Fancy Footwork
Ornate traditional quillwork adorns these Blackfoot moccasins

BY ARNI BROWNSTONE

It came as a surprise when my colleague Silvia Forni brought back from Cameroon, Africa, a spiritual leader’s ceremonial gown and cap completely sheathed in porcupine quills. I had grown accustomed to the quillwork of the North American First Nations women who embroidered their delicate designs with colourfully dyed, 5-centimetre-long quills of the North American porcupine, Erethizon dorsatum. In contrast, the Cameroon outfit employed 23-centimetre-long, undyed quills of the crested porcupine, Hystrix cristata. Despite the differences, it is interesting to consider an example of North American quillwork in light of the gown and cap discussed by Silvia on page 26.

The quillworked moccasins shown here were made in the early 20th century by Jenny Duck Chief, a Blackfoot Indian from southern Alberta. They bear the image of the mythical Thunder Bird. According to the Blackfoot, the powerful Thunder Spirit gave the first porcupine to their ancestors and taught them how to work its quills into pleasing designs. The Blackfoot considered the act of quillworking to be sacred, the preserve of a relatively small number of women who were initiated into the rituals and knowledge of that art before acquiring the right to practice it. The Cameroon outfit was used in ceremony, and its quills were also imbued with mystical powers.

Traditions surrounding the use of porcupine quills would change in both Africa and North America. In Cameroon, feathers replaced quills in dance outfits, and in North America glass beads slowly came to be used instead of quills. By the early 20th century, quillworking and its attendant customs had all but disappeared among the Blackfoot. Jenny made these moccasins to wear herself on her wedding day. She married John Duck Chief, the eldest son of a head chief who would later come to occupy that position. Primarily known as a beadworker, on this occasion Jenny momentarily chose to revive the ancient art of porcupine quill embroidery.

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