



Coat

Great Lakes, Potawatomic

ca. 1880

L: 35.25 in; w: 20 in

T0254

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/827/coat?ctx=500fcc548380907deffd89cff61f090bc5f82405&idx=0>

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During the Otsego workshop, I was fortunate to visit with a mid-nineteenth century coat with possible Potawatomi origins. Eugene Thaw purchased the coat in 1992 from Toby Herbst, an art dealer in Santa Fe, New Mexico¹. Beyond the written receipt of this transaction, there is no additional record of the coat's maker or wearer. The sales receipt indicates that the item is a man's coat created sometime between 1860-1880 and attributes the coat to having Chippewa origins. These bits of information and the materiality of the coat are useful for determining the coat's genealogy, however it is through the colors and symbolism on the coat that expresses a Potawatomi or Anishinaabe maker and origin. While each Nation is distinct, the Potawatomi, Ojibwa (Chippewa), and Odawa are collectively referred to as Anishinaabeg and are connected historically, culturally, and politically.

According to the date provided on the sales slip, the coat was created after the forced removal of Potawatomi from their original homelands in 1838. Potawatomi were forced, at gunpoint, on a 660-mile journey known as the Trail of Death². This forced relocation led them into close proximity with Southern Plains tribes in Indian territory. Over time, these close relations resulted in the development of "Prairie-style" beadwork. David W. Penney suggests that the development of Prairie style beadwork was informed by Delaware women³, a Northeastern tribe that was also relocated to Indian Territory. Penney also observes that the colors "pink and powder blue" were commonplace in Delaware attire⁴. These same colors find their way into the Potawatomi coat and can be located in the border designs of the back collar and the geometric florals emanating from the front pockets (see Figure 1).

A similar coat exists in the Whitecloud Collection of Native American Art at the New Orleans Museum of Art. The *Man's Coat*, attributed to the Delaware of Oklahoma, is also dated to the mid-1800s (see Figure 2)⁵. The Potawatomi Coat in the Thaw Collection and the Delaware Coat in the New Orleans Museum of Art are similar in their overall construction, materials, and placement of designs. Both coats are made from smoked deer hide and feature wide rounded collars that taper to the front. While the beaded designs on the coats differ, they resemble similar spatial arrangements. The majority of the beadwork travels along the bottom hem of the coat and is located around the cuffs, front pockets, wide back upper collar, and front upper and under collar. The form of this style of coat was inspired by Euro-American military frock coats⁶.

While the overall construction of the Potawatomi coat carries colonial influence and inter-tribal exchange, there are indicators of resistance and cultural continuance. Located within the delicate beadwork of the Potawatomi coat are specific design choices that pull the viewer to observe a

¹ Retrieved from the Fenimore Art Museum's T0254 Object Record. Accessed May 23, 2019.

² Christopher Wetzel. *Gathering the Potawatomi Nation: Revitalization and Identity*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), 31.

³ David W. Penney. *Art of the American Indian Frontier*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 114.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Paul Tarver, Ralph T. Coe, Jane Somerville Irvin, Megan O'Neil, Thomas St. Germain Whitecloud II, and Jacques St. Germain Whitecloud, eds. *Blue Winds Dancing: The Whitecloud Collection of Native American Art*. (New Orleans: New Orleans Museum of Art, 2005), 138-139.

⁶ *Ibid.*

distinctive Potawatomi or Anishinaabe worldview. The interchanging five-pointed stars and crescent moons along the bottom hem make reference to cosmological concepts while the geometric florals make reference to our natural world. Anishinaabeg spiritual beings are also present through *mishibizhiig* (underwater panther) and *animikiig* (thunderbird) symbolism invoking Anishinaabe power and relations⁷. The underwater panther is identified through the otter-tail design which is created by an elongated hexagon and double diamond pattern (see Figure 3)⁸. The vertical and horizontal zigzag patterns denote lightning, which is associated with *animikiig*; and whirling water, which is associated with *mishibizhiig* (see Figure 4)⁹. Alan Corbiere and Crystal Migwans trace a number of these motifs to the mid-1700s and early 1800s when they were incorporated, in large quantities, into quilled and fiber bags. As this was a time of immense change for Anishinaabeg, these important spiritual beings “were perhaps intended to invoke—diplomatically and spiritually—a distinctly Anishinaabe power”¹⁰. It is possible that this same idea translated to the symbolism in the Potawatomi coat. As the maker placed designs of memory and remembrance of Anishinaabe ways of being, perhaps they too were invoking a similar power as they navigated tumultuous beginnings in a new territory.

List of Figures:

Figure 1:

Coat, circa 1880, Detail of pink and powder blue geometric florals.

Thaw Collection, Fenimore Art Museum

Photograph by author

Figure 2:

Man’s Coat, circa 1850

Delaware Peoples, Oklahoma, United States

Animal hide, glass beads, silk cotton sateen, wool tape, cotton thread

Collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art Gift of Mercedes Whitecloud in memory of Dr. Thomas St. Germain Whitecloud III, 2004.240¹¹.

Figure 3:

Coat, circa 1880, Detail of otter-tail pattern on Potawatomi coat.

Thaw Collection, Fenimore Art Museum

⁷ Alan Corbiere and Crystal Migwans. “Animikii miinwaa Mishibizhiw: Narrative Images of the Thunderbird and the Underwater Panther,” in *Before and After the Horizon: Anishinaabe Artists of the Great Lakes*, eds. David W. Penney and Gerald McMaster (Washington, DC: National Museum of the American Indian, 2013), 37.

⁸ Lois S. Dubin. *Floral Journey: Native North American Beadwork*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 87.

⁹ *Ibid*, 146.

¹⁰ Alan Corbiere and Crystal Migwans. “Animikii miinwaa Mishibizhiw: Narrative Images of the Thunderbird and the Underwater Panther,” in *Before and After the Horizon: Anishinaabe Artists of the Great Lakes*, eds. David W. Penney and Gerald McMaster (Washington, DC: National Museum of the American Indian, 2013), 38.

¹¹ Paul Tarver, Ralph T. Coe, Jane Somerville Irvin, Megan O’Neil, Thomas St. Germain Whitecloud II, and Jacques St. Germain Whitecloud, eds. *Blue Winds Dancing: The Whitecloud Collection of Native American Art*. (New Orleans: New Orleans Museum of Art, 2005), 138-139.

Photograph by author

Figure 4: Coat, circa 1880, Detail of vertical zigzag pattern on Potawatomi coat.
Thaw Collection, Fenimore Art Museum
Photograph by author

Cite as: Deleary, Mary. "Coat (T0254)." *Otsego Institute Alumni Review* Vol 7. (2019)
[<https://www.theotsegoinstitute.org/uploads/1/3/9/6/139631595/deleary.pdf>].