

## Traditional Métis Clothing – Patrick Young

**Module Objective:** In this module, students will be informed about various aspects of Métis material cultural, particularly the flower beadwork motif.

### I) Introduction to Métis Dress

A distinctive Métis clothing style developed in the Red River area in the early nineteenth century as part of a growing cultural awareness. The North West Company (NWC)'s decision in 1806 to compel its traders to marry Métis rather First Nations women may have contributed to this new identity. It was shortly after this that paintings by Rindisbacher and Kane portray Métis men in distinctive dress. They are clad in blue capotes held together by an Assomption sash, as well as decorative leggings and moccasins. A colourful shot pouch is often draped on the chest, and some men are shown wearing top hats wrapped in ribbons in which feathers were stuck. Winter dress consisted of caps with two peaks called "wide awakes", and leather coats trimmed with fur and brightly painted and decorated with quillwork. This costume remained distinctively Métis until the late 1860s.

The clothing of the Métis was similar to that of the Euro-North Americans in that it was tailored to fit closely to the body, but manufactured from the skins of game animals. Decoration with small glass beads on the clothing was very indicative of Métis craftsmanship, which became an art form. Beaded clothes included moccasins, coats, belts, and mittens. The clothing was fashioned from buckskin fringed with horsehair and included moccasins. The capote was of caribou skin and a cap was sometimes made of otter skin or muskrat.

Women combined the leatherwork of their Cree mothers with European glass beads to create superb leather garments. Leather, unlike European cloth, was very durable, water resistant and suited to life on the prairies. The worked hides were sewn together with sinew, a fibrous and very strong material which, came from the bison.

It originates in the tendon, which runs down the backbone of the bison and is always removed when an animal is butchered because of its utility as a thread and for securely binding items together. However, as the bison disappeared and people settled in increasing numbers in an agrarian lifeway, leather clothing and the use of sinew succumbed to European materials and fashions.

Métis women fashioned all the clothing, even in recent times, particularly in times when money was tight. This included jackets for the children, their own skirts, blouses and dresses, mens' capotes, moccasins, toques and leggings. There are numerous accounts of women fashioning dresses, shirts and other articles of clothing out of flour bags, which they dyed to make colourful. Blankets were made from old clothes and those who could knit made mitts and socks. In the extended family women sewed and made clothes together. As time passed and people changed their livelihood, European fashions gained acceptance and popularity so that by the end of the nineteenth century Métis dress differed little from that of the general Euro-Canadian population. It can be said that Métis women have always manufactured clothing for their families and through their attention to design and decoration elevated garment making to an art form.

Women also made clothes as special gifts. This is particularly true among the northern Métis (such as the Dene-Métis). Giving specially- made clothing signifies bonds of friendship and kinship. These articles are often highly decorated and express the high degree of artistry these women possessed. The gifts are often presented at Christmas or New Year's, though they are commonly given to mark important social, cultural and religious events.

In other instances, very artistic pieces of clothing were manufactured for sale to tourists, particularly after the decline of the bison in the late nineteenth century. Some

were designed to resemble European fashions of the time, such as fine indoor slippers, but were covered with beadwork, quillwork or embroidery. The expert craftsmanship of Métis women attracted the eye of many collectors and tourists, supplying their families with welcome income. Métis women were able to keep alive their Aboriginal heritage and artistry through the use of quillwork, embroidery, shell decoration, and beadwork as well as through the tailoring of bison, moose, caribou and deer hides into European style garments.

Even the most utilitarian clothes were decorated. The beaded, quilled and embroidered patterns were placed on areas of clothing where they would be highly visible but not subject to wear and tear so as to preserve them. These include, for instance, the vamp of a moccasin and the shoulders, cuffs, front plackets and pockets of a jacket. The designs were colorful and trailing so as to divert attention away from seams in clothes. As well, it was not uncommon for all the patterns on a piece of clothing to be joined by sinuous flower stems or some other design attribute to give the decoration a very continuous, flowing effect.

