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Huron Moose Hair Embroidery

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HURON MOOSE HAIR EMBROIDERY

By F. G. SPECK

THE use of moose, caribou, or reindeer hair in appliqué embroidery upon skin seems to have an extremely wide distribution in the north of both Asia and North America. As pointed out by Dr Boas, forms of this hair technique are found ranging from Siberia to the lower St Lawrence in Canada with remarkable continuity, among the Koryak,¹ the Chukchee,² the Eskimo of Alaska,³ the Indians of the Mackenzie area,⁴ those of the Great Lakes, both Iroquois⁵ and Algonkians, and those of the St Lawrence valley⁶ and New England.⁷ No general or comparative studies in this form of art seem as yet to have been made; nothing

¹Jochelson, *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History* (Jesup North Pacific Expedition), vol. VI, p. 681.

²Bogoras, *ibid.*, vol. VII, part 1, pp. 226-7.

³Nelson, *18th Annual Report Bureau of American Ethnology*, part 1, pp. 37, 38, 39, 41. Also observed on Eskimo specimens from King Id. and Diomed Id. in the Museum of the Univ. of Pa., collected by Dr G. B. Gordon.

⁴*Voyages to the Arctic* (1789-1793) Mackenzie (Trailmakers Series), Vol. 1, pp. cxlii, 235 (Cree and Chippewyan).

⁵Information furnished by Mr A. C. Parker, State Museum, Albany, N. Y. The technique is also found on specimens from the Great Lakes in the collection of Mr G. G. Heye, Univ. of Pa. Museum.

⁶Observed by the writer among the Montagnais about Lake St John, P. Q.; also recorded by Mr A. B. Skinner among the eastern Cree.

⁷Willoughby, Dress of the New England Indians, *American Anthropologist*, N. S., vol. 7, p. 502, quoting S. G. Drake's *Tragedies of the Wilderness*, p. 52. Observed by the writer among the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, and Malisit.

more than records of its occurrence in particular tribes having appeared, so far as I am aware.¹

During several visits in 1908 and 1909 to Indian Lorette, P. Q., Canada, where the Huron Indians engage extensively in the manufacture of hair-embroidered articles, I had the opportunity of making the studies which are now presented. The decorative technique which, it should be borne in mind, is strictly an embroidered and not a woven one, together with the patterns discussed here, while they may not be limited to the Huron, are nevertheless to be taken properly as a special study of Huron art. My studies were made from the purely objective standpoint, the only one which seems safe to follow at present until the art of the adjacent Algonkians and Iroquois has been investigated. From the earliest times, according to the testimony of the Indians themselves, the Huron produced decorative effects on their clothing, and various buckskin articles, by embroidering the surfaces in appliqué with different colored moose hairs. With the Huron hair embroidery has developed to such an extent as to take the place of quill work and beadwork almost entirely, affording the characteristic means of artistic decoration, as porcupine quill work, painting, beadwork, and various kinds of blanket and basket weaving do elsewhere in America. While no historical records contain, as far as I know, any specific reference to the technique in this tribe, a number of old specimens in museums² and in the possession of the Huron themselves indicate the antiquity and the native origin of both the technique and some of the designs.

Before discussing the designs and their significance some objective aspects of the art will be treated. The field of decoration has no very definite limits, the designs being placed upon buckskin surfaces wherever feasible. The characteristic places for ornamen-

¹H. Ling Roth, *Journal of the Royal Anth. Inst. of Gt Britain* etc., vol. 38, p. 51 (1908), illustrates and describes, in an article entitled "Moccasins and Their Quill Work," a moccasin, pl. viii, fig. 9, and a knife sheath, fig. 10, in which he has quite evidently mistaken the moose hair for the porcupine quill technique.

²Specimens may be found in the collections of the Peabody Museum, Cambridge, Mass.; American Museum of Natural History, N. Y.; New York State Museum, Albany, N. Y.; and in the Heye collection, Museum Univ. of Penna., Phila., Pa.

tation, however, were and are, as follows: the bands on men's head-dresses (when not covered with silver work); the epaulets, sometimes the cuffs, and collars of buckskin coats; the lower borders of shirts and the front facings; the flaps of both men's and women's leggings; below the knee in a band-like strip and about the lower border of the legging; women's cuffs and collars; the lower border of the long loose woman's waist and skirt; and the moccasin vamp and lapel. Belts, bandoliers, pouches, bags, and knife-sheaths were also similarly decorated. The manufacture of many modern articles of embroidered buckskin fashioned after the old style, especially moccasins, for commercial purposes, is a regular industry among the Huron today.

