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Cradleboard
Mohawk-Iroquois, c. 1860

In the northeastern parts of North America, the Indian women used to carry their babies in cradleboards on their back by means of a strap over their foreheads. The Iroquois cradleboard was of the general regional type: a flat wooden board with a protective bow attached near the top and a footrest at the lower end. The bow was braced to stand upright, and was held in place by means of a crosspiece passing under the board, into which the ends of the bow were inserted. Draped over the bow, a cloth served as a sunshade or as a protection against rain and mosquitoes; colorful trinkets might be dangling on the hoop to amuse the child. Much of the infant's first year was spent on the cradleboard.

According to Iroquois traditions, long ago baby carriers were made of elm bark, but the use of wooden boards was mentioned already in early colonial times, and a cradleboard acquired from the Onondaga Iroquois bears the date 1750 (Lyford, 1945; p.58). Decoration on such early examples was usually restricted to carvings on the bow and along the upper edge of the board.

During the nineteenth century the Iroquois communities became ethnic enclaves, surrounded by a rural White population. Located south and west of Montreal were (and are) St. Regis, Caughnawaga, and Oka, three Mohawk-Iroquois communities established as Roman Catholic missions in colonial times. Folk art of a carved and painted floral type was still very much alive among their French-Canadian neighbors. By the mid-nineteenth century this art form made its appearance on the Mohawk cradleboards. There is some evidence that White craftsmen were involved, most obvious in the more elaborate carvings of which this particular cradleboard is a fine example. The involvement of white artisans and the Christian religion of these Indians may explain why there is no record of ritual customs in creation of these Iroquois cradles, in contrast to such records from many other Indian groups.

While birds in the foliage is a French-Canadian theme in these carvings, bears, beavers and deer pictured at the foot of meandering vines were additions probably requested by the native customers. Occasionally such animals are also pictured underneath the footrest.

Some of these images may refer to the clan of the child's mother. On this example, the bear pictured on the foot of the foliage may be the eponym of the Mohawk bear clan. Below the footrest a bird (eagle?) with arrows in its talons is reminiscent of an American national emblem. St. Regis (Akwasasne) straddles the American/Canadian border, and many of these cradleboards originated from this Mohawk community. Carvings of this quality were made in the 1860s.

Swaddled in diapers the baby was strapped to this board with the green trade cloth wrappings. Such straps were often decorated with beadwork as well as with the silver

brooches. These brooches were produced for the Indian trade by Canadian and American silversmiths from c. 1750 until c. 1830. In the meantime, several Iroquois men had taken up the craft, mainly copying the early trade silver. The examples on this cradleboard include two “intertwined hearts”, which were popular among the Indians as an emblem or badge of their Iroquois nationality. Up to c. 1865, this Iroquois silverwork was fairly common. In recent years, a few Iroquois artisans have revived this craft.

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