

The Use of Birchbark by the Ojibwa Indians

by Earl Nyholm

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The Woodlands Indians comprised the many tribes from several different North American language stocks inhabiting the vast area extending from Ontario and Minnesota eastward to the Atlantic Ocean. The Ojibwa Indians, an Algonkian speaking Woodlands people, originally lived at the east end of Lake Superior. During the fur trade, they moved north- and westward until they had spread over the largest geographic area occupied by one tribal group in North America. During the 19th century, in this country they gradually ceded most of their land in treaties with the government and settled on numerous reservations, principally in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan.

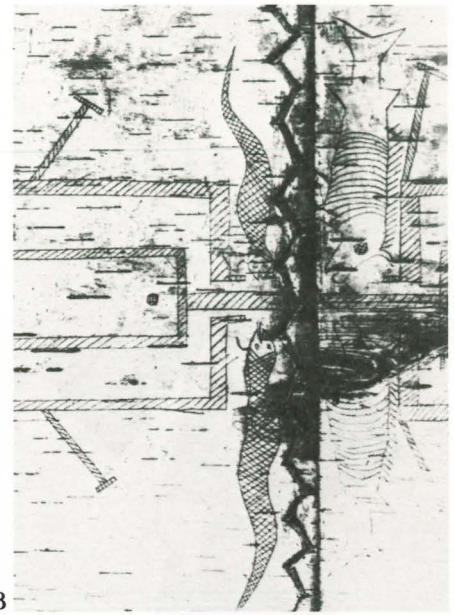
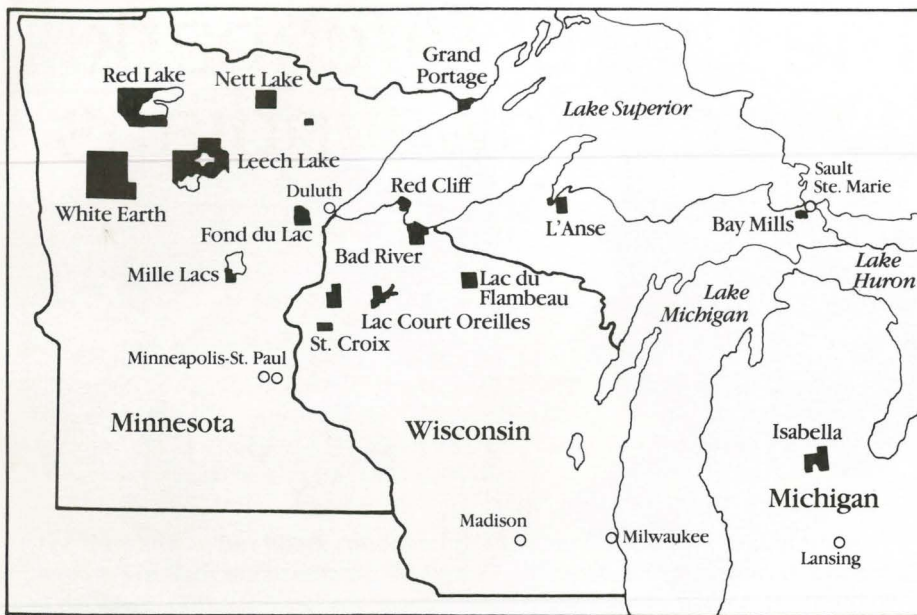
White birchbark has been a vital resource for the Woodlands Indians for centuries. The bark of the common birch tree played a major role in everyday life of the tribes of the vast Woodlands area.

Thinking of birchbark calls to mind the image of an Indian silently paddling a feather-light bark canoe across a moonlit lake (fig. A), but the canoe was only one of many functional and artistic uses to which *wigwaas*, as the Ojibwa called birchbark, was put. The bark products of the Ojibwa and other Algonquian-speaking people of the great Lakes area included large items such as canoes and mats for covering wigwams, and smaller objects – dishes, cookware and religious scrolls. Even the most basic utensil made of birchbark was artistic in concept, and its design and decoration were considered an integral part of the creation.

Both white and yellow birchbark grow in layers. However, Indians had little use for yellow birchbark because it was considered weak and thin, whereas

A





B

white birchbark was stronger, often reaching the thickness of shoeleather. In late spring and early summer, sap moisture in the trees permitted easy removal of the bark. It could be taken from the tree in large sheets often measuring five m (sixteen ft.) or more in length and up to 1.1 m (three and a half ft.) wide. Smaller trees provided thinner bark which was ideal for small articles, such as dishes and winnowing trays for wild rice.

Most completed birchbark crafts are not white but rather a golden brown. The inner side of the bark is placed on the outside of the item, for it is smoother and more attractive to the eye. (The white side tends to be lightly rough.) This reversal also provides longer life.

