

WC 8708014

Octopus Bag, Wasco-Wishxam, c. 1860-1870

Living opposite each other on both sides of the Columbia River near The Dalles, Oregon, the Wasco and Wishxam operated an intertribal market place. Since long before the arrival of white people, products from the coast traded there for goods from the interior. Shortly after Lewis and Clark came down the river (1805) the Canadian fur trade spread into the region. Most of the canoe men and trappers employed by the traders were Red River Métis and Cree from Manitoba, and Iroquois from Montreal. Many of them married into the local tribes, and by c. 1840, there were several Métis settlements on the Willamette and Columbia rivers.

These people carried their pipe and tobacco in 'firebags' tucked under their belts. Due to the long tabs at the bottom of these bags, they are called 'octopus bags' in museum terminology (see WC 8609007). Intrigued by this fancy equipment the native women in the Columbia River region made their own versions of these bags.

Most remarkable are the octopus bags made by the Wasco and Wishxam. Utilizing the twining technique of their own basketry they decorated the bags with woven beadwork. Also, the designs used in this beadwork were copied from their traditional basketry. Most of these western octopus bags are provided with a shoulder strap.

Drs. T.J. Brasser

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Literature:

Gogol, J.M., "Columbia River/Plateau Indian Beadwork". American Indian Basketry, Vol. 5-2, September 1985. (This bag now in the Warnock Collection is pictured on p. 20).

Schlick, M.D. and K.C. Duncan, "Wasco-style Woven Beadwork". American Indian Art Magazine, Vol. 16-3, Summer 1991.

WC8708014 Octopus Bag

Wasco-Wishxam

This distinctive bead-woven Wasco/Wishxam (Upper Chinookan) octopus bag is one of a small number of such works known today. Little recognized outside of the region until recently, these bags carry messages from earliest times on the lower Columbia River.

Glass seed beads in many colors were available at the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Vancouver by the 1850s. However, their use in fully beaded firebags was unusual. Also unusual for the time was the technique of manufacture. For generations, Upper Chinookan basketmakers had utilized loose warp twining with native-spun dogbane to weave complex designs into their soft root digging bags. This weaver used the same ancient technique to weave a firebag in the octopus form she had seen carried by men of the fur trade who came past her home on the Columbia River.

Beadworkers from other tribes would not adopt this distinctive loose warp twining method until much later.¹

Designs on this bag reflect the traditions of the maker's people. The large blue figure with yellow accents that dominates one side is reminiscent of the giant condor motif seen on many Wasco and Wishxam root bags. These great birds, noted frequently in the Lewis and Clark journals, had largely disappeared from the Columbia Gorge by the 1850s. The concentric diamond designs and stacked triangles also were popular motifs in other Columbia River arts.

Although elaborate "X-ray" figures were common on early Wasco/Wishxam twined baskets and carvings, the connected skeletal figures that dominate one side of this bag offer a starker image, one that possibly reflects the tragic deaths by disease in the maker's recent past. In the 1830s, a devastating epidemic, probably malaria, swept up the Columbia River from the Pacific Ocean leaving only one person in four alive. Of those few who survived, some moved eastward to join remaining relatives at the Cascades.²

A fine example of a bead-woven octopus bag from this period is in the collection at Maryhill Museum of Art. That bag was given to the museum by the granddaughter of an Upper Chinookan leader known as Welawa or Chief Chenoweth. The Maryhill bag has been attributed to his wife, Mumshumsie, a known beadworker by the 1850s. Welawa's family and their relatives lived along the Columbia between the Cascades and Hood River, Oregon.

Ellen Underwood, one of Chenoweth's daughters, has been recognized in recent years for her fine beadwork produced into the late 1800s. Her beaded bags are smaller, but made in the same loose warp twining technique as that on the Warnock bag and the work of her mother. A close friend of Ellen's, Martha Aleck of Hood River, also was known to use this technique. Although other family members continued to make beaded handbags into the 20th century, none appears to have used this bead weaving technique of their elders.

The distinctive loose-warp weaving construction of this Warnock bag and the regional features of the design offer the intriguing possibility that the maker was related to or lived among this known 19th century Columbia River family of beadworkers.

Mary D. Schlick, July 2008

Mt. Hood, Oregon

¹ Lessard, F. Dennis. "Great Lakes Indian 'loom' beadwork. *American Indian Art Magazine*, 11(3):54-61, 68-69.

² Williams, Chuck. *Bridge of the Gods, Mountains of Fire*, Elephant Mountain Arts, 1980. 96