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THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN COLLECTION. A CATALOGUE

JUDY THOMPSON

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began research on the collection in September 1973, and the manuscript was submitted for publication in September 1974.

Introduction

From the time of the earliest contact between the white man and the North American Indian, a considerable number of native artifacts have been brought or sent back to the European homes and institutions of their collectors. Only a fraction of the older material survives today. The History Museum in Bern, Switzerland, has a collection which is of excellent quality, considerable age and diversity, and in a good state of preservation. This relatively small collection (350 items) is not well-known to students of North American ethnography, or to the general public. The artifacts come from a variety of sources: although Switzerland was never one of the dominant trading and exploring nations in the New World, the Swiss, including artists such as Bodmer, Kurz, Wäber, and Rindisbacher, soldiers serving as mercenaries in North America, immigrants, and travellers, were often enthusiastic recorders of Indian life and collectors of native material culture.

By the time scientific investigations began in the second half of the 19th century, many North American Indian cultures had been destroyed, and almost all had been to a greater or lesser degree altered by the influences of the white man. Material culture collections, particularly comparatively early post-contact collections such as those described in this catalogue, play an important role in the reconstruction of pre-contact native cultures, as well as providing information about changes during the crucial post-contact period.

Materials and Technology

Prior to the introduction of European trade goods, the native craftsman relied upon his environment for a wide variety of raw materials. Animals provided skin for clothing, shelter, thongs and containers, hair for decoration, horn and bone for tools, spoons, and arrowpoints, and sinews for thread, bowstrings and snares. Plants, berries, flowers, mosses, earth and charcoal produced a range of colours, while porcupine quills and moose- or caribou-hair were widely-used decorative materials. The extent to which a natural resource predominated in the material culture was in direct relation to its availa-

bility. Tribes living in the heavily-forested Northwest Coast area used wood and bark in many ways – for clothing and ceremonial paraphernalia, as well as for housing, canoes and tools. Among the Pueblo tribes of the dry Southwest, wood artifacts were rare, and pottery played a significant role; while among the tribes of the grassland Prairies the use of animal hides, particularly buffalo hides, dominated the material culture. However, raw materials and finished products were not limited in circulation to their immediate environment: long before the arrival of the Europeans there was an active and extensive trade network between Indian tribes, by which a considerable volume of products reached areas far removed from their points of origin. It was in this way that red pipestone (catlinite) from quarries in Minnesota circulated as far west as the Rocky Mountains, and dentalia shells collected on the west coast of Vancouver Island reached north to the western Arctic, south to central California, and east to tribes living on the Plains beyond the Rocky Mountains.

More rapidly than any other aspect of the native culture, the material culture changed in response to new ideas, materials, and markets presented by the white man. Often European trade goods were in circulation before the first appearance of a white explorer or trader in an area, having arrived through the native trade networks. Direct Indian-white trading activities began in the 16th century on the north-east coast of the U.S.A. and in eastern Canada, while on the west coast European trading ships began to make regular stops after 1778. The resulting effects on the traditional material culture were profound. The all-pervasive Venetian glass beads and, to a lesser extent, silk embroidery threads, gradually replaced porcupine and bird quills as decorative mediums; wool blankets and trade cloth took the place of skins for clothing, and steel needles, cotton thread, and scissors were used instead of awls and sinew thread for sewing. The availability of metals for tools and weapons affected all aspects of technology; woodworking in particular was facilitated, as evidenced by the dramatic post-contact increase in production on the Northwest Coast. In the Eastern Woodlands, the initial impetus provided by iron woodworking tools was later reversed, as iron trade vessels replaced the native wood containers. Even colours were affected: at first the Indians boiled their decorative materials with pieces of European trade cloth to produce the desired shades; later they traded for packaged aniline dyes whose hard bright colours were preferred over the former, more subtle, natural shades. A wide variety of novelty items was also circulated, some of which became standard items of Indian dress and accoutrement; for example, tomahawk-pipes (Cat. Nos. 41, 75, 150), mirrors (Cat. No. 198), and silver ornaments (Cat. No. 33).

Many of the new materials and products were assimilated into the native cultures with relatively minor modifications to traditional techniques and styles. In some cases, however, the impact of Indian materials and technologies with those of the white man resulted in new products which bore little resemblance to either traditional native crafts or to European goods. For example, the Bern collection includes several specimens made from a characteristic dark-brown tanned skin decorated with porcupine quill and moose-hair appliqué (Cat. Nos. 43, 69, 86–89), as well as several birchbark items decorated with moosehair (Cat. Nos. 68, 70, 90, 91). While such items are almost certainly Indian-made, and their forms (in the case of the tanned skin items) and materials present a distinctly «native» appearance, their production was initiated by Ursuline nuns in Quebec, Canada, and was a response to the demands of the souvenir trade (Turner (1955): the same source has been drawn upon for the information provided in the following paragraph).