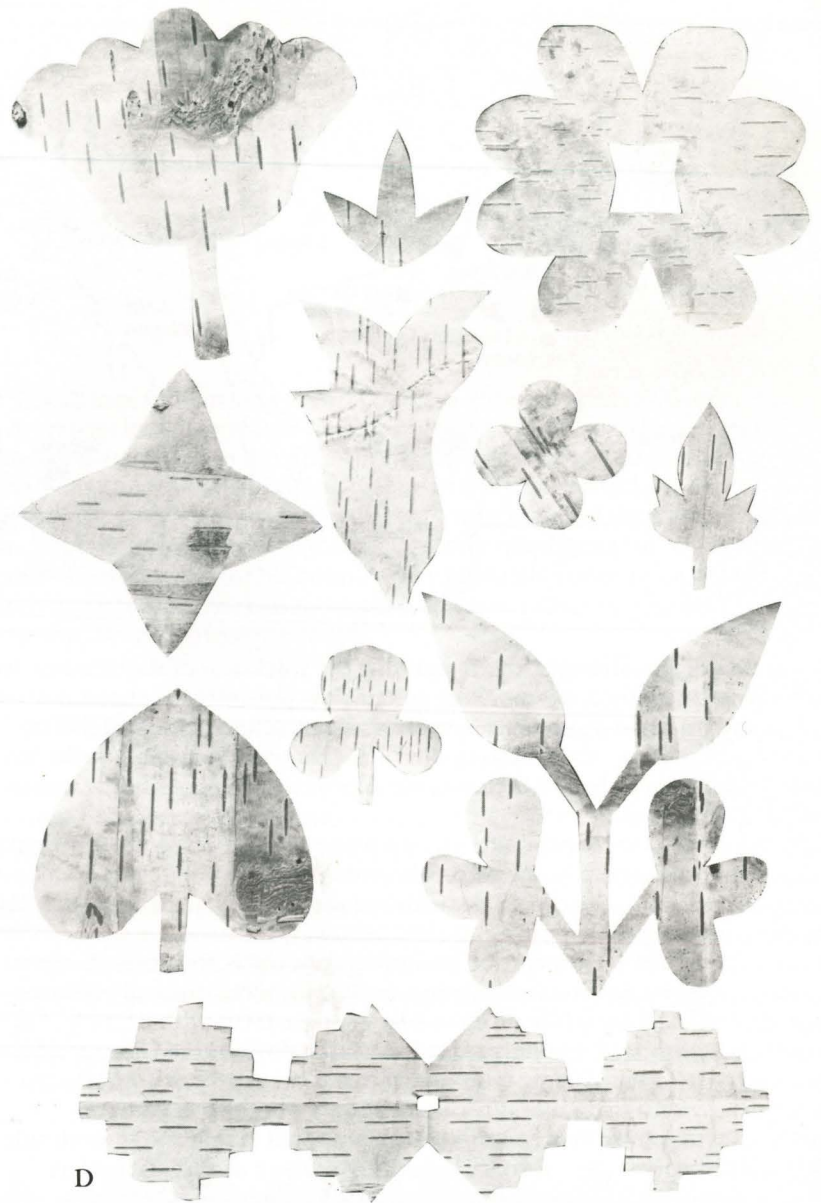
Because birchbark is waterproof, no sealing material is required except to cover cuts or seams. Seams on containers for liquids were normally covered with pitch derived from white birch or black spruce trees with a touch of deer tallow added. Often a bit of finely pounded charcoal was mixed in to render the pitch a deep black. The oblong winnowing tray used in processing wild rice, a basic staple as well as a commodity of the Ojibwa, does not need to be seam-sealed with pitch. This container is exceptional in that the smooth side of the bark – the brown side – forms the inside. As with a *makuk* (which is described below), it is topped off with a wooden splint.

Some items, such as mats for wigwam coverings and household containers, were sewn together with split spruce roots or the inner bark of basswood, known to the Ojibwa as “rope.” Sewing materials were always soaked first and kept wet while in use. When dry, they formed a tight stitch. Highly versatile, basswood bark was cut or torn into long, thin strips for sewing, or “spun” into cord. Traditionally, the basswood bark was dyed with natural colors from berries, roots, or the earth to give it a pleasing effect, but today the Ojibwa may use commercial coloring to avoid the laborious task of preparing the natural dyes. Wigwam covers overlapped slightly and were sewn together with split root in a simple over-under stitch. An awl was used to punch holes in the bark; the spruce root or the basswood bark, with its end cut to a point, was threaded and pulled through. Birchbark scrolls used in the Ojibwa religion (Midewiwin) were sewn together in similar fashion, and a form of pictographic writing was inscribed with a pointed instrument (fig.B). These inscriptions were highly symbolic and could be read only by trained practitioners.

