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