

# Crafts of Survival: The Materials of Ottawa, Ojibway, and Potawatomi Culture

by James M. McClurken

Michigan's Ottawa, Ojibway, and Potawatomi Indians relied directly upon the forests and waters of their Great Lakes home for food, shelter, and clothing. Life in this beautiful but sometimes unpredictable and unyielding environment required a well developed technology crafted by local artisans with the materials from their home region. Ojibway people between Sault Ste. Marie and the Straits of Mackinac supported themselves primarily by gathering wild foods such as berries and maple sap, hunting for large and small game, and by harvesting rich catches of whitefish and lake trout. The Ottawa, Potawatomi, and Ojibway who lived in the Lower Peninsula also relied on wild foods but in addition grew storable crops of corn, squash, beans, and sunflowers that allowed them to live in larger, more permanent settlements than did the northern Ojibway. These resources provided the basis for a rich cultural heritage of technology and crafts.

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General areas occupied by Michigan's Indians at the beginning of the 19th century

Before Europeans brought manufactured goods to the Great Lakes, Indian men used wood, stone, bone, and plant and animal fibers to construct a complex set of technological inventions needed to make their livelihood. The sleek, lightweight canoes they made of birchbark, cedar, and spruce to transport their families and harvests along Michigan's many waterways are considered by many Americans as a crowning achievement of Michigan Indian technology. For winter travels over land or snow-covered ice, they made snowshoes from black ash wood interlaced with rawhide strips. To catch fish, they wove intricate nets, constructed weirs, and carved highly polished bone harpoons. Hunting required straight shafted, accurate arrows and spears and many well constructed traps. Men also made the wooden, bone, and stone tools used by the women to clear fields and hoe the crops.

Most daily household items Indian men made bore little or no iconography or drawings that Americans today consider art. However, many of the tools Michigan Indian men created were so well adapted to life in pre-industrial Michigan that original designs or variations on them continued to be used until well into the 19th century. From the 1650s onward European rifles replaced stone-tipped projectiles for hunting, and metal hoes and axes facilitated horticulture. In contrast, the French, British, and Americans adopted Indian-style canoes, snowshoes, and fish nets. Indeed, the Ottawa and Ojibway who lived near the Straits of Mackinac expanded their indigenous crafts during the fur trade era between 1650 and 1820 and sold the canoes to the Europeans who used them to transport furs from the western reaches of Lake Superior to Montreal. When Europeans did not rely on the Indians to provide them with such staples as fish and maple sugar, they used Indian-made equipment to feed themselves.

Men were responsible for leading religious rituals, and for these they made the many specialized, decorated items of value to modern collectors. They drew sacred scrolls depicting the mythical

Canoe building required several people working together. Here the bottom bark is held down by a frame weighted with large stones in preparation for sewing the bark with split spruce roots. The seams are then sealed with pine or spruce pitch mixed with deer tallow. Photo courtesy Michigan State Archives, Department of State





accounts of creation and migration which their people re-enacted in their rituals. They preceded every religious event and secular council by smoking from a ritual pipe. The pipe bowls were made of stone carved in simple, smooth elbow shapes or as effigies of humans or animals. These bowls were secured to long pipestems ornamented with carvings, feathers, and painted decorations. Men made a variety of drums, as well as the rattles and flutes that accompanied them, whose beats guided dancers during ritual and on social occasions. They also carved wood or stone amulets, objects believed to incorporate a portion of the powers pervading the world around them. The Indians believed that with these amulets they could favorably influence the unseen forces in their universe.

The designs Michigan Indian men etched, painted, or carved on their creations often portrayed the spirit beings whom they believed controlled the forces of nature. For example, the people who relied heavily on fishing in the sometimes rough and stormy waters of the Great Lakes often carved the image of Otter. The Ottawa, Ojibway, and Potawatomi all believed that the world was once covered with water. An Otter dove to the bottom and brought one grain of sand to the surface. From this their culture hero Nanabozho created Mackinac Island, the place Michigan Indians considered the center of the world, and from there all the surrounding land from which they made a living. Having demonstrated his power to overcome water-related dangers, the Indians called on Otter to protect them as well. They also depicted a great horned panther whom the Ojibway called *Me-she-pe-shiuv*. This monster lived beneath the Great Lakes

Ojibway woman from Bay Mills, Michigan weaving a basket with black ash splints. Photo courtesy Michigan State Archives, Department of State



and stirred up unexpected storms that capsized the fragile canoes and claimed Indian lives. The Indians also used their art to create images of *Ab-ne-mi-ke* or Thunder Bird, *Me-she-pe-shiw*'s arch enemy, to protect themselves from the panther's powers. European missionaries tried for centuries to replace these native beliefs with Christianity, but they failed. During 200 years of interaction with Europeans, they would not forswear their world view in which making objects of religious significance played a crucial role.

