



Tufted Caribou Hair Picture
Unknown Dene or Métis Artist
ca. 1982
H: 10"; W: 5 ¾"
T0666
<http://collections.fenimoreartmuseum.org/node/5063>

By Abra Wenzel (Carleton University)

This tufted caribou hair picture hails from Fort Providence, which is situated in the Mackenzie River Valley in the southern Northwest Territories of Canada. The Valley is home to several Dene Nations and the Métis.¹

Within both Dene and Métis Cultures women are responsible for nearly all aspects of clothing manufacture.² Moose hair tufting originated as a new decorative technique in 1916 through three Métis women, Catherine/Katherine (Beaulieu) Bouvier, Madeline Bouvier, and Mrs. Boniface Lafferty of Fort Providence and is now a decorative technique often incorporated into Indigenous clothing and household items. Celine Lafferty, daughter of Madeline Bouvier, taught this unique art form to Sister Béatrice Leduc of the Grey Nuns who continued to teach it in various Indian Residential Schools in the Northwest Territories.

The object pictured is formed by gathering dyed caribou hairs into discrete sections. The artist has dyed the hairs in shades of green, purple, red, and yellow. The hairs are then twisted and knotted to the velvet backdrop. The stems connecting the flowers and leaves have been constructed by twisting caribou hairs together. The velvet was then reinforced with canvas. The artist in typical fashion began with the pistil, trimming the hairs in progression with the final result a floral portrait that is raised from the surface.³

The process is similar with regard to handling and tufting both moose and caribou hair. However, caribou hair is considered to be much easier to manipulate because it is much shorter and finer. As a result, pieces that incorporate caribou hair demonstrate tightly knit patterns.

The use of caribou hair is very similar to and may hail from the art of moose hair tufting (Figure 1). This technique was first used to ornament utilitarian moccasins and mittens. However, over time it has become popular for creating tufted pictures, such as the example examined. Typically, tufted pictures are made with the intention to be framed and hung as home decorations.⁴

In the 1980s, the Arctic Trading Company made a tufting kit generally available. The final product was a single framed floral tufting, much like the caribou tufted picture shown here. The kit was promoted to preserve the art of tufting and was quite successful in its goal. As a result, the simplified five-petal flower motif became the standardized design.⁵ The transition from more complex designs to the five-petal floral is demonstrated by comparing this piece with the one in Figure 1. Figure 1 is a moose hair tufted picture made by Celine Lafferty who, as mentioned above, was the daughter of Madeline Bouvier and a master tufting artist herself. In comparison to this piece, Celine Lafferty's piece shows a much more complex design and earlier influences of silk embroidery and beadwork.

Hybridity was the overarching theme during my time at the Otsego Institute. This caribou tufted picture whole heartedly embraces and demonstrates hybridity between technique and design. It is a widely held belief that floral designs were introduced into Indigenous societies with the arrival of Euro-Canadian missionaries.⁶ European-influenced floral motifs came to dominate the decorative art of Subarctic First nations. Caribou and moose hair tufting represent indigenous techniques that reflect both social transformation and self-transformation.⁷ Additionally, the more recent caribou tufted piece demonstrates the shift from community use of tufting to souvenir commodity. Tufting signifies Métis women reimagining themselves in a new space; their embracement and mediation of floral designs in new and different mediums allows them to navigate new social contexts.

Moose hair tufting was focal in my Master's project and forms an important element in my doctoral research on cultural hybridity in Indigenous crafts and art through settler contact. Otsego has provided me with the tools to think more critically, and observe the processes of making. More specifically, my experiences at Otsego have taught me how to observe material culture objects as sites of translation. Objects not only have the ability to communicate through language imaging, but also through the medium and techniques used. Objects possess the ability to tell the story of their making. These are lessons that have allowed me to develop a more encompassing perspective toward my research, especially when viewing and interpreting tufted pieces from different collections.



Figure 1: Tufted Moosehair Panel (T0662). Artist: Celine Lafferty (1900-2001); Location: Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories.

¹ The Métis is used in Canada to describe persons of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry. They self-identify as Métis and are distinct from First Nations, Inuit, or non-Aboriginal peoples.

² Judy Thompson, *Women's Work Women's Art: Nineteenth-Century Athapaskan Clothing* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2013) 35.

³ Amy Malbeuf, *Apihkêw (s/he braids, s/he weaves, s/he knits)* (MFA dissertation, Department of Visual Arts, University of British Columbia 2016) 11.

⁴ Kate Duncan, *Northern Athapaskan Art: A Beadwork Tradition* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1989) 62.

⁵ Amy Malbeuf, *Apihkêw (s/he braids, s/he weaves, s/he knits)* 12.

⁶ Marius Barbeau, *Saintes Artisanes: les Brodeuses* (Montreal: Editions Fides 1943) 17; Kate Duncan, *Northern Athapaskan Art: A Beadwork Tradition* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1989) 56.

⁷ Nicholas Thomas, "Technologies of conversion: cloth and Christianity in Polynesia" in *Hybridity and its Discontents: Politics, science, culture*. Edited by Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes (New York: Routledge, 2000) 199.

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