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Author(s): H. Ling Roth

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MOCASSINS AND THEIR QUILL WORK.

BY H. LING ROTH,

[WITH PLATE VIII.]

WHEN we first compare the footgear of the North-American Indians, known as mocassins, with that worn by the better-to-do Europeans at the end of the Middle Ages we are, I think, most of us inclined to believe that mocassins were introduced into America by Europeans. But such a belief is quite wrong. Although the first mention of the word mocassin, written *Mawheassuns*, was made so late as 1612, by Wm. Strachey (Hakluyt Soc., vol. vi, 1849, p. 194), there is ample evidence as to the existence of the article quite contemporary with the advent of Europeans. So far back as 1527–1536, Nunez in the account of his retreat across Florida and the Mississippi to the west coast of Mexico, refers on several occasions to the footgear of the natives with whom he came into contact—natives who were then making the acquaintance of their destroyers for the first time, and to whom articles of European manufacture had not yet filtered down. There are also numerous references to, and descriptions of, mocassins in the Jesuit Relations.

The characteristic of the mocassin lies in the fact that the sole and upper are made in one piece of the same quality of prepared skin, which, at the present day, we often call buckskin, chamois leather or wash-leather. But as changes were, no doubt, from time immemorial in progress amongst the North-American Indians as elsewhere, we find that, while some tribes continued to use what we may call the primitive article, others adopted an improved form which was provided with a sole made of green hide. This transition has been going on even in modern times, for the old members of the Blackfoot Indians have quite recently told Clark Wissler that mocassins were formerly made without soles, and of a single piece of skin, with the seam at the heel, but for a long time they have used soles of raw-hide with soft tanned skin for uppers (*Annual Arch. Report for 1905*, Toronto, 1906, p. 166). Perhaps further light could be thrown on the transition by enquiry amongst Indians, who use the more modern form of mocassin, and who are unaware of any change, as to whether in their ceremonial observances the earlier or later form is worn.

Long ago Catlin pointed out that there was a prevailing and striking similarity of costume amongst most of the North-Western tribes. He could not say that the dress of the Mandans was decidedly distinct from that of the Crows or the Blackfoot, the Assiniboines or the Sioux; yet there were modes of stitching or embroidering in every tribe which might at once enable the traveller, who was

familiar with their modes, to detect or distinguish the dress of any tribe. These differences consisted, he said, generally in the fashions of constructing the head-dress, or of garnishing their dresses with porcupine quills, which they used in great profusion (p. 100). Elsewhere he remarked that a Crow was known wherever he was met by his beautiful white dress! The skins used by the Blackfoot were chiefly dressed black, or of a dark brown colour; from which circumstance, in all probability, they, having black leggings or mocassins, have got the name of Black-foot (pp. 45, 46)! He said nothing as to the distinguishing marks of the mocassins. All the same we have only to glance cursorily at any collection of mocassins to see at once how widely they differ, and to conclude correctly that the Indians themselves must, except in the case of remote living tribes, have been able to distinguish between the different sorts worn by their neighbours. Henry relates (i, p. 435) that when his friends were on the trail of some Sioux (who had stolen horses) at a

FIG. 1.—PATTERN OF A KICKAPU MOCASSIN.

The central portion, with the heel at C, forms the sole. It folds over so that B is joined to B' forming an inverted L seam at C; A is joined to A' and the rounded portion drawn over the toes. F F are the flaps or ankle pieces. Bankfield Mus.

FIG. 2.—PATTERN OF A SHOSHONE UPPER. BANKFIELD MUS.

deserted camp, they discovered upwards of a hundred pair of old shoes, and on examining the tracks made from the different forms of shoes were able to conclude that three different tribes made up the party, viz.: the Yankton, the Gens des Feuilles, and some other. Out of bravado, too, a retreating raiding party would leave an arrow or a mocassin in a conspicuous position to let the despoiled ones know who had robbed them.

