

## THE GREAT WHITE COVERUP

Julia Harrison

In a recent publication, Thomas Myers (1987: 1) calls material culture the "neglected parent of modern American anthropology." He laments the separation between the study of anthropology and the study of objects that happened in the early decades of the twentieth century. He feels that if we knew more about the objects that we house in our museums, "we might have a less idealized understanding of . . . Indian culture" (Myers, 1987: 1). While likely correct, his plea is directed to only one area where research needs to be done.

Myers's article discusses a study that he did of moccasins in two museum collections which, while poorly documented, led him to some interesting conclusions concerning the culture that produced them. He determined that a large percentage of the moccasins was not made for Native use, but was in fact made for sale or trade to Whites and that these moccasins tended to be simply made and decorated. He sees this process as "part of Plains Indians' adaptation to life on the reservation . . . by the manufacture of simplified 'Indian' goods for sale" (Myers, 1987: 1). He agrees with work done by Graburn (1976) that, when "traditional" goods are made for a curio market, there is a concomitant deterioration in quality. Graburn goes on to say that these objects have a lessened symbolic content for those who made them.<sup>1</sup>

Myers raises questions concerning what this process tells us about other collections which were specifically commissioned for sale to museums, such as those amassed by James Mooney, Frances Densmore, and other anthropologists (Myers, 1987: 40). But this type of collection makes up a small percentage of museum Native materials. A larger percentage of museum Native holdings is that randomly collected by individuals who wished to have some record of their travels among these people (see Phillips 1987). We need to address the question as to what these latter collections tell us

about the people who made the materials, but I would speculate that a more fertile area of research would be to investigate what they can tell us about those who collected them.

In this paper I would like to present some preliminary thoughts on this topic based on some work that I did with a group of objects which have been attributed to the Red River Metis in the period approximately 1820 to 1870. I suggest that while the study of objects in museum collections may reveal something about the culture of the people who made them, they can likely tell us more about the people who collected them, as some of the objects that are in museum collections likely had little relevance in the originating culture.<sup>2</sup> This idea is pertinent to the current museum world and links with a trend advocated in a recent publication by Marcus and Fischer (1986). They suggest that contemporary anthropology can "offer [a] worthwhile and interesting critique of our own society" (Marcus and Fischer, 1986: IX). Museums, and their collections if examined anthropologically in this "experimental moment" of contemporary anthropology, can offer an element of that critique of our society.

The ideas presented here parallel those of Sandy Niessen (1986) in her attempted study of Indonesian textiles in European museum collections. Her frustration with their records led her to state that ethnographic museums are largely "monuments to western thought and history" (Niessen, 1986: 1). Niessen laments that museum records for the textiles tell us "what little information satisfied western curiosity . . . [in fact it is] . . . their only coherent statement" (Niessen, 1986: 1). I would suggest that this "only coherent statement" is a very important one from which to initiate anthropological research on museums and their collections to come to better understand them. Anthropology and museums are perhaps best reunited as the anthropology of museums. As anthropologist Michael Ames has said, "by studying museums in their social and historical settings we can study the making of culture in its concrete reality" (Niessen, 1986: 36). Marcus and Fischer suggest that this must be a critical reality as well. This critical appraisal of the museum as an institution will

hopefully open the doors to a more honest assessment of why we hold the objects that we do and what we should do with these holdings in the future.

During the nineteenth century one of the largest concentrations of Metis people in the West lived in the Red River area. In 1820, they numbered nearly 10,000 people (Metis Association: 12). But this relatively large and historically important group, the mixed blood populations which grew from the marriages and liaisons of Native women and European men, are not well understood and subsequently not well represented in Canadian museum collections. There are several reasons for this, most of which derive from the lack of recognition of the Metis as a distinct group in the early days of Canadian history due to the perceived ambivalence of their biological and cultural roots.

There is no doubt that a lot of items were collected from the Metis in the nineteenth century as it was the Metis who lived around the trading posts or in larger areas of concentration of population such as Red River. It was also the Metis women who were first schooled by the nuns in the mission because of their concentrated populations and who learned how to do much of the embroidery which was prized by visitors to the region. But much of the material collected from Metis throughout history has been "ascribed to the Cree, Ojibwas, Assiniboine, Eastern Sioux and a variety of northern Athapascan groups (Brasser 1985: 222). When these objects were collected by colonial officials, military personnel or travellers, it was their "Indianness" that was emphasized. As souvenirs, they represented the "exotic" and the possibility that they were created by individuals of mixed-blood was frequently ignored or overlooked. Many of these souvenirs eventually found their way into museum collections and the "Indian" origin of the pieces was likely passed on with them. Often items may not have been identified as to any specific Indian group for such subtitles were not important to the collector.<sup>3</sup> These items were simply the "other" or "Indian."

