



Wigwam Model  
Unknown Anishinaabe Artist  
ca. 1847-1854  
7 x 4 1/4 x 5 5/8  
T0258

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/831/wigwam-model?ctx=3232180a83f82b25baafc1792d9e4854151cf4fb&idx=0>

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One knee on the ground, a hunter rests the buttstock of his rifle against his shoulder carefully aiming at a blue and white bird. As viewers, we see this one moment before a spark propels the shot into the airborne bird. On the other side of the model, we see the hunt was successful, as the hunter returns home to offer the bird – now abstracted as a blue and white rhomboid – to a waiting woman (Figure 1). As viewers, we see only the realized artwork, not the hours that went into gathering the birchbark which forms the four walls of this wigwam model, the hundreds of dyed porcupine quills shaping the figural and floral designs that adorn all sides, or the second layer of birchbark added to the interior of the model to keep the delicate quill ends from being damaged. Like with any human-made object there is an entire ecosystem of connections, conversations and motives that surround the making of this model, many of which we can only guess. We see a work that was created by an Anishinaabe woman to communicate – something.

This model is a unique example of quilled birch bark house models, the first and only known example of a quilled home in the shape of a wigwam. There are other examples of quilled houses such as the quilled house in The British Museum (Figure 2) also produced by an Anishinaabe artist in the nineteenth century. These house models, however, were created to resemble a frame house of European design adorned with windows, drapery, and everything else a European woman of the time might want in a house. These other models were produced for the commodity market, which was burgeoning in the nineteenth century as Euro-American consumers sought handmade objects as a balm to the industrial modes of production beginning to take over more of their lives [1]. The creation of art and utilitarian goods by Indigenous makers for the commodity market was a direct reaction to the removal of their livelihoods by settler colonialism. If this was made for the commodity market, however, why are there no other examples in Native Art collections across the globe?

My thoughts on this are that this model was another type of exchange, a gift. The model entered the possession of the Fenimore Museum from the collection of James Bruce, the 8th Earl of Elgin, 12th Earl of Kincardine and Governor General of Canada from 1847 – 1854. The model was most likely presented to him during his official visit to Port Sarnia and Sault Sainte Marie in 1850 by a delegation of Anishinaabe [2]. The British were no strangers to diplomatic gifts, understanding them to be necessary in any political relationship, especially between nations, and as stronger ties to peace than commodities with fluctuating values [3]. During British colonial rule, gifts were seen not only as markers of peace, but a way to indebt Indigenous communities and construct them as dependent on colonial governmental rule [4]. For the Indigenous communities the British interacted with, gift giving was a no less important or practiced part of politics but permeated many aspects of both secular and spiritual life. Gift giving for both parties was a way to influence the other and move the political board in their favor.

Unlike the male dominated Euro-American world of the time, in Indigenous communities' women were of political importance, if not the main decision makers. We can look at this model,

created by a woman, possibly as a gift for another woman who appeared to have political importance. That woman was Lady Mary Louisa Bruce, wife of Lord Elgin, and daughter of John Lambton, 1st Earl of Durham, and Governor General of Canada from 1838 – 1839. We can read the model as a gift to Lady Bruce through the iconography incorporated on its faces. Specifically, the back face of the model (Figure 3), where a three-pronged white shape dominates the space. I believe this is Trillium, a flower native to the temperate regions of North America. Trillium as a species in general is known commonly as birthroot due to its medicinal properties that can ease childbirth and recovery [5]. There are two species of Trillium native to the area where the model was gifted: Nodding Trillium (*Trillium cernuum*) which has a white flower and Red Trillium (*Trillium erectum*) which has a red flower [6]. According to 19th century French polymath and botanist Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, the “reds and whites” had a gendered distribution among the Indigenous peoples: he observed red being for men and white for women [7]. The incorporation of a trillium in such a physically large way was intentional on the part of the artist. It is placed as a link on one side between the narrative scenes of men’s and women’s work and the entrance to the home on the other. It was a woman’s responsibility to keep the home, be partnered in the raising of children, to teach, and to connect the next generation with the lands around them.

For Indigenous peoples there is an intimate relationship that forms with materials when they are harvested that tie into a kincentric Indigenous worldview, that is based on respect and reciprocity with all living beings, plant, animal, and human. Women create to protect and provide for their families, nations, and world. Each work is about more than its specific moment in time, it is a creation that transmits generational knowledge as an intrinsic part of the artistic process [8]. When we look at this model, we can see a portion of the artist’s world view quilled into the faces of the model, pulled through the materials, and given as a diplomatic gift. This gift represented a way of life that its maker was trying to preserve, and in the process of gifting, attempting to transfer that importance, to another person likely to understand, a woman of power and authority.

[1] Ruth B. Phillips, “Souvenir, Commodity, and Art in the Northeastern Woodlands” in *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American art from the Northeast, 1700-1900*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press 1998) 7.

[2] Ruth B. Phillips, “Iconography: Picturing Natural Man” in *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American art from the Northeast, 1700-1900*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press 1998) 147

[3] Jessica Yirush Stern, “The Gift Exchange,” in *The Lives of Objects: Native Americans, British Colonists, and Cultures of Labor and Exchange in the Southeast*, (Raleigh, North Carolina: UNC Press Books 2016) 95.

[4] Dean Neu, "Presents' for the 'Indians': Land, Colonialism and Accounting in Canada," *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 25, no.2 (2000)

[5] Stevens Foster, *A Field Guide to Medicinal Plants and Herbs of Eastern and Central North America*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 2000) 157. Erna Gunther, and Jeanne R. Janish, *Ethnobotany of Western Washington: The Knowledge and Use of Indigenous Plants by Native Americans*. (Seattle: University Of Washington Press 1992) 26. Alma R. Hutchens, *Indian Herbalogy of North America*, (New York: Shambhala Publications 1991) 33. Alma R. Hutchens, *A Handbook of Native American Herbs*, (New York: Shambhala Publications 1992). Matthew Wood, *The Earthwise Herbal : A Complete Guide to New World Medicinal Plants*, (Berkeley: Calif. North Atlantic Books 2009) 473-478.

[6] "Trillium cernuum," USDA PLants Database, USDA, accessed January 10, 2023, <https://plants.usda.gov/home/plantProfile?symbol=TRCE>. "Trillium erectum," USDA PLants Database, USDA, accessed January 10, 2023, <https://plants.usda.gov/home/plantProfile?symbol=TRER3>.

[7] Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, *Medical Flora; or, Manual of the Medical Botany of the United States of North America*, (Philadelphia: Atkinson & Alexander 1828)

[8] Jill Ahlberg Yohe, and Teri Greeves, "Introduction," in *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*, eds. Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Minneapolis Institute of Art in Association with the University of Washington Press 2019) 23-25.

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Figures:



Figure 1: Proper Left Face, Wigwam Model  
Unknown Anishinaabe Artist  
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Fenimore Museum, T0258



Figure 2: Model building/structure; box  
Unknown Anishinaabe Artist  
ca. 19th century

The British Museum, AM2003, 19.20



Figure 3: Proper Rear Face, Wigwam Model  
Unknown Anishinaabe Artist  
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