

WC8609007

Firebag, Swampy Cree, c. 1850

A flat bag made of navy-blue trade cloth. Long 23.5 inches; 60 cm., decorated on both sides with curvilinear floral motifs in spot-stitch beadwork. Extending downward from the bottom are four pairs of tabs, finished with bead-strung fringes that terminate in tassels of red wool yarn. These tassels are tied together with porcupine quills. Due to these four double tentacles, this is called an “octopus bag” in museum terminology, though in the Canadian Northwest, they were called firebags, as they were used to carry pipe, tobacco, and a flint and steel to make fire. Tucked under the belt, firebags were carried by the Métis and Indians employed in the Canadian fur trade during the nineteenth century.

Ancestral to these peculiar bags were similar bags made of skin and decorated with painted designs, made by the Ojibwa Indians of the western Great Lakes region in the eighteenth century. After the American War of Independence developments in the Great Lakes region forced the local fur traders to move to more western frontiers. With them went many of the Ojibwa Indians as well as a large number of Métis, the half-breed “children of the fur trade”. The Métis were employed as canoe peddlers, while their women made a living with the production of snowshoes, moccasins, and other garments for the traders and their native customers.

After their settlement on the Red River in southern Manitoba these Métis adopted the tabbed skin bags of their Ojibwa relatives as the prototype in creating the first octopus bags. Utilizing the floral style of embroidery taught in mission schools the Red River Métis developed a distinct style of floral beadwork. By c. 1850, their colorful firebags became popular all over the northern Plains, northwards into the Yukon, and westwards along the Colombia River.

Octopus bags of Red River Métis origin have been collected from all these regions, but it did not take long before the Indians created their own versions as well (see WC 8708014). Along major trade routes from southern Manitoba, Métis firebags reached the northern Cree by the 1840s. The floral art of the Métis bags appears to have strongly appealed to the Cree women; it motivated them to develop a floral style of beadwork that became a hallmark of Cree art in northern Manitoba and northern Ontario. Dating back to c. 1850, this particular octopus bag in the Warnock Collection is an early example of this art development among the Swampy Cree. Typical for the Cree is also the fringe of beads arranged in bars of different colors. The use of porcupine quills on the red tassels is seldom noticed on these bags, and supports the early date for this example.

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October 2006

Literature:

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Octopus Bag WC8609007, Cath Oberholtzer PhD

The story of this beaded octopus bag begins in 1833 when a newly certified medical doctor from the Orkney Isles (Scotland) signed on as the ship's surgeon for the Hudson Bay Company's (HBC) supply ship *Prince of Wales* and sailed to James Bay in the Canadian north. An early freeze-up that year forced the ship and its crew to winter-over close to Moose Factory. By the time the ship was ready to return to Britain in 1834, Dr. John Rae had accepted an invitation to remain at Moose Factory as the Medical Officer for the HBC. Rae remained there as surgeon and trader until 1844.

This decade-long sojourn gave Rae the opportunity to pursue many interests and to develop a friendship with the Crees. He was as eager to learn about the men's technology and survival techniques as he was to learn about women's skills. This willingness, his natural adeptness at just about everything he undertook, and his attempts to learn the Cree language, engendered respect and admiration from both Natives and non-Natives. At some point, Rae's interests motivated him to rig up a work bench to make – among other items – “patterns for bead and silk work for the women” (SPRI MS 787/1-2:188). Although the term “patterns” can be interpreted as either “designs” or “templates,” the iconography of Cree items associated with Rae suggest that these patterns were indeed designs.

Rae's rapport with the women coupled with his interest in their artistry proved to be instrumental in establishing – or at least promoting – a cottage industry among a coterie of needlewomen proficient in creating decorative Cree items. Leggings, bags, hoods, mittens and birch bark baskets enhanced with silk embroidery, beads, porcupine quills and/or silk ribbonwork (cf SPRI MS 787/1-2:69) were produced for Rae, his friends and other HBC officers, including the crew of the Company's ships. For example, the brilliant-colored silk ribbonwork hood and leggings collected at Moose Factory in 1848 by Dr. George Roper, ships's physician on the HBC ship, *Prince Albert*, would have been made specifically for trade (Oberholtzer 2000; see also a beaded hood and matching octopus bag in *L'Art du Grand Nord* 2001:385 [#416], 388 [#422]. A similar bag is in the collections of the Manitoba Museum with the previous number, LFG HBC 2260).

