



Belt Cup Artist once known
Eastern Woodlands
ca. 1795-1820
Maple burl, leather strap, sewing pins
7 ¾ x 3 ¾ x 2
T0856
<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/796/cup>

By: Laura J. Allen
Montclair Art Museum



This object is a drinking cup made to hang from the wearer's waist sash or belt. An Eastern Woodlands artist carved it with finesse from the hardy burl of a maple tree in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. [1] It features three carved beavers, two sturgeon, two heart- or leaf-shaped designs, a radial medallion, a sawtooth rim, a "fiddlehead" scrollwork handle, and a barrel-shaped toggle attached with a leather thong. [2] The cup shows a complexity of iconography and elaboration of form that carried relational and cosmological values in a fur trade context. "Artwork provides exposure to internal cultural priorities while informing our own people about key historic and philosophic practices," writes Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora Nation), practices that "are based on the interrelationships between human and other-than-human beings." [3] Her comments apply well to this historical work.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Eastern Woodlands peoples commonly made and used wooden cups (with and without toggles) for drinking and eating. [4] When canoeing, the traveler could detach their belt cup and dip it into the lake or river for refreshment; for this reason belt cups are also known as "canoe cups." These vessels are related to Woodlands ladles (which have longer handles) and bowls that were part of one's personal belongings and brought to meals and ceremonial feasts. These wooden wares can be elegantly sculpted with figures that may represent the clan of the owner or protective spirits revealed to them in dreams. [5] Cups circulated often between Native and non-Native people, and numerous examples live in museum collections. [6]

That said, belt cups as elaborate and fine as the Fenimore example are rare in contemporary collections. Two other extant cups by the same artist are known, and their provenance is unclear. The most documented is the cup at the Canadian Museum of History (CMH), which has three three-dimensional beavers, three sturgeon, and a rooster (Fig. 1). The toggle is a kneeling figure instead of a barrel. The CMH cup was purchased in 1951 by ethnologist Marius Barbeau from the widow of a man who inherited it from his father, a forestry worker based in Quebec. Barbeau reasoned that the artist had lived in the upper St. Maurice River region (Atikamekw territory.) [7] The third cup, also collected by Barbeau, is on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art from the Charles and Valerie Diker collection (Fig. 2). It is very similar to the Fenimore cup, with a large beaver on the fiddlehead handle, a beaver in relief on either side of the bowl, and multiple sturgeon. It is missing its toggle. The Diker cup is attributed to an Odawa or Ojibwe artist (Michigan or Ontario), but with no specific provenance data [8]. To add to this ambiguity, the Fenimore cup's records note that it was in southern Canada for some of its lifetime, and also that collector Devere Card, one of the Fenimore cup's prior owners, acquired it in New York State and was told it was Haudenosaunee. [9]

Beaver iconography is common on historical Woodlands belt cups, ladles, bowls, pipes, and the handles of the "crooked knives" used to carve these objects. [10] Beaver plays an important role in Algonquian and Iroquoian creation stories, and this being is one of the symbols of kinship groups. [11] Notably, the cluster of forms on the three cups references key commodities in the fur trade: beaver, sturgeon, and casks of alcohol. Atlantic and lake sturgeon fisheries were abundant and important at this time, nourishing Indigenous communities and traded to non-Native people as well. [12] The barrel toggle on the Fenimore cup refers to brandy or rum; some ladles and pipes from this time depict people drinking from similar barrels (e.g. Fig. 3). Alcohol was gifted to Native people to initiate trade negotiations, exchanged for furs, and integrated into

trading rituals and Native ceremonials [13]. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, company factors would give “trade captains”—male lineage leaders—cloth “captains coats,” alcohol, tobacco, and other valued items to help establish and maintain long-term exchange relationships. The captain then distributed these goods to his cohort that he organized to visit the post. [14] It is plausible that exquisite belt cups like the Fenimore cup and its siblings—which reference the goods and relationships at stake—may have been owned by Native trade captains. Such fine items would befit and benefit the social standing and economic roles of these leaders. The carved cups may also have been used to drink the product before, during, or after the exchanges. [15]

