

Gorget, about 1200–1350

Caddoan

Mississippian region

Busycon whelk shell

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0001

Shell neck ornaments were ancient badges of high rank and office. This example depicts a figure in profile. In its front hand, the figure holds a circular object from which a raccoon pelt dangles. The back hand grips a rattle, and a turkey looms over the figure's shoulder.

Vessel, about 1300 – 1500

Mississippian region

Clay, pigments

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0003

This ancient head vessel is one of several that seem to portray a specific individual after death; in every instance, their shriveled lips expose teeth, and their eyes are hollow.

Interpretation is difficult, but they may represent the heads of deceased leaders, ancestors, or captives. The ear piercings undoubtedly held ornamentation of some kind.

Bag, ca. 1790

Ottawa or Anishinaabe (Ojibwa)

Great Lakes region

Black-dyed deerskin, porcupine quills, silk binding, hair tassels, tin cones

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0008

The imagery on this bag likely originated in a man's vision. A Thunderbird, the dominant sky-world *manito* (spirit being) associated with the powers above, hovers above a horizontal earth line and two diagonal serpent *manitos* of the under-the-earth realm.

Bag, ca. 1870 – 80

Mesquakie

Great Lakes region

Glass beads, wool yarn, twine

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0012

The image on this bag is of the Underwater Panther, the powerful under-the-world *manito* (spirit being) that made water turbulent and treacherous but also bestowed great blessings on humans. The geometric patterns may identify the woman who made the bag—probably the owner's wife—and record her own vision experiences.

War Club, ca. 1620 – 80

Eastern Woodlands region

Hardwood, brass, iron, copper and shell inlay

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0794

Its great age, exceeding rarity, and detailed imagery make this club extraordinary. On one side is a likeness of the club's owner; the distinctive hairstyle and facial tattoos assured that he would be recognized. On the other side is a snapping turtle, possibly the owner's guardian spirit, above a war record: two headless enemies whom the warrior likely vanquished. The grip and blade take their forms from European swords; the pommel assumes the shape of a wolf's head.

Ladle, ca. 1750

Wyandot or Huron, (Wendat), northern Ohio

Wood

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0032

Feast Bowl, ca. 1780

Northeastern Woodlands

Wood, pigment

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0824

Male and female spirits preside over this luminous feast bowl. The larger head is the female's; the male's hair is roached, or cut into a crest that runs down the center of his head. The bowl was likely used at feasts honoring its owner's personal guardian spirits.

The murmur of the trees when the wind passes through is but the voices of our grandparents. Often a whole forest hums with talk, and the trees can be heard at a distance. They have joys and trials like us. . . . Hence one should be careful not to hurt their feelings. That is why it is meet [fitting] to offer a tree tobacco when one is about to cut it down; that is why it is good not to fell trees wantonly.

—From the field notes of William Jones, Mesquakie (Fox), who worked among the Mesquakie before 1907. A graduate of Columbia University, Jones was the first Native American to earn a doctorate in anthropology.

Bag, ca. 1840 – 1860

Haudenosaunee (Seneca, Iroquois)

Woodlands region

Wool, glass beads, silk lining, glazed cotton lining

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0690

By the 1800s, Native artists in the eastern Great Lakes had long experimented with European materials, including those used to create this bag which was intended for the commercial market. Design vocabularies often translated old images into the new artistic register. Here, for instance, the quartered structure refers to the four cardinal directions of the Woodlands cosmos.

Moccasins, 1847 – 1853

Wendat (Huron)

Woodlands region

Black-dyed skin, dyed moose hair, cotton thread, silk lining, binding and ribbons

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0038a-b

These Wendat (Huron) moccasins are exceptional for their delicacy and superb condition.

Both Native Americans and tourists prized such moccasins because of their elaborate moose-hair embroidery. French Ursuline nuns in Quebec introduced Wendat women and girls to the embroidery arts and Renaissance floral designs.

Miniature Settee, ca. 1830

Wendat (Huron)

Woodlands region

Birch bark, moose hair, dye

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0795

This little settee is an elaborate piece of doll furniture, a souvenir, or perhaps a display model. The Wendat (Huron) maker manipulated birch bark into a classic Empire-style shape and finished it with exuberant moose-hair embroidery. The settee decoration demonstrates the excellent command of floral imagery developed by Huron women.

