



Mukluks

Unknown Tli'cho artist

1981-82

Ht: 12"; W: 6"; D: 8"

T0657a-b

[URL coming soon]

By Jennifer Bowen Allen (Yukon Historical & Museums Association)

The Northwest Territories (NWT) is in Northern Canada, in between the Yukon and Nunavut territories. There are five First Nations and an Inuit Nation in NWT: Gwich'in, Sahtu, Dehcho, Tli'cho, Akaitcho, and Inuvialuit. The Sahtu, Dehcho, Tli'cho and Akaitcho peoples are Dene and members of Denendeh (part of a larger family of languages known as Athapaskan).

Dene were superior designers of footwear due to the rough and rugged wet lands of Cordillera and Alaskan Plateau. The landscape defined their designs for footwear and clothing to deal with changing climates and conditions. In the 1800s, early fur traders collected Gwich'in summer outfits (a caribou skin outfit with five pieces: a tunic, knife sheath, hood, mitts and moccasin-trouser). The outfit was a popular item to collect and can be found in many museum collections around the world.

When the Canadian Ethnology Service began collecting artifacts in the 1860s, the Dene Nations and Inuit Nations had well-defined traditional territories.¹ The earliest style of footwear collected from the Dene was the pointed toe moccasin-trouser. This style of moccasin was collected among all of the Dene and Gwich'in, but not the Inuvialuit. The moccasin-trouser was a design that combined the moccasin and trouser as one piece. The moccasin-trouser quickly disappeared

with the introduction of European clothing brought by the fur traders. The ease and comfort of the new trouser evolved the moccasin-trouser into the wrap-around moccasin. The pointed toe feature remained until the 1930s when the rounded toe became popular, as an easier pattern to assemble.² The wrap around moccasins allowed for more decorative embellishments, such as a beaded trim (around the heel) with a strip of beaver fur trim. The women preferred using young beavers with darker hair for men's moccasins. This style of moccasin is still a popular design among the Dene. Many people either call them slippers or moccasins.

The Mukluks (T0657a-b) in the Fenimore Art Museum collection were collected in a Tli'cho community in 1981-82. They are made with Melton, a wool fabric, in a dark blue and red. The leggings are trimmed with factory-tanned rabbit fur and the soles are made with home-tanned moose hide. The floral motif is pink, green and yellow and embroidered with yarn, with woven straps. The centre of the floral motif is made with French knots. Embroidery was introduced by nuns, either in the church or residential schools. Early in the trading relationship between the Dene, the women embroidered with silk, then moved to yarn as it came available. The yarn is pulled apart into four strands; a single strand is used to create the floral motif. A satin stitch is used to create the pedals, leaves, and stem. The soles of the mukluks are made with smoked moose hide. Moose hide is best for adult footwear for its varying thickness. The lower straps are made with smoked caribou hide. Caribou is best for long straps, because its hide is thick and is very strong. These Mukluks are a combination of hand sewn and machine sewn.

Judy Thompson suggests that European clothing was quickly adopted by the Dene, but that they preferred their traditional hide footwear. The hard soled footwear didn't take hold until the non-native population began establishing communities at the trading outposts. At the turn of the century, steamboats began bringing up supplies for houses and construction equipment for roads. The need for rubbers and hard soled shoes increased as Denendeh's environment slowly began to change. Many of the Dene were hired on to work with the heavy equipment, requiring them to use hard soled shoes. There is a company who designed rubbers to fit moccasins, but I would need to do more research on the origins of the rubber moccasin, to know who and when this style of rubber was introduced.

¹ Judy Thompson and Beta Shoe Museum, *Pride of the Indian Wardrobe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) 19.

² *Ibid*, 28.