The motifs on these cups likely also held cosmological significance to help bring their owners hunting, fishing, and trading success. Like a number of other belt cups, these have sawtooth (zig zag) designs along their rims. Art historian Ruth Phillips describes such triangular patterns on woven bags and cups as energy lines that express the powers of Thunderbird and other beings in the upper-world realm, chiefly lightning and thunder. The pairing of wavy or castellated lines in the lower register (fig. 4) refers to Thunderbird’s symbolic opposite and opponent, the Underwater Panther, who churns waters in the underworld realm. [16] Compare as well a historical Abenaki belt cup with a zigzag rim above and two snakes below, also underworld creatures (fig. 5). The bowl of the Fenimore cup likewise depicts water creatures beneath its sawtooth rim: the beavers and sturgeon (which would submerge when dipping the cup). All these animals are associated with Underwater Panther. [17] Jesuit observers noted in 1667 that Anishinaabe fishermen would make offerings to Underwater Panther to help provide a good catch of sturgeon. [18] Appeals to this underworld spirit would also have been appropriate when hunting beaver for trade. [19]

All told, the creative assemblage of forms on this belt cup would have been legible to both Native and non-Native agents in active exchange of goods. These exchanges may have involved this cup itself, being a particularly fine, intricate piece suited for gift-giving. The cosmological meanings of this cup’s imagery would also have had special potency for the Indigenous hunter/trader to whom the vessel initially belonged. This cup’s creation and use would have been effective in maintaining abundance and proper social and spiritual relations in the Woodlands world.

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Notes

[1] Burls are knobby growths on the trunk of tree that feature contorted grain patterns. Hardwood burls were commonly used for carved bowls and cups at this time because of their durability and beauty. See Devere A. Card, *The Use of Burl in America: A Short Discussion of American Treen, with Special Attention to Such Treenware Articles as Are Made from Burly Growths* (Utica, N.Y: Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, 1971). This cup is described in plates IV and V of that text as well as in Eva Fognell and Alexander Brier Marr, eds., *Art of the North American Indians: The Thaw Collection at the Fenimore Art Museum*, 2nd edition (Cooperstown, New York: Fenimore Art Museum, 2016), 94.

[2] The fish on this cup are likely sturgeon and not another elongate species such as pike. Depicted indicators are the incised large bony plates and the barbels (though the artist took some liberties with the fins).

[3] Jolene Rickard, “Returning Home: Indigenous Art Creating the Path,” in *Becoming Our Future: Global Indigenous Curatorial Practice*, ed. Julie Nagam, Carly Lane, and Megan Tamati-Quennell (Winnipeg, Manitoba: ARP Books, 2020), 19, 20.

[4] Frank G. Speck, *The Iroquois: A Study in Cultural Evolution*, 2nd ed., Bulletin 23 (Bloomfield Hills, MI: Cranbrook Press, 1955), 83 and Frank G. Speck, *Penobscot Man: The Life History of a Forest Tribe in Maine*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1940), 113. See also Allen Wardwell, “Belt Cup,” in *The Guennol Collection*, ed. The Brooklyn Museum, vol. 3 [New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1991], 148.

[5] Betty Coit Prisch, *Aspects of Change in Seneca Iroquois Ladles, A.D. 1600–1900*, general ed. Charles F. Hayes III, Research Records, no. 15 (Rochester, NY: Research Division, Rochester Museum and Science Center, 1982), 51 and Ruth B. Phillips, “Like a Star, I Shine: Northern Woodlands Artistic Traditions,” in *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples*, ed. Julia D. Harrison (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, Glenbow Museum, 1987), 63. See also Evan M. Maurer, “Representational and Symbolic Forms in Great Lakes-Area Wooden Sculpture,” in *Great Lakes Indian Art*, ed. David W. Penney (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, the Detroit Institute of Arts, 1989), 22–38.

[6] Historical Eastern Woodlands wooden cups are in the collections of the National Museum of the American Indian, Canadian Museum of History, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Royal Ontario Museum, Harvard Peabody Museum, Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Museum and Research Center, and others, as well as in private collections.

[7] Marius Barbeau commentary in CMH object record for A-430; Marius Barbeau, *I Have Seen Quebec* (Toronto, Macmillan, 1957). Attribution based on stylistic analysis can be difficult given widely shared visual traditions across the Woodlands.

[8] David W. Penney, ed., *Indigenous Beauty: Masterworks of American Indian Art from the Diker Collection* (New York, NY: Skira Rizzoli Publications, Inc./American Federation of Arts, 2015), 158, 162. Dealer Donald Ellis, who sold the cup to the Dikers, indicated that he acquired the cup from Canadian collector Harold Groves. In the 1960s, Groves had purchased Barbeau’s personal collection of Native art, but no further information on provenance accompanied the cup. (Donald Ellis email to author, March 21, 2023)

[9] See references for footnote 1 and the Fenimore Art Museum object record online.

[10] See Prisch, *Aspects of Change in Seneca Iroquois Ladles* and Russell Jalbert and Ned Jalbert, *Mocotaugan: The Story and Art of the Crooked Knife—the Woodlands Indian’s Indispensable Survival Tool* (Nantucket: Metacom, 2003).

