

## The Sash – Darren R. Préfontaine

**Module objective:** In this module, students will be informed of the history of the sash, its many uses and its importance to the Métis people.

Today, the sash is considered to be an integral and highly symbolic aspect of Métis identity. No Métis cultural or political event is considered official until somebody arrives proudly wearing his or her sash. In fact, Métis communities often honour the social, cultural or political contributions of talented Métis by awarding them the “Order of the Sash.” Sashes are also awarded to non-Métis as well. For example, on September 24, 1998, the then President of South Africa and great human rights activist Nelson Mandela, was given a sash by Senator John Boucher of the Métis National Council. In such circumstances, awarding the sash is a tangible means of expressing and preserving Métis identity and culture, while striving towards self-determination.

In Western Canada, the sash is associated with the Métis. However, in Central and Eastern Canada, the sash is associated with traditional French-Canadian, Acadian and First Nations’ culture. Each of these groups has made and worn different varieties of sashes. The variety of sash worn by the Métis, known in French as “*ceinture fléchée*” or “arrow belt”, was originally crafted by French-Canadian artisans in the village of L’Assomption, northeast of Montréal from about 1780. Later the *Haudenosaunee* (Iroquois) began to manufacture this fur trade staple as it gained popularity throughout North America. Nevertheless, this type of sash is strongly identified with traditional French-Canadian culture as expressed in the historical record and in period paintings by Cornelius Kreighoff, Henri Julien and other Canadian artists. The sash was brought out to what is now Western Canada by *Canadien* (French Canadian), and, to a lesser extent, *Haudenosaunee* and *Anishnabeg* (Algonquin) voyageurs working with the North West Company (NWC).

Nobody really knows for sure whether or not First Nations, Europeans or Euro-Canadians first made sashes. First Nations women, from throughout Turtle Island (the Americas), have practiced finger weaving, using plant fibers and wool from indigenous fauna, since time immemorial. However, they did not have access to lambs' wool, the necessary component of sashes, until the Europeans began trading with them. Eastern Woodlands North American First Nations also made Wampum Belts, which were sacred or diplomatic belts that were used to record history or were given to other nations to cement peace and friendship treaties. While these belts may have been the inspiration for the fur trade sash, they were not worn.

This first sash was clearly based on First Nations finger-weaving techniques, and European design and raw materials. However, in the vast cultural exchange between Europeans and Indigenous peoples during the fur trade, various Aboriginal nations, including the Métis, accepted this cultural adaptation, and began making sashes. As First Nations and Métis women gained access to wool from both the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and the NWC, panoply of sashes began to be made in distinctive colours and patterns. Métis families soon developed their own patterns, much like Scottish clans had their own tartans, and occasionally incorporated beads into the threads.

The homemade sashes varied in their sizes, design and colours and were typically constructed of a looser weave than the trade sashes. As the demand for trade sashes increased, there was a move among manufacturers to standardize the form and design. Those Indian and Métis people who manufactured their own, however, maintained more variability and this craft production can be seen as developing independent of and coexisting with the more standardized Assomption sashes.

Most traditional hand-woven sashes were about fifteen centimetres wide and two metres long, although some reached six metres in length. A typical sash had a red band or *coeur* in the centre, paralleled by a series of colourful zigzags forming arrow designs, giving the sash the name "arrow" belt. Quality sashes were made from very fine wool, which was waxed and re-twisted. These sashes were woven so tightly that they were water-resistant and could be used to carry small amounts of water. A top quality sash, using 300 to 400 fine waxed woolen threads, usually took about 200 hours to complete. A lower quality sash made from 100 or so thicker woolen threads could be made in 70 to 80 hours. On average an arrow or point was made the length of the weaver's index finger, about 9 centimetres (3.5 inches). As a result, most weavers made about 21 arrows or points per metre (7 arrows or point per foot) of sash. Some pieces, however, exhibit double the number of arrows per metre. The most popular colours used by weavers making sashes were red, pale blue, dark blue, yellow and green. In some cases, beads were introduced among the threads or strung in as decoration or to outline the arrows.

One means to make a sash required the weaver to tie one end of the length of threads to a ceiling beam or high up on a wall and the other to a long nail on the floor. Two wooden sticks would be fastened to the middle of the threads to hold them firmly in place. The weaver would then start at the middle of the threads and work toward the end tied to the nail on the floor. When one half was woven and the fringe made, the length of threads was reversed to allow the weaver to work on the loose half, again from the middle of the length to the end. The rationale for only working one half of a length at a time was that it would have been impossible to manipulate such long pieces of thread if the weaver worked from one end to the next and produce a tight, well made sash.

Using similar weaving techniques, women also produced colourful shawls for themselves as well as brightly coloured garters to hold up stockings. The garters could be woven from end to end because of their short nature, unlike the much longer sashes, which had to be woven from the middle to the ends. And, like the sashes, many of the colourful garters incorporated arrow and point designs.

