



A CHERISHED CURIOSITY

*The Souvenir Beaded Bag in
Historic Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Art*

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Double-Curve Motif

The root of the double-curve motif is clouded in antiquity. The basic form was comprised of two opposing spiral or scroll designs that either turned inward or outward (fig. 2.1). The motif appeared throughout the decorative arts of the Indian nations from the northeast. In the Canadian Maritimes, it has been preserved in prehistoric Mi'kmaq rock art and was first described in the writings of Marc Lescarbot, a French author, poet and lawyer, in 1606–1607. The Reverend Silas Rand, who produced the Micmac/English dictionary in the 1800s, reported that his informants could not recall the origins of the design or what it meant. Though its original meaning is lost among the Wabanaki, in some applications it could be a graphic representation of the fiddle-head fern that grew abundantly in the Northeast. High in vitamins A and C, the fern would have had a rejuvenating effect on those who survived the winter on a sparse diet, deficient of ascorbic acid, and as such it would be regarded as a healing or sacred plant.

In 1957, Ruth and Wilson Wallis published a monograph on their work with the Maliseet for the National Museum of Canada. They wrote that the ancient occupation of collecting fiddleheads was an “enduring and relevant pursuit that had survived among them.”

The tightly curled heads of ferns, as they formed in the month of May, were the first spring greens for these Indians. Malicite say they taught the whites to eat fiddleheads, and now they pick and truck them to commercial canneries in New Brunswick and Quebec. The fern must be picked at the right moment, when still curled, “as tight as a fiddlehead” (Wallis and Wallis 1957:17).

In his treatise on the double-curve motif among the Penobscot, Frank Speck wrote extensively on the topic.

There seems, however, to have been in the past, if not now, judging from surviving ideas, a slight tendency for the women to connect the figures

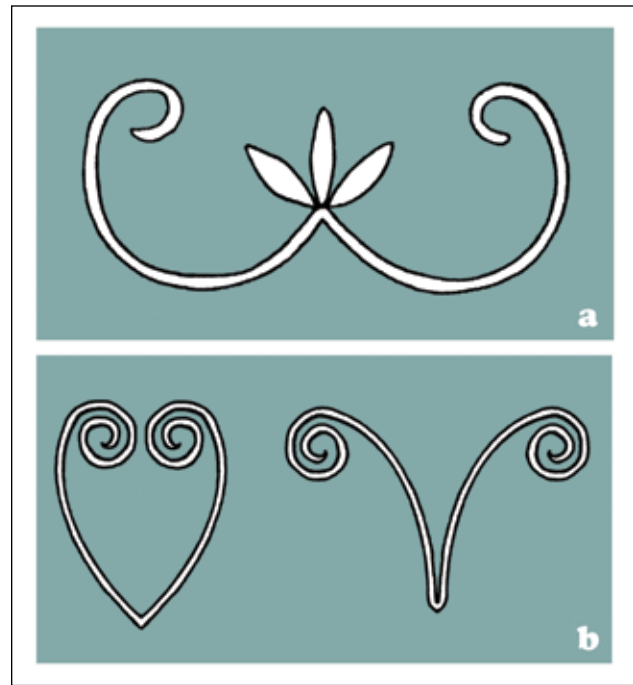


FIG. 2.1. (a) – stylized Wabanaki double-curve-motif with a characteristic mound or pedestal at the center; (b)—stylized Haudenosaunee double-curve motifs as seen on beaded bags. The form often has the bottom of the curve stems coming together at the base point.

with medicinal plants, as though there might have been some feeling of protective magic underlying their use as decorations upon personal property (Speck 1914:4).

In addition to its possible use as a healing or sacred plant, Speck goes on to say that it had a political function as well.

The primary significance of the double-curve and scroll figures among the Penobscot was a sort of political symbolism. The double-curve represented the bonds uniting the different members of the chief's family, the subdivisions of the tribe, or the officers of the council. This symbolism has, however, been totally forgotten except by a few of the older people (Speck 1914:4-5).