Ted Brasser has tried to resurrect some of the Metis material, identifying several genre of objects and decorative

techniques distinctive of the Metis in the Red River region in the period from about 1800 to 1870. Several writers concur with him that, in the Red River in the early decades of the nineteenth century, there was a "rise of ethnic identity" among the mixed blood populations (Brasser, 1985: 223. Also see Spry, 1985, Foster, 1985). This identity, it is assumed, led to the development of a distinctive artistic tradition. Part of this art tradition was a group of hide coats, which were often white in colour and elaborately decorated with porcupine quills or paint. In large part these coats are undocumented with little information available on who made them, or who collected them. The evidence attributing these coats to the Metis, as meager as it is, is convincing.

An entry from the diary of Frank Mayer, a traveller in the Red River region in the 1850s, stated that "The Metis women produced the most beautifully garnished work of beads, porcupine quills and silk, with which they adorn leathern coats, moccasins, pouches and saddles" (emphasis added) (Heilbron, 1941: 148). The Metis operated "freight trains" of Red River carts travelling down into Minnesota, taking with them the objects listed above to trade or sell for staples for the Canadian Red River community. The Red River region as the derivative area for the coats is further supported by some of the design components which reflect Cree and/or Ojibwa traditions from the Great Lakes region or those of the Eastern Sioux of the Minnesota area. But while these traits are identifiable, these coats and other items generally attributed to the Metis people show a fusion of many traditions and a willingness to experiment with new colours and designs (see Brasser, 1985; Heilbron, 1941). This concurs with Mayer's observations of the Metis people.

According to Heilbron, "They [the Metis] are a wild, picturesque race, and they are hardy and athletic. Their costume partakes of the character of their genealogy--mixed" (1941: 149). Not only were the various components of their costume "mixed" but so also were the decorative elements used on their clothing. Some were Native; some were European. The Metis women who made these items incorporated European floral designs with the

Native techniques of quillworking and painting. Various construction elements of the coats also combine both Native and European elements. Not only are they made of hide but several of them have fringing which is undoubtedly a derivative from the fringes found on Indian shirts. Some of the other elements of the coats, though, are derivative of European men's fashion of the period 1820 to 1870. The overall tailored cut of the coats is clearly European in derivation. Individual coats manifest certain traits which can possibly date them to specific decades but it must be kept in mind that fashion trends in North America at this time may well have been several years behind the "haute couture" of Europe and thus must be cautiously used in dating these pieces. The group of coats examined show elements borrowed from various types of coats found in the period 1820 to 1870 (Dunning, 1987). However, other elements of the coats are derivative of European military uniforms of the era. Both epaulets and "waterfalls" or "Tommy backs" are also found on these coats (Ross, 1986). "Waterfalls" are the groups of fringes or braid found at the center back of some of these coats which were found on some military uniforms during this time. On these coats the braid has been replaced with quill wrapped hide. Some of the coats with their ornate decoration and short cut, resemble "drummers" coats which were often the most elaborately decorated uniforms worn (Fortier, 1985). Combining all of these elements leads to the plausible conclusion that such a mixing of elements could well have come from the hands of those who knew both Native and European cultural influences well--the Metis.

One type of documentation that does not exist, however, to link the Metis to these coats is descriptions of their being worn by the Metis. The closest thing that can be found is a drawing by Frank Mayer of a "Halfbreed" at Pembina. But it is difficult to determine from the drawing the nature of the material from which the coat is made (Plates 1 and 2).

In fact many of the coats show no sign of wear, suggesting that they were not made to be worn but to be sold. Furthermore, the logic of their construction and placement of some design



PLATES 1 and 2:

Red River Halfbreed, 1859. Sketch by Frank Mayer [E. Ayer Collection, The Newberry Library].

elements suggest that only the strangest-shaped person could ever have worn some of them, and then could never have sat down. Should they have done so, they would have crushed the design elements which are placed on the skirt. Most coats show no such damage.

The descriptions in the historical literature of what Metis actually wore mirror the one offered by Isaac Cowie in the 1860s. It describes the Metis as "fond of dress" opting for "fine blue cloth capotes with brass buttons, fine cloth trousers, broad L'Assomption belts, fine coloured flannel shirts, [and] black silk neckerchiefs and foxtail plumes, anointments of pomatum and scented hair oil, besides silver finger rings and gilt earrings" (1913: 352). Alexander Ross, in the 1840s, noted that the women, too, were "fond of show" and described their costumes as consisting "all . . . of foreign manufacture" (1972: 1909-1). For Metis men, there are repeated observations of the wearing of a blue capote, the L'Assomption sash and beaded moccasins which affirm the popularity of these items. But only moccasins (many not worn) and a relatively limited number of sashes ever found their way into museum collections. None of the blue capotes appear to have survived.