But we have no need practically to go back to the old travellers in search of the distinctive marks—these old travellers do not give them in any case—for the distinctions hold good at the present day. There is (1) the general outline of the piece of leather which makes up the mocassin; (2) the form of the sole, whether in one piece with the upper, or a separate greenhide sole; (3) the ankle flaps; (4) the seams; (5) the tongue; (6) the strings; (7) the ornamentation¹ or colouring. A few examples will suffice, viz.:—

¹ See "Decorative Art of the Sioux Indians," by Clark Wissler, *Bull. Am. Mus. Nat. Hist.*, xviii, 1904.

A *Kickapu* mocassin, made of one piece of skin; sole broad, rounded at the toes with slight indication of position of big toe; flaps cut straight at the back and not joined together, pointed in front; sewn at the heel, inverted $\perp$ seam from root of toe nail and along centre of instep upwards; no tongue; strings start from the opening in front and are otherwise quite loose; bud and petal ornamentation over instep.

A *Shoshone* mocassin made with greenhide sole; sole somewhat narrow; flaps rising obliquely above the ankle and sewn together; uppers joined at the back; long triangular tongue ending in a point; loose strings slipped through at four places—two openings on each side of the foot; beadwork ornamentation on the instep in the form of a man standing with arms outstretched and legs apart, and a post on each side of him.

An *Apache* mocassin, upper made in two pieces—the upper proper sewn at back and wedge-shaped tongue in reversed position to that of the Shoshone tongue; separate sole, very pointed, with point of large toe barely rounded, the strings follow the opening for the insertion of the foot and pass through the tongue to hold it up; each right half coloured a light orange, with dark red cross below the little toe and a narrow band, also dark red, following the seam down the front; each left piece daubed with light ochre and a dark red cross below the little toe; a dark red band follows the seam between the sole and the upper all the way round. There is also a fringe sewn down the centre, between the two halves of the uppers, formed of a band of leather slit into strips, round the ends of which pieces of tñ have been hammered

In the small collection at my disposal at Bankfield Museum, Halifax, it is not possible to say for certain that the distinctions described are all characteristic, but they tend to show that the distinctions are very marked. In so far as I know, no list has yet been compiled of the distinctive character of the footgear of the tribes of North America, and it is not possible to do this in England. It may not be out of place to mention here that in the United States there are evidently factories where mocassins are turned out by machinery, and I have had such articles sent to me from America, and have been told they were really made by Indians—but the Indians who made them must have been factory hands!

The care of a traveller's mocassins was a marked feature of Indian hospitality. Bradbury, always on good terms with Indians, tells us (*Early Western Travels*, p. 179) that the squaw in some instances examined his dress and in particular his *mockasons*; if any repair was wanting she brought a small leather bag, in which she kept her awls and split sinew and put it to rights. This care of a visitor's mocassins was, however, a native custom extended to Europeans. Tanner (*Trav.*, Lond., 1830, p. 89) refers to the case of an Indian who had got lost and to whom the Crees, amongst whom he fell, gave a new buffalo robe and a handsome pair of mocassins, "an example of hospitality much practised by Indians who have not had much intercourse with the whites." Tanner was to all intents and purposes an Indian, and he remarks elsewhere (p. 90) that his own family were once thus treated by

the Crees, "the principal wife of the chief examining our mocassins and gave each a new pair." It was, in fact, the women's duty to dress the leather, "make and mend the shoes of the whole family, dry the men's shoes and rub them quite soft before they present them to their husbands in the morning" (Masson's *Recits de Voy. Nipigon Indians*, p. 257). It is also mentioned by one of the Jesuit Fathers that on the hunter's return his wife takes his leggings and shoes, wrings them out if they are wet and puts them to dry (xi, p. 211).

According to the Jesuit Fathers, in summer on the soft ground of the plains the Indians went without mocassins, but in rough country, as we might have expected, the wearing of mocassins was a necessity, and their absence was a sign of distress. Lewis and Clark's party mention the anxiety of some of their Indian companions who, referring to the tracks of two barefooted Indians, considered such barefootedness a proof that those who made the marks must have suffered very severely (iii, p. 161). From the knowledge of the suffering caused by the

absence of mocassins, coupled with the well known desire of proving their valour, arose the heroic custom, mentioned by Bradbury (*Early Western Travels*, p. 65), of a noted Osage warrior, not being a chief, who on leading a war party had, amongst other restrictions, to travel "without mockasons or even leggings."

