

The Sash

Today, the sash is considered to be an integral and highly symbolic aspect of Métis identity. No Métis cultural or political event is considered official until somebody arrives proudly wearing his or her sash. In fact, Métis communities often honour the social, cultural or political contributions of talented Métis by awarding them the "Order of the Sash." Sashes are also awarded to non-Métis as well. For example, on September 24, 1998, the then President of South Africa and great human rights activist Nelson Mandela, was given a sash by Senator John Boucher of the Métis National Council. In such circumstances, awarding the sash is a tangible means of expressing and preserving Métis identity and culture.

In Western Canada, the sash is associated with the Métis. However, in Central and Eastern Canada, the sash is associated with traditional French-Canadian, Acadian and First Nations' culture. Each of these groups has made and worn different varieties of sashes. The variety of sash worn by the Métis, known in French as "*ceinture fléchée*" (*saencheur flechey* in Michif) or "arrow belt", was originally crafted by French-Canadian artisans in the village of L'Assomption, northeast of Montréal from about 1780. Later the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) began to manufacture this fur trade staple as it gained popularity throughout North America. Nevertheless, this type of sash is strongly identified with traditional French-Canadian culture as expressed in the historical record and in period paintings by Cornelius Krieghoff, Henri Julien and other Canadian artists. The sash was brought to what is now Western Canada by Canadien (French Canadian), and, to a lesser extent,

Haudenosaunee and Anishnabe (Algonquin) voyageurs working with the North West Company (NWC).

Nobody really knows for sure whether or not First Nations, Europeans or Euro-Canadians first made sashes. Since time immemorial, First Nations women, from throughout Turtle Island (the Americas), have practiced finger weaving, using plant fibers and wool from indigenous fauna. However, they did not have access to lambs' wool, the main component of sashes, until the Europeans began trading with them. Eastern Woodlands First Nations also made Wampum Belts, which were sacred or diplomatic belts that were used to record history or were given to other nations to cement peace and friendship treaties. While these belts may have been the inspiration for the sash, they were not worn.

This first sash was clearly based on First Nations finger-weaving techniques, and European design and raw materials. However, in the vast cultural exchange between Europeans and Indigenous peoples during the fur trade, various Aboriginal nations, including the Métis, accepted this cultural adaptation, and began making sashes. As First Nations and Métis women gained access to wool from both the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and the NWC, a whole panoply of sashes began to be made in distinctive colours and patterns. Métis families soon developed their own patterns, much like Scottish clans had their own tartans, and occasionally incorporated beads into the threads.

The homemade sashes varied in size, design and in colours and were typically constructed of a looser weave than the trade sashes. As the demand

for trade sashes increased, there was a move among manufacturers to standardize the form and design. Those First Nations and Métis who manufactured their own sashes maintained more design variability. This craft production developed independently but coexisted with the more standardized Assomption sashes.

Most traditional hand-woven sashes were about 15 centimetres wide and two metres long. Some reached 6 metres in length. A typical sash had a red band or "*coeur*" its centre, and was paralleled by a series of colourful zigzags forming arrow designs, giving the sash the name "arrow" belt. Quality sashes were made from very fine wool, which was waxed and re-twisted. These sashes were woven so tightly that they were water-resistant and could be used to carry small amounts of water. A top quality sash, using 300 to 400 finely waxed woolen threads, usually took about 200 hours to complete. A lower quality sash made from 100 or so thicker woolen threads could be made in 70 to 80 hours. On average an arrow or point was made the length of the weaver's index finger, about 9 centimetres. As a result, most weavers made about 21 arrows or points for each metre of sash. Some pieces, however, exhibit double the number of arrows per metre. The most popular colours used by weavers making sashes were red, pale blue, dark blue, yellow and green. In some cases, decorated beads were introduced among the threads, often outlining the arrows.

One way to make a sash required the weaver to tie one end of the length of threads to a ceiling beam or high up on a wall and the other to a long nail on the floor. Two wooden sticks would then be fastened to the

middle of the threads to hold them firmly in place. The weaver would then start at the middle of the threads and work toward the end tied to the nail on the floor. When one half was woven and the fringe made, the length of threads was reversed to allow the weaver to work on the loose half, again from the middle of the length to the end. The rationale for only working one half of a length at a time was that it would have been impossible to manipulate such long pieces of thread if the weaver worked from one end to the next.

Using similar weaving techniques, women also produced colourful shawls for themselves as well as brightly coloured garters to hold up stockings. The garters could be woven from end to end because of their short nature, unlike the much longer sashes, which had to be woven from the middle to the ends. And, like the sashes, many of the colourful garters incorporated arrow and point designs.

For the Métis, the sash was more than a decorative piece of clothing. The sash could be used as a rope, which could be used to pull canoes over portages. It could also be used to harness heavy loads on the backs of men and women who unloaded freight canoes and York boats. It could be used as a dog harness. The Métis used the sashes' fringed edges as an emergency sewing kit. It could contain personal artifacts, such as medicine, tobacco, a pipe, or a first aid kit. It could also be used as a towel, washcloth, and during winter, it could keep a capote fastened to its wearer.

During the early nineteenth century, sashes became an important fur trade items. These fur trade sashes, were originally made in L'Assomption, in

Lower Canada and were sold mainly to the Métis in the Red River Settlement and to French Canadians. Overtime, the HBC began manufacturing Assomption sashes in England, using less time and labour intensive industrial looms. These mass manufactured sashes were less durable and attractive than the hand-woven variety, and they almost led to the abandonment of the art of finger weaving. Fortunately, folklorists such as Marius Barbeau revived the art in the 1920s and 1930s. Today, finger-weaving programs are taught through cultural institutes, museums, and art classes in both Québec and Western Canada.

Adapted From:

Préfontaine, Darren. "The Sash".

<http://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/00741.pdf>