Huron-Wendat Historical Visual Arts Tradition: Symbol of Cultural Continuity and Autonomy in the Past, Source of Inspiration in the Present

Anne de Stecher

Huron-Wendat moosehair embroidered souvenir art of the nineteenth century is a fascinating artistic tradition and a rich source of information about Aboriginal resistance to assimilation. The embroidery demonstrates the continuity of traditional spiritual beliefs, and represents the development of a highly successful commodity industry by the Huron-Wendat nation of Quebec. The powerful meanings and significance of these embroidered art works continue to be a source of inspiration to Huron-Wendat artists today.

The economic and cultural significance of this tradition has been hidden, as Ruth Phillips argued in *Trading Identities*, because embroidered souvenirs have been largely misunderstood.[1] First, the works were not distinguished from the first phase of production invented by Quebec nuns in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and second, the Huron-Wendat works were devalued in the twentieth century as their significance to the Huron-Wendat community went unrecognised. My research builds on Phillips' work in *Trading Identities;* she redefines Native commodity wares, moving them from a marginalised position as a lesser category of material culture, an inauthentic hybrid, to a position as souvenir arts.

My purpose is to present the history of these souvenir artworks as a narrative of Huron-Wendat cultural resistance in their efforts to maintain their autonomy as a nation, a struggle which continues into the present day.[2] This paper will take a fresh look at the embroidered imagery as an invitation to nineteenth-century Euro-Canadians and to international visitors into the community's distinct cultural traditions, and will describe the commercial development of the artisan ware as a strategic response to changing circumstances of contact. Lastly, this paper explores the Huron-Wendat moosehair souvenir tradition as a source of inspiration for Huron-

Wendat artists today in their continuing quest to assert a distinct identity, now in a postcolonial context. My discussion reflects the transition from Western definitions of "Native art" to more broadly defined concepts of visual culture "grounded in the authority of the Native perspective." [3]

The Huron-Wendat whose works are discussed descend from the Christian Huron who settled outside Quebec City in Lorette after the dispersal of the Huron Confederacy east of Georgian Bay in the mid-seventeenth century.

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Fig. 1. Quebec convent work, *Reticule Base*, eighteenth century. Moosehair, birchbark, thread, Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Photo: Ruth B. Phillips.

Embroidered imagery

Moosehair embroidery is a tradition of miniature works of virtuosity and artistry created in early eighteenth-century Quebec convents for one purpose: to be sold as a commodity to European buyers, soldiers, colonial administrators, and travelers. The convent sisters united Native materials and techniques with the French embroidery tradition. The convent images represent two emblems of primitivism: the unclothed Noble Savage and the clothed, potentially settled and civilized, Christian Savage. A late eighteenth-century Quebec convent reticule base depicts these two emblems [Fig. 1]. Together they form a narrative of contact and illustrate early Western stereotypes of Native peoples.

In the early nineteenth century, production of this commodity work shifted to the Huron-Wendat community of Lorette where Huron-Wendat artisans continued the tradition embroidering small, functional objects such as trays, boxes, cigar cases, and purses with moosehair in floral or figurative designs. However, the motifs of the imagery changed: the Huron-Wendat women adopted and adapted the European pictorial tradition of the convent works to create images reflecting their own cultural tradition.

To the Huron-Wendat, the new motifs were expressions of autoethnography, mediations of the earlier convent representations. They represented their community in everyday activities in the present day, rather than frozen in time in the Noble Savage's romanticised wilderness. The

images also contained spiritual significance to the producing community, reflecting Huron-Wendat and northeastern Woodlands traditional beliefs. The northeastern Woodlands syncretic approach to spirituality suggests that Native peoples who adopted Christianity incorporated the religion with their traditional beliefs. The embroidered motifs indicate that these souvenir arts were a medium though which the Huron-Wendat could express continued connection with their cultural traditions despite assimilationist pressures.

