

WC 8812008

Hunter's Bag, Great Lakes Region

A flat pouch made of black-dyed deerskin; Width 9.25 inches, 23.5 cm.; Height 11.25 inches, 28.6 cm., attached to a short fingerwoven yarn strap. The pouch decorated with porcupine quillwork and red-dyed hair tassels on tin-plated iron cones; the strap decorated with white beads in an open diamond pattern.

This bag was owned by Mr. E.B. Gray, Esq. in Scotland; it was sold at Christie's auction, New York, November 28, 1984.

This is the most beautiful example of the type of bag worn by Indian men in the Great Lakes region in the 18th century; all made of black-dyed buckskin, of an almost uniform size and shape; their fine quillwork decoration picturing major deities in the native religion. Fragments of surviving documentation indicate that these bags were most popular among the Ottawa, Eastern Ojibwa and Potawatomi; a slightly divergent type was used by the Menomini. The earliest surviving examples were collected in the 1760s; they were recorded as late as the 1840s among the Potawatomi. Originally these bags were worn on the chest by means of a short neckstrap, such as attached to this example. By 1800 American influence had made longer shoulder straps more popular. Straps as attached to this bag are usually referred to as fingerwoven, though they are actually tightly braided in a technique called "oblique interface". The open diamond pattern created by white beads was frequently used in the Great Lakes region.

Charms relating to hunting and warfare were carried in these bags, as well as pipe and tobacco. Charms and tobacco played a role in the cultivation of a beneficial relationship with the spirits. While occupied with such ritual preparations or the hunt, the owner placed the bag in front of him like an icon.

Most likely the thunderbirds pictured on this bag relate to the owner's guardian spirits. Spirits appearing in a vision quest often appeared as a couple, male and female, who adopted the young person as their "sacred child". He is pictured here in bird form between his spiritual parents. Black-dyed buckskin served to accentuate the colorful quillwork, but in this case it may have reminded the Indian that thunderbirds travel in dark clouds.

The complex quillwork of these images is unique. Also the use of hair tassels as an integral part of these images is extremely rare. The woman who created this bag was an outstanding artist. Most probably she was a Michigan Ottawa, creating this work in circa 1780.

Drs. T.J. Brassler
Peterborough, Ontario
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Reference:

Brasser, T.J., Bojou Neejee; Profiles of Canadian Indian Art; National Museum of Man, Ottawa, 1976.