Regarding the comfort or discomfort in the use of mocassins, according to European ideas, I have not been able to gather much information, but no doubt owing to the Indian having been brought up to their use from infancy they were a comfortable footgear until an improved article was discovered. Catlin tells us on one occasion,

FIG. 3.—PATTERN OF APACHE UPPER AND TONGUE. BANKFIELD MUS.

"on this march we were all travelling in mocassins, which being made without any soles, according to the Indian custom, had but little support for the foot underneath and consequently soon subjected us to excruciating pain, whilst walking according to the civilised mode with the toes turned out" (p. 219). On the other hand Long, speaking of the Omahaws, says: "In stepping the feet are universally placed upon the ground in a parallel manner with each other; they say that turning out the toes in walking, as well as turning them inward is a very disadvantageous mode of progression in high grass or in narrow pathways" (xv, p. 71). Both these authorities agree as to the position of the toes adopted by the Indians when walking; and the want of support caused by the absence of a hard sole can be appreciated. Perhaps some of the numerous American field ethnologists can add further particulars regarding walking in mocassins.

Long (*Western Trav.*, xv, pp. 66, 67) says, that when on a march the mourners would walk barefoot in testimony of their mourning. But this discarding of the mocassin had ultimately a symbolical meaning. Before the Shoshones would

smoke the pipe of peace "they pulled off their mocassins, a custom," Lewis and Clark afterwards learnt, "which indicates the sacred sincerity of their profession when they smoke with a stranger, and which imprecates on themselves the misery of going barefoot for ever if they are faithless to their words, a penalty by no means light to those who rove over the thorny plains of their country" (ii, p. 52).

It was no doubt a kindred feeling which induced them to put mocassins on to the dying, a custom which the Jesuit Fathers noticed early in the seventeenth century but were unable to explain (xi, p. 251). At an Omahaw funeral Long mentions the placing of a pair of mocassins with other articles which were to be used on the long journey, which the deceased was supposed to be about to perform (xv, p. 6, and xvi, p. 123).

As mentioned above, the women have to prepare the skins; but they do not seem to have been in the habit of preparing the skins, required for mocassins, in a different way from that of skins required for other purposes except when the hair of the animal was to be kept on. Beyond, therefore, referring to the writings of those who have described skin dressing nothing more need be said on the subject here.¹

In their quill work the North Americans had, and a few of their survivors have still, a method of dress (and basket) ornamentation which is unique—not being found in any other part of the world. The quill work is at the same time pleasing and most artistic. The first mention of this work, which I have been able to trace, is by Champlaine, in his voyage to Canada, 1603, who relates that the women were adorned with "Matachia, which are paternosters and chaines interlaced, made of the hair of the Porkespicke, which they dye of various colours" (Purchas, xviii, p. 194). It is also mentioned by G. S. Theodat, a "Recollect" of St. Francis, who travelled amongst the Hurons in 1624 (*Le Grand Voy.*, Paris, 1632, reprinted Paris, 1865). He says the women "font aussi comme vne espece de gibesiere de cuir ou sac à petun, sur lesquels elles font des ourages digne d'admiration, avec du poil de porc espic, coloré de rouge, noir, blanc et bleu, qui sont les couleurs quelles font si viues, que les notres

FIG. 4.—PATTERN OF A MOCASSIN MADE ALL IN ONE PIECE.

As shown, S is the underside of the sole, which is folded under at the dotted line A, until D touches D' and the triangular portion DEF comes up on the right side of the foot, E being joined to E'; C is the centre of the heel, U is the upper and T the tongue. Bankfield Mus.