## **II) The Flower Beadwork People**

The most dominant style that characterized Métis decorative patterns was the floral design. This design became one of the most distinctive symbols of the Métis. Indeed, the Dakota Sioux and Cree people referred to the Red River Métis as the "Flower Beadwork People" because of their increasing use of these designs between 1800 and 1820. Early ethnographic material from Red River indicates a great deal of experimentation and merging of various art traditions. Many Métis decorative art forms have roots in traditional First Nations patterns such as the octopus pouch and the rectangular tobacco pouch bearing a decorated beaded flap along the bottom. As well, the quill, bead and embroidered patterns used up until the 1840s were

dominated by geometric aboriginal designs. However, it was after this period that the Métis, like no other group west of the Great Lakes, embraced the floral pattern.

The origins of this Métis art style likely lie in the mission schools of New France that were established in the first half of the seventeenth century. It was here that the Ursuline order of nuns taught the local Huron, Iroquois and mixed-blood girls European codes of dress and behaviour. Included in this education were ideas of good housekeeping and the arts of stitching and embroidery. The girls worked with European materials such as silk thread, glass and metal beads, velvet and wool. They were also introduced to the European floral patterns for the first time. Silk thread from France was initially used; however, it became more economical to utilize local materials. Moose hair was then employed, but due to its short length, a new technique was developed known as the "appliqué technique". This involved laying bundles of hairs on the material and attaching them at intervals with sinew or cotton thread.

This European influence became evident among the Huron and Iroquois of the early nineteenth century, whose embroidery designs were typically represented by conventionalized solid floral figures, as well as by scrolls and loops. Meanwhile, Ojibway trading parties who made annual journeys to Québec were being introduced to this embroidery style either first hand through the Ursuline sisters, or second hand through other First Nations or French Canadians. The Ojibway as well as the Métis coming out of the Great Lakes region in turn transmitted this style further west, where it influenced the Métis in the Red River area.

With the establishment of Roman Catholic mission schools at Pembina, St. Boniface and Baie St. Paul by the 1830s, increasingly naturalistic and colourful floral designs

became more dominant on Métis products from the Red River country. The arrival of the Grey Nuns to the Red River Settlement in 1844 further advanced the Métis art style. Like the Ursuline Nuns in Québec, the Grey Nuns educated the local First Nations and Métis girls in domestic activities including embroidery. However, the Grey Nuns used exclusively European materials and techniques. This is significant because while the First Nations in Québec were influenced by European folk art motifs, they continued to use local material and the applique technique. The Red River Métis, on the other hand, utilized local materials such as quills, but the tradition of true European embroidery with silk thread was maintained.

It was in the Red River region toward the mid-nineteenth century that the floral embroidery style reached unprecedented levels of skill and artistry. Due to the mobile nature of the Métis, with their extensive trade and marriage relations, the Métis floral art style spread and influenced practically every tribal group on the Northern Plains. As Métis artisans joined Aboriginal groups, many underwent assimilation, resulting in the Métis influence going relatively unnoticed. From the Assiniboine, First Nations in the West, through to the Métis groups of the Sioux, Cree and Saulteaux in the East, the arts and crafts of these peoples blended into one another making it all but impossible to make cultural distinctions. Eventually as the Métis began losing their visible role in the West, their influence and use of this art style became obscured. The floral designs were attributed to a "new Aboriginal style". As a result, many decorated artifacts from this past era found in museums have been attributed to various Aboriginal groups rather than the Métis. Within the last decade, however, a movement has begun to rectify this situation, and the significant role played by Métis artisans is now being recognized.

The vivid colours used in Métis floral embroidery, as well as the limited range of colours used, are immediately striking. Flowers are usually embroidered in shades of pink through red, with the buds in shades of blues and purples. The centres of the flowers are a white or a very dark yellow, and the leaves are green. A three dimensional effect is produced with a combination of layering, and the focal point convening at the centre of the flowers.