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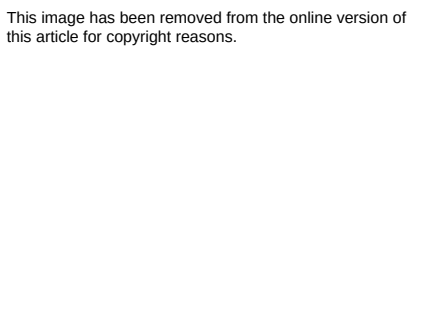
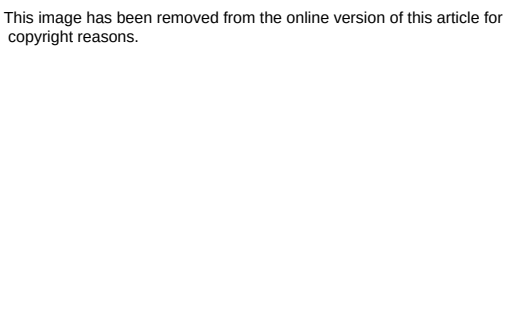
Fig. 2. Huron-Wendat of Wendake, *Tray*, nineteenth century. Birchbark, moosehair, thread, Haffenreffer Museum, Brown University, Rhode Island. Photo: Ruth Phillips.

A tray panel in the Haffenreffer Museum illustrates how Huron-Wendat artists represented their community and their cultural beliefs [Fig.2]. Motifs show figures dressed for special occasions, including items of clothing that reflect interaction with European culture. These are scenes of everyday activities in the present rather than frozen in the past. Images of hunting, gathering fruit, walking with children or pet dogs, and motifs such as strawberries and strawberry flowers, fruit trees, tobacco plants, and different animals and birds that are part of the Eastern Woodlands spiritual tradition are depicted often.[4]

One panel from a birchbark tray in the British Museum depicts a man smoking a pipe walking a pet dog. In another panel, a woman sits smoking under a tree where a kettle is heating over a fire, and a basket of berries sits beside her [Figs. 3, 4]. The art's function as a commodity creates a double meaning in the works. The motifs subvert earlier primitivist understandings of the Noble Savage, yet maintain an image of picturesque Native figures close to nature to create images that mesh with the expectations of nineteenth-century European buyers.

The iconography of a red wool purse in the Horniman Museum demonstrates traditional Huron-Wendat beliefs [Fig. 5]. It is a powerful work of great vitality and technical virtuosity, and the animal motifs and colours have complex meanings. In northeastern Woodlands cosmology, the panther can be an Under World spirit, the source of shell, crystal, copper, and precious materials that assure long life and physical and spiritual well-being.[5] The white bird may relate to the Thunderbird of the sky world.





Figs. 3 and 4. Huron-Wendat of Wendake, *Tray*, mid-nineteenth century. Birchbark, moosehair, thread, British Museum. Photo: Ruth Phillips.

Black connotes the absence of life and cognition while white indicates cognition or mindfulness. We can only speculate about the exact meaning of this iconography; what remains certain is that it reflects traditional Aboriginal beliefs rather than Christian teachings.

The works were valued as representations of an imagined, earlier, simpler time, of a life integrated with nature and community. The most exquisite works were considered precious. In the early to mid-nineteenth century, the market for these commodities included visiting dignitaries, aristocrats, and the military; fancy embroidered barkware was "a gift of choice for diplomatic visitors to Canada" or royalty. For example, a "highly decorated box made of birch bark and flawlessly worked and embroidered" enclosed a daguerrotype to be given to Empress Eugénie, wife of Napoleon III in 1855.[6]

Commercial Development

The desire for these valued commodity wares, together with Huron-Wendat business development strategies, made the nineteenth-century souvenir production a successful, internationally known artisan industry that provided economic and social autonomy for the Huron-Wendat nation throughout the nineteenth century. The impetus to develop the industry occurred when land reductions from growing settler populations made the traditional Huron-Wendat hunting, fishing, and farming economy no longer sustainable. The community responded by turning their existing limited artisan production into a thriving industry.