Splint Basket, ca. 1840

Haudenosaunee (Oneida, Iroquois)

Great Lakes region

Ash-wood strips, pigments

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0040

Hood, ca.1847 – 53

Mi'kmaq (Micmac)

Woodlands region

Trade cloth, silk ribbon, dyed ostrich feathers, glass beads

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0041

This hood is an excellent example of the fine ribbon appliqué work that Mi'kmaq women developed in the early 19th century. Narrow bands of ribbon with straight, scalloped, and peaked edging required fine stitching. The bright ribbon provides vibrant contrast to the black trade cloth, while colorful silk rosettes and the black-dyed ostrich feathers add an elegant flamboyance to the hood.

Pouch, ca.1840 – 50

Mi'kmaq (Micmac)

Woodlands region

Wool stroud, glass beads, silk, thread

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0778

The main design element on this bag crafted with white beads is a double curve—a fundamental image in Micmac culture that may symbolize vegetation and bounty.

Hunting Coat, ca. 1785-1800

Innu (Naskapi)

Woodlands region

Native tanned caribou skin, pigments, sinew thread

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0630

The triangular gusset stitched into the back of the skirt may be the symbolic center of the coat's power and refer to a mountain from which caribou were released to surrender themselves to the hunter. Some of each garment's ornamentation came from the hunter's dreams which his wife translated into designs and painted onto his clothing. This coat is based on 17th-century European fashion, and was worn with similarly decorated leggings, moccasins, mittens, and cap.

Thaw Collection
Woodlands

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Sash, ca. 1816

Wendat or Haudenosaunee (Huron or Iroquois)

Woodlands region

Yarn, glass beads, thread

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0786

Wolf Clan Hair Comb, 1989

Serpent Hair Comb, 1989

Otter Hair Comb, 1988

Bear Hair Comb, 1988

Stan Hill (1921-2003),

Mohawk (Turtle Clan), Haudenosaunee (Iroquois)

Woodlands region

Antler

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0753-56

These combs pay homage to the artist's Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) ancestors, who made similar carvings until the late 1700s. Northeast Native people may have believed that power and vitality concentrated in the hair—one of the few body parts that visibly renews itself—and early observers were struck by the elaborateness and individuality of Native hairstyles. The artist, a steel worker for most of his life, began to carve at the age of fifty-five, and his award-winning work has inspired other contemporary Native carvers.

It has always been amazing to me to see my carvings slowly come alive with my inner feelings. It gives me great satisfaction to be able to give life to some animal that has lived his life upon this earth and the remains [were] discarded and thrown away.

—Stan Hill, Mohawk (Turtle Clan), Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) artist, 1977

Cradle, ca. 1870

Mohawk, Haudenosaunee (Iroquois)

Wood, hide, metal, pigment

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0758

This cradleboard—with its stars, hearts, and Scottish thistles in a Grecian-style vase—synthesizes a Native form and imagery with influences from French and English settlers. A mother carried the cradle on her back; a now-missing footboard supported the baby's weight, and the bow at the front prevented injury if the cradle tipped over.

Bandolier Bag, ca. 1830

Seminole

Southeast region

Trade cloth, yarn, glass beads, cotton backing

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0005

Shoulder bags with triangular flaps and forked or multilobed straps are distinctive to the Southeast. In both form and imagery, serpentine lines on the forked ends of this bag's shoulder straps may relate to snakes, which possessed spiritual significance, but little else is known about the sumptuously beaded motifs.

Big Shirt, ca. 1920

Seminole

Southeast region

Cotton, metal hooks and eyes

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0309

By the early 1800s, many Seminoles fled from the Southeast to Spanish Florida to escape the U.S. government's forced relocation policies. In Florida, Seminole women began to make garments with trade cloth, and by the early 1900s, the now-famous Seminole patchwork tradition emerged.

Sash, ca. 1800-1825

Choctaw, Mississippi

Wool cloth, beads, threads

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0826

Nineteenth-century sashes made by the Choctaw in the Southeast wrapped around the waist or crossed in pairs over the chest. They often bear an ancient double-scroll motif, which may refer to water, serpents, and concepts of duality and fertility. Originally an insignia of chiefly rank, the sash is probably the oldest component of traditional dress still in use today.