The materials employed are moose hairs, needle and thread, the latter, according to the opinions of the Indians, replacing awl and

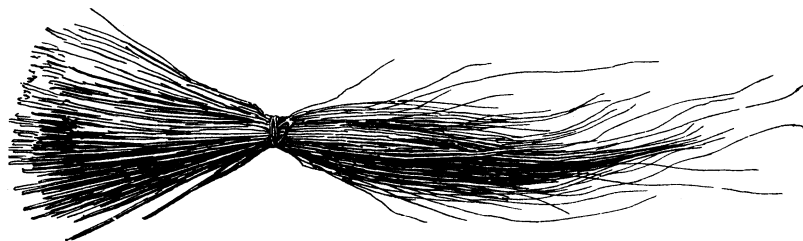


FIG. 1.—Bundle of moose hair.

sinew. Quantities of moose hair are obtained by Indians who hunt every fall in the Laurentian mountains. Caribou hair as a substitute for moose hair is declared by the Huron to be useless on account of its shortness and fineness. The moose hairs, or more properly bristles, are about five inches long and come from the mane and cheeks of the animal, those from the rump being also available. They are then kept in bundles of several colors tied together (fig. 1), from which they are drawn when wanted. The Huron have for so long a time indulged in the use of aniline dyes for their moose hair that I did not succeed in learning any of the native dyes. Numerous colors and shades are used, though red, dark green, blue, and natural white, are the commonest.¹

¹ Cf. G. S. Theodat (*Le Grand Voyage*, Paris, 1632, reprinted Paris, 1865, p. 91), a priest among the Hurons in 1624 who wrote that the women made a kind of pouch

The process of embroidering, which is a women's activity, is as follows. The operator starts her design by choosing from her bunch of bristles a small quantity having the desired shade, and transferring them to her mouth. From the mouth they are again transferred, 4 to 6 together, to the buckskin and stitched down with thread at intervals of about one-sixteenth of an inch. Usually 4 bristles at a time are stitched down for the narrow line patterns, and 6 to 10 for the broader and more solid flower figures. When near the end of this strand of hairs the operator inserts another, trims off the ends of the old which have been left loose under the last stitch, and continues. The joinings are accordingly invisible while the design is stitched on, forming for some distance a continuous line. To end a line of embroidery it is either covered with a stitch, or doubled back on itself far enough to cover the end. Beginning at the bottom the artist builds up her design, choosing, as she proceeds, the particular figures in her repertoire. The needle is passed completely through the material with each stitch, a piece of paper often being held underneath and allowed to remain when the design is finished.

In the different ways of applying the moose hairs, several techniques, producing varied decorative effects, are to be observed. In the characteristics of these devices there appears to be some significance in their widespread similarity, whether present in Koryak, Eskimo, or Indian embroidery. Some devices, as will be seen, are identical with those employed in the porcupine quill technique so widely practiced in America.¹ Four of these devices for decorating flat surfaces have been observed among the Huron.

1. The simplest technical form is that which may be called the simple *line*, where the hairs are merely stitched down, without twisting or bending, upon the surface, as in fig. 2, *a*. This device is found practically the same all over the range of the hair em-

or tobacco bag of skin on which they did work worthy of admiration with porcupine quills colored red, black, white, and blue. Quoted by H. Ling Roth, *Journal of the Royal Anth. Institute of Gt Britain* etc., vol. 38, pp. 47-57 (1908).

¹A detailed comparative study of the American porcupine quill technique is being made by Mr W. C. Orchard whose manuscript, though still unfinished, contains an account of some forty varieties.

broidery. By crowding these lines close together, or by curling them in a spiral, solid areas may be covered with designs (pl. III) which are often hard to distinguish from these done with porcupine quills. Animal and life forms are often treated in this way.

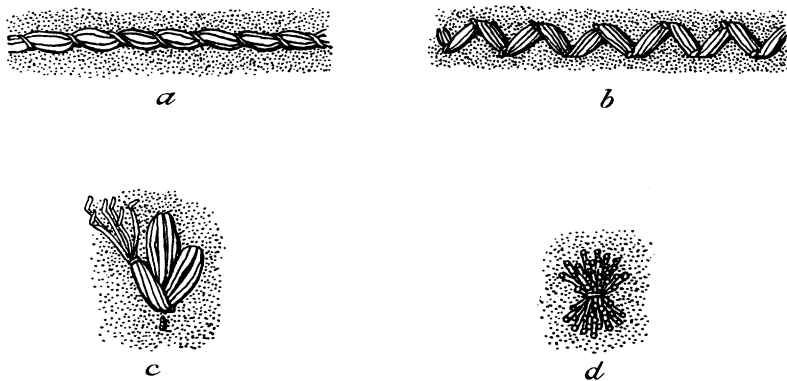


FIG. 2.—Embroidery techniques.

