

WC 8903012

Carved of pinewood, the figure of a naked man with outstretched arms; the loins wrapped with a strip of birch bark. The height is 18.37 inches, 46.6 cm.; the width of the arms 18.25 inches, 46.3 cm.

The arms are socketed to the body. Wooden nails pierce the hands and feet; blood is suggested by red paint at these nails and at the side of the figure's body. These details identify this carving as that of a crucified Jesus Christ. Small hand-forged metal nails in the top of the head may have held a hairdo and/or a thorned crown, now lost. The man's ribs are indicated by horizontal grooves along both sides of the body. Presumably, the figure was once attached to a cross; the front of the carving has darkened by age (or by exposure to candle smoke?), whereas the back has retained the lighter shade of wood.

Recognized as of American Indian origin, this carving was sold by Alexander Acevedo to the Masco Corporation in 1998, though the dealer did not explain his reasons for the identification as American Indian, nor did he provide any information that might have been helpful in tracing the origin and age of this carving. Most probably, Acevedo acquired it from a private source, for research failed to trace it to any auction. The identification as Ottawa was suggested by Richard Pohrt Jr., who thought it might have come from the old Ottawa Indian church in Cross Village, Michigan. In 2004, this crucifix was acquired by John and Marva Warnock.

Confronted with a piece of which all provenance has been withheld, I will try to guess why an Ottawa origin has been suggested, and whether this is an acceptable identification. The carving itself provides the two major components of this research: the regional style represented by this piece, and its obvious association with Christianity.

Woodcarving was a well-developed art expression of the Great Lakes Indians, and the style of this art was shared by all regional tribes. Most of the carvings had a utilitarian function, as bowls, spoons, war clubs, etc. Carvings of human figures ranged from small puppets to life-sized statues, the latter usually representing supernatural beings. Traditionally these figures were simplified to their essential shape, eliminating all superficial details. In the 1830s Indians were used to leaving sacrifices at a large Manitokan, standing along a river near Cross Village, an Ottawa Indian settlement in Emmet Co., Michigan (Wright, 1917; 157). This may have been the sculpture that is now in the Detroit Institute of Arts (Penny, 1992; Fig. 175). Human figures might have arms, but these were seldom separated from the body. Without information about their precise origin it is practically impossible to differentiate Great Lakes Indian sculptures into tribal types.

However, sometimes we recognize the work of an individual artist. With regard to this crucifix, there is a noticeable resemblance with several carved figures that came from the old church in Cross Village. Preserved in the public museum of nearby Grand Rapids, these carvings show a similar shape and treatment of the heads, the same plain surface of the body and, most striking, arms that are extended from the body. No other carvings

from eastern North America resemble the crucifix so much. Fingered hands, as on some of these figures and on the crucifix, are rare in Great Lakes Indian carvings. Identically carved figures were noticed on a number of puppets sitting in a canoe model, made by the Ottawa chief Blackbird in c.1814 (Taylor, 1986).

It is assumed that the carvings in the Grand Rapids museum date from the second half of the 19th century, but an earlier date is suggested by the history of the Roman Catholic mission among the Ottawa Indians.

Living near the main thoroughfare from Montreal to the West, the Ottawa Indians were involved in the fur trade since the mid-seventeenth century. Jesuit missionaries from Michilmackinac frequently visited the Ottawa in Emmet County until 1742, when a mission was established there at Cross Village. Promoted by the mission, farming and log house constructions started the subsequent reputation of the local Indians as the most successful in the adaptation of European industry. Missionaries were scarce though; the Jesuits tended to plant the religious seed and trust to its spiritual growth. A large part of the native population remained loyal to their ancestral religion; many natives undoubtedly paid their respect to both religions, but at least one local Ottawa Indian was trained for the priesthood in Quebec. Due to political interference the Jesuit mission in the region was forced to close in 1762, at the Ottawa Christians were largely on their own until the reestablishment of the Roman Catholic mission in 1827. During this long interval the Christian minority gradually reverted again to native religious practices.

In 1800, a smallpox epidemic ravaged the native population, and with the death of Tecumseh in the War of 1812 the Indians lost their dream of ever regaining control of their destiny. In 1823 the local Ottawa Indians requested the U.S. president to send them a Roman Catholic missionary, in a letter written by Chief Blackbird, the wood carver mentioned before. When a missionary visited them in 1825, the Indians had already set up a large cross in front of a wigwam large enough for religious service, and on a nearby hill stood a chapel made of logs (Shurtleff, 1963; 13). In 1827, a permanent mission was established at present Harbor Springs, and a church was built. It was either at this occasion or when a new church was built in 1839 that the local priest invited his flock to offer their talents in the decoration of the interior (Wright, 1917; 76). Presumably, he was aware of their proficiency in woodcarving and quillwork or barkware, art forms that were becoming a source of income in the emerging tourist market. In 1846, the Indians made a new set of quillworked altar decorations for the church in Cross Village (Phillips, 1998; 181).

I am not aware of any other mission church in the Great Lakes region that was decorated with native sculptures. These events suggest that a significant part of the local native community was determined to make the Christian religion their own. Their church decorated in native fashion may have been reminiscent of the old mission churches in the Spanish Southwest.

Unfortunately, political and social developments in the American Great Lakes region were neither conducive for the survival of a native mission community, nor for the

development of Christian folk art. By means of a government treaty forced upon the Ottawa in 1855, their tribal organization was dissolved and the region thrown open to American settlement. The Ottawa people remained devoted Roman Catholics, but in 1895 a new church replaced the old mission and its furnishings were sold at auction (Shurtleff, 1963; 19). Most probably the sale include this crucifix and other sculptures.

In many Indian communities, the crucified Jesus Christ is still regarded as an image of profound mystery and as a sacred symbol of both man's mortality and immortality. All available evidence supports Richard Pohrt's suggestion that this crucifix was carved by an Ottawa artist for his old church in Cross Village, either in 1827 or 1839.

Drs. T.J. Brassler
Peterborough, Ontario
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