

MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

The MSU Libraries are pleased to supply this material to you via interlibrary loan. The MSU Libraries do not hold copyright of this material and cannot authorize any further reproduction.

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted materials. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be “used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research”. If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of “fair use”, that user may be liable for copyright infringement.



**Interlibrary
Services**

MSU LIBRARIES

InterLibrary Services,
Borrowing
MSU Libraries
366 W. Circle Drive, DB#5
East Lansing, MI
48824

Borrowing: 517-884-6398
Lending: 517-884-6399
www.lib.msu.edu

If you have questions or need a more accessible version of this document, please contact ILL@mail.lib.msu.edu or call 517-884-6398.

RAPID REQUEST

ILLiad TN: 1026674



Rapid #: -13333113



Print Date: Thursday, May 31, 2018

CALL #: E 51 .M42

LOCATION: BIZZELL STACKS

Journal Title: Masterkey

Article Title: Ottawa Indian Quillwork
Decorated Birchbark boxes: The Martha Berry
Memorial Collection

Article Author: Watkins, Frances E.

Volume: 9

Issue: 4

Month/Year: July 1936

Pages: 123-127

ISSN: 0025-5084

Borrower: **RAPID:EEM**

Odyssey: 35.8.223.23

Not On Shelf

Not Found As Cited

Rapid requests are for copies only. Before saying "Yes" to this request, please verify the following:

- ✓ The citation given has been verified.
- ✓ There is a single article that can be scanned.
- ✓ There are no maps or other large pieces that accompany this article.

OTTAWA INDIAN QUILL-DECORATED
BIRCHBARK BOXES

THE MARTHA BERRY MEMORIAL COLLECTION

By FRANCES E. WATKINS

ONE of the most interesting of the many recent gifts to Southwest Museum is the collection of more than eighty boxes of birchbark, decorated with porcupine quills, presented by Mrs. Frances Berry Colby in memory of her sister, Miss Martha Berry, by whom they were gathered before 1920. This is a remarkably complete as well as beautiful collection, for Miss Berry spent her summers for many years in the homeland of the Ottawa, where she had unusual opportunities for acquiring all the different examples of their workmanship. It is difficult to realize that such artistically lovely articles could be fabricated of no more elaborate materials than a few strips of birchbark and a handful of dyed quills. There are no exact duplicates among the four-score boxes, although several of similar design are included, probably made for commercial purposes. Even in preparing for the market the Indian craftswoman finds it almost impossible to duplicate her wares. Like nature, which never repeats but is constantly producing an infinite number of variations on the same theme, the Indian woman varies her pattern with each new creation.

The technique of porcupine-quill embroidery is a very old one. The earliest explorers to come into contact with Eastern Indians describe this unusual form of decoration. The principal medium was embroidery on soft-tanned skins, but quill ornamentation was also used on birchbark houses and containers. Strangely enough, the use of the quill for these purposes did not always follow the somewhat restricted area in which the porcupine is found, but trade in porcupine quills was very active. The Ottawa, however, secured their own raw material. This was the work of the men, just as the embroidery was the work of women. The animals were trapped, shot from trees by means of the bow and arrow, later with guns, or dug from burrows. The porcupine was not skinned, but the quills were plucked from the carcass, which afterward became a tasty roast. Occasionally quills were pulled from the living animal. Quills were carefully sorted as they were taken from the porcupine, and the different sizes were stored in separate containers made from the bladders of elk

or buffalo. The largest spines came from the tail, the next in size from the back, next from the neck, and the least from the under parts. These last were used only in the finest and most delicate work. For use on birchbark the larger quills were probably selected. Early dyes were made from various minerals and plants found locally, but commercial dyes have been in use for so long that knowledge of the nature of these ancient colorings has been lost.

The sewing kit needed to achieve the most intricate designs was very simple—a bladder pouch for the quills, a bone marker for tracing the design (of late a lead pencil is sometimes used), some bone awls or awls with metal points, and a knife. No needle, no thimble, no thread. The method is equally simple. The quills are used in the round, not flattened as in embroidery on leather, and the sharp point acts as its own needle. An awl, somewhat smaller in diameter than the quill, is used to punch a tiny hole in the line of the pattern, the point of the quill is inserted from the wrong side of the box, a second hole is punched and the quill pushed through again, this time from the right side. For the next stitch a fresh quill is taken, until the pattern is completed, when all the ends on the reverse side are cut off close to the bark, and the raw surface covered with a thin lining of bark. Sometimes two or more stitches can be made with one quill. As birchbark contracts slightly after the awl is withdrawn, the quill is thrust through the perforation as soon as possible, to be held tightly by the contraction, so that no further fastening is needed. An unfinished box in the collection shows this technique very plainly. The box itself, round, with straight sides, was made before the embroidery was applied. The ends of the quills have not been cut.

Four types of stitchery have been used on the boxes in this collection. The most frequent is a stitch resembling "satin-stitch," used for flower petals, leaves, background, or any space which must be filled in; the "outline-stitch," for stems and linear patterns; a variation of the "single-stitch," often utilized for fern leaves, daisy petals, or thistles; and the "cross-stitch," which serves the double purpose of reinforcing as well as ornamenting edges, corners, and seams.

The boxes in the Martha Berry Memorial Collection fall naturally into two main classes. In the first, and probably older form, the birchbark itself serves as a background for the pattern in vividly dyed quills, and the boxes are often bordered with sweet-grass. The designs are more or less realistic floral

patterns. The boxes in the second class may be said to show a certain degree of sophistication, many of them resembling in form and size our modern round tin candy boxes. The bark is concealed under a covering of quillwork, pure white, brown, or both brown and white. The designs are simpler and more highly conventionalized, merely outlined in silhouette on the quill ground, but retain the floral motive except in two or three specimens, on which a star is used. There are several subdivisions of these main classes, some highly individual.