[11] Heidi Bohaker, “‘Nindoodemag’: The Significance of Algonquian Kinship Networks in the Eastern Great Lakes Region, 1600-1701,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (2006), 25–33; Barbara Alice Mann, *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas*, vol. 4, *American Indian Studies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 2–3, 96.

[12] I thank faculty member Jonathan Holstein for raising this point. See, e.g. Holzkamm, Tim E., Victor P. Lytwyn, and Leo G. Waisberg. “Rainy River Sturgeon: An Ojibway Resource in the Fur Trade Economy.” *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe Canadien* 32, no. 3 (1988): 194–205.

[13] Peter C. Mancall, “Alcohol and the Fur Trade in New France and English America, 1600–1800,” in *Drugs, Labor, and Colonial Expansion*, ed. William R. Jankowiak and Daniel Bradburd (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 89–99; Ann M. Carlos and Frank D. Lewis, *Commerce by a Frozen Sea: Native Americans and the European Fur Trade* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 89–94. Some writers point out a potential relationship between alcohol barrels carved on Wendat pipes and ladles and the quantities of rum used for visionary experiences during the annual feast of the Wendat White Panther society. The fact that barrels exist on belt cups and other wooden objects from a range of Woodlands nations suggests a multiplicity of meanings for the depiction of alcohol kegs. On the Wendat White Panther Society, see Marius Barbeau, *Huron and Wyandot Mythology with an Appendix Containing Earlier Published Records*, Canada Department of Mines Memoir 80, Anthropological Series 11 (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1915), 95-97, see also P.D. Clarke in Appendix, 342–344.

[14] David W. Penney, “Captains Coats,” in *Three Centuries of Woodlands Indian Art: A Collection of Essays*, ed. J. C. H. King and Christian F. Feest, *European Review of Native American Studies Monographs* 3 (Altenstadt: ZKF Publishers, 2007), 86–87.

[15] I thank faculty members Jonathan Holstein and David Penney for suggesting the potential connection between these cups, captains of trade, and drinking traded alcohol.

[16] I am grateful to Otsego faculty member Ruth Phillips for bringing the ROM cup in figure 4 and her interpretation of its symbols to my attention. See Ruth B. Phillips, *Patterns of Power: The Jasper Grant Collection and Great Lakes Indian Art of the Early Nineteenth Century* (Kleinburg, ON: McMichael Canadian Collection, 1984), 25, 52. According to Phillips, the ROM cup was purchased from a man named Cowan near Wyebridge, Ontario, whose father was probably George Cowan (d. 1804), an esteemed Métis trader who operated his own post.

[17] Ross Kenneth Harper, “To Render the God of the Water Propitious: Hunting and Human-Animal Relations in the Northeast Woodlands” (PhD diss., Storrs, CT, University of Connecticut, 1999), 31.

[18] Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, vol. 50: Lower Canada, Iroquois, Ottawas 1664–1667 (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1899), 289. For

Woodlands religious significances of fish, see Åke Hultkrantz, “Water Sprites: The Elders of the Fish in Aboriginal North America,” *American Indian Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1983).

[19] Harper, “To Render the God of the Water Propitious,” 9.

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Supplemental Figures



Figure 1

Drinking cup

Artist once known, Eastern Woodlands

ca. 1795–1820

Maple burl, fiber

L: 7"; W: 3 3/4"; H: 2 1/3"

Image: Canadian Museum of History A-430, IMG2015-0154-0229



Figure 2
Belt Cup
Attributed to Anishinaabe
(Odawa or Ojibwe, Michigan, or Ontario)
ca. 1820 Wood, nail, lead?, staple
6 5/16 x 3 5/8 x 2
MMA (Loan from Charles and Valerie Diker Collection) L.2021.3.6
Image courtesy of Donald Ellis Gallery, New York and Vancouver
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/844515>



Figure 3

Ladle Artist once known, Wendat (Huron)

ca. 1750

Maple

9 ½ x 6 ¾

T0032

Image Courtesy of Fenimore Art Museum, Photo by John Bigelow Taylor, NYC

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/690/ladle>



Figure 4
Drinking Cup
Artist once known, Eastern Great Lakes*
19th century
Wood, red stain, wire
16"
ROM 16744
Image courtesy of ROM (Royal Ontario Museum), Toronto, Canada. ©ROM
*See note 16 for provenance information



Figure 5

Belt cup

Artist once known, Abenaki

Collected 1921 in Vermont Wood

NMAI 10/8146

Image: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (10/8146).

Photo by NMAI Photo Services.

https://americanindian.si.edu/collections-search/objects/NMAI_116715