The first convent in Quebec was set up in 1639 and soon had several Indian girls as pupils. The nuns were excellent needlewomen and taught their pupils European needlework techniques and motifs. To economize, the nuns began to use the traditional native decorative material, moosehair, instead of imported silk thread. Aware of the already-existing demand for «Indian» souvenirs, they organized the production in the convent of moccasins, gloves, bags, wall-pockets and other novelties in which the native materials of tanned skin or birchbark, porcupine quill and moosehair harmonized with European floral designs and needlework techniques. True embroidery, found on the birchbark items, involves threading the decorative material through a needle and then stitching it into the background; this technique was not used by the Indians in pre-contact times. The sale of such items became an important source of income to the convent and, later, to the Huron Indians whose geographical and economic situation in the 18th century particularly favoured their following the example of the nuns. A very active industry developed, centered around the Huron Indian village of Lorette, which by the early 19th century had taken the lead from the nuns in the production of «Indian» crafts. This small centre, about 8 miles from Quebec city, is probably the source of most of the items in the above style which are found in museums today.

Another interesting development, and one in which the new form departed even more radically from traditional native crafts, was the carving of argillite by the Haida Indians of the Queen Charlotte Islands. This activity, now one of the best-known aspects of North-west Coast Indian art, also developed in response to the need for curios for trade with the white man, and in this case had its origins in the «scrimshaw» carvings of white sailors.

Scrimshaw refers to the leisure-time carving of whales' teeth and walrus tusks into knick-knacks and curios by seamen on whaling ships. Initially, the Haida carvers emulated this craft with similar materials and motifs, but around 1820 the activity took a new and distinctive direction when they began to utilize argillite, a soft shale found in a single quarry on Graham Island near Skidegate village. As their mastery of this medium developed and trade in the carvings increased, the carvers in their search for new subject matter turned more and more to their own mythology and traditions. The result was the production of a large number of novelty items (small boxes, plates, miniature totem poles, tobacco pipes, and even flutes) in which a basically non-traditional form (none of the carvings were used by the Indians themselves) was the vehicle for a visual presentation of traditional myths, carved in a traditional style.

The pipes, of which there are several in the collection (Cat. Nos. 12–17) are an interesting example: the form is definitely non-traditional, having been derived from the Europeans (the natives on the northern Northwest Coast had no tradition of smoking), but the carving (often so elaborate that the pipe was hardly recognizable as such, and was certainly non-functional) represents mythological figures and stories reminiscent of Haida carving in wood.

Other examples of new directions in native crafts resulting from the influences of, and impetus provided by, non-Indian technologies and markets are found in the Southwest culture area. The Navaho Indians are widely known today for their weaving of wool blankets and rugs, and for their distinctive, massive, silver jewellery. Both of these crafts have been strongly influenced in their development by outside factors. The Navaho were weaving in the early 18th century, having learned the craft from their Pueblo neighbours; their wool came from sheep obtained from the Spanish. Originally, finely-woven blankets were produced for use by the natives themselves, but this production declined as commercial clothing became available, and probably would have died out had not white traders encouraged the women to make rugs which would appeal to the non-Indian market. Since then a variety of distinctive local styles have developed and the types of wool and colours used have gone full circle, from handspun wools and natural dyes to use of ravelled commercial cloths and commercially spun wools, to bright aniline dyes, then the recent trend back to vegetable dyes and hand-spun wool.

The art of silverworking was acquired by the Navaho in the mid-1880's, from travelling Mexican silversmiths. From the Navaho, the technique spread to other Southwest tribes, with the Zuni and Hopi in particular developing their own distinctive styles. In the early days,

Mexican coin silver was the source of supply, but later white traders purchased silver in slug and sheet form and sold it to the Indians. Initially, the silver jewellery was produced for Indian use, but the opening up of markets with white men in the 1890's resulted in a large production of items intended for the non-Indian trade.

Organization of the Catalogue

The material in the collection has been divided into various culture areas for presentation. The culture area concept is frequently used to simplify the organization of North American ethnographical material; the term «culture area» can be defined as a geographical confine within which the inhabitants have a sufficient number of culture traits in common and at the same time enough traits which are dissimilar to those of other areas that they may be conveniently grouped together (Driver (1969: p. 17)). Although students of North American Indian cultures generally find it convenient to divide the continent into seven or more such regions, the size and scope of the Bern collection made five major divisions (Pacific Northwest, Woodlands, Plains, Plateau – Great Basin – California, and the Southwest) more practical (see Figure 1). The geographical location and predominant material culture traits of each area are outlined at the introduction to each section, along with any available information on the collectors of the artifacts. It should be remembered, however, that culture area divisions are artificial constructions and, particularly in boundary areas, tribes of one area often had many material culture traits in common with the adjacent area, thus making assignment of undocumented specimens quite arbitrary. This is particularly the case with a few of the Plains and Woodlands items.