In a February 8, 1943, letter from the archaeologist George Quimby to Frank Speck, in the collection of the American Philosophical Society Library, Quimby expressed his belief that

the double-curve motif occurred in prehistoric Hopewell art. So this design likely originated in antiquity. It appears in the decorative arts of both the Haudenosaunee and the Wabanaki and Speck observed that in the art of the Iroquois,

[t]he greater portion, however, exhibits the curves turning outward instead of inward.... Regarding the symbolism of the curved figures it is reported that they are primarily a representation of celestial, geographical and mythical phenomena (Speck 1914:8).

Among the Haudenosaunee, Arthur Parker,³¹ describes the use of the double-curve to represent phenomena such as the world tree or celestial tree. It sometimes symbolized the horns of a living chief if they turned outward, or a dead one if they turned inward (Parker 1911:48).

Speck believed that the double-curve motif originated with the northern Algonkian and was later adopted by the Haudenosaunee.

Evidence is well established to show the wide distribution in former times of the Algonkian double-curve decorative figure as far south as southern New England and the Middle Atlantic slope. An inference not to be slighted follows: that Iroquois and Huron art motives and techniques were acquired from Algonkian predecessors in the northeast, or, to put it in another way, that Iroquois migration may have resulted in the imposition of the general art style of the northern area upon that of the newcomers in that area. That this explanation was the true one the author sensed with equal conviction in 1925, after carrying on field investigations of the distribution of art types among Canadian tribes (Speck:1945:62).



FIG. 2.2. Beaded bag, Haudenosaunee type. Glass beads, red wool broadcloth, silk ribbon edge binding. First quarter of the nineteenth century. 6.2 inches high by 6.2 inches wide. The bag illustrates the use of the single scroll or spiral motif as a stand-alone design element. This feature is often found on early Haudenosaunee beaded bags.



FIG. 3.10. A group of beaded bags, Haudenosaunee hexagonal type. All are beaded on wool broadcloth and have a silk ribbon edge binding. Typically 7 inches high by 6.5 inches wide. From approximately 1800–1830.



FIG. 3.11. Beaded bag, Haudenosaunee type (both sides shown). 7 inches high by 6 inches wide by 2 inches thick. First quarter of the nineteenth century. An early drawstring reticule with a central sun with equal-armed cross motif on one side and an abstract, four-directional design on the other. The extended top is made of silk and there is a 2-inch wide gusset made from the same material.

beaded on could not support the weight of a heavy layer of beads.

Figure 3.10 illustrates more examples of pre-1830 Haudenosaunee bags. The fundamental characteristics of the earliest souvenir bags is that they were often hexagonal in shape (although a smaller number were U-shaped), and they had intricate, curvilinear and geometric designs that were well-organized and logically constructed. These designs included large areas of negative space. The decorations often incorporated traditional symbols like the double-curve, heart, diamond, sun with equal-armed cross, and a host of other organic motifs (fig. 3.11). Bags from this period had few design elements that were solidly beaded. For the most part, the beads were sewn onto a wool broadcloth that was either red or black. Occasionally, bags from this period are found that were beaded on black velvet and a small number were beaded on silk (fig. 1.7a). The edge binding was almost always silk ribbon and usually in green, red, or blue, although other colors were sometimes used. As a

rule, a two-bead edging was sewn along the outside of the bag and there are variations of this stitch as well, though the variant in figure 3.12 is perhaps the most common.

The use of silk ribbon as an edge trim on early souvenir bags may have been occasioned by events in France. “Large stocks of ribbons were dumped on the Indian market when the French Revolution [1789–1799] enforced in France a rigid simplicity of dress” (Brasser 1976: 38). Franklin Allen points out that during the period from 1841 to 1846, “there was a noticeable falling off in the demand for silk goods” (Allen 1904:32). These dates coincide with the rapid decline in the use of silk edging on beaded bags and with the introduction of the Niagara floral-style (discussed in Chapter 4), which more often than not used a cotton ribbon/hem tape as the edge binding.

