

WC 8912008

Sash, Central Algonkian, southern Great Lakes

A sash or strap, finger-woven of brownish-red woolen yarn, with long fringes at both ends. Long 86 inches; 218.5 cm., width 4.75 inches; 12.2 cm.

Found in an Australian curiosities cabinet dating back to the 1820s, probably collected by James Drummond, Eighth Viscount of Strathallen, a Scotsman who died in 1851. Sotheby's Auction, New York, November 28, 1989, Lot 147.

Usually referred to as fingerweaving, sashes of this type were actually tightly braided in a technique called "oblique interlace". The most informative discussion of these textiles, including schematic drawings of the braided structure, was published by Dorothy Burnham (1981). The braiding of bags and sashes with native vegetable fibers and bison wool was common throughout much of the eastern parts of the country. Evidence of its aboriginal development has been discovered in prehistoric mounds in Ohio, northeastern Oklahoma, and other locations (Holmes, Willoughby).

The brownish-red color of the woolen yarn and the narrow black edging of this sash are typical for the early colonial period. Before the introduction of commercial yarns in a range of colors, this first woolen yarn was made by unraveling trade cloth and re-spinning the wool into useable thread. In the process of braiding, white pony beads were strung on the threads, creating a pattern of chain-link diamonds.

Multi-colored fingerwoven sashes became more popular by the 1770s in most regions, though the old type of monochromatic sashes decorated with white geometric beadwork were used by Iroquois and Ojibwa people well into the 19th century. Most probably, however, this particular sash is of pre-1800 vintage, in view of the recycled wool and the remarkable yellow sections.

Similar yellow sections and bands have been noticed on the aforementioned prehistoric fabrics, and on a small number of the oldest surviving braided sashes and bags of the colonial period (see WC 8612026). One example was found in a medicine bundle of the Sauk & Fox Indians (Harrington, 1914), and also some of the circa ten other examples are assumed to have been made by Central Algonkian tribes south of the Great Lakes

The process of creating these yellow sections – always in brownish-red material – has not yet been satisfactorily explained. Most probably it was done either by red dyeing a yellow fabric while protecting sections with some kind of resist (clay perhaps), or by bleaching sections of a red fabric with a discharge, such as lime. The Indians may have made lime from burned clamshells. It is interesting that the black edges of this sash were not affected.

On this sash, the yellow sections functioned to indicate the location of some enigmatic slits that were created during the braiding process. These slits are unique; extensive research has failed to find finger weavings with such devices. The four slits correspond

as two pairs when the sash is folded in half. Most probably they served to attach something, most probably something of a colonial non-native nature, but that is about all I can bring up.

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References:

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- Willoughby, C.C., Textile Fabrics from the Spiro Mound, Missouri Archaeologist, Vol. 14, 1952.