Within each culture area, the material is presented in the order of its receipt by the museum. Since there was often a considerable lag between the time the material was collected and the date of its deposition in the museum, the sequence gives only a very approximate idea of the relative age of the specimens.

The problem of documentation, or rather, the lack of it, is a pervasive one in the research of ethnographic material, particularly in the case of many older collections. Items were collected as souvenirs or curiosity pieces, with little attention being paid to their histories; where collection information *was* remembered or recorded, it was often lost or forgotten by the time the material came to a museum, and museum curators were themselves frequently guilty of not obtaining and recording all available information at the time of accession. With regard to the Bernese material, it is noteworthy that some of the larger collections (for example,

the Wäber material from the Northwest Coast, and the Forrer Klamath collection) do possess reliable basic documentation, however skimpy, and that the excellent Schoch collection from the Plains and Eastern Woodlands does at least have accompanying data regarding collector, time and general area of collection, even though the collector's attributions are frequently questionable. In every case where information from the collector exists, this is reproduced in the catalogue, directly quoted wherever possible.

A further point in the presentation of the material which deserves explanation concerns tribal attributions. Wherever the tribal attribution of a specimen is the opinion of the cataloguer (or, where specifically mentioned, of another researcher), this attribution has been placed in square brackets. This is to emphasize that, although arrived at after examination of ethnological studies, documented comparative material, and all existing documentation, the attribution is still an «educated guess», as

opposed to those items for which sufficient reliable documentation exists that the tribal origin can be stated as fact.

Key to Catalogue Descriptions

Cat. No. Title
 Museum No. Figure No.
 Description
 Condition
 Dimensions: H. – Height; W. – Width; D. – Depth;
 L. – Length; Diam. – Diameter
 Tribe (when in square brackets, is the opinion of the cataloguer)
 (Collector; date of collection; place of collection:
 Collector's comments) (other documentation)
 Acc.: date of accession in the Museum
 Literature

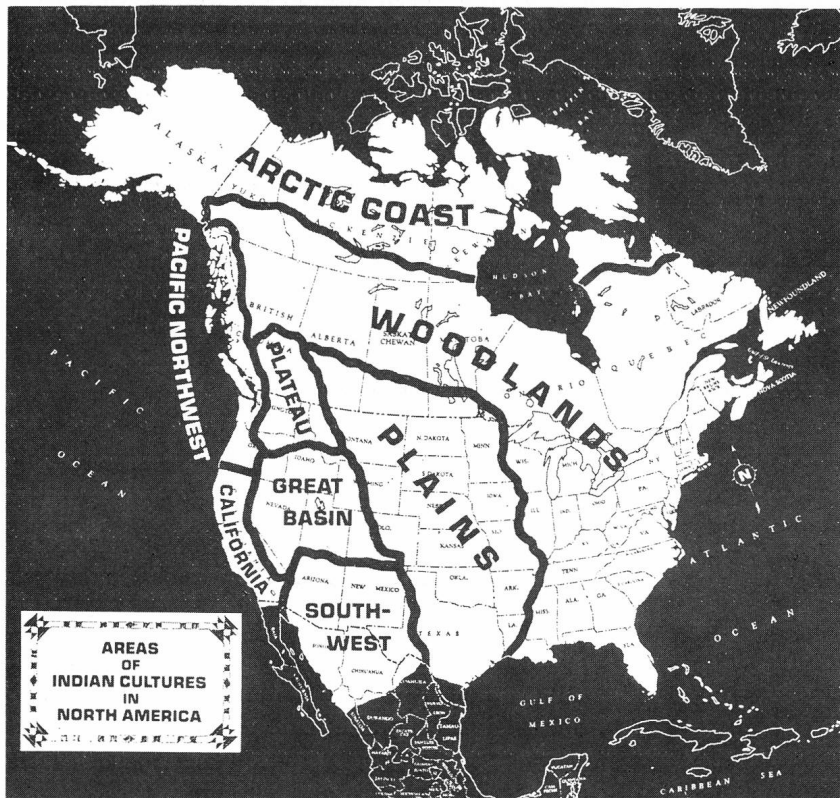


Fig. 1. Areas of Indian Cultures in North America (Reproduced from Feder (1973: p. 10))