An early bag with a simple though elegant four-directional motif is illustrated in figure 3.13. It is made in the style that dates from the first quarter



FIG. 3.17. Beaded bag, Haudenosaunee type. Glass beads, red wool broadcloth, silk ribbon edge binding. 7.125 inches high by 6.5 inches wide. First quarter of the nineteenth century. Some bags had unusual flap designs like this example with a three-point, functional flap. The reverse side is figure 1.8f.



FIG. 3.18. Beaded bag, Haudenosaunee type, possibly Seneca. Glass beads, black velvet fabric, silk ribbon edge binding and a balsam fir motif on the flap. Approximately 6 inches high by 6 inches wide. Early to mid-1840s. An unusual three-point, non-functional flap design on this mid-nineteenth century bag. From the collection of Naomi Smith. Used with permission.

is functional and it is stylistically similar to the example in figure 3.18 that is from the 1940s. Additionally, on some souvenir bags, the flaps concealed a small slit or hidden pocket beneath them.

Late Classic Period (mid-to-late 1820s—1840s)

The beaded bags that the Haudenosaunee produced for the souvenir trade are distinctive and they changed stylistically over time. These changes occurred gradually but, as a general rule, distinguishable style refinements can be categorized and placed into broad time frames. There are two classic periods when the hexagonal bags were produced: pre-1830 and post-1830. The gray line of demarcation between the two occurs sometime after the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. This event not only brought more tourists to the Falls but it likely spurred competition between

Native beadworkers as well. As time progressed, their work matured and by 1830, examples with highly developed compositions are found. The complexity of designs on bags produced after the official opening of Erie Canal suggests that as tourism flourished at Niagara Falls, so did the designs on bags. By 1830, the use of finer beads allowed for more intricate and technical designs. Bags from this period are found with some of the smallest seed beads that the Bohemian bead factories were producing. The bag in figure 3.19e and 3.20b, for example is embellished with mostly size 20/0 and 22/0 (.046 & .040 inch diameter) beads. Since their primary function was as an exchange commodity, the ultimate end for the artists was to make their bags more attractive and desirable to a potential patron.

In appreciation for their support of the American cause during the War of 1812, the Tuscarora were granted the immutable right to sell their beadwork on Goat Island.

