

THANKS TO THE Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund (ACHF), the Minnesota Historical Society and the Science Museum of Minnesota are further researching the American Indian material culture in their extensive Bishop Henry B. Whipple collections. Among the many significant aspects of these collections is Dakota ribbonwork.

Ribbonwork is an indigenous North American art. While the materials involved are almost entirely of European origin, the work itself is firmly rooted in precontact techniques and artistic expressions. Ribbonwork is usually associated with indigenous nations from the Great Lakes and the southern Great Plains. The Dakota have generally been ignored as ribbonworkers, yet these collections demonstrate otherwise.

This art began to take hold in the Great Lakes region in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. The Dakota had long been involved in a vast network of trade that eventually brought them silk ribbons of European manufacture. They also had extensive contact with other nations known for ribbonwork, especially the Ho-Chunk. Some of the earliest visual records of Dakota people wearing clothing with ribbonwork are sketches and paintings by Seth Eastman, who was stationed at Fort Snelling during the 1840s.

An appliqué technique, ribbonwork usually decorates the edges of clothing, blankets, and moccasins. A ribbon—initially silk, though contemporary artists generally use taffeta—is cut and folded under to create “peaks” and “valleys” and then sewn onto the base fabric. The next ribbon is either cut in the same pattern and sewn next to the first, creating a thick line, or cut in a mirror image of the previous one and sewn down to create a shape.

Ribbonwork falls into two aesthetic categories: curvilinear and geometric. The objects in the Whipple collections use the geometric style to decorate moccasins, leggings, a shirt, mitten cuffs, and small bags, all made and used by the Dakota in Minnesota for much of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Some of the foremost Dakota ribbonwork artists represented in the collections are *Makpedaga* Sarah Good Thunder, *Red Bird Woman* Esther Walker St. Clair Hart, and *Mazasinawin* Mary Red Cloud. Sarah Good Thunder probably made the moccasins worn by her husband, *Wakinyanwaste* Andrew Good Thunder (fig. 1), and then decorated the vamps with ribbonwork. Another distinctive use of the geometric style is to decorate the curved edges of moccasin vamps and bags (figs. 3 and 4).

The work of these artists demonstrates a Dakota innovation and contribution to this indigenous art. Visit www.inhonorofthepeople.org, also funded by ACHF, to explore more ribbonwork in the Whipple collections.

—*Scott Shoemaker, Whipple Collection ethnology research assistant*

Fig. 1

Wakinyanwaste
Andrew Good Thunder,
1899 (MINNESOTA
HISTORICAL SOCIETY)



Fig. 2 *Haâpikçeka*—child's moccasins—remarkably like Good Thunder's. A similar early-twentieth century pair in the collections of the National Museum of the American Indian is attributed to the Ho-Chunk of Nebraska. (MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY)



Fig. 3. *Haâpikçeka*—moccasins—by Esther Walker St. Clair Hart. Records indicate they were “Presented to Mrs. Evangeline Whipple by Mrs. Esther Hart, on visit to Birch Coulee, Oct. 1908.” (MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY)



Fig. 4. *Oœuha*—bag—probably by Esther Walker St. Clair Hart or Mary Red Cloud, nearly identical in shape to the moccasin vamp (fig. 3). (SCIENCE MUSEUM OF MINNESOTA)



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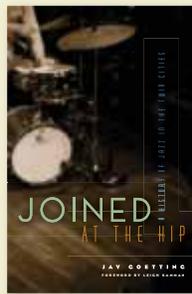
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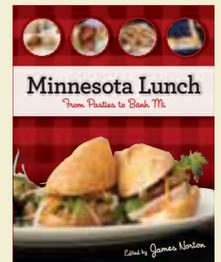
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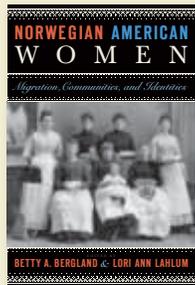
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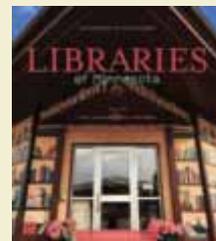
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