



**James Bay Cree Hood**

Unknown Eastern Cree artist

ca. 1860

L: 24 ½” including fringe, 19 ¾” without fringe; W: 9 11/14” closed, 18 ½” open

T0788

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/729/hood?ctx=b49b5f1a5a3ca5feb7440f63a295ab11dc2c2a74&idx=0>

By Paula Menarick

Aanischaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute



This example of a beaded hood, or as the Eastern Cree of James Bay called them, “e mitsuits utstuden,”<sup>1</sup> demonstrates the master craftsmanship achieved by Cree women in the 18th and 19th centuries. The materials and technique of the Fenimore hood include seven main colours with a variation in the shades and sizes of beads. The smallest beads are slightly smaller than today’s size 15 seed beads (1.3mm) with the largest being equivalent to today’s size 9 (2.2mm). Bead workers were very meticulous when it came to ordering their material through the Hudson’s Bay Company. The three panels have two distinct floral design schemes: the outer and inner panels are decorated with the same motif, whereas the center panel has a larger and more elaborate motif. The fringe is composed of beadwork strung on sinew that is stitched to the hood, while the other beadwork has been affixed with nylon thread. The red and blue trade wool tassel at the peak of the hood is known in Cree as *ahchaahkw*, which translates as both “*spirit*” or “*the pom-pom on a hat*.”<sup>2</sup>

According to Cree traditional knowledge, men and women’s hoods were a highly honoured and respected piece of clothing. The size of the hood, colours and motifs are ways to distinguish between the male and female versions. These hoods were not worn by everyone; some Elders say they were worn only by married women, wealthy families or people gifted with shamanic powers. Traditionally the decoration and designs used on Cree clothing and accessories result from inspiration from a supernatural connection with the spirits of the land and the hunt who would communicate with people through dreams, telling the owner’s life story through symbolism. The motifs, colours and designs were shared with a bead worker, who would then do her best to display the person’s visions through her beadwork. Once completed, the hood was given to the owner, and it was worn only during traditional ceremonies, winter journeys and special occasions:

According to my mother, there was an elderly lady who made these hoods for members of the community. When one was completed, it was never brought indoors. This was done out of respect for the one who made them. My mother said that her grandmother wore them while travelling. Even when she was old, she still walked everywhere when on a journey. When they arrived to where the camp was being made, she would walk to a small tree to hang her hood on it. It was only when they left camp again that she would wear it. But the beads used to make it were readily available. Other supplies used to make these hoods were things used in hunting campsites. The fabric they used was called *kapui*. She said it was the best fabric for use and it was sort of like a blanket material, which they fashioned into a pointy hat.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cree term is according to an elder from Fort George, Harriet Matthews (Flannery 1933 and 1936 field notes); in Cath Oberholtzer, “Together we survive: East Cree Material Culture,” (Master’s thesis, McMaster University, 1994), 111-112.

<sup>2</sup> Eastern James Bay Cree Dictionary, Northern Dialect 2012 Edition, 438.

<sup>3</sup> Lily Pepabano, Aanischaaukamikw Virtual Exhibitions, accessed October 15, 2015, <http://www.creeculturalinstitute.ca/collection/>

Despite the obvious aesthetic appeal of these elaborately beaded hoods, they still fell out of use in *Eeyou Istchee* over the course of the 20th century. Discussing the reasons for this is beyond the scope of this essay, but the fact remains that the physical beauty and tradition was almost forgotten and lost in time for the Cree people. Study of the hoods that remain in existence in museum collections today, like the Fenimore hood, has empowered the Cree people of *Eeyou Istchee* to revive their lost traditions through the materiality of the objects, and from the materiality comes the revival of the immaterial—the intangible heritage that is reawakened through the engagement with these lost ancestors.

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