But the "Metis" white coats did find their way into museums and they obviously did not suffer the ravages of daily wear because, to their eventual owners who were likely not Metis, rarely did these coats represent a garment to be worn. These coats were not the mundane, but represented the "exotic" nature of the "Indians" who made them. To the Metis who actually created them, they were an impractical item. (The Metis were wearing imported clothes almost exclusively, with the possible exception of decorated moccasins.) But there was no less attention to detail and quality. There may have been a jumbling of stylistic elements, in that different features of European styles may have been combined in one garment, but there was never a loss of logic or detail. For example, on one coat there are pocket flaps that are off the seam, where logically one might find them if they did in fact cover a pocket. But the purely decorative

function of such flaps, as vestiges of pockets, was a European design element often found on coats of this period. The Metis woman who made this coat was accurate with the details that she chose to incorporate within the complex and varied whole (see the front and back cover photographs of this volume). Moreover, all of the coats examined exemplify superb craftsmanship. The quality of the quillwork rivals anything produced in this area at any point in history. If in fact some of these coats were made as late as the 1870s, they demonstrate that there were still craftswomen around at that time who knew and practiced a wide range of quillwork techniques long after beadwork and silk embroidery had become popular.

In some ways these coats were vestiges of a bygone era in that they are made from hide (rather than stroud cloth which the Metis used to make their own capotes because it was readily available) and demonstrate decorative techniques no longer popular. This raises the question, to whose aestheticism were they responding? Unquestionably, like any marketable product, the coats had to satisfy the market demands for which they were being produced. Graburn (1976) has suggested that objects made for sale have less symbolic relevance to the culture which made them than those made for use in the culture. He also suggested that objects made for sale or trade show a deterioration in quality.<sup>4</sup> This does not appear to be the case with the Metis coats. What was being produced is in fact a whole new genre of items which had little relevance to the culture who made them. Their key value to the people who made them was the high monetary or trade value that they must have had because they would have required a great amount of labour and time to complete.

Recent research suggests generally that it was not in the early period of contact that Native peoples parted with items of high cultural value.<sup>5</sup> In the late eighteenth century one of Captain Cook's officers, James King, noted that when the things which represented their "Gods" were parted with by any of the Pacific Coast Indians it was done "slyly," demonstrating that



there was a sense of "committing . . . an impious crime" (Cole 1986: 3). It was only in later years, when the pressure of White settlement and the destruction of the economic livelihood of the Native peoples (including the Metis) threatened their very existence and caused cultural disintegration, that they more readily parted with such items.

Thus, beyond the high level of craftsmanship that the Metis women demonstrated in these coats, there is little that they tell us about them. But they do tell us something about the perception of their makers by the people who collected or possibly commissioned them.

Although there is no direct evidence that any of the coats were commissioned, we do know that other items were. In the Royal Ontario Museum there are a set of hide "doilies" which were commissioned by a friend of Alexander Morris, the son of the Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories. He not only paid women but also provided them with the supplies necessary to complete the work, including the thread and cut pieces of hide to decorate. This small incident is a good example of some of the processes at work which could have dictated the final form of a piece of "Metis" handiwork. One could speculate that many of the coats were made on commission when one considers the amount of work that went into such a piece--an unlikely investment to make if one is uncertain of the sale of the piece.

Commissioned or not, these coats suggest that those who collected them had a very idealized view of the Native people from whom they bought their "souvenirs." The coats manifest to the purchaser what are "pure" Indian characteristics in that they are decorated with quillwork and paint--not beads or silk thread--yet both were common during the period that these coats were made.<sup>6</sup> They are made of the finest Native hides, but in a form (a European style coat) which has an inherent logic and acceptance to the visitor. While "exotic," these items are not "too" foreign.

The hides used for the coats are all of fine quality and, as has been mentioned, were often white. Whether or not the colour of these coats has any relevance in the acceptance of these items as desired souvenirs is uncertain, but it does warrant further examination. Such factors need to be linked to the processes at work in the mind of the tourist, be it a nineteenth- or twentieth-century traveller, when he selected the appropriate "souvenir" to make the travel experience tangible upon returning home.

The lack of attention paid by the collectors to the specific identity of the women who made these coats (were they Indian or Metis?), and the fact that they likely have very little relevance to the culture which made them, suggest that the early travellers who collected much of what now resides in museum collections, in fact, documented what they perceived the culture to be and not what it was. They collected objects which appealed to their cultural values and aestheticism, not necessarily those of the people who made the items. Their choice mirrors the "exotic" that the Native peoples of North America represented. It is not my intention to berate these people for their lack of scientific collecting for it must be remembered that they often did not set out to document systematically the lifestyle and aestheticism of these populations. But when we in museums study this material it would be prudent to remember this fact and not attempt to load these objects with more than they are capable of revealing.