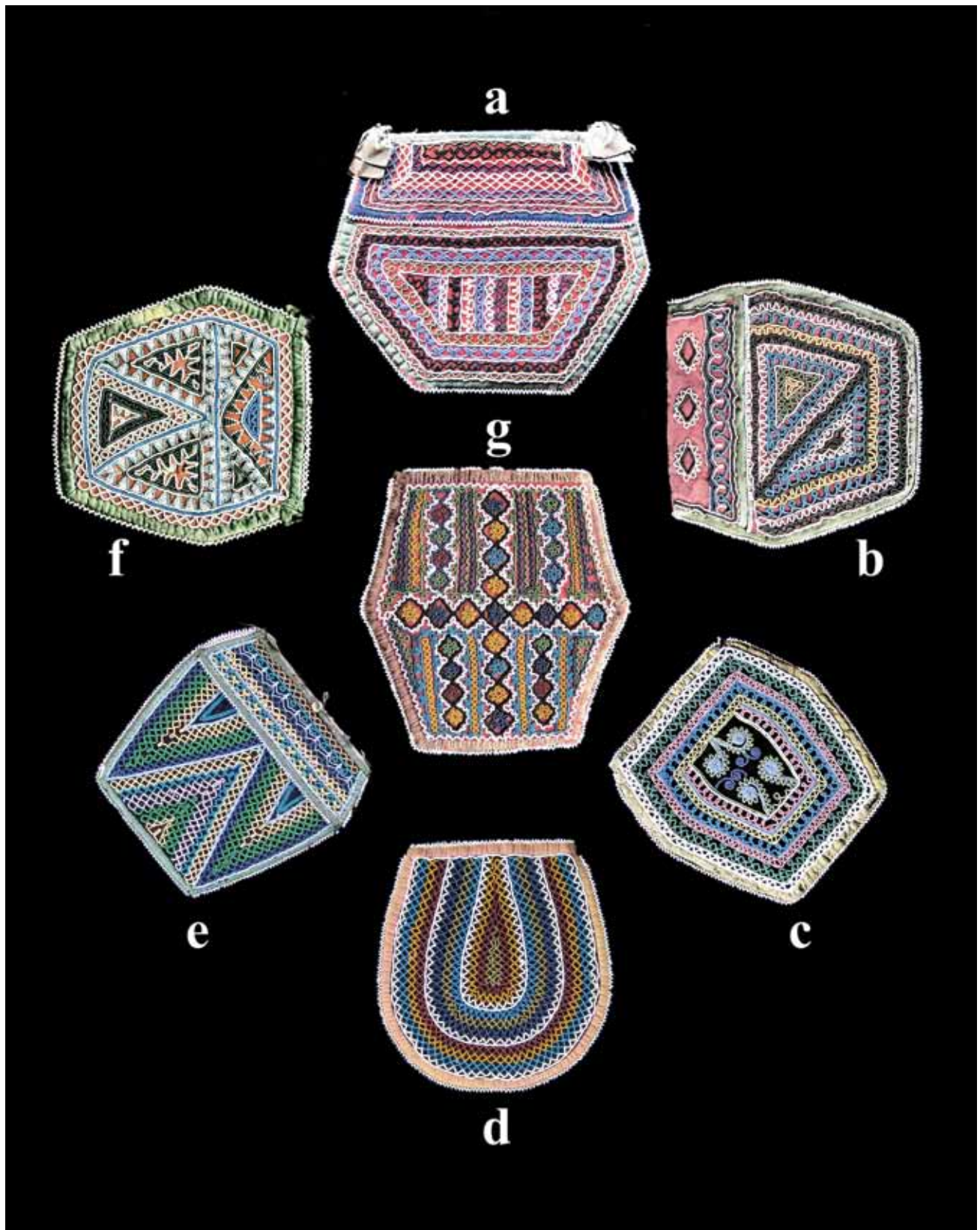


FIG. 3.19. A group of beaded bags from approximately 1830 to the 1840s. Haudenosaunee type. Glass beads; some are beaded on wool broadcloth, some on velvet. All have a silk ribbon edge binding. (a) – 6.9 inches high by 8.5 inches wide. (f) – from the collection of Richard Green and dated 1842 on the inside. Used with permission.



FIG. 3.37. Beaded bag, Haudenosaunee type (both sides shown). Glass beads, red wool broadcloth, cotton lining and silk ribbon edge binding. 6.3 inches high by 6.3 inches wide. First quarter of the nineteenth century. A splendid early bag with an intriguing motif on the reverse.

with dyed moosehair (fig. 3.39a and b). From the testimony of the Indian themselves, moosehair embroidery has been in use since the earliest times to embellish their clothing (Speck 1911:1). In souvenir work, moosehair embroidery was most often used to decorate objects made from birch bark, such as card cases, cheroot cases, canoe models and a host of other items (fig. 3.40). It was also used to embroider designs on hats, moccasins, slippers and purses (fig. 3.41). The softer colors that Native artisans used to stain moosehair were derived from various sources, including berries, mosses, flowers, roots and bark. It wasn't until trade cloth became available that they were able to achieve brighter colors. This was done by boiling scraps of blue or red wool broadcloth along with the moosehair, leaching out the fabric's color, which gave the hair a vivid hue. In the mid-1850s, aniline dyes were industrialized and the synthetic dye industry began producing vivid colors that had a much broader range than were available with natural dyes.

Though the use of moosehair to decorate articles made from birch bark is often associated

with the work of the Ursuline nuns and their Huron students, the technique of moosehair embroidery has been found, with remarkable continuity, among the tribes from Alaska to the Great Lakes, as well as with the Iroquois and Algonkians (Speck 1911:1). Some of the finest Seneca textiles produced during the mid-nineteenth century for what would ultimately become the New York State Museum included rare embroideries in dyed moosehair that were made by Caroline Parker and her mother Elizabeth Parker, whose work will be examined shortly (Parker 1919:88).