### **III) Northern Métis Clothing Styles**

With the fur trade expanding further North in the late nineteenth century so too did a Métis style of dress and decoration. It was a unique style that combined elements of European, Red River Métis patterns and northern First Nation traditions. The dress of the Métis men of the Mackenzie River in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century consisted of a jacket made of smoked and tanned skin. It was decorated with fringes and beaded or silk embroidered yokes, with front panels and cuffs. The style likely came from the cloth-military style coat presented to First Nations leaders of the mid-nineteenth century by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), but in keeping with First Nations tradition the coat was made out of local material. In addition to these coats, cloth leggings also appear by the late-nineteenth century. Southern Métis venturing north likely introduced them. The leggings were generally made of wool cloth and decorated with floral-beaded, knee high side panels and ribbon rosettes. These were quite unlike the traditional Athapaskan leggings of tanned skin pants with attached moccasins.

The decorative style that peaked in Red River had a particularly strong impact in the Mackenzie Valley. After its introduction in the late-nineteenth century silk embroidery soon began to appear on moccasins, gloves, mittens and other clothes. As well, the decorative elements began to show a distinctive northern flavour, reflecting the

adaptation of this artistic flare to northern living. Snowshoes were painted and tasseled carioles were elaborately decorated, and wooden whip handles were carved, as were drawknife handles. Standing irons of dog collars were decorated with tails of fur bearing animals or woolen tassels, and elaborately decorated blankets, or tuppies, used to cover dog sleds were introduced. By about 1932, however, these elaborate decorative motifs and most other forms of Métis art in the Mackenzie District began to disappear. Currently there are only a few women in Fort Providence who still make woven quillwork.

Although traditional Métis art is not as prevalent as it once was in the North, a new form of artistic expression did develop in the early part of this century by Mrs. Boniface Laferté, a Métis woman from Fort Providence. This art form arose out of the shortage of silk thread, beads and other material shortly after World War I. Mrs. Laferté was forced to improvise with local materials and had noticed a nun decorating the local Bishop's chair and kneeler using the "punch technique" with wool. Inspired by this, Mrs. Laferté began using the punch technique not with wool, but moose hair. She taught this new technique known as "moose-hair tufting" to her daughter-in-laws, and it was soon picked up by the local nuns in the mission schools. The art quickly spread and is still commonly used today to decorate items such as moccasins, barrettes, and purses, and can also be framed as wall art.

#### **IV) Métis Men's Clothing**

The clothing of early traders married to First Nations women were usually was fashioned from buckskin fringed with horsehair. Jackets were constructed out of caribou, moose, or bison skin. The long hide or skin coats were almost always decorated by beadwork, quillwork, embroidery or painting in a variety of motifs,

depending on the cultural affiliation of the woman making the design. Fringes were regularly attached along the arms or the bottom of the jacket.

A common Métis man's winter outfit consisted of a long capote (jacket), corduroy or tanned-skin pants held up with bright suspenders, cotton or wool shirts, Assomption sashes, mittens and brightly adorned moccasins. To conserve warmth they tied the capote and pant cuffs to restrict cold air from entering and warm air from escaping. For headgear, the man might wear a cap made from the fur of an otter or muskrat, or a cap with two peaks called a "wide awake". A colourful shot pouch is often draped across the person's chest. If men did not have stockings or socks, they would place a rabbit skin or piece of wool in their moccasins to keep their feet warm. They would sometimes wear a hooded cloak or cape of woolen cloth. They would also wear mittens. This was not a very bulky winter costume, but through continuous exercise they were able to stay very warm compared to their Euro-North American counterparts who dressed very bulkily but were relatively inactive.

In addition to the military-style smoked hide coats already mentioned, worn by Métis men in the Mackenzie River Valley, cloth leggings made from variously coloured cloths also appear by the late nineteenth century. Southern Métis venturing north with the fur trade likely introduced them. The leggings were generally made of wool cloth and decorated with floral beaded, knee high side panels and ribbon rosettes. These were quite unlike the traditional Athapaskan leggings of tanned skin pants with attached moccasins.

Some Saskatchewan Elders recall that Métis men wore overalls, particularly in the 1930s when money for clothing was scarce, while others stated men's outfits included



a little bib (possibly a neck handkerchief) and leggings. For his wedding, a Métis man would wear an “old fashioned suite”.

