Great Lakes Bandoleer Bags

The most spectacular examples of Great Lakes beadwork are the bandoleer bags, which emerged suddenly by c. 1850. The development of this colorful apparel started among the Minnesota Ojibwa or Chippewa, i.e. in the Northwestern margins of the Great Lakes region. This location may explain the Red River Métis influence apparent in the early types of this bandoleer bag.

A very similar shoulder bag, made of deerskin and decorated with quillwork, had become popular among the Métis in the Dakotas by c. 1830. Some beadwork cloth variants of this Métis type are known from Minnesota in the same period, presumably resulting from the intimate relationship of the Ojibwa with the Métis. The art of loom-woven beadwork, invented by the northern Cree in the 1740s, may have reached the Ojibwa through Métis contacts as well.

Subsequent developments show how the Ojibwas enriched the Métis prototype with elements derived from their own traditional bags and pouches. These earlier bags were worn on the chest, on short and narrow neck straps. The longer and much wider shoulder straps of the bandoleer bags may have been adopted from colonial European military bandoleers. Another foreign introduction were floral designs, gradually appearing on the bandoleer bags. This floral style originated from mission schools, primarily attended by Métis girls. The Ojibwa bandoleer bag became rapidly popular between the Menomini, Potawatomi, and other neighboring tribes, who created their own typical variants.

The Great Lakes bandoleer bag has the wide shoulder strap attached to a rectangular flat pouch, both made of cloth. The presence of black cloth related to the former use of black-dyed deerskin. Also the lack of a flap and the extension of the back of the pouch above the opening are survivals of earlier native types. Some of the Ojibwa bandoleer bags had a Cree-Métis type of shoulder strap, made in two separate parts, which had to be tied together at the shoulder (see WC 8708874).

Panels of beadwork, either loom-woven or in a loose-warp technique covered the strap and the front of the pouch below the opening. The extension of the pouch above the opening might be left plain, or was decorated with a small floral design in spot-stitch beadwork.

In contrast to the decoration of bandoleer bags in other regions, those of the Great Lakes reveal the continuation of earlier regional designs in the new bead weaving. Traditional designs of explicit religious symbolism were becoming rare, however. Many of the design elements in the woven beadwork were related to the geometric patterns used in woven quillwork by the Cree and Métis (see WC 8906010). Others were derived from the linear patterns of white beads on the older finger-woven bags (see WC 8612026). The diagonal designs on these woven bags were ancestral to the diamond pattern and patterns based on an “X” motif in the woven beadwork of many bandoleer bags (see WC 8708857 and 8708859).

The variety and beauty of these bandoleer bags stands in sharp contrast to the poor economic conditions in which the native people found themselves in the nineteenth century. The fur traders had moved to more profitable regions, the forests were being cut down, and the Indians were powerless against the "civilizing" schemes of government and missionaries. Apparently, it was precisely this repressive situation that stimulated the native women to create colorful apparel for festive occasions. Once they became popular, large numbers of these bandoleer bags were produced to serve as gifts in intertribal give-away ceremonials, and for the horse trade with the Indians on the Missouri River. As prestigious badges of ethnic identity, several bags were often worn by a man, the bandoleers crossing at the chest.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century the bandoleer bags became larger, and their utilitarian function was abandoned when the pouch changed into decorative panels, often no longer furnished with even a small pocket. The geometric designs in woven beadwork were given up by the Ojibwa, to be replaced by spot-stitch beadwork of realistic floral patterns, often combining roses, oak leaves and bluebells all on the same stem. By the 1930s the flowers had withered, but in resent years, some new bandoleers were reported.

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