Another rare type of moosehair decorated purse was made of birchbark. In a mid-1850s daguerreotype, the subject holds one on her lap (fig. 3.42). A similar example that has the moosehair embroidered onto wool broadcloth that covered the birchbark is illustrated in *Trading Identities* (Phillips 1998: plate 15).

The style of Northeast Woodland beaded bag pictured in figure 3.43, is a type that may have originated with the Mohawks from Kahnawake as a nearly identical bag is illustrated in a document in the research files of the Iroquois Museum, in



FIG. 3.38. Ambrotype, 2.8 inches wide by 3.3 inches high. Mid-to late 1850s. A rare image with a young lady holding a Haudenosaunee bag embellished with a heart motif.



FIG. 4.8. Beaded bags, 1840s, Haudenosaunee type, possibly Seneca. Each is approximately 5.5 inches high by 6.5 inches wide. Glass beads, black velvet fabric, silk ribbon edge binding. A style of bag that may have originated with Caroline Parker or her mother, Elizabeth. They all have strong similarities to a bag she is wearing in figure 4.6.



FIG. 4.9. A group of beaded bags, Haudenosaunee type. 1840s. Glass beads; some are beaded on wool broadcloth; others on velvet or silk. All have a silk ribbon edge binding. These are typically 5.5 inches high by 6 inches wide. (g) and (i) are decorated with dyed moosehair (See: fig. 3.39). This style is generally characterized by scalloped edges, a tight band of beads along the perimeter and a distinctive floral style. These are possibly the work of Caroline Parker. The floral motif on bag (c) is remarkably similar to one on a table cover in the Rochester Museum and Science Center, Rochester, New York that was made by Caroline Parker (See: Holler 2011:16).

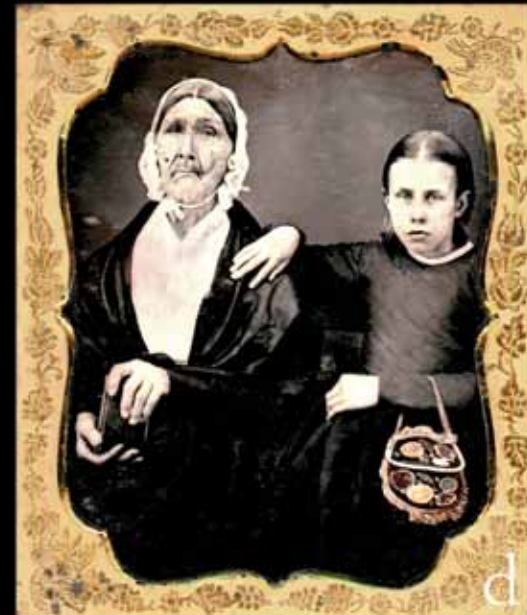
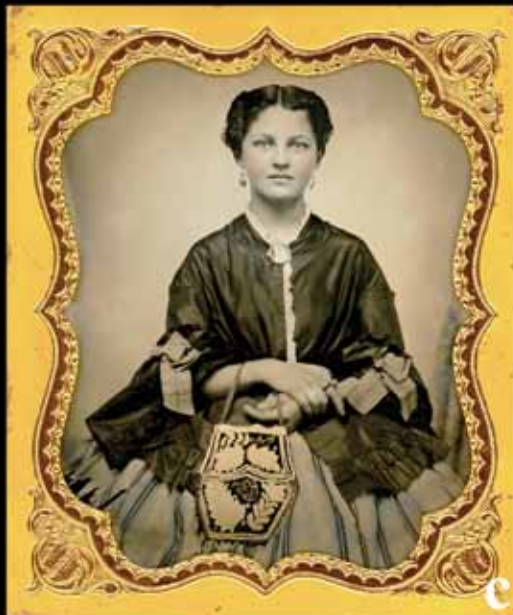
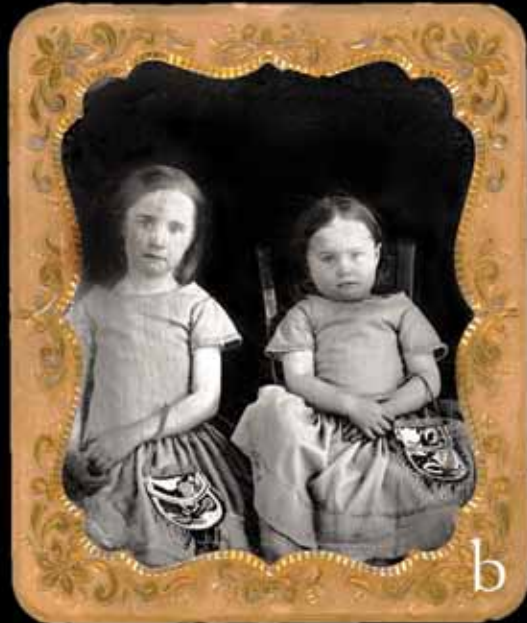


