

Fabrics of the Iroquois

The Lewis H. Morgan Collection for the New York
State Museum



1
Front of overdress made by Caroline Parker. The cloth overdress is decorated with beads and with silver brooches around the collar and down the front (from Morgan 1850:Pl. 6).

2
Back of the overdress, with decoration of beadwork (from Morgan 1850:Pl. 6a).

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In The University Museum are a number of Iroquois manufactures collected at various times in various places in New York State and Canada. There are similar collections, some larger, some smaller, in other museums. Some objects obtained from Indians in

the 17th and 18th centuries have found their way into European museums. But the most significant collections in this country were made in the heyday of the natural history and anthropological museums—from approximately the middle of the 19th century to the Great Depression, when money for amassing such materials became scarce and both academics and nonacademics turned more of their attention to

other interests.

Of all these collections of Iroquois artifacts, the most important was that made for the state of New York in 1849 and 1850 by Lewis H. Morgan, America's greatest 19th century anthropologist. It was remarkable not for the rarity of the articles collected or their outstanding quality of workmanship, although some fine manufactures were included. Nor did it include

objects noteworthy for their association with famed historical events—the kind of objects once so favored by local historical societies. Its strength lay in its comprehensiveness, for Morgan sought to collect, as he said, sufficient materials “to illustrate the general character of . . . Indian fabrics, implements and utensils” (Morgan 1850:95; cf. 1851:391).

In the 19th century it was not possible to collect all types of artifacts the Iroquois had once made and used. Pottery making had long since disappeared as a craft. Kettles made of metal bought from European traders had early replaced pottery cooking vessels, although dishes and spoons fashioned of wood continued to be made. Similarly, stone tools—axes, knives, and the like—had been replaced by ones made of metal. Knowledge of Iroquois stone and clay manufactures could be gained only from inspection of archaeological remains. As Morgan stated the situation:

Within the past century great changes have been wrought among the descendants of the ancient Iroquois. Their primitive fabrics have mostly passed away, and with them many of their original inventions. The substitution of the fabrics of more skillful hands, has led to the gradual disuse of many of their simple arts. At the present moment, therefore, much of the fruit of their inventive capacity is entirely lost. Fragments, indeed, are frequently disinterred from the resting places to which they had been consigned by filial or parental affection; but they are mere vestiges of the past, and afford but a slight indication of their social condition, or of the range of their artisan intellect. It is impossible, therefore, at the present day, to make a full collection of the implements, domestic utensils, and miscellaneous fabrics of our Indian predecessors. Many of their inventions are still preserved among their descendants, who yet reside within our limits; but that portion of them which would especially serve to illustrate the condition of the hunter life, have passed beyond our reach. (Morgan 1850:67; cf. 1851:391)

Then, too, some of the artifacts the Iroquois were still manufacturing at the time employed tech-



3 Caroline Parker wearing articles of traditional Seneca clothing that were sent by Morgan to the New York State Museum (from Morgan 1851:opposite p. 148).

niques learned in historic times, a fact not unnoticed by Morgan:

In the present advanced condition of our Indian population, a large proportion of their articles are of a mixed character. They rather exhibit the application of Indian ingenuity to fabrics of foreign manufacture, as shown in their reduction into use, than originality of invention. But this class of articles are not without a peculiar interest. They furnish no slight indication of artisan capacity, and will make a species of substitute for those articles which they have displaced, and those inventions which they have hurried into forgetfulness. (Morgan 1850:67; cf. 1851:354)

“the manufactures of the Iroquois . . . are indicative of the unique genius of a people”

This being the case, Morgan suggested that the manufactures of the Iroquois are not mere curiosities, as so many have regarded them. Rather, they are indicative of the unique genius of a people:

The fabrics of a people unlock their social history. They speak a language which is silent, but yet more eloquent than the written page. As memorials of former times, they commune directly with the beholder, opening the unwritten history of the period they represent, and clothing it with perpetual freshness. However rude the age, or uncultivated the people from whose hands they come, the products of human ingenuity are ever invested with a peculiar and even solemn interest. It is greatly to be regretted that so few remains of the skill and industry of the Iroquois have come down to the present age, to illustrate the era of Indian occupation. Although their fabrics are indicative of a low state of the useful arts, the artificial contrivances by which they were surrounded are yet the indices of their social condition, and for this reason are not devoid of instruction. Further than this, it is but just to them to save from oblivion the fruits of their inventive intellect, however unpretending they may seem, that, in the general judgment pronounced upon their memory, they may not be defrauded of even their humblest inventions. (Morgan 1851:351–352)



4 Photograph of a daguerreotype taken ca. 1850 of Caroline Parker wearing a traditional Seneca costume. (Photograph courtesy of the Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, CA; neg. #24,963).