¹ R. W. Schufeldt, "The Navajo Tanner," *Proc. U.S. Nat. Mus.*, ii, 1888, pp. 59–66, very complete; Alfred L. Kroeber, *Bull. Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist.*, xviii, 1902, pp. 26, 27; Catlin, pp. 45, 46; Long, xiv, pp. 312, 313; Henry, pp. 360, 382, 395; Hennepin (p. 191), and Schoolcraft, who gives an illustration of a dressing frame and of several of the leather dressing adzes used.

ne semblent point en approcher" (p. 91); and again: "quelqu'vnes d'entrelles ont aussi des ceintures et autres parures faictes de poil de porc espic, teincts en rouge cramoisy, et puis fort proprement tissuës" (p. 134). Father Hennepin, who was in 1680 on the Mississippi, where the natives use wooden canoes and not bark canoes, refers to a chief who had some relative's bones carefully wrapped up in skins ornamented with several red and white bands of porc epic (p. 332). There does not seem to be much recorded as to the use of porcupine quills for purposes other than the special form of decoration under notice, although Fraser, writing in 1805 (Masson's *Recits*, i, p. 350), says the Corbeaux Indians substitute porcupine tails for

FIG. 5.—POUCH FOR HOLDING QUILLS MADE OF BISON INTESTINE.
M. A. Owen Collection, University Mus., Cambridge.

combs, and Lewis and Clark say of the Teton Okandandas, a Sioux tribe, that they wore loose robes of buffalo skin dressed white and adorned with porcupine quills loosely fixed so as to make a jingling noise when in motion (i, p. 139).

FIG. 7.—
ARAPAHO
QUILL
FLATTENER. (op. cit. p. 28), Fig. 7.
After Kroeber.

In so far as I am aware no one has yet published any description of the method in which the quill is applied as a decoration to mocassins or any other portion of the wash-leather dress of the North-American Indian. Long boasts of what he learnt to do among the Indians "as regular as the natives." He adds, "I also made makissins, or Indian shoes, of deer skins, drest and smoked to make the leather soft and pliable, and worked with porcupine quills and small beads, etc." (*Voy. and Trav.*, London, 1791, pp. 71, 72), but like every other writer he leaves us to find out how the quills were applied.

The only quills which appear to be used are the short ones taken from the tail of the Canada porcupine (*Erethizon dorsatus*), averaging in length about 65 mm. (2½ in.). They are used without any preparation except that of dyeing and flattening. Kroeber, speaking of the Arapaho, says the quills were softened in the mouth and flattened with a bone

As to the dyeing Alex. Mackenzie was informed that coal was used as a dye "with which the natives render their quills black" (p. 26), and Geo. Heriot (*Trav.*, Lond., 1807, p. 293), says that, apart from the colour extracted from the juice

of particular plants and berries, "they extract with considerable dexterity, the colour of European cloths, which they transfer to the leather and to the porcupine quills, with which they fabricate their little works."

In answer to some enquiries I addressed to Miss Mary Alicia Owen (author of the *Folk Lore of the Musquakie Indians*) regarding the provenance of the colours used, that lady very kindly sent me the information which follows: "Yellow is made from the bark of the hickory tree (*Carya alba*); the quills are soaked in an infusion made from boiling water and bark, and afterwards washed in a weak lye made from wood ashes, and then dried in the shade. Green is obtained from the boiled juice of wheat or common garden spinach. Purple and blue are obtained from the juice of the grape (*Vitis cordifolia*), which grows wild and has a villainously sour, almost black fruit, as small as a currant, with juice the colour of claret. Scarlet and orange are procured from onion skins. Crimson, pink and magenta, are the stains of the poke-berry (*Phytolacca decandra*). Once I saw an exquisite pink which I was told was made from the petals of the prairie rose (*Rosa setigera*), and on another occasion I saw a magnificent red which an old woman said was made from dog's blood and mussel shells; I begged to be allowed to see the process, but the old woman refused permission. Other colours are made from roots, leaves and bark, but the Musquakies as a rule care little for them and are losing the secret of preparing them. When the Indians have the opportunity of buying dyes from the traders they do so; when they have not this opportunity they produce their own dyes. Of late years there has been set up the fashion among some Indians of working the quills uncoloured into patterns on birch bark. The bark is coated till it is soft and the quills are stuck in after the holes are made with an awl. It is probable that the uncoloured quills are used in the wet bark because dyed ones might run and fade. It is most probable that the use of uncoloured quills is quite a modern one as all the Indians are very fond of bright colours, and it is the colouring of the quills which gives them their charm—without the colouring the quill work falls flat and becomes objectless."

