Fabrics of the Iroquois

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

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).

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 1850b: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 Europeans 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 Similarly, stone tools—axes, knives, and the like—had been replaced by ones made of metal.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 skilful 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 disentangled 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 artistic 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 rest within our limits, but that portion of them which would especially serve to illustrate the condition of the former life, have passed beyond our reach. (Morgan 1850b:67; cf. 1851:391)

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 monuments of former times, they communicate directly with the beholder, opening the unscribed history of the people by their expression, and clothing it with perpetual freshness. However rude the age, or uncivilized the people 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 1851:331–332)
The History of a Collection

Just as the fabrics of a people speak a language more eloquent than the written page, their preservation can also mean exacting. The memorials of language can be collected and preserved in libraries, but those that have been studied by those who wish to, but manufactures require museums. And if it is proven that the 1847 Morgan made no serious study of material culture until such a depository became available.

It did so in 1847 the Regents of the University of the State of New York despatched 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 soil, and the monuments and memorials of our colonial and revolutionay history. Morgan, who had made some study of the archaeological remains in New York while pursuing his researches on culture 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 Race (much of which is the subject 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 1840 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 ($25) to be placed at Morgan’s disposal to make such a 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 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—not 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 Park family at Batavia, one of whose members, the young Elly 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 the language has yet been developed, and such classifications of artifacts as have been attempted to date have been made by hazard quality about them. The range and variety, then, of a collection such as that made by Morgan cannot be estimated by reference to a larger, established schema, but only by some ad hoc classification. A number of these may suggest themselves, none I have better suited to 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 kinds including the noted half-ball-headed variety, tomahawks, scalping knives, axes and adzes, quivers, bow and arrows, traps and furs for birds and for fish. Those for transportation include walking canes (some elaborately carved), moccasins, and moccasins. For use in connection with ceremonial dances, there are elaborate, carved canoes, and a host of other objects.

For hunting there are the bow and arrows, as well as the arrow and spears. For ceremonial purposes there are the tomahawk and moccasins. For medical purposes, there are the medicines and herbs.

6. Beaded war bag pictured in Figure 4. The Iroquois also manufactured such bags for sale to whites. (From Morgan 1880: opposite p. 880.)

7. Skirt of blue broadcloth with beadwork, made by Caroline Parker (from Morgan 1880: 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 ground 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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Elisabeth Tooker is currently Professor of Anthropology at Temple University. A graduate of MacMurray College (B.A., 1949; Ph.D., 1955), she is the author of The Iroquois Ceremonial of Midwinter, which is based in part on her field work on the Tonawanda Seneca Reservation, as well as author of other publications on North American Indians.

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.)