

## ✿ GROWING COLLECTIONS ✿



*This rare painted buffalo robe was recently acquired by the Ethnology Department of the Royal Ontario Museum.*

### Rare Buffalo Robe Acquired

An intriguing painted buffalo robe was recently received by the Ethnology Department of the Royal Ontario Museum as a result of the generosity of Mr. Avrom Isaacs. Painted buffalo robes are usually associated with Plains Indian cultures and generally fall into two categories: those showing pictographic images of war deeds painted by men and those bearing abstract, geometric designs painted by women. The Museum's recently acquired robe is marginal to both categories. It is of a type of which there are only 14 known examples, and has caused considerable speculation revolving around two issues: attribution and the iconography of branch-like motifs.

The problem of attribution was first tackled in 1916 by B. W. Merwin, who studied eight of the robes. While he correctly recognized their common Ojibway heritage, he was mistaken when he associated the robes with the shamanic practices of medicine men. In contrast, John C. Ewers, in his study of Plains Indian painting published in 1939, described this type of hide painting as "of doubtful aboriginal origin," Ewers's attribution is doubtful in view of the number of documented examples that indicate Ojibway origins. It was only with Christian Feest's study published in 1979 that a true picture of the origin of these robes began to emerge. He concluded that the items in question

were executed by a single Ojibway artist from the area of Michigan or Wisconsin and were intended for sale to tourists.

A clearly visible inscription on the new ROM acquisition, *Mrs. Wm. Minar, Newberg Mich., Oct. 9, 1884*, supports Feest's conclusions, while adding further insight to his touristic attribution. The robe is dated four years after the buffalo herds had disappeared and may have been considered by its owner, presumably Mrs. Minar, as a souvenir of a bygone era. Indeed, a trophy-like quality is suggested by the untrimmed edges left on most of the remaining robes, which preserve a semblance of the living animal. Furthermore the repertoire of motifs

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found in variations on all the robes are images that native craftspeople knew to be particularly saleable in the non-native marketplace.

However, the touristic association may be understood in more precise terms in view of the fact that the robes have not strayed far from where they were made. All are in collections situated around the Lake Superior region, which suggests that the robes had been in local use. Thus the woman's name in the inscription might mean that in addition to serving as a tourist souvenir, the robe had a utilitarian function, perhaps relating to home life.

The second problem of iconography applies to the curious branch-like images painted skilfully over sewn-up slits that are on all of the 14 known robes. When studying the placement of the branches in relation to the other painted elements on each of the robes, the branches seem totally random. However, a different situation presents itself when the placement of the branches on the buffalo hide itself is considered. In order to clarify the relationship, I made tracings from illustrations showing only the branches on each robe, and then superimposed all the tracings on each other. In this way, it became readily apparent that the array of branches is not completely random. The branches tend to be distributed towards the head of the buffalo skin and around the undersides, but not towards the upper portion of the rump. I believe that the slits were made by someone other than the artist, and that the artist created the branches to improve the appearance of the flawed robe.

While the reason for the slits and the intended use of the robe remain issues for speculation, the Royal Ontario Museum is most grateful to receive this unusual artifact.

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