The quills are sharp enough and strong enough to withstand being gently pressed into wash-leather without the aid of an awl to prepare the way. But, in so far as I can ascertain from the specimens of quill work which have come under my observation, in no case are the points of the quills used for fixing them on to the leather, although at a first examination one gets the impression that the quills are so fixed. This is no doubt partly due to the elasticity of the woolly-like surface of wash-leather whereby holes or threads are quickly covered up, and partly to the quills being placed intentionally very closely together. Perhaps the fact that sinew is used instead of thread may also help the misconception.

The details of the quill working which follow are taken from the four articles illustrated in Figs. 8–11 (Pl. VIII), viz., two mocassins said to come from Hudson's Bay, a knife sheath and a frontlet—all in Bankfield Museum, Halifax, Yorks.

In Fig. 12 I have reproduced one of the commonest quill patterns, made of all white quills, and have shown everything that can be seen of it either with the naked

eye or with a pocket lens. Felt with the finger, the pattern is found to sit tight on to the surface of the leather, and without opening it up one can but conclude

FIG. 12.—WHITE QUILL WORK ON MOCASSIN, FIG. 8.
Q = Quill.

FIG. 13.—THE SAME AS FIG. 12, BUT SPREAD OUT TO SHOW HOW APPLIED.
L = Loop in surface of leather; S = Sinew; Q = Quill.

that the quills have been driven into the leather at their points. But such is not the case. In Fig. 13 I show what has been really done. A series of loops, L, have been made in the surface of the leather by means of the woman's awl, the thorn;

FIG. 14.—WHITE AND RED QUILL WORK ON A POUCH IN BANKFIELD MUS.
RQ = Red quill; WQ = White quill.

FIG. 15.—THE SAME AS FIG. 14, BUT SPREAD OUT TO SHOW HOW APPLIED.
L = Loop; S = Sinew; RQ = Red quill; WQ = White quill.

through these a piece of sinew has been drawn and then the flattened quill has been placed in position under and over the sinew as shown. Nothing could be simpler, yet the elasticity of the materials and the skill of the workwoman are so great that

FIG. 16.—ANOTHER ARRANGEMENT OF WHITE AND RED QUILL WORK ON MOCASSIN, FIG. 8.

FIG. 17.—THE SAME AS FIG. 16, BUT SPREAD OUT TO SHOW METHOD OF APPLICATION.

they completely hide the method by which the result is achieved. In a similar way are produced the designs with two or more coloured sets of quills. Fig. 14 shows an arrangement in red and white, which arrangement is explained

by the diagram in Fig. 15. In Figs. 16 and 17 another arrangement is exhibited, together with its explanation.

FIG. 18.—QUILL WORK BORDER ON MOCASSIN, FIG. 8.

A different style of ornamentation is shown in Fig. 18, being the outer border of Fig. 8. Here the sinew instead of being drawn through the loops in a straight line is made to run through an upper and lower loop alternately, and the quill is *twisted* round the sinew instead of being kept flat. Perhaps the quill is moistened to prevent breakage when it is being twisted.

FIG. 19.—QUILL WORK APPLIED TO COVER A SEAM.
E = the two edges of leather placed together; S = the "cord" (of sinew),
T = the thread of sinew which joins the two pieces of leather; Q = the quill.