2. The *zigzag* technique, in which the line is started as for the preceding but bent at right angles to itself with each stitch, is most characteristic (fig. 2, *b*). Here the thread of each stitch is concealed by the bent-over hairs. The device is very agreeable and simple, being used throughout the whole hair embroidery region as a border.¹

3. An *overlapping* appliqué connected with the preceding is prominent in the formation of the flower designs. In this more hairs are, as a rule, used together to give more body to the figure. The main idea in this device is that the thread stitches are entirely out of sight, being concealed in the folds of the hairs, while the latter bulge somewhat between the stitches, producing an effect very favorable for the representation of the flower petals or fir leaves in which the device is chiefly employed (fig. 2, *c*).

4. The other Huron technique, which is also to be observed on Eskimo specimens, may be termed the *bristle*, because here the

¹A variation of the border zigzag is common on a number of Eskimo specimens from Alaska, collected by Dr Gordon, in which the same process is modified to produce a meander.

hairs are cut through between the stitches allowing the loose ends to stand erect forming a bed of bristles (fig 2, *d*).

Of edging devices two are common. One (fig. 3, *a*), the plain edging, has a mass of hairs stitched directly along the edge of the buckskin entirely concealing it, the other, the zigzag edging, used also in covering seams, has the hairs sewed on in zigzags over the edge (fig. 3, *b*).



FIG. 3. Edging techniques.

Recently the Huron have taken to ornamenting birch bark boxes with the moose hair designs, the same patterns and method of attachment being employed as on buckskin. The finish and workmanship of these articles is most ingenious.

While dealing with the use of moose hair as a means of decoration, mention should perhaps be made of the bristle and metal dangles commonly employed as a fringe or edging for embroidered surfaces. Dangles or pendants of the same kind are to be found among the plains tribes. With the Huron there are two varieties. One consists of little clusters of moose hair, horse, or caribou bristles,

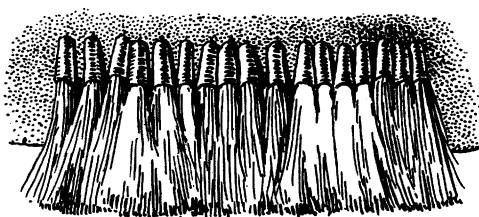


FIG. 4. Metal and bristle fringe.



FIG. 5. Metal and bristle dangles.

white or red, with a cone of tin around the base (fig. 4), the series usually being arranged in a compact fringe. The other (fig. 5) is similar to the first in all respects except that a few beads are

attached to make it longer, and the individual dangles are set farther apart. The dangles occur chiefly on the epaulets of coats, as an elaborate substitute for a simple fringe, along the seams or on the flaps of men's leggings, and sometimes on flat surfaces of fancy articles of buckskin or undressed caribou skin, as in figure 5.

Moose hair in its natural white color is also used by the modern Huron as a false embroidery decoration on finger rings and bracelets made of splint and horse hair. The foundation of the ring consists of a narrow splint around which either black or red dyed horse hair is tightly wrapped. A few white moose hairs are inserted under the horse hair wrapping, going over and under it and exposing one or more stitches to bring out some fancy figure. The technique is identical with that common among the plains tribes,¹ who decorate the quills of feathers in their headdresses with horse hair wrapping and turkey beard insertion. A similar ornamental device is common on the rims of bark baskets among the northwestern Canadian tribes,² and I have seen it on quilled Penobscot pipe stems.

DESIGNS.—We find here that, like many primitive people, the Huron have associated their decorative figures with familiar objects which they seem to resemble, and have accordingly given them a certain class of names. The important feature of these design names is that they are for the most part taken from the plant kingdom. Thus we have among them, representations of balsam fir, barberry, flox, marguerite, clover, and parts of plants such as roots, trunks, stumps, crossed branches, vegetation which conceals the roots, buds, fruit, and the part that covers the base of the branch, all of which are more or less conventionally realistic. Besides these, two others, not plant names, the star and the cat's paw, occur. Figure 6 shows these elementary figures, some with slight variations in their forms.

The larger designs are used independently but more frequently are combined to make up a complete figure resembling a tree or

¹ The technique is found on specimens from the Osage in the Heye collection, Univ. of Pa., and the Winnebago and Sauk and Fox in the American Museum of Natural History, N. Y., collected by Mr A. B. Skinner.

² Cf. Teit, The Shuswap, Jesup North Pacific Expedition, *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History*, N. Y., vol. II, no. 7, pp. 480-7, for discussion by Dr Boas.

