



Two sets of cornhusk dolls

Unknown Haudenosaunee artists
ca. 1870-1880

(a) male: h 10 ¾" (b) female: h 11 ¼" (c) baby in cradleboard: h 5 ¾"
T0808a-c [pictured here] and T0870a-b

https://collections.fenimoreart.org/search/t0808*

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Artists belonging to the communities of Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk and Tuscarora who comprised the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and lived among the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York and southern Great Lakes in Canada in the 19th century made cornhusk dolls in a number of ways, for a variety of purposes: to sell to tourists, as children's toys, and as medicine. Cornhusk dolls have also functioned as modes of self-expression. Documentation for cornhusk dolls in the archives of the Canadian Museum of History establishes that Haudenosaunee donors and makers regarded dolls similar to those in the Thaw collection as accurate self-representations.

The Thaw Collection has two sets of cornhusk dolls. One set is composed of three dolls: a man, woman, and baby in a cradleboard (T808A-C), likely made between 1870 and 1880. Their clothing is constructed from a variety of materials. The male doll's shirt is made of patterned cotton, on top of which is a woolen fabric blanket or sash edged with red cotton tape. His fringed leggings and moccasins appear to be made of tanned hide. The female dolls is dressed in a red cotton tunic edged with a golden yellow tape, under which is a dark coloured skirt edged in pinkish-red cotton and red leggings edged in blue cotton, both decorated with beadwork in a linear-style commonly found on Haudenosaunee clothing worn in the Longhouse. Like the male doll, her moccasins have beadwork along the vamps. The small doll in the cradleboard is tucked in with a miniature red woolen cradleboard wrapper, also decorated with linear-style beadwork. All three dolls have painted or drawn-on faces.

The other set of cornhusk dolls in the Thaw Collection (T0870 a-b) were also likely made in the mid to late 19th century. The clothing worn by this pair is similar to the other set: the male doll wears a headpiece, sash, shirt, fringed leggings and moccasins, and the female doll wears a tunic, skirt, leggings and moccasins. However, the articles of clothing worn by this pair of dolls have been made with fewer materials and decorated with less beadwork. Faces were drawn on these two dolls as well, but are more difficult to see, perhaps due to fading over time.

Looking closely at both sets of cornhusk dolls in the Thaw collection, certain construction details suggest an artist's or community's unique style. For example, the hands on the first set of dolls have finely articulated fingers, whereas the hands on the second set of dolls are rounded knobs. The colourful and detailed beadwork found on the first set of dolls suggests the artist who made this set was as much a talented beadworker as she was a cornhusk doll maker. The fine stitching on the clothing worn by the second set of cornhusk dolls suggests this artist was also a fine seamstress. Such details illustrate the multi-talented nature of Haudenosaunee artists, as well as the spectrum of artistic individuality expressed through this artistic tradition.

Cite as:

Loyer, Stacey. "Two sets of cornhusk dolls (T0808a-c)." *Otsego Institute Alumni Review* Vol 3. (2010) [<https://www.theotsegoinstitute.org/uploads/1/3/9/6/139631595/loyer.pdf>].