Considering the items directly associated with Dr. Rae, one particular silk-embroidered caribou-hide octopus bag now housed in the collections of the National Museums of Scotland (L304.128), plays a significant role in the identification of this Warnock bag. Elsewhere I have discussed the design on one face of this bag which establishes the first use of stylized thistles on decorated items in the Moose Factory area (Oberholtzer 2002:220; 2006:101; also illustrated in Bunyan et al. 1993:78). Evident as well are the “fiddlehead” motif, central rosette, and tiny paired leaves ubiquitous to Cree iconography in this southern region of James Bay. Comparison of this face of the hide bag with that of the Warnock bag reveals striking similarities and an almost motif-for-motif replication of the design elements. In addition to the expected motifs, the tri-foliate and fan-shaped motifs of the bag itself and the delicate patterns on the appendages are executed on both the embroidered and beaded expressions. Although stylized thistles are not apparent on the beaded bag, one is, in fact, incorporated as the vase-like feature from which the design emanates, just as it does on the embroidered bag. The most noticeable difference is the replacement of the embroidered fan-like motif, suspended at either end of arched lines on the lower section of the bags, with a uniquely-shaped beaded motif on the cloth bag.

The second face of both octopus bags reveal equally demonstrative similarities (see Coe 1977:36 for a color plate of the second face of the hide bag). While the decorative elements of

both faces are organized around a dominate vase-like outline, a swagged line occurs on the bottom of each of these second faces. Here again, the embroidered fan-shaped motif is replaced with the same beaded motif as occurs on the other face. Neither the stylized thistles nor a few minor swirls have been included on the second face of the Warnock bag. The free-flowing lines of the designs on the “leg” tabs are virtually identical with those on the legs of the hide bag. The use of three and four colors on individual floral motifs on the legs and bottom third of the beaded version suggest a non-Cree influence. The fringes made of seed beads on both bags incorporate the same colors but in different sequences to create a striped appearance. Both sets of fringes have red yarn tassels secured with porcupine quills.

The similarities between the two bags suggest that they were the work of one woman, or alternatively, the same pattern was used for both. Conclusive evidence that both bags belonged to Dr. John Rae rests with a black and white photograph of Rae taken about 1860 by William Armstrong, a partner of the Toronto firm of Armstrong, Beere & Hime Civil Engineers, Draughtsmen and Photographers. The photograph¹, which served as the model for a painting, clearly records Rae wearing an octopus bag replete with details so similar to those beaded onto the Warnock bag that they must indeed be one and the same bag. Armstrong’s subsequent watercolor portrait of Rae, finished in 1862, also includes a blue octopus bag which confirms the color choice. However, the painted details of the beadwork have been abstracted until it presents only a barely recognizable design. The painting, in the collections of the Glenbow Museum, is illustrated in the frontispiece of *No Ordinary Journey* by Bunyan et al (1993).

(Photograph belongs to the Armstrong album in the collections of the Canadiana Department of the Royal Ontario Museum)

In conclusion, while the development² of octopus bags from earlier bag forms bearing four and later six appendages³ remains somewhat obscure, the provenance of these two octopus bags, one embroidered hide and one beaded cloth, acknowledges the presence of this form in the Moose Factory area in the late 1830s. As well, strikingly similar motifs and colors of beads used on leggings⁴ collected by James Watt, an HBC employee at Moose Factory during Rae’s time there, intimates that at least these three items were made by one Cree woman, or closely related women, at Moose Factory.

Sources:

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1993 *No Ordinary Journey: John Rae-Arctic Explorer 1813-1893*. Edinburgh: National Museums of Scotland.

Coe, Ralph E.

1977 *Sacred Circles: Two Thousand Years of North American Indian Art*. Kansas City, Missouri: Nelson Gallery of Art.

Duncan, Kate C.

¹ My sincere gratitude is extended to Arni Brownstoun of the Royal Ontario Museum who brought this photograph to my attention in 2003.

² See also Brasser’s note for the Warnock octopus bag and Kate C. Duncan 1991 with the caveat that the present findings change the distribution and time frame provided by these authors.

³ It has been suggested that the tabs of the octopus bags represent the legs of the subarctic’s most important mammal, the caribou, with the small double tabs representing the paired “toes” of the hoof.

⁴ I am indebted to Dr. Alison Brown of Aberdeen University for an image of these leggings which have been kept by Watt descendants.

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SPRI Scott Polar Research Institute MS787/1-2 "John Rae's Autobiography"