A different method again is illustrated in Fig. 19. The quill decoration in this case is intended to cover the seam—seams appear to be always "corded," generally with sinew. There is another method of quill application used for decoration where there is no seam, such as is shown in Fig. 20; the difference being that where a seam is to be covered the quill is twisted round the "cord" sinew, Fig. 19, and where there is no seam the quill is squeezed lengthwise and sewn on. This is a less effective method, and, I am inclined to think, is of late introduction. It forms the general decoration on the knife sheath, Fig. 10, and is similar to that on the mocassin, Fig. 9. But the quill border on the knife sheath, while also stitched on, is done so in a different manner, the fastened down quill being bent alternately over to cover the stitch, Fig. 21.

FIG. 20.—QUILL SQUEEZED LENGTHWISE AND SEWN ON MOCASSIN, FIG. 9, AND KNIFE SHEATH, FIG. 10.

FIG. 21.—QUILL BORDER ON EDGE OF KNIFE SHEATH, FIG. 10.

A very intricate piece of work is shown in Fig. 22, which illustrates the joint of the ankle flap with the uppers on the mocassin, Fig. 8. A band of leather (the "cord" of European sewing) is placed along the two edges of leather to be fastened together and the quill wrapped round this, but on the front or outside

edge the sewing thread (sinew) is made to run through each coil whereby the cord is secured to the joint. Here again the method is entirely hidden and it is only discoverable by carefully opening out the work. The result of the work is very effective.

FIG. 22.—QUILL WORK APPLIED IN MOCASSIN, FIG. 8, TO COVER UP THE EDGES OF THE LEATHER OF THE MOCASSIN AND THE ANKLE FLAP.

Quite different in every respect from all the foregoing methods is the quill work shown and explained in Figs. 23 and 24, taken from the central flat band of ornamentation on the mocassin, Fig. 9, already mentioned. It is the same as that

FIG. 23.—QUILL WORK FORMING THE ORNAMENTATION OF CENTRAL PIECE OVER INSTEP DOWN TO TOES OF MOCASSIN, FIG. 9, AND THE WHOLE OF THE ORNAMENTATION OF FRONTLET, FIG. 11.

T = Sinew used as thread to make the corrugations, S = Sinew at end of every third row of quills; C = Sinew to hold T in position; F = Stitches on to mocassin; Q = Quill.

FIG. 24.—THE SAME AS FIG. 23, AS SEEN WHEN COMPLETED; WITH SECTION.

shown on the frontlet, Fig. 11. The quills are corrugated, Fig. 23, by means of tightly drawn sinew thread placed alternately over and under the quill, so that when the work is completed it gives the impression of being a set of narrow beads

FIG. 8.—MOCASSIN FROM HUDSON'S BAY. BANKFIELD MUSEUM.

FIG. 9.—MOCASSIN FROM HUDSON'S BAY. BANKFIELD MUSEUM.

FIG. 10.—KNIFE-SHEATH FROM HUDSON'S BAY. BANKFIELD MUSEUM.

FIG. 6.—THORN AND QUILLS. UNIVERSITY MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE.

FIG. 11.—FRONTLET FROM HUDSON'S BAY. BANKFIELD MUSEUM.

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closely threaded, Fig. 24. When completed the little piece of ornamentation is sewn on to the article to be decorated.

As mentioned above I fail to find from any of the specimens at my disposal that the quills are fixed into the leather by means of their sharp pointed ends. That the decorative use of quills on leather may have originated that way from basket work is quite possible. At the same time I think that the method of affixing the quills by means of direct sewing, as in Figs. 20 and 21, is a later development which may have originated with seed or bead work. The development of quill work decoration may perhaps be surmised to have been as follows:—

1. Applied to basket-work or mat-work where the quill ends are inserted into the interstices of the plaiting.
2. Applied to leather work by means of pressing the points into the material.
3. The adoption of the loop and sinew.
4. Twisting quills round stitches of sinew.
5. Twisted or squeezed up quills sewn on.

European ornamentation, apart from bead work, is not infrequently put on, such as silk braid, flannel ankle flaps, etc., etc.; in Bankfield Museum there is an old mocassin, which has been in the collection over fifty years, ornamented with silk *tambour* stitch pure and simple.