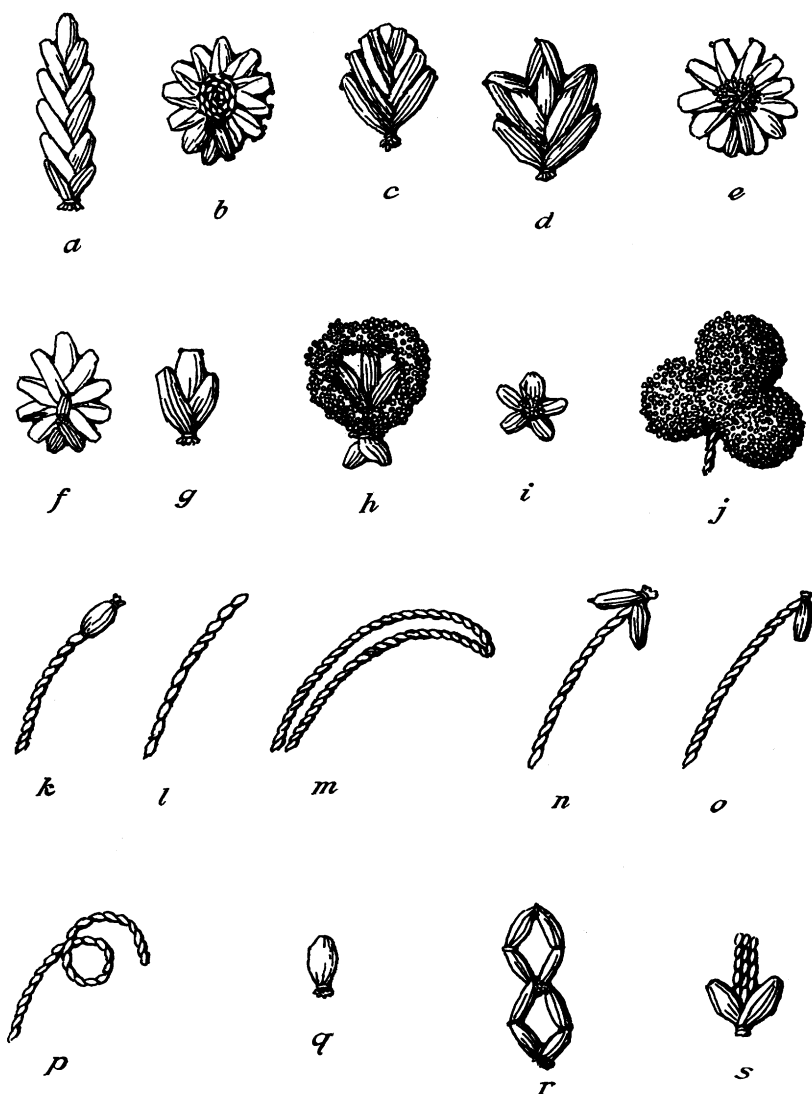


FIG. 6. — Moose hair embroidery figures: *a*, balsam fir; *b*, star; *c*, *d*, cat's paw; *e*, marguerite; *f*, flox; *g*, barberry; *h*, wild chicory; *i*, forget-me-not; *j*, clover; *k*, branch with fruit or bud; *l-o*, dead or leafless branches; *p*, bent branch; *q*, broken branch or stump; *r*, crossed branches; *s*, roots and vegetation around base of tree.

plant. This complex pattern is decidedly a characteristic of the Huron moose hair decorations. The zigzag should perhaps be included in these patterns for it has a definite decorative function as a border although it lacks a realistic interpretation. The zigzag, it appears, is a particularly prominent decorative motive in all eastern Algonkian and Iroquois art. Of the flowers themselves however, the Huron claim the balsam fir, cat's paw, and star to be the oldest. Most of the others, it is thought, are later developments, but at any rate they have been employed commonly as decorative motives since early in the nineteenth century. It will be noticed in comparing the figures of the star, marguerite, and flox, that the difference is determined by the technique in the center, the star having a coil of the simple line, the marguerite having the bristle, and the flox the overlay. In the mind of the Indian artist the idea in these designs is purely realistic, the various elements going to make up the whole plant or tree, as it may be. But strangely, no violence, according to the native eye, is done to the realism by combining such things as a balsam fir trunk and branches with a cat's paw (pl. I, fig. 4). The main idea is said to be to produce variety and a pleasing effect with the few patterns at hand. In regard to the use of different colors there seems to be no regular attempt to reproduce the flowers in their natural hues, with the exception of the clover and forget-me-not. In fact, as will be seen, most of the figures appear in unnatural colors, the balsam fir, for instance, being blue, red, or white as often as green. Not infrequently one figure contains two different colors. The only conventional use of colors, as far as I could observe, seems to be the employment of green for branches and roots.