Men wore hats of felt, velvet and fur, which were decorated with beads, ribbons or fringes of black silk. Feathers were sometimes stuck in ribbons wrapped around the hat as extra decoration. Winter caps were made from otter or muskrat fur, while top hats were worn during warmer weather. Another hat-style worn by Métis men called a tam is very similar to the Scottish form from which it originated. It is a pillbox-style hat with a tassel extending from the middle of the top of the hat and is decorated with beadwork and embroidery.

#### V) The Capote

The capote was a hooded jacket made from a woolen HBC blanket and worn most commonly in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. (Trousers were also made from point blankets). It was lightweight but warm and wearable in fall, winter and spring. The jackets which the Métis wore extended to the knees and flared at the bottom to allow the wearer greater leg movement while running behind a dogsled. The pattern for the capote was cut from a HBC point blanket because of their high quality and enduring use in the fur trade. The women who made these jackets had to be very conscious of waste and proportion because the entire jacket was made from one blanket only. Each coat became an original, unique work of art when beadwork, embroidery, sashes, fringes, and quillwork were added on.

In the early 1800s, the point blanket capote became so widespread that different groups adopted certain styles as their own, almost in the sense of an ethnic or group

marker. Voyageurs from Montréal wore chiefly blue capotes, those of Ville de Québec wore red and Trois Rivières voyageurs wore the multi-stripe form. Prior to the 1821 merger, blue became the colour of the NWC while the HBC wore red. The Métis in the West preferred blue while the First Nations red. The multi-stripe form was worn by both, but generally for dress occasions because they discoloured easily and were less common as a trade item compared to the solid colours.

## VI) Métis Women's Clothes

Women's everyday wear was simple and practical, again a combination of both First Nations and European styles. Women wore long skirts, dresses or gowns, not pants. The women's dresses and skirts were sometimes decorated with bright ribbons, frequently sewn in rows above the hemline. In the winter, women wore leggings (*mitasses*) fashioned from wool or velvet under their dresses. The leggings, too, would be decorated with embroidery and beads.

A familiar Métis woman's outfit consisted of long-sleeved blouses, which were tucked into a long skirt at the waist. Cloth was a preferred material for their garments, though velvet was quite common. Depending on their access to a trading post or store, woman incorporated materials such as lace, fine cloth and ribbons into their outfits. Like the men, they wore highly decorated leather moccasins on their feet. A shawl was worn about the shoulders in warmer weather, while in the winter the woman wrapped it about her heads to keep warm. While not all that common, high-button shoes were a much-desired fashion among women. For a wedding, a bride wore long gowns and shawls, and often a hat.

While most of their everyday outfits were dark, women also produced an assortment of bright and decorative clothing for festive occasions. The decoration on women's clothing was composed, at times, of dyed horse or moose hair, beadwork, ribbons, embroidery and shells, painted or not, which also were used for jewelry. Jewelry was worn on the neck, fingers, and ears and in the hair. For festive occasions, such as New Year's celebrations (*le réveillon*), weddings and dances, women had an opportunity to wear their jewelry and put on their bright and decorated gaily skirts, silk dresses leggings, colourful shawls and moccasins.

## VII) Miscellaneous Clothing

The Métis also outfitted themselves with other, distinctive items. The rabbit-skin robe and coat had their origins among the people inhabiting the northern forests. Using dozens of rabbits, women cut the worked pelts into strips leaving the hair on. Using a simple looping technique, the women weaved the strips into large robes or into jackets for men, women and children. While bulky, the finished garments were very warm.

Tobacco pouches could be found hanging from the waists of men, as were shot pouches. The bandolier bag, also known as the shoulder bag, friendship bag or pony bag, was a regular addition to (primarily) men's attire in the Great Lakes region. It was a bag made from tanned hide which was worn across the body, with the strap draped over one shoulder and could be used for carrying a variety of items, from shot to fire making equipment and dried meat. The octopus bag, so called because it had four long tabs along the bottom of the pouch, was also utilized by the Métis and used as a carrying pouch. While functional items these hats, pouches and bags were highly decorated with beadwork and/or quillwork in geometric or floral designs and fringes of leather or silk-wrapped hair.

