



Beaded Sash

Unknown Choctaw artist

ca. 1830

L: 56"; W: 3"

T0240

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/1589/sash?ctx=67de2f0bcdd1f789029f1b4080e22161cb1cda9b&idx=0>

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This beaded sash—also called a baldric or *eskofatshi* in the Choctaw language [1]—is one of only two items identified as Choctaw in the Thaw Collection of the Fenimore Art Museum. Often cited as one of the oldest components of modern traditional dress [2], this garment presents a compelling glimpse into Choctaw lifeways and history. The Thaw Collection sash is made of navy blue trade wool, which is lined by a blue-green cotton fabric. A close inspection of the item also reveals that the back of the sash—the layer that would have lain against the wearer’s torso—was likely once a pale colored silk. Remnants of this lustrous material still peak out in shattered fragments from under the fine hand stitching that secures the wool and cotton layers of fabric together.

While this particular sash does not share the vibrant range of colors or the myriad motifs used by contemporary Choctaw artists, it does speak of a kind of continuity in design. The pattern on this garment is known today in Choctaw communities as the *scroll*, or the *coiled snake* design [3]. Many sashes now housed in museums that date from the 19th century to the present are adorned with this design, which consists of variations on a motif of two circles connected by diagonal lines. Choctaws still use the scroll pattern in many art forms: a quick visit to the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians’ official websites, for example, shows that this pattern appears in many contemporary art forms, ranging from beadwork to graphic design.

The Thaw Collection sash also demonstrates another type of continuity between past and present iterations of this garment—its use. And well-used this sash appears to have been: when viewing its design carefully, one can see where a craftsman once tacked down and secured the tiny, white seed beads after a thread was broken or became loose. These beads were initially attached to the sash using what is widely called the “overlay” or “spot stitch” [4]. Places of discoloration where the dyed wool perhaps became wet and then bled into the stitching also suggest that someone wore this garment several times before it entered the art market. Much like sashes today, it was likely tied around a Choctaw woman’s waist or draped across a man’s chest during a traditional dance or other social event.

In studying and spending time with the Thaw Collection’s *eskofatshi*, I gained a different perspective on the present orientation of research on Choctaw arts in scholarly circles, as well as the influence of this literature on how Choctaw arts are evaluated and collected. There is very little documentation for this particular garment—how it was originally purchased, by whom, where, and the identities of its maker and wearer are currently unknown. This is also true of its attributed date, 1830, and its designation as “Choctaw” [5]. Similarly, there is a dearth of published information available on the meaning of Choctaw sashes, beyond historical topics such as the scroll motif’s association with the Pre-Columbian Mound Builder societies of the Eastern Woodlands [6]. While this context is important when considering the long-term history of Southeast Native expressive practices, it also shifts focus away from contemporary, and even 20th century meanings and uses of this garment. What does the sash mean for today’s wearers? How were they designed and by whom in the more recent past? And how do contemporary community members conceive of the scroll pattern? Sash making is, after all, still an important practice in modern Choctaw communities.

In thinking about value and connoisseurship in the arts during my participation in the Otsego Institute, I began to consider how trends in scholarship—which have tended to favor colonial and pre-colonial periods of Choctaw history—might have influenced the contents of Choctaw collections in museums and private collections, as well as their corresponding catalogue data. Collectors might value sashes like this one more if they correspond in some way with existing scholarly writing. This would likely then influence what types of arts are purchased on the market, and to what period of history they are attributed [7]. Participating in the Otsego Institute introduced me to these patterns, and suggested new avenues for my future research. It also underscored the importance of ethnographic research and the vital incorporation of community member knowledge in the study of any type of art form.

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[1] See James Henri Howard, *Choctaw Music and Dance* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 32.

[2] Sean Everette Gantt, “Nanta Hosh Chahta Immi? (What Are Choctaw Lifeways?): Cultural Preservation In The Casino Era” (Ph.D., The University of New Mexico, 2013), 7.

[3] James Henri Howard, *Choctaw Music and Dance* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 35.

[4] Special thanks to 2019 Otsego Institute faculty member Emil Her Many Horses for his assistance on this identification.

[5] While the design of this object is consistent with other museum sashes identified as Choctaw, it is also possible that this garment’s maker had a different tribal affiliation. For example, similar sashes at the National Museum of the American Indian (catalog numbers 22/6353 and 1/8587) are identified as Coshatta (Koasati), suggesting that the attribution of the Thaw Collection sash should be further investigated.

[6] See for some examples Patricia Galloway and Clara Sue Kidwell, “Choctaw in the East,” in *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 14, Southeast, ed. Raymond Fogelson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2004), 507; America Meredith, “Stitches in Time: The Rebirth of Southeastern Woodlands Beadwork,” *First American Art Magazine* (blog), March 27, 2015, <http://firstamericanartmagazine.com/southeast-beadwork/>.

[7] Special thanks to 2019 Otsego Institute faculty member, David W. Penney, for discussing collecting patterns with me in greater depth.

Bibliography

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