A more detailed description of a few actual designs taken from specimens will serve better to explain the use and significance of the designs. The figures and their interpretations have been given separately in figure 6. Very characteristic figures are to be found on the vamps of moccasins. The oval forward part of the vamp is always decorated with two or three parallel curves, comprising mixed simple lines and zigzags. The colors employed are usually blue and white, the whole being considered as a Huron tribal mark

of identity (pl. I, figs. 1, 2, 3, 4). In the enclosed space appears a flower design which is often varied to suit individual fancy. Fig. 3, pl. I, is an old and typical moccasin pattern, representing the balsam fir, with three green branches alternating with two leafless ones, all having their stems and roots hidden in vegetation. Moccasin 4, pl. I, is similar to the preceding in all except the cat's paw at the top. Fig. 1, pl. I, with balsam fir, is also of the same general type varying the leafless branches with dead ones and having the

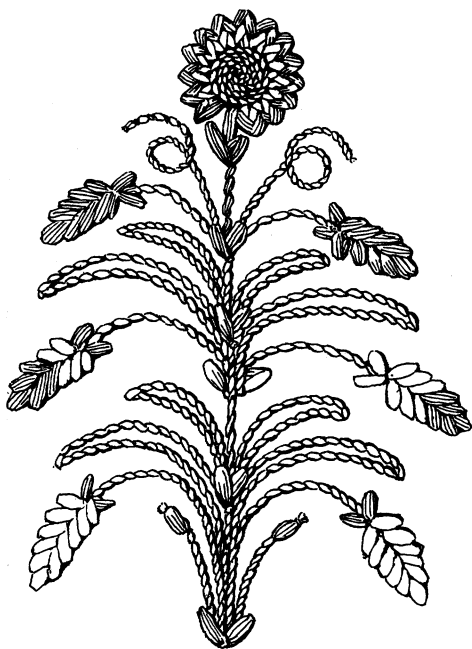
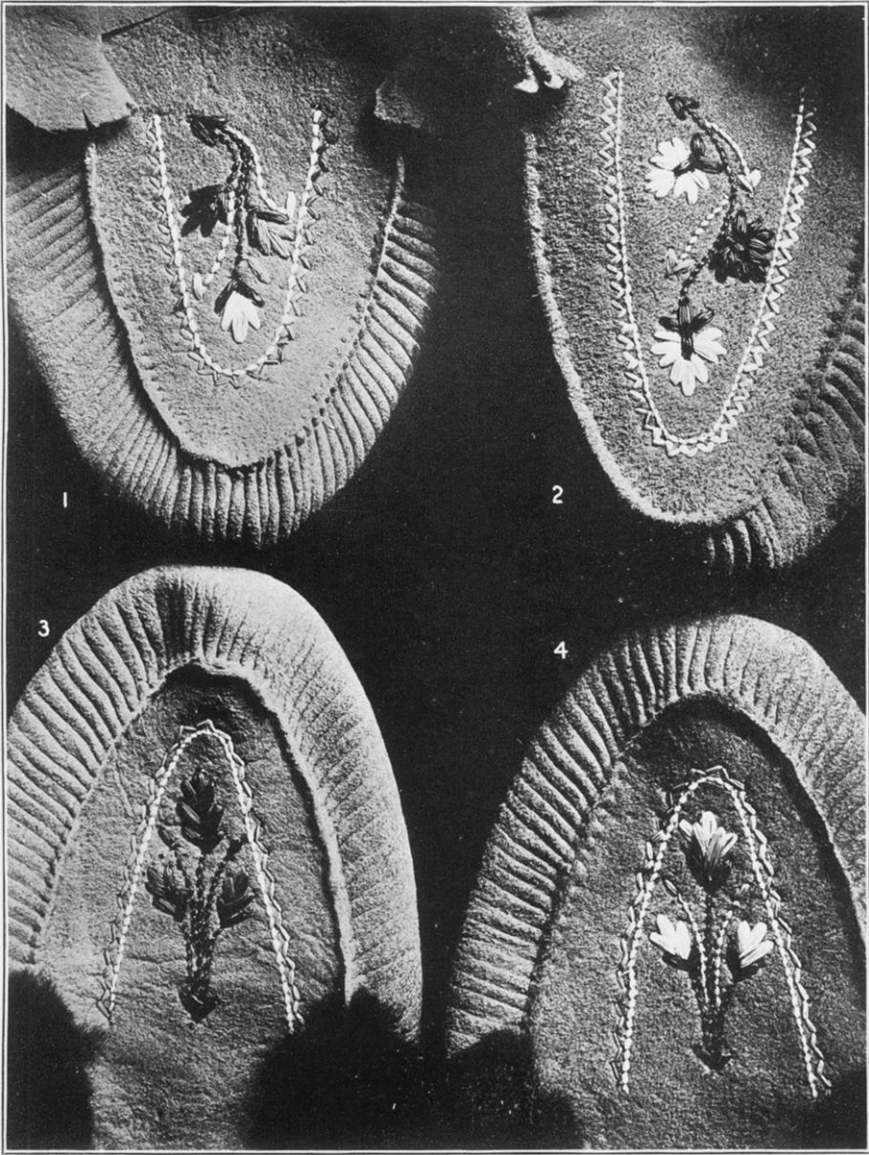