Doll's clothing was fashioned with the same craftsmanship and artistry as were people's clothes, and just as brightly adorned. The Métis also fashioned blankets and jackets for dogs pulling sleds or carrying goods on their backs. These outfits were not just simple pieces of cloth or leather cut to fit the animal but were highly decorated with beadwork, bells, feathers, quillwork or embroidery and well-made. Similarly, horse blankets and saddles were also crafted with great attention to detail as a person's horse was a source of great pride to the rider and was treated to a great deal of attention.

### **VIII) Commercial Aspects of Métis Clothing Design**

Unlike the symbolism that dominates Aboriginal art, the constant awareness of commercial value among the Métis made their artwork strictly decorative. This market orientation was dominant throughout the developmental history of Métis art, and the market itself can be divided into three overlapping phases.

The first phase began in the late-eighteenth century where Métis artisans were employed by trading companies where they experimented with various aboriginal and mission arts. The second phase began in the late-nineteenth century when Métis art matured and was at its height. Métis trading expeditions provided the art for First Nations consumers all over the plains, as well as for sale and exchange in St. Paul, Minnesota Territory. The dwindling bison herds combined with an increase in settlement later in the century led to a focus on the early tourist trade. This occurred in the Lake Winnipeg area where there was ready access to the market, and along well-traveled routes and destination points such as Grande Rapids on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg. Victorian objects were decorated producing such items as silk-embroidered caribou hide purses, wall pockets, silk thread embroidered picture frames, greeting cards, glasses and card cases, porcupine quill woven napkin rings, and ladies

silk embroidered caribou hide slippers. As well, local workshops were established on the Missouri River. At such places as St. Pierre, elaborately quill worked costumes were produced for Euro-American travelers and mountain men. The final phase of this art's history sees the Métis catering to the upper class, including aristocratic sport hunters and government officials, producing items such as silk embroidered table mats.

In more remote regions of the Subarctic away from centres of trade, traditional methods of decorating functional objects continued from the nineteenth into the twentieth century. Functional objects that were decorated include men's tabbed fire bags, silk thread embroidered caribou hide mittens, moose hide moccasins embroidered with glass beads on velvet, velvet pockets and pouches embroidered with iron beads in floral designs.

#### **Fast Facts, Questions and Activities:**

- I. Another name for the Métis is the "Flower Bead Work People" which was given to them by Siouxian and Algonquian-speaking First Nations for the elaborately decorated floral patterns of bead and quillwork and silk embroidery on their clothing
- II. The Métis were essential middlemen in the beaver fur and buffalo robe trade, which led to numerous fashion crazes in Europe and in European centres in North America.
- III. Each Métis community and family has developed its own distinct clothing patterns. For instance, the Dene Métis in the Mackenzie River Valley have a different dress than that of Prairie Métis etc. In some instances, such as the western and eastern coast of Canada, the Métis made and wore clothing, which was remarkably similar to First Nations, and Inuit garb.
- IV. Using some of the floral beadwork and embroidered works in the CD-ROM, *The Metis: Our People or Story* or the Study Print Series, *Expressing Our Heritage*, as a guide, design a pattern for your own Métis artistic creation.
- V. List some of the materials necessary towards making traditional Métis clothing.
- VI. Why were Hudson's Bay blankets so valued among the Métis?
- VII. List some traditional Métis clothing. Was traditional Métis clothing functional?
- VIII. What aspects of traditional Métis clothing were of distinct Aboriginal origin? What aspects were of European origin?

- IX. Métis women have always been artistically inclined and blended Aboriginal and European traditions when they made their clothing, which are left as artistic treasures. Go to your local museum and try to find some traditional Métis clothing. Then take a picture of an artifact that interests you. Following that, go to the library, Internet or to the archives and then write up a brief history of the item. In your article, indicate what the item was used for, who made it, and how it got into the possession of the museum. Each of these inquiries will lead you towards other stories. For instance, did museums borrow, steal or buy Métis cultural artifacts in the past? Once you have done this, you can begin to appreciate what it took to make the item, why it was made and by whom it was made, and how the museum or cultural institution received the item.
- X. When did the Métis start to wear more European clothing? What had happened to traditional Métis society that forced the Métis to wear Euro-Canadian clothing?
- XI. What are the names of the various hats that were worn by the Métis?

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