FIG. 4.25. (a) (b) & (d) are daguerreotypes, 3.25 inches high by 2.75 inches wide. 1850s. (b) is unique in that each child has a bag. (d) – the extra expense that was paid the photographer to hand-color the bag in this image speaks of its importance to the owner and how much it was admired. (c) a ruby ambrotype, 3.25 inches high by 2.75 inches wide. 1855–1857. The purse in this image is much larger than most of the bags seen in the Niagara floral style.



FIG. 4.26. Beaded bag, Haudenosaunee type, late Niagara floral style. Glass beads, black velvet fabric, red cotton ribbon/hem tape edge binding and silk ribbon along the top opening. 7.8 inches high (not including fringe) by 8.6 inches wide. Mid-to late-1850s. By this date the ovate flowers that were prominent on bags from the early-1840s to the mid-1850s had evolved into elongated, leaf-like clusters. By 1860, the long, thick stems had all but disappeared and most designs were now asymmetrical.

Lady's Newspaper was made by the Tuscarora, the Iroquois nation living closest to Niagara Falls and most heavily dependent on the tourist trade there" (Phillips 1998:256).

The photographic record demonstrates that by the late 1850s, the transformation from ovate florals to elongated leaf clusters was almost complete. In 1859, photographer William England traveled to the United States for the London Stereoscopic Company and he photographed many scenes at

Niagara Falls. While there, he captured an image of a group of Iroquois women making and selling beaded items. The descriptive text that accompanied one of these stereo views indicated the subjects were a group of Senecas that made their living from the manufacture and sale of fancy articles which England described as purses, pincushions, needle-books, moccasins and caps (Jeffrey 1999:26). Another of his images, titled "Yankee Notions," features a bag he acquired at the Falls. It's an example of a transitional-stage Niagara style bag with ovate florals on the flap and elongated leaf clusters on the body (fig. 4.27).⁶⁹ A close examination of the bag reveals that the bilaterally symmetrical designs and long stems that were prominent on earlier pieces are gone. Except for a single flower on the flap, the ovate florals have

evolved into elongated leaf-like clusters and the design is asymmetrical.

In 1863, Jeremiah Gurney photographed operatic contralto Felicita Vestvali (1824–1880) dressed for her role as Orsini, in Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* (fig. 4.28). There is a similar treatment to the design on her large Haudenosaunee bag which has a single ovate floral motif on the flap and elongated leaf clusters on the body. The bag dates to the same period as the example in the "Yankee Notions" stereoview.