Recognizing the true nature of many items in museums will alleviate one aspect of the tensions found between Native peoples and museums which hold Native collections. A percentage of what we hold never had great relevance to the Native cultures and thus will help little in understanding aspects of "traditional" Native societies. A study of the records of those who amassed the collections, or of those who collected only a few items, will undoubtedly find many more references paralleling those of Jacobsen, who collected for several European museums on the Northwest Coast during the late-nineteenth century. He laments "that the Fort Rupert Kwakiutl had not been able to make much new material since his purchase from them the previous autumn"

(Cole 1986: 64). Clearly he was selecting from items made solely for his purchase. These objects, like the Metis white coats, were created for the European market.

Some of the real questions that must be investigated by museum anthropologists concern the issue of why we have chosen to preserve this material in museums. The ramifications of what this material actually represents and what we like to think it represents must be clearly understood. An understanding of what meanings these objects have taken on will lead us to appreciate their true value within our society.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The objects discussed in this paper fall between Graburn's category of "commercial fine arts" and "souvenirs." These items do in fact "adhere to culturally embedded aesthetic and formal standards" (commercial art) but I will argue that they have reduced "symbolic content" as they conform "to the consumer's popular notions of the salient characteristics of the . . . group" (souvenir art) (Graburn 1976: 5-6).

<sup>2</sup>This question could well be insightful if asked too of those people such as Densmore who did not set out to make the "scientific" collections.

<sup>3</sup>Phillips (1987) has suggested that in some instances the lack of personal assemblages of "material culture and art" by individuals such as traders and missionaries and the often concomitant "little information" recorded by these people about the cultural objects (as opposed to details about Indian life and belief) possibly stemmed from "over-familiarity and ease of access" to these "exotic" peoples (69).

<sup>4</sup>See note 1.

<sup>5</sup>In the context of doing the exhibition, "The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples," which drew heavily on European collections and understandably include some of the earlier material collected from North America, there is not a large amount of religious or sacred material for areas such as the Woodlands (Ruth Phillips: personal communication).

<sup>6</sup>Beadwork and silk thread embroidery are found on smaller items, such as moccasins, which come from this time period. These moccasins were possibly made "on speculation" rather than on commission. They most likely manifest the aesthetic values of their makers rather than those of the person for whom a commissioned item (such as a coat) was being made.

## REFERENCES

- Ames, Dr. Michael M.  
1986 Museums, the Public and Anthropology: A study in the Anthropology of Anthropology. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Brasser, Ted. J.  
1985 In Search of Metis Art. In The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America, J. Peterson and J.S.H. Brown (eds.) Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, pp. 221-229.
- Cole, Douglas  
1985 Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre Inc.
- Cowie, Isaac  
1913 The Company of Adventurers. Toronto: William Briggs.
- Dunning, P.  
1987 Costume Historian, Parks Canada. Personal Communication.
- Fortier, P.  
1985 Military Costume Historian, Parks Canada. Personal Communication.
- Foster, John E.  
1985 Some Questions and Perspectives on the Problem of Metis Roots. In The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America. J. Peterson and J.S.H. Brown (eds.) Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, pp. 73-91.
- Graburn, Nelson H.H. (ed)  
1976 Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Heilbron, B.L.  
1941 Mayer and the Treaty of 1851. Minnesota History 22 (2) pp. 133-56.
- Marcus, G.E. and Fischer, M.M.J.  
1986 Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Metis Association of Alberta, Joe Sawchuk, Patricia Sawchuk and Theresa Ferguson  
1981 Metis Land Rights in Alberta: A Political History. Edmonton: Metis Association of Alberta.

- Meyers, Thomas P.  
 1987 An Examination of Central Plains Moccasins: Evidence of Adaptation to a Reservation Economy in Plains Anthropologist 32 (115): 29-42.
- Niessen, Sandy  
 1986 A Tale that 1001 Batak Textiles Tell About 12 European Museums: A Collection History. Submitted for Proceedings of Koln Symposium on Indonesian Textiles.
- Phillips, Ruth B.  
 1987 Jasper Grant and Edward Walsh: The Gentleman-Soldier as Early Collector of Great Lakes Indian Art in Journal of Canadian Studies 21 (4): 56-71.
- Ross, Alexander  
 1972 The Red River Settlements: Its Rise, Progress, and Present State. Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers.
- Ross, D.  
 1986 Letter to Julia D. Harrison, February 5th.
- Spry, Irene M.  
 1985 The Metis and Mixed-Bloods of Ruperts Land Before 1870. In The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America. J. Peterson and J.S.H. Brown (eds.) Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, pp. 95-118.