The History of a Collection

Just as the fabrics of a people speak a language more eloquent than the written page, their preservation is also more exacting. The memorials of language can be collected and preserved in libraries, there to be studied by those who wish to, but manufactures require museums. And it is probably for this reason Morgan made no serious study of material culture until such a depository became available.

It did so when in 1847 the Regents of the University of the State of New York decided to add to the State's Cabinet of Natural History a 'Historical and Antiquarian Collection.' The following year a circular was prepared and sent to citizens, "asking their aid, in furnishing the relics of the ancient masters of the soils, and the monuments and remembrances of our colonial and revolutionary history." Morgan, who had made some study of the archaeological remains in New York while pursuing his researches on the structure and organization of the League of the Iroquois, replied, offering the State articles in his collection, an offer that was accepted. The year before (1847), Morgan had published the results of his ethnographic researches in *The American Review* (much of which he subsequently reprinted in *League of the Iroquois*). But he had included in this series of articles, "Letters on the Iroquois," no discussion of his archaeological findings, and with the publication of these "Letters" his interest in the Iroquois had waned. He may well have welcomed the opportunity to dispose of what archaeological materials he had collected.

The State's interest in its aboriginal inhabitants, however, revived Morgan's own interest, and in 1849 he proposed that it include in its Historical and Antiquarian Collection examples of costumes, implements, weapons, and utensils in common use among the Iroquois. The State concurred, authorizing a sum of money (\$215) to be placed at Morgan's disposal to make such a



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Beaded moccasin for a female (from Morgan 1850:Pl. 2).

collection. This he did, with such success that another appropriation (of \$250) was made for a further collection in 1850.

In making these collections on the Tonawanda Seneca Reservation in New York State in 1849 and 1850, and on the Six Nations Reserve in the Province of Ontario in 1850, Morgan sought to collect examples of what he termed all "species" of articles—rather as a biologist might collect examples of all species he encountered in a particular region. To this end, Morgan commissioned some articles to be made—notably by the Parker family at Tonawanda, one of whose members, the young Ely Parker, was his principal interpreter and collaborator—as well as purchasing

objects then in use. But neither in his schedules of articles furnished nor in his report did he attempt any classification of these "species." Rather, he listed them in no apparent order.

No truly adequate taxonomy for the study of material culture has yet been developed, and such classifications of artifacts as have been attempted have a somewhat haphazard quality about them. The range and variety, then, of a collection such as that made by Morgan cannot be indicated by reference to a larger, established schema, but only by some ad hoc classification. A number of these may suggest themselves, no one perhaps better suited to the task than the others.

It is, then, only for convenience that the Iroquois manufactures assembled by Morgan are here classified into "tools" and "containers"—both words being used broadly—to indicate the scope of the collection. The "tools" of the Iroquois may, also merely for convenience, be subdivided into eight categories: those used for (1) war and hunting, (2) transportation, (3) fire-making, (4) smoking, (5) food preparation, (6) singing, (7) gaming, and (8) ceremonial rituals.

Iroquois Tools

The tools used in hunting and war (i.e., for killing animals and men) by the Iroquois, and collected by Morgan, include the spear (reputed to be a recent introduction), war clubs of various types including the noted ball-headed variety, tomahawks, scalping knives, bows and arrows, quivers, blowguns and darts, and traps for birds and for fish. Those for transportation include walking canes (some elaborately carved), snowshoes, burden straps (i.e., tump lines) of the inner bark of slippery elm and of basswood (some decorated with quillwork, some with moose hair), burden frame (a kind of backpack), horse saddle (a post-European contact introduction), and canoe and paddles. Fire-making tools collected by Morgan were the bow drill and the more recent flint and steel; smoking tools included tobacco and pipes.

The Iroquois cultivated a variety of corn, beans, and squashes. Morgan collected samples of the three principal kinds of corn grown (white, red, and white flint), six varieties of bean, and four varieties of squash. Corn was prepared by pounding in a wooden mortar and pestle, examples of which Morgan also sent the State, along with carved ladles, spoons, hominy stirrers, and a bread turner.

As do other North American Indians, the Iroquois use drums and rattles as singing tools. The drum is a water drum: a wooden keg partially filled with water and with one end covered with a skin drumhead held in place with a hoop. Rattles include turtle shell rattles, horn rattles (a section of horn stopped at both ends with wood and attached to a handle), squash rattles, and knee rattles of deer hoofs. Morgan collected examples of all these, and an Indian flute.