FIG. 7. — Design from a pouch.

addition of a short branch stump near the top of the figure on the left. The significance of an enclosure or a fence is sometimes assigned to the zig-zag, as here, for example, where it is made to surround a complete tree. The roots and branches in this one are curved. In fig. 2, pl. I, we have a similar design except that flos replaces the balsam fir. Moccasin patterns do not vary much from the types shown, the chief variations being in cat's paw, star, marguerite, and balsam fir center designs.

The moccasin patterns

are the pride of these Indians and display the best qualities of their art. Figure 7, from a leather pouch, may be taken as a typical example of the more elaborate complete figure. The design represents a balsam fir tree with a star above it. Beginning at the top beneath the star we have dead twisted branches, verdant branches, two sets of leafless branches, and the last two repeated with a pair of broken branches between them, until the bottom is reached



HURON MOOSE HAIR MOCCASIN PATTERNS

where budding branches appear emerging from the two short spurs at the base representing the vegetation around the roots. The long straight line running from the bottom through to the star is a root. The three pairs of spurs along this line represent the nodes where the branches join the trunk. In this design the colors are used irrespective of their real values, the branches and root being green, the balsam fir, red, blue, and white, the star blue and white, and the nodes red. Figure 8 shows another typical design, from a piece of embroidered caribou skin. It represents uniformly a balsam fir tree with verdant and dead branches alternating, in red, blue, and white, with red nodes where the branches join, with budding branches at the bottom and green vegetation at the roots similar to the preceding figure. A common design on small caribou skin bags for tobacco consists of a tree figure with balsam fir branches alternating with dead branches of type *n*, figure 6, surmounted on the top with the cat's paw, star, marguerite, flox, or wild chicory. Small scissors-holders of caribou skin, for the tourist trade, are embroidered commonly with disconnected figures of barberry, flox, and crossed branches. These Indians also make buckskin hunting coats with fringed epaulets over the seam of each shoulder upon which the women embroider very attractive designs. Above the fringe, oftentimes of metal dangles with tufts of moose or caribou bristles (figs. 4, 5), there usually appears a zigzag enclosure, following the outline of the epaulet, within which is a tree design surrounded by disconnected figures. Here the balsam fir, cat's paw, clover, and flox seem to be the most used, the whole diversified with various forms of dead or leafless branches. Upon the collar and cuffs of these coats the same designs with zigzag border have been noticed. Wall pockets of caribou leg, with the hair and hoof on, for the reception of pipes are commonly manufactured by the Huron and