The oldest specimens in the collection belong to the first class, although they are not boxes, but open, shallow bowls in form. They are made in sections, each bordered with sweet-grass, sewed together with commercial thread. The most interesting and typical is octagonal, with scalloped rim, and has two floral motives repeated alternately in the panels. The colors—red, pink, brown, and green—are soft and old, shaded from light to dark with pleasing effect. Two shallow saucers are also included, one rimmed with sweet-grass, the other with bird quills. These four examples are the only open vessels, as all the others are boxes with lids.

In shape the birch-bark boxes are round, rectangular, or oval, with a few odd shapes, found mostly in class one. Many have obviously been fabricated for some special use, as, for instance, a long glove box and the imitation of an old sole-leather trunk, with rounded top. In class two there is a valentine box—heart-shaped, covered with brown quills, and with a red tulip on the cover.

A brief description of the several types and subtypes of boxes in the collection follows, omitting, however, the shallow open bowls previously described.

Class I, A—Rectangular and round boxes of birchbark, with lids fitting over the box top, bordered with sweet-grass sewed with commercial thread. The patterns are gay, varicolored flowers with green leaves; bright red, magenta, purple, white, green, and sometimes pink being the colors most frequently used. The corners of the rectangular boxes are reinforced with white quill crosses.

B—Similar to *A*, but instead of sweet-grass they are bordered with split reed, also sewed with commercial thread.

C—Practically the same as *B*, but instead of brightly colored flowers the designs are in all-white quills, giving an effect of daintiness. The glove box above mentioned is in this class. These are probably simplified boxes prepared for trade.

D—Rectangular boxes, decorated in white quills on a bark ground. The lids are flat, attached to the boxes with thread hinges, and fasten either with native fiber cord or basketry loops. The patterns are all-white, or white flowers with yellow centers and green leaves.

Class II, A—Round, deep boxes, with the entire surface covered with brown or white quills. The lid is flat, fits into, not over, the box, and is decorated with a simple floral pattern on a bark ground. If the box is white, the design is usually white, or white with yellow center; if brown, the decoration is brown and white. Some have a basketry loop handle in the center of the cover.

B—Rectangular, resemble *Class I-D*, with the difference that boxes and lids are covered solidly with brown or white quills. No pattern or design. They are bordered with sweet-grass or split reed.

C—Round boxes, lid fits over the box, and both are covered with quillwork in white, brown, or mottled brown and white. In several specimens the quills cover the bottom as well as the top of the box. The greatest variation in size occurs in this class, the boxes ranging from 2 to 10 inches in diameter, and from 2 to 5 inches in depth. The unfinished specimen previously described belongs in this division.

One group of boxes, which properly should be placed in *Class I, A*, consists of small, well-made containers, bordered with white quills and embroidered with very fine threadlike quills in floral patterns. The only zoöomorphic design in the entire collection occurs on the largest of these—a gay red bird perched on a thistle and surrounded by a green wreath. Finally, the collection includes half a dozen birchbark napkin rings, decorated with quills, and a very small blue and white pin-cushion. There is considerable variation in size, the boxes ranging in depth from an inch and a half to 7 inches, and in diameter from an inch and a half to 10 inches. The workmanship is excellent, and all are neatly finished inside with bark linings held in place by scattered stitches.

In conclusion, a brief word regarding the Ottawa Indians. They make their home today in northern Michigan and southern Canada, about the Great Lakes, not far from their original habitat. They are closely related to the Chippewa, a Central Algonkian group. Champlain, who encountered the Ottawa in 1615, described them as great hunters, warriors, and fishermen, and mentioned that they often went as far as four

or five hundred leagues to trade. Later explorers stated that the Ottawa were among the rudest and most barbarous nations in Canada, but that contact with the Iroquois was improving them. Today, however, the situation is very different, and as early as 1859 it was said of them that "this people is still advancing in agricultural pursuits; they may be said to have entirely abandoned the chase; all of them live in good, comfortable cabins; have fields enclosed with rail fences, and own domestic animals."

In the leisure fostered by this more sedentary life the women have occupied themselves in making birchbark vessels for sale, utilizing old forms and old designs invented for very different purposes. In the old days birchbark served for the manufacture of dishes, storage boxes, cups, and containers of varying types, and even houses and canoes. What pottery was to the Southwest and basketry to the Pacific Coast, birchbark was to the Northeast. The Martha Berry Memorial Collection of quill-decorated bark boxes shows how the Indian woman beautified even her everyday utensils.

THE APACHE SCOUTS

By ARTHUR WOODWARD

AT THE present time there is only one detachment of full-blood Indians in the active service of the United States Army. This is the fast-dwindling remnant of the Apache scouts now stationed at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. This body was organized in the days when Gerónimo was loose in the mountains. At that time they numbered nearly 300, today they are but 11.

In 1928 the War Department seriously considered the elimination of the Apache scout detachment as a body, but the commanding general of the Eighth Corps area, in which Fort Huachuca is situated, recommended that the scouts, "well disciplined, well trained and performing work very efficiently," be retained. As a result, the scouts remained on regular duty. They were not different from any other group, so far as army duties were concerned. On February 17, 1928, Capt. W. C. Steiger, 10th Cavalry, commanding, to which the scouts were attached at that time, wrote:

"The detachment is composed entirely of Apaches, some from White River and some from San Carlos Agency. From