For the Métis, the sash was more than a decorative piece of clothing. The sash could be used as a rope, which could be used to pull canoes over portages. It could also be used to harness heavy loads on the backs of men and women who unloaded freight canoes and York boats. It could be used as a dog harness. The Métis used the sashes' fringed edges as an emergency sewing kit. It could contain personal artifacts, such as medicine, tobacco, a pipe, or a first aid kit. It could also be used as a towel, wash cloth, and during winter, it could keep a capote fastened to its wearer.

During the early nineteenth century, sashes became an important trade item for both the HBC and the NWC. These fur trade sashes, were originally made in L'Assomption, Lower Canada and were sold mainly to the Métis in the Red River Settlement and to French Canadians. Overtime, the Hudson Bay Company began manufacturing Assomption sashes in England, using less time and labour intensive industrial looms. These mass manufactured sashes were less durable and attractive than the hand-woven variety, and they almost led to the abandonment of the art of finger weaving. Fortunately, folklorists such as Marius Barbeau revived the art in the 1920s and 1930s. Today, finger-weaving programs are taught through cultural institutes, museums, and art classes in both Québec and Western Canada.

### **Fast Facts, Questions and Activities** (originally written by Karon L. Shmon):

- I. The sash was used not only for decorative purposes, and to show cultural pride, but also for keeping clothing fastened as well. It was used with pants, coats and shirts.
- II. Sash patterns could be intricate and varied to display the weaver's expertise.
- III. Some patterns have names, for example, the arrowhead sash, which has pointed arrowhead designs on it.
- IV. Arrowhead designs require skill because of the pattern.
- V. Machine woven sashes are less costly because machines can make a sash faster than a person. This almost led to the disappearance of Métis finger weaving, as it was no longer a good way to make money. Now it is being revived, especially in Métis families.
- VI. Other designs include the rainbow sash, the filmstrip sash, salt and pepper sash, the diamond sash, and the diamond arrowhead sash. Another variation besides pattern is the way in which the ends, or fringe, are finished. Some possibilities are to leave the edges raw, to trim them evenly, to braid them, to unravel them, or to twist them together, two strands at a time.
- VII. Sometimes sashes served functional purposes. It could be used as a tumpline, which assisted in carrying heavy goods by providing extra support around the forehead and the cargo that was being carried.
- VIII. A sash could serve as a makeshift rope, perhaps to tie a boat.
- IX. Everyday sashes were usually shorter and less fancy than the ones used for special occasions.
- X. What type of occasions do people dress up for? Powwows, parties, sundances, weddings or church. These would be the occasions for which Métis may choose to wear a dressy sash, to show they are proud to be Métis.
- XI. Discuss the traditional uses of the Métis sash. Do Métis sashes resemble Scottish clan tartans?
- XII. Draw and design your own Métis sash. Use the examples provided in the CD-ROM, *The Metis: Our People, Our Story* as a guide or design your own.

### **Major Activity: Métis Finger Weaving** (Karon Shmon)

Karon Shmon developed the text below as a teacher's guide for a Métis finger-weaving video. It is advised that teachers or workshop facilitators consult this or another finger-weaving video before they attempt to finger weave, for as Karon wrote "finger weaving can be very frustrating, because it is done entirely by hand, and is more difficult than it looks, requiring manual dexterity".

However, she concludes “if students are given a simple introduction to the basics, followed by a project they can complete, they can then decide whether to go on to sash making before investing too much in supplies or time. Not everyone will want to try a sash”.

### **Materials needed to make a sash:**

The initial project is a small finger weaving, which will turn out about 20-30 centimetres long. It will have only 12 strands in order to be manageable for the students. Sashes vary in width from about 32-44 strands and in some cases more, depending on the size of the person who will wear it, and their patience and determination. More strands require more weaving. The first weaving project will require between 90-120 minutes, which should allow for students to receive individual and small group help. It is helpful if the students who learn to weave help you teach the others, so they too can finish their projects.

For a class of thirty students, twelve skeins of yarn in three different colours are required (4 x 3 colours). Inexpensive synthetic yarn is suitable for beginners to learn with. Pure wool is expensive and should be used for sashes once the technique is perfected. It is important that the wool is thick enough to ensure the results are soon evident. Fine wool requires many more strands and will require hours of weaving to produce results. All of the wool used for any one weaving should be the same thickness. You will also need masking tape and frozen-treat sticks (one per student).

The large demonstration weaving is easier for students to see and will give them some practice requiring less dexterity than is required with wool. To make one, use three distinct colours, four strands each, all of uniform size.

#### **1) Basic Métis finger weaving:**

The rainbow pattern is the most simple to do and allows students to follow one another's work and notice discrepancies more readily. They can get creative in subsequent projects, varying the colours and design patterns as they wish. An overall even number of strands will work best, and each colour used should also have an even number of strands. (Otherwise, the pattern changes somewhat, as the rows alternate and the front becomes the back and then the front again.)

Points to remember:

- I) First row: Start on the right side with the end strand. Over, under, over, under, until you have no more strands to go over or under. Then, put the weaving strand up.
- II) Subsequent rows: Start with the end strand at the back (right side). Go over the front, under the back until finished, then put the weaving strand up, exchanging it for the one that was up there. It will become obvious whether to go over or