The community opened its market to wholesale trade and met demand for goods by establishing a mass production system and organising workers in an efficient division of labour. By 1845, the artisan industry was already a success and the community was thriving. Newspaper articles described the elegant homes of the community and labeled their "fortunes bourgeoise."[7] To report the industry's economic success in today's terms, the 1898 income for was valued at around $70,000 Canadian Dollars, the equivalent of approximately $1.5 million today, for a community whose total population, including children, totaled three hundred.[8] This successful business, the outcome of Huron-Wendat agency, political acumen, and business ability, demonstrates that the community was fully engaged in the processes of modernity, although the images that made their success and met their buyers' tastes depicted them in primitive pastoral scenes.

From highly prized collectibles in the nineteenth century, these works became evidence of cultural decline in the early twentieth century. The shift was brought about by the new discipline of anthropology's concept of authenticity. Material culture that showed the least evidence of European influence was valued, while products of transcultural exchange, including commodities made for sale to European buyers, were seen as degenerate products of cultural decline. This was how moosehair embroidery souvenirs were positioned. Marius Barbeau, who collected numerous examples from the Huron-Wendat community as artifacts for the Museum of Man, decided the works were not authentic but were a product of foreign contact, a "spurious American art" devalued as decadent and derivative.[9]

In recent years another shift has occurred away from the authenticity paradigm and toward redefining commodities as evidence of cultural continuity. Souvenir wares are now recognized as a florescence of First Peoples' creativity and inventiveness. As Phillips argues in *Trading Identities*,

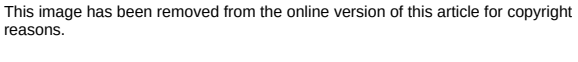


Fig. 5. Huron-Wendat of Wendake, *Lady's handbag*, mid-nineteenth century. Wool cloth, moosehair, thread, Horniman Museum, London. Photo: Ruth Phillips.

recognizing the "aesthetic and cultural value of commodity productions is a significant part of the process of identifying and valuing the active roles that Aboriginal people played in mediating the impact of colonialism."[10]

Huron-Wendat artists today

Contemporary Huron-Wendat artists draw from symbols of earlier traditions with purposes that parallel those of nineteenth-century producers of embroidered works. Contemporary artists attempt to assert their distinct cultural identity in the face of a dominant EuroCanadian settler society. Huron-Wendat artist Sylvie Paré's *La fête des morts* demonstrates the connections between earlier Huron-Wendat artwork and today's works including symbols of identity, agency, and cultural continuity [Fig.6]. This work demonstrates the importance of the moosehair embroidery tradition to the ongoing struggle of identity reconstruction for Native peoples who are still marginalised by non-Native society.[11]

The installation *La fête des morts* was part of the 2000 *Urban Myths* exhibition held at Ottowa's Karsh-Masson Gallery. The work includes Paré's grandmother's black ceremonial robe, traditional Huron headdress, collar-ruff and belt made of leather and black velvet and elaborated with moosehair embroidery. These items were made for use within the community, not as souvenir wares, but the materials and floral motifs have close similarities to souvenir art. This exemplifies dual signification: commodified arts use the same materials and symbols as works made for use by the Huron-Wendat themselves.[12] The black velvet robe and its embroidered belt are the center of the installation mounted ten feet above the ground. The headdress and collar ruff are arranged on black velvet stands to either side. The layout represents a secular altar and refers to the fête des morts, the ceremony important in pre-contact and early contact Huron-Wendat social organization and cultural identity.[13]

The fête des morts was a ceremonial feast lasting several days. Families of the five nations of the Huron-Wendat federation gathered to bury their dead, carefully prepared, in a common grave. This ceremony permitted the souls of the dead to be released to an afterlife in an otherworld village, much like life on earth.[14] The Huron-Wendat produced artworks to be buried amongst other precious gifts with the dead. The fête des morts ceremony was a foundation of the five nations' solidarity. Families of those whose bones were buried together could not fight against each other; it was a way to knit the nations into a community.