In Iroquois culture, some games

may be played in both sacred and secular contexts. One such is the "bowl game" or "peach stone game." It is played by hitting a flat-bottomed wooden bowl containing six peach stone dice (blackened on one side) on a blanket covered floor. Another game uses eight bone dice thrown from the hand. Other games include lacrosse (once played with a wooden ball; see *Expedition* 27(2):53), snowsnake and snow boat games (both involving throwing the object—the wooden "snake" or "boat"—down a trench in the snow), and javelin games (one in which javelins are thrown at a ring rolled on the ground and another in which they are thrown for distance). Morgan collected objects used in all these games, as well as descriptions of play.

Specifically ceremonial objects are few in Iroquois culture. Of these, the most famous are the False Face masks, of which Morgan collected two examples, as well as a

special shovel (ashes stirrer) used in the New Year's ceremonial.

Iroquois Containers

The "containers" used by the Iroquois may be subdivided into two types: those for people and those for objects. The former include the house (Morgan had William Parker, Ely's father, build a model of the old style multifamily longhouse), cradleboard (what Morgan termed a baby frame), and articles of dress. Anciently, the most basic article of men's dress was a breechcloth, of which Morgan provided an example, as well as the more recently introduced kilt used in the dance. Women wore a skirt, then usually made of blue broadcloth decorated with beadwork, an overdress usually decorated with beadwork and silver brooches, and a blanket. Both men and women wore leggings and moccasins, and a man



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Beaded work bag pictured in Figure 4. The Iroquois also manufactured such bags for sale to whites. (From Morgan 1851:opposite p. 388).



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Skirt of blue broadcloth with beadwork, made by Caroline Parker (from Morgan 1850:Pl. 5).

might also wear a headdress, whose most distinguishing feature was a large feather set in a socket so that it could revolve.

To this basic costume might be added belts and bands of various kinds—waist, shoulder, arm, wrist, knee, and hair—made of various materials and decorated in various ways. Also used in connection with the costume might be various kinds of necklaces, and medals and breastplates (of shell and of silver).

Morgan collected examples of all such parts of the costume, taking special pains to provide the State with a complete woman's and a complete man's costume. The woman's costume made by Caroline Parker, Ely's sister, is illustrated in Figures 1–7.

Containers for objects were fashioned of various materials. Some were made of bark. The bark trays, bark barrels, and bark "sap tubs" (used to collect maple sap) collected by Morgan are examples. Others were of bark splints woven into baskets intended for various purposes, including the type used to sift pounded corn. Others were made of skin, in Morgan's time, notably for use as tobacco pouches. Still others were made of cloth decorated with beadwork in various styles (Morgan lists work bags, pocketbooks, satchels, needle books, and pin cushions) not of Indian invention, but used by them and more importantly of the sort much favored by whites of the time and manufactured for sale to them.

Fate of the Collection

In all, Morgan sent some 500 objects to the State Cabinet. With them he sent reports describing some of the manufacturing techniques employed and the use the Iroquois made of the articles provided. Morgan well knew that although the fabrics of a people "speak a language which is silent, but more eloquent than the written page," they—like the recorded texts of a language—are part of a total plan of life, and to be more completely and accurately understood, need to be placed in that context. His reports, then, do not describe each article in detail, but

explain the objects and the use of the most prominent of them (Morgan 1852:70).

As published these reports included hand-colored plates of what he regarded as the finest specimens, and engravings in the text of some others. (Those illustrations accompanying his report on his 1849 collecting activities and two plates later published in his 1850 report Morgan reprinted in *League of the Iroquois*, published early in 1851, about the same time he sent his final report to the Regents of the State University.) It is fortunate he did so, not only because of the value the illustrations have to the reading public, but also because much of the collection perished in the disastrous Capitol fire on March

29, 1911. Only a few dozen objects were saved.

It was an ironic fate. Morgan had sought "to save from oblivion the fruits of [Iroquois] inventive intellect . . . that they themselves may be at least correctly judged" (Morgan 1850:68; cf. 1851:352). Fortunately, examples of most "species" are preserved in other collections, including Morgan's own personal collection which he bequeathed to the University of Rochester, now in the Rochester Museum and Science Center. Even more fortunately, the Iroquois have not completely abandoned their old manufactures, and continue to produce examples of both these and objects in styles more recently introduced.

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Lewis H. Morgan, an attorney practicing in Rochester, New York, at the time the collections here described were made, graduated from Union College in 1840. He is the author of "Letters on the Iroquois," a series of articles based on his earlier research on the Tonawanda Seneca Reservation published in *The American Review* (1847), as well as author of several articles on other topics in *The Knickerbocker*. (Photograph from the Lewis Henry Morgan Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library)



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