The Ojibwa fashion many kinds of baskets from birchbark. Some baskets, called *makuks*, have a square bottom with sides which slant in towards the top to form a circle (fig.C). The top is finished off with a split willow to prevent the bark from tearing. In July, when blueberries ripened, they made ideal berry pails; otherwise, *makuks* provided year-round containers for storing foodstuffs. To the amazement of some, these containers can actually be placed over a direct flame and will not burn as long as there is liquid inside them. Wintergreen berry tea

C



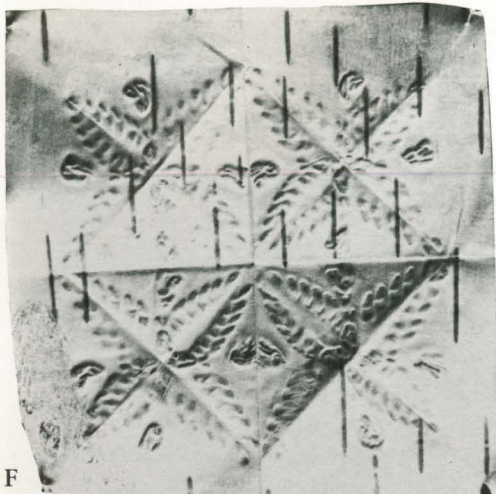


was quickly brewed in this fashion and sweetened with a bit of granulated maple sugar, and provided a refreshing break to the Woodlands traveller.

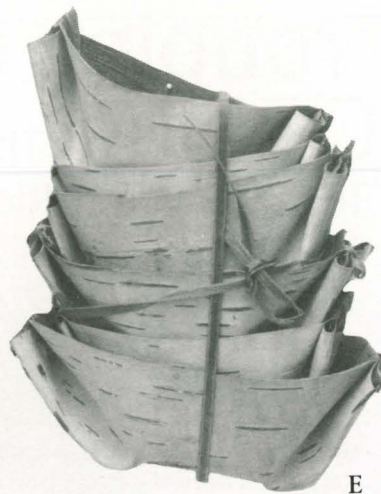
Ojibwa artifacts were often adorned with birchbark cutouts in the form of bird or abstract floral designs (fig.D); these were sewn on with split roots. Another traditional manner of decorating a bark vessel was to scrape away the bark surrounding the desired design so that the underlying bark, which is somewhat lighter in color, offered a contrasting background.

One birchbark eagerly sought by the modern collector is the small but intricately designed porcupine quill work box, which comes in many shapes. Quill work was developed long before the arrival of Europeans. Today, however, only a few Ojibwa specialize in it. While the quills for box making may be left naturally white with brown or black tip, some workers prefer to dye them with either natural or commercial coloring. The quills are first softened in water, then inserted in the bark from the back (white side) through a hole punched by an awl; they are drawn through to the front, bent over, then fastened against the bark. A thin piece of bark is always placed so as to hide the snipped ends. Designs of such birchbark boxes vary greatly, but semi-realistic floral, conventional geometric and abstract animal patterns are the most common.

Most quill boxes are etched with sweet grass bound with a simple stitch of black thread. Less common are boxes stitched with moose hair to resemble embroidery (in place of quillwork).



F



E

For the Ojibwa, birchbark canoes were ideal for travel over the countless waterways of their environment. Because their construction required much skill and patience, only a few people in any village made canoes. Others bartered or traded to acquire one. Four to six people worked together to build a canoe, generally two men and several women. Most of the time required was spent just collecting and fashioning the various parts; the actual construction often amounted to only about one-third of the total time for its completion. Birchbark formed the shell; white cedar was obtained for the gunwales, thwarts and ribs. Spruce or jack pine roots were split and used for stitching.

Birchbark canoe construction is unusual in that it is accomplished from the outside. The shape of the canoe comes from a form held in place by rocks and later removed. A section called the "bottom bark" is first put into place with a second piece added on each side to give proper height. (Contrary to common depictions, the golden side of the bark is on the outside.) This side bark is sewn on using split root with a double stitch to give it strength. Sewing is almost always done by the women, with the exception of the ends, which are laced up by the head canoemaker. The seams are later sealed with pine or spruce pitch with deer tallow added.

Canoes varied in size and length. Hunters or trappers preferred shorter canoes, about three to three and a half m (ten to twelve ft. long); an Ojibwa family required one four and a quarter to five m (fourteen to sixteen ft.) in length. War canoes could reach a length of six m (twenty ft.) with a width of a little over a meter (forty to forty-six in.). French *voyageurs* enlarged the boat even further to transport their beaver furs over the Great Lakes to the seaports. Their "canot du maître" (whence our word "canoe" is derived) could be as long as eleven m (thirty-six ft.) and had a carrying capacity of over three and a quarter metric tons (three and a half tons).

Although many traditional birchbark articles in Ojibwa culture were gradually replaced by those of European-American manufacture (oil cans, for example, were substituted for bark receptacles to collect maple sap, fig.E) many Ojibwa continue to perpetuate the birchbark crafts of their ancestors (fig.F). At this year's Festival, a number of them will demonstrate the construction of the wigwam, canoe and food vessels made of bark.



Suggested Reading

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Filmography

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