



### Moosehair-embroidered Birch Bark Tray

Unknown Wendat artist

ca. 1847-1853

Ht: 1 3/4"; L: 15 1/2"; W: 12"

T0283

<http://collections.fenimoreartmuseum.org/items/show/1074>

By Anne de Stecher

The nineteenth-century souvenir arts of Wendat women artists, exquisitely worked moosehair-embroidered moccasins, pouches, and bark objects, were sought-after collectibles for European visitors and tourists, while Wendat chiefs presented the finest examples as gifts to Indigenous and European dignitaries. The Thaw collection at the Fenimore Art Museum contains a notable assemblage of Wendat moosehair-embroidery and among the most outstanding are those acquired by Lord and Lady Elgin. Each is a masterpiece of design and technical expertise and the strong provenance of the collection makes it even more remarkable. Lord Elgin was Governor General of the Canadas from 1848 to 1854, while Lady Elgin, the daughter of Lord Durham, spent a year in Quebec in 1838, when her father was Governor General. Lord and Lady Elgin visited the Wendat village of Wendake (Lorette) for both formal and informal meetings with community leaders.

Among the highlights is a birch bark tray, worked with moosehair-embroidered floral motifs that reflect British taste and passion for the botanical (T283). The artist applied delicately-coloured moosehair in graduated shadings to create three dimensionality, using short and long or brick stitches, while the berry stitch gives texture and the satin stitch creates smooth leaves and stems.<sup>i</sup> With complete command of technique and design, the artist achieved a high degree of verisimilitude. Moving clockwise from the bottom left, we see a morning glory, a budding rose, a spray of sneezewort, forget-me-nots, and chrysanthemum. The arrangement is dynamic; stems radiate from a central point in the balanced asymmetry characteristic of Wendat design. A border of exactly placed small leaves frames the central arrangement, while a frame of four bark panels

is lined with maple leaves, their colours representing seasonal change. The tray demonstrates virtuosity in a needlework tradition that was regarded in European terms as an essential accomplishment of well-born women.<sup>ii</sup> Lady Elgin herself had a strong interest in needlework and took lessons in moosehair embroidery during her time in Quebec in 1838.<sup>iii</sup>

It is thought that the tray was made by Marguerite Vincent La8inonkie (1783-1865), an attribution based in historical context.<sup>iv</sup> Marguerite Vincent, of the Vincent-Picard family of hereditary chiefs, was a moving force in the development of the Wendat souvenir industry. Her son Grand Chief François-Xavier Picard Tahourenché received Lord and Lady Elgin at the Vincent-Picard family home during their visits to the community and she was probably present during these meetings. The tray reflects the community- and the artist's- familiarity with European culture. However community knowledge of mid-nineteenth-century moosehair embroidery production, brought forward through discussion with Wendat artist Mireille Siouï, opens other attribution possibilities. Moosehair embroidery was part of Wendat family and community life and many Wendat women were skilled in this art form, producing works for their families as well as souvenir wares.<sup>v</sup> The artist who created the trays could have been one of the artist-needlewomen whose work was sold by the Vincent-Picard family souvenir enterprise.<sup>vi</sup>

The Thaw collection tray may have been commissioned by Lord and Lady Elgin, or it may have been a gift, presented during one of several meetings between Lord and Lady Elgin and Wendat leaders. As treasured souvenir or diplomatic gift, this tray, like other artworks in the moosehair embroidery tradition, acted as a cultural intermediary, creating connections between Wendat and European settler communities.

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<sup>i</sup> Wade, Victoria N. *The Basic Stitches of Embroidery* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1960) n.p.; Annette de Stecher, "Wendat Arts of Diplomacy: Negotiating Change in the Nineteenth Century," in *Beyond Wendake* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press) Forthcoming.

<sup>ii</sup> de Stecher, "Wendat Arts of Diplomacy."

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> *Culture and Democracy: Lord and Lady Elgin in Canada, 1847-1854*, Exhibition, Rideau Hall, 2004.

<sup>v</sup> Folder 5, box 61, Marius Barbeau fonds, III-H-3, Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau, Quebec.

<sup>vi</sup> Mireille Siouï in discussion, Congres d'Études Wendat et Wyandot, 14 June 2012.