The fête des morts feast, a cornerstone of Huron-Wendat culture

and society, represents Huron-Wendat identity. Paré's installation attempts to reconstruct a memory of the ceremony through these moosehair artworks. The artworks are symbols that express the struggle for a reaffirmation of memory, identity, and territory among First Nations communities.[15] The installation conveys the enduring symbolic power of artworks that are typically labeled ethnological by museums.[16] Paré's work is not a nostalgic vision of tradition, it is a cultural reappropriation.[17] Paré turns toward the future, integrating an indigenous perspective within contemporary society, and restoring a living power to these works that comes from their original function as part of this ceremony.[18] Paré calls them pieces of memory, reconnecting the Huron-Wendat with the past in a celebratory context.[19]

Fig. 6. Sylvie Paré, *La fete des morts* installation, 2000. Velvet, birchbark, moosehair, various metals, Karsh-Masson Gallery, Ottawa.

Rather than drawing on particular iconographic motifs, Paré presents the items themselves and their grouping as a metaphor. Deborah Doxtator describes traditional Native three-dimensional forms, such as clothing, basketry, or wampum, as metaphors that present knowledge as an "instant fusion," imparting meanings that may not have words to describe them.[20] She argues that "ideas...can be embodied and exist in concrete physical forms."[21] Paré's work is current, reflecting issues of the world today, and is traditional, anchored to the "continuities of the metaphors embodied in" traditional forms.[22] The tradition of cultural strength, agency and collective action to thrive in the face of oppression, is reflected in Paré's work. *La fête des morts* connects the past with the present and demonstrates continuity of Huron-Wendat identity.

1 R. B. Phillips, *Trading Identities* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998) 144-145.
2 A. Nurse, *Tradition and Modernity: The Cultural Work of Marius Barbeau*, Diss. (Kingston, On.: Queen's University, 1997) 262.
3 K. Coody Cooper, *Living Homes For Cultural Expression* (New York: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institute, 2006) 8.
4 Phillips, *Trading Identities*, 137.
5 G. Hamell, *Trading in Metaphors: the Magic of Beads*. Proceedings of the 1982 Glass Trade Bead Conference. Research Records No. 16 (Rochester, New York: Rochester Museum and Science Center, 1983), 6.
6 J. Schwartz, 'Un Beau Souvenir de Canada', in *Photographs, Objects, Histories* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 28,16, 20.
7 D. Delâge, 'La tradition de commerce chez les Hurons de Lorett-Wendake', *Recherches Amérindiennes au Québec* 30.3 (2000) 46, 47; P. Drouin and M. Rankin, following the report of Jean-Pierre Sawaya, *Marguerite Vincent La8inonkie,* 'La Femme Habile aux Travaux d'Aiguille', Formulaire de Demande-Personne, 2000-42 (Ottawa: Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, 2000) 2159.
8 J. Tanguay, *Marguerite Vincent La8inonkie,* 'La Femme Habile aux Travaux d'Aiguille'. Rapport Supplémentaire, 2007-29 (Ottawa: Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, 2007) 14; http://measuringworth.com, (16 May 2009).
9 M. Barbeau, 'The Origin of Floral and Other Designs Among the Canadian and Neighboring Indians', *International Congress of Americanists*, 23 (1930) 512.
10 Phillips, *Trading Identities*, 15.
11 C. Charce, *Entre-Deux Mondes: Métissage, Identité et Histoire: Sur les Traces de Sonia Robertson, Sylvie Paré et Rebecca Belmore*. MA thesis (Montreal: University of Quebec in Montreal, 2008) 137.
12 Phillips, *Trading Identities*, 20.
13 S. Dyck, *Urban Myths* (Ottawa: Karsh-Masson Gallery, 2000) 11.
14 Ibid.
15 Charce, *Entre-Deux Mondes,* 80, 5.
16 Ibid., 78.
17 Ibid., 4.
18 Ibid., 67, 78.
19 Ibid., 78.
20 D. Doxtator, 'Basket Bead and Quill, and the Making of "Traditional" Art', in *Basket, Bead and Quill* (Thunder Bay, On.: Thunder Bay Art Gallery, 1995) 16.
21 Ibid., 17.
22 Ibid., 16-17.