Women, whose primary responsibilities included tending fields, preserving food, making clothing, and maintaining the home, practiced many aesthetically pleasing subsistence related crafts. During early historic times they formed and fired ceramic vessels. European copper and brass kettles quickly replaced native clay jars. However, women continued to make other containers essential for harvesting and processing both natural and horticultural crops throughout the 19th century. They cut and stitched birchbark boxes called *mokuks* and wove carrying bags from pounded basswood fiber and cattails which they used to transport essential goods for their families. Early French observers reported that Ottawa women also wove colorfully dyed cattail mats with which they covered the floors of their houses and also traded to their neighbors, though these disappeared from the women's repertory in the 1700s.

Making and ornamenting clothing also belonged to the female sphere of activities. Women processed the animal hides essential for making shirts, leggings, breech clouts, dresses, moccasins, and robes. Before Europeans brought inexpensive cloth goods to the Great Lakes, women tended to every aspect of making and maintaining their family's entire wardrobe. The Indians wore plain

Potawatomi bag, 1750-1800, Milwaukee Public Museum. Photo courtesy Grand Rapids Public Museum





everyday clothes, but women produced finery for special ceremonial and social occasions. They embroidered these with porcupine quills dyed red, yellow, orange, blue, or brown colors obtained from available plants that yielded natural dyes. The designs they created often combined geometric patterns with stylized renditions of the plants and flowers in their environment. Throughout the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries they continued producing these distinctly woodland motifs on both leather and cloth, mixing and substituting glass beads for traditional quillwork. Indeed, demand for decorated clothing increased as Indian women married Euro-American traders and dressed their husbands in the Indian style of the frontier.

Ottawa, Ojibway, and Potawatomi life changed drastically during the 1820s when the United States, along with several missionary societies, attempted to prepare the Indians for life in American society. When large numbers of settlers took homesteads throughout the state, they disrupted Indian's seasonal cycle of production from natural resources, and many Lower Peninsula Indians themselves built permanent agricultural settlements. They used annuity money received from the sale of their lands to buy the necessary tools. Men expanded the size of fields and worked with women to grow crops of potatoes, corn, other vegetables, and wheat for themselves and to sell to the newcomers. Men employed their wood-working skills to build log and frame houses at permanent settlements, furnishing them like the homes of their American neighbors. Skills and crafts associated with hunting gradually became less important throughout the 19th century as Indian men took wage paying jobs as farm hands, lumbermen, and carpenters. Steamboats and roads limited the need for birchbark canoes, and the skill of making them died away in all but the most remote Upper Peninsula settlements by 1900. In many places male crafts related to religious rituals continued until the early 20th century, but by and large, men abandoned their pipe, drum, and amulet making in favor of Christian rites and symbols.



Contemporary Ojibway quillwork. Photo by Nicholas R. Spitzer

Missionaries encouraged Indians to continue producing crafts which the latter could adapt to their new life styles — especially those which could be sold. Women adapted porcupine quill and bead floral motifs from traditional clothing decorations to beadwork on salable cloth items that Americans found aesthetically pleasing. Missionaries also encouraged women to adopt the crafts of spinning, weaving, and embroidery to take the place of buckskin and to provide cloth goods for their way of life. In this too, Indian women applied their traditional designs in items like quilts. Men and women continued to make birchbark boxes which they decorated with porcupine quill embroidery, often in floral designs or those depicting important mythological or environmental animals. The Ottawa on Little Traverse Bay helped support their mission church and school by preparing decorated *mokuks* filled with maple sugar which they donated to the church. Their clergymen then sold the harvest and used the proceeds. Ottawa, Ojibway, and Potawatomi women wove decorative and functional baskets from splints the men cut from black ash which they sold to Americans to earn needed cash, especially during the final years of the 19th and early 20th century.

Some Michigan Indians still practice traditional crafts of porcupine embroidery on birchbark, beadwork, and basketry in designs similar to those used by their grandparents. They sell them at pow-wows throughout the United States and southern Canada. Many use the proceeds of these sales to finance their participation in these gatherings where they dance, sing, and pray, socializing and re-emphasizing their Indian identity.

#### *Suggested reading*

Armour, David A. "Beads in the Upper Great Lakes: A Study in Acculturation." In *Beads: Their Use By Upper Great Lakes Indians*, ed. Gordon L. Olson. Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Public Museum, 1977.

Cleland, Charles E., Richard D. Clute, and Robert E. Haltner. "Naub-Cow-Zo-Win Discs from Northern Michigan." *Midcontinental Journal of Archaeology* 9(2): 235-249.

Clifton, James A., George L. Cornell, and James M. McClurken. *People of the Three Fires: The Ottawa, Potawatomi and Ojibway of Michigan*. Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Inter-Tribal Council Press, 1986.

Densmore, Frances. *How Indians Use Wild Plants for Food, Medicine and Crafts*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1974.

Dobson, Pamela J., ed. *The Tree That Never Dies: Oral History of the Michigan Indians*. Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Public Library, 1978.

#### *Suggested film*

*Wiigwaasijiimaan* (The Birchbark Canoe), by the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, and Bemidji State University, 1978.