Another carte-de-visite from this period depicts an unnamed actress from Toledo, Ohio (fig. 4.29a). Both the flap and body of her bag is decorated with elongated leaf motifs in an asymmetrical design of the type that first appeared in the mid- to late 1850s. The young girl depicted in figure 4.29b is wearing a similar bag. Other images from the 1860s depict actors or theatrical groups that are dressed in Indian attire and in a



FIG. 4.33. Daguerreotype, mid-1850s, 2.75 inches high by 3.25 inches wide. The lady in the center is holding a Niagara floral style bag with a bilaterally symmetrical design. Haudenosaunee friends have suggested that the younger women could be Iroquois and that one of them may have made the bag.

parakeets, alluding to the now extinct birds that once lived in their North Carolina homeland before the Tuscarora moved north in the early eighteenth century. Jolene Rickard, a Tuscarora artist and scholar, has written that the birds, flowers, and cherries to feed them were a common theme for Tuscarora beadworkers. “A long time before we migrated” she wrote, “the Maker of All Things had given us a special bird to be cared for by the young. As the story goes, we became lax, and the bird went away, and the time of our greatest struggle began.... The people put the

bird into the beads to help remember the message” (Rickard 1992:110).

Though Rickard’s statement is expressive and articulate, the Carolina parakeet wasn’t determined to be extinct until over two hundred years after the Tuscarora moved north. It was the only parrot species native to the eastern United States and the last wild specimen was killed in Florida in 1904. The last known captive bird died in the Cincinnati zoo in 1918 but it wasn’t until 1939 that it was determined to be extinct. It had colorful green plumage over most of its body and a



FIG. 4.34. Three beaded bags that incorporate a bird in the design, Haudenosaunee type, Niagara floral style. Glass beads, black velvet and red cotton ribbon/hem tape edge binding. All are circa 1850. (a) – 6.25 inches high by 5.75 inches wide. (b) – 8 inches high (not including the fringe) by 7.5 inches wide. The maker employed an unusual color combination on the birds using only transparent green and clear beads. (c) – 7 inches high by 5.8 inches wide. This piece has a silk ribbon edge binding along the top opening and a silk ribbon strap.

yellow head with red coloration around the beak. One of the curious features about the birds in historic Haudenosaunee beadwork is that they rarely appear in these color combinations. This could be attributed to artistic license or a memory lapse by mid-nineteenth-century Tuscaroras about exactly what the birds looked like. Perhaps the disconnection with the bird that Rickard speaks of was figurative, occasioned by their displacement from North Carolina after a war with local settlers in the early eighteenth century.

The earliest birds depicted in the Niagara style of beadwork date to the 1840s. Birds resembling a parakeet are not found in Iroquois beadwork prior to that, so if the Tuscarora made these bags, why did they wait more than 100 years after migrating north to include them in their beadwork?

Small birds were very popular on Berlin Work and white work embroidery from the 1840s to

the 1870s. In fact, birds were pervasive across the spectrum of Euro-American decorative arts. They first appeared in the Niagara floral style when Berlin Work was at the height of its popularity. Furthermore, the items that Victorian women were crafting for themselves in Berlin Work were similar to those the Iroquois were producing for sale: i.e. purses, pincushions, slippers, etc. and many Victorian pieces were also beaded and embellished with birds.

Perhaps the appearance of birds on non-Native work ignited a resurgence or rekindled an ancient memory among the Tuscarora. Considering that these bags were being made in many Haudenosaunee communities, the unanswered question is whether the birds are a representation of the Carolina parakeet or if their simultaneous appearance in the beadwork was a reaction or an accommodation to prevailing fashion trends.

formally owned by the anthropologist Frank Bergevin. When he acquired them the vamps were loose and the aged paper stiffeners beneath them were visible and found to be from a mid-nineteenth-century Montreal area newspaper. This is certainly no guarantee that the moccasins are Mohawk but it suggests that they could have been made nearby.

The Mohawks travelled extensively in the nineteenth century, performing in medicine shows, circuses, theatrical groups and especially in Wild West shows. Their participation in the entertainment industry is a proud part of their history.

Texas Jack Omohundro's Wild West Show recruited most of their Indian entertainers from Kahnawake and many of them

FIG. 5.3. Cabinet card; the subjects are identified on the back as Mohawks. 6.5 inches high by 4.25 inches wide. 1880s–1890s. The woman has several large floral motifs on her skirt and collar that are similar to those on the bags in figure 5.2. She also has a beaded star motif on her sleeve cuffs. Photographer: A. B. Comstock, Waverly, New York.