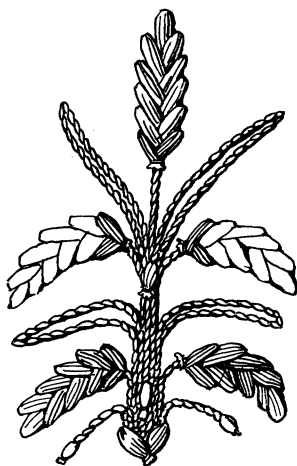


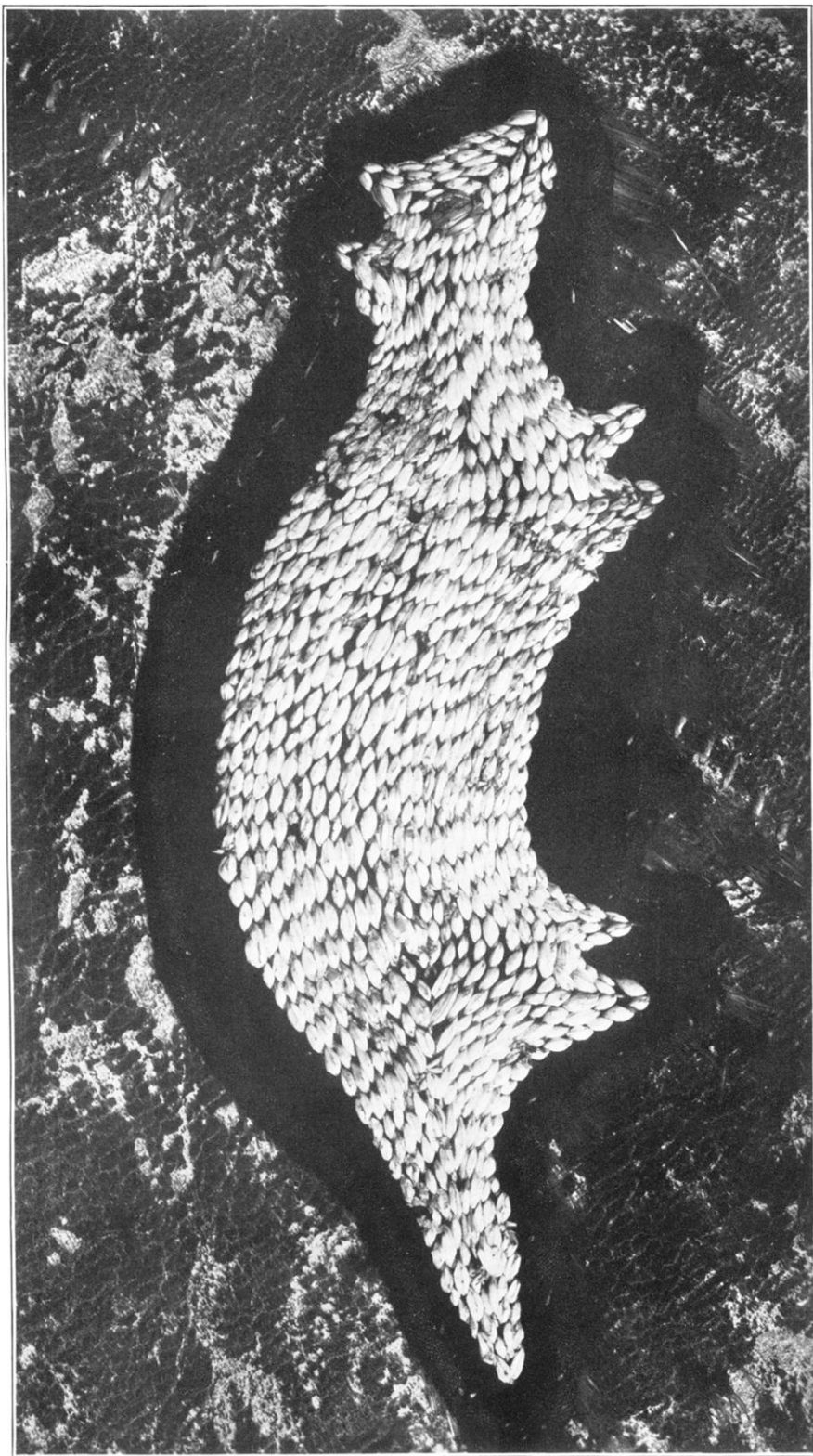
FIG. 8. — Typical moose hair design.

their neighbors. The facings of the pockets are usually bordered with the zigzag which encloses designs and figures similar to those placed on the epaulets of coats. Long narrow surfaces, such as belts, bandoliers, moccasin lapels, coat fronts, or legging flaps, the latter from hearsay, are ordinarily decorated with long sinuous lines from which at intervals balsam fir sprays or various flowers branch off. In all such areas of decoration the zigzag takes a very prominent place as a border. A hunting knife case of caribou leg was observed, its buckskin lapel decorated with a series of green balsam fir figures. A headdress band had at intervals separate figures representing pink marguerites, and green balsam firs, the latter quite long, the whole band being bordered above and below with a zigzag. Balsam fir patterns like this in which there were fifty spurs on each side are known to have been made. An old pair of child's moccasins in the Heye collection has a broad flap or lapel decorated with cat's paw figures and branch stumps at intervals, joined together by a waving line or stem. On the vamp the cat's paw forms the central figure with barberries at each side. Outline figures of bow and arrows, tomahawk, and cross are sometimes used as decorations, though these are undoubtedly of quite modern adoption.

