

## **Métis Embroidery**

Much like beadwork, embroidery is prevalent on clothing, personal and household items throughout the regions which the Métis traveled and lived. A common motif or design, again, is the floral pattern, which exists in a relatively narrow spectrum of colours. The flower designs are a carryover from the time prior to the 1850s when women used quills in their embroidery. Flowers are usually embroidered in shades of pink through red with the buds in shades of blues and purples. The flowers' centres are white or dark yellow, and the leaves are green. A three-dimensional effect is produced with a combination of layering. The focal point convenes at the flowers' centre. The overall pattern is constructed of curving stems, sparsely distributed, delicate leaves, flower buds and flowers.

The introduction to silk embroidery was provided in the early Catholic mission schools in the seventeenth century along the St. Lawrence River (now present-day Québec) and around the Great Lakes. The Ursuline nuns instructed local Huron, Iroquois and mixed-blood girls in embroidery and beadwork. The girls worked with European materials such as silk thread, glass and metal beads, velvet and wool and were introduced to the European floral patterns for the first time. Silk thread from France was initially used but it soon became more economical to use local materials.

Using moose hair, women adapted embroidery into the appliqué technique. The moose hair was too short to use for traditional embroidery so it was laid in bundles and then attached with sinew or cotton thread on

cloth or worked hide at intervals. Moose hair tufting is now a flourishing art form, suitable for framing, as well as a means to decorate clothing. In other instances, hair was wrapped in thread to form pipes, which were attached onto the item in conjunction with the embroidered pattern. The hair would be wrapped for about half a centimetre then attached to the garment before continuing with the wrapping.

Ojibway and Métis trading parties who journeyed to Québec (then New France and later Lower Canada) were introduced to this embroidery style either firsthand through the Ursuline nuns or second hand through other First Nations groups or French Canadians. These journeying groups transmitted the styles and techniques, in turn, to those working further west, influencing the Red River Métis. Once the Grey Nuns came to Red River and began teaching in the Catholic mission schools, they began instructing local First Nations and Métis girls in domestic activities including embroidery. Unlike the Ursuline Nuns in Québec, the Grey Nuns used European materials exclusively. Thus, the tradition of true European embroidery was maintained among the Red River Métis. In addition, the production of quality silk embroidered items by Métis girls was a source of income for the nuns as well as for the girls' families.

While nuns introduced European ideas about embroidery, Métis girls and women experimented with various styles and decorations once outside the nuns' influence. As a result, they developed their own unique artistic tradition. Embroidery appears on both functional and decorative items such

as mittens, jackets, leggings, moccasins, vests, knife sheaths, bags, dog blankets, wall pockets, pillowcases, piano covers, picture frames and purses.

On jackets, the embroidery is limited to the shoulders, cuffs, pockets and front plackets while it appears on the vests' front, neckline and bottom edges. Women would even take prefabricated items and embroider them as a means of adding their own embellishment. On any clothing item, embroidery is placed on highly visible areas not on those, which will receive a great deal of wear and, thus, deterioration.

Silk embroidery was a favourite decoration among the Métis of the Mackenzie River Valley in the Northwest Territories. After its introduction in the late-nineteenth century by Métis dispersing from Manitoba and what is now Saskatchewan and from nuns in boarding schools, embroidery soon began to appear on moccasins, gloves, mittens and other clothes. The decorative elements began to show a distinctive northern flavour reflecting the adaptation of this artistic flair to northern living. For instance, embroidery was used to decorate dog blankets and sled covers.

The tradition of embroidery is still alive today, though silk is commonly replaced with cotton and rayon floss or thicker wool and synthetic yarns. The floral patterns are still as popular today as in the past hundred years. Embroidered items have long been popular items in the tourist trade, but many are still produced as gifts for friends as well as for personal use and adornment. In fact, women have long given embroidered mitts and moccasins to husbands and male kin as special New Year's presents among the Métis in the Subarctic.

**Adapted From:**

Young, Patrick. "Métis Beadwork, Quillwork and Embroidery".  
<http://www.metismuseum.com/media/document.php/00715.pdf>