OPPOSITE: FIG. 5.4. Four cabinet cards from a much larger collection that depict Mohawks. Each is 6.5 inches high by 4.25 inches wide. 1880s – 1890s. The images are identified on the back as follows: (a) – “Caughnawaga Mohawks.” Photographer: J.C. Patrick, Coalport, Pennsylvania. (b) – this is the same group of Mohawks portrayed in image (a). The woman appears to be wearing the identical collar and hat that she wore in image (a) although she is attired in a different dress. Photographer: E.J. Potten, Mansfield, Ohio. (c) – the individuals are identified as Angus Montour (American Horse) who was from Kahnawake; his first wife Sarah, (Trinsiotakua), and Uncle Mike (Aronionawa). Photographer: Keethler, from Cynthiana, Kentucky. (d) – a period inscription on the back reads: “Mohawks.” This group may have belonged to the St. Regis Indian Show Company. The dresses that both women are wearing display a “tree of life” motif that is quite similar to one on the dress worn by Mary Ann Black Eagle, a member of the St. Regis Indian Show Company (see: Phillips 1998:15, fig. 1.8). Photographer: Close & Co., West Branch, Michigan. On all the images there is some variation of a large and prominent floral motif that is observed on the bags and this floral motif may be diagnostic of early Mohawk work.



a



b



c



d



FIG. 5.17. A group of beaded bags, Haudenosaunee type, likely all Mohawk. Glass beads sewn onto various cotton fabrics. The edging on bags in this style is often beaded in a spiral weave. Typically 7 inches high by 8.5 inches wide. 1900–1915.

flat and raised beadwork, it's an exceptional example from the early twentieth century. It incorporates a crystal bead spiral edging and a crystal beaded fringe and is beaded on olive-green velvet. Commoditized Mohawk beadwork that included US flags were no doubt made for sale in US markets, and this enterprise was very profitable for many Mohawk families. Some were admired for the comfortable homes they had built for themselves from the sale of their beadwork (Phillips 1998:25), but export duties jeopardized their livelihood. In 1898, a group of 44 Kahnawake women wrote to the US Congress requesting they remove tariffs that threatened the sale of their "beadwork and Indian novelties" in the United States (Iroquois Women letter, October, 1898).

Flags appear on Iroquois beadwork from time to time. Some large nineteenth-century pincushions had this motif as early as 1876, at the time of the Centennial International Exhibition, the first official World's Fair in the United States. In 1901, the Pan American Exposition (PAE) may have stimulated the manufacture of patriotic mementoes, too, as a number of dated pieces with flags appear about this time. The PAE was another World's Fair type event that was held in Buffalo, New York. Some 700 Indians from 42 tribes were represented. There was a Wild West show on the grounds and the Haudenosaunee had a Six Nations exhibit, comprised chiefly of bark huts, and they were no doubt selling their beadwork there too. These expositions were events that expressed or inspired love for one's country and the Mohawks may have



FIG. 5.18 – Beaded Bag, Haudenosaunee type, likely Mohawk (both sides shown). Glass beads sewn onto a tan velvet fabric. The edging is beaded in a spiral weave. 4.6 inches high (not including the fringe) by 4.4 inches wide. Dated 1908 in beads. The depiction of a rat may be a reflection of the sense of humor of the maker. The flower on the flap is almost one-inch thick in raised beadwork.

fashioned these pieces to appeal to the patriotic feelings of their patrons.

An exceptional example from the first quarter of the twentieth century has a figure riding a horse and carrying the Union Jack (fig. 5.17a & e). Dated 1915 below the horse, it's beaded on that bright, hot pink fabric that was prominent on Mohawk work during this period. The design on the back appears to be part of the continuing evolution of the large floral or star pattern seen on the mid-nineteenth-century bags and on the late-nineteenth-century Mohawk cabinet cards. Here, both elements are incorporated into one design.

Another unusual bag from this period has a rat on one side and a large, floral motif on the other (fig. 5.18). The high style of raised beadwork on the flap is more commonly found