In the collection of Mr George G. Heye there is a Huron costume consisting of a sleeved coat, skull cap with tuft of feathers at the top, and leggings, a remarkable example of the moose hair technique (see pl. II). The entire costume is made of the skin of the harbor seal with the hair side out. On the cap are a series of red cloth diamond cut-outs sewed on the skin. These are decorated with the characteristic Huron zigzags and cat's paw figures. The coat is ornamented on the collar, front facings, cuffs, and lower border all around with hair-embroidered designs on the red cloth foundation. All of these are likewise thoroughly characteristic both in technique and outline. They include the ever-present zigzag, cat's paw, balsam fir, star, flox, daisy, stumps, and roots in various groupings as will be seen from the illustration. A series of ornamental triangular cut-outs about the lower border of the coat is very suggestive of the similarly decorated Montagnais and Naskapi where oftentimes, indeed, even similar painted flower figures appear.



HURON SEAL SKIN COSTUME WITH MOOSE HAIR EMBROIDERY



SOLID FIGURE OF BEAVER IN MOOSE HAIR

The Huron coat, however, which must have belonged to some chief, is rather exuberantly ornamented with animal figures, horse heads, human heads, and birds on the back, sides, and sleeves. I was told by the Huron that such figures were quite commonly used, although they can hardly be as typical as the simpler flower figures. One of the animal figures, evidently a beaver, the emblem of the Huron,¹ shows very well the solidly embroidered areas (pl. III). The leggings are similarly decorated down the outside, the designs here being cat's paws, balsam fir, flox, stumps, and roots, besides animals, crescents, and ellipses. On the whole this costume is the oldest, and in many respects the most typical specimen showing the moose hair technique, that has so far come under observation.

It appears, in conclusion, that the moose hair appliqué embroidery of this tribe forms an integral part of a widespread northern technique, similar in many respects to quill work. As to the flower designs, about the origin of which at present very little in general is known, it seems that with the Huron at least three are native. From this it may be expected that, upon investigation, certain elements at least of the flower patterns in the art of other northern and eastern tribes may likewise be found to be native.² As regards the relationship between the moose hair technique and the realistic names, I think the latter are purely secondary in origin, the design having acquired names from their resemblance, in the native eye, to certain familiar objects. To judge by the appearance of these non-geometrical designs, plant and flower likenesses would be most naturally suggested. The occurrence of the evergreen balsam fir as the chief name and figure corresponds to what is found among

¹ Cf. also J. A. Maurault, *Histoire des Abenakis* (Sorel, 1866), p. 227.

² Evidences of the early use of flowers, as decorative motives among the New England Indians are to be found in some of the colonial accounts; cf. Willoughby "Textile Fabrics of the New England Indians," *Amer. Anth.*, vol. 7, p. 88, quoting Gookin; also "Dress and Ornaments of the New England Indians," *ibid.*, pp. 502, 508. Also as an example of apparently indigenous flower designs among the central Algonkian, mention might be made of the conventional but quasi-realistic trailing arbutus figure in its quill decorations on birch bark boxes of the Michigan Potawatomi. With these people the arbutus is known as the "tribal flower," according to the late chief Simon Pokagon. Cf. "*Ojimaŋkwe mitigwaki*" *Queen of the Woods*, S. Pokagon, p. 155-9 (Hartford, Mich., 1899).

Indians of other regions, where the pine, for instance, occurs as a motive both in California and on the Plains. From an early beginning with only three or four plant names the Huron appear to have developed their art by inventing certain new flower figures and modifying some of the old conventional ones and giving them new plant names. So, it is claimed, representations of exotic plants such as forget-me-not, flox, and others, have crept in as motives in modern times making the technique less prominent than the attempt at realism so far as the decorative idea in the mind of the native artist is concerned.

As an early result of investigations now being carried on among the northeastern Algonkian tribes, I find incidentally that the first three figures of the Huron set, fig. 6 (*a*, balsam fir; *b*, star; *c*, cat's paw) also occur in the incised designs of the St Francis Abenaki, Penobscot, Malisit, and Micmac. Furthermore the figure known as *balsam fir* by the Huron goes under the name of *tree* among the Penobscot where it is exceedingly common in their exquisite decorative wood carving. Identical figures are to be seen on the skirts of painted buckskin coats from the Naskapi Indians of the Labrador interior,¹ and another figure identical with the Huron *barberry* occurs on another Naskapi coat in the American Museum of Natural History, N. Y. It is evident that these figures had a wide distribution among the northeastern Algonkians with whom they were shared by the Huron, if not altogether borrowed by them.²

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¹ Cf. Turner, "Ethnology of the Ungava District," *11th Annual Report Bur. Amer. Ethnology*, p. 282, fig. 88.

² I have recently seen two specimens of the moose hair embroidery among the Penobscot, the figures and technique of which are identical with those of the Huron. Moreover, both Mr Mechling and myself have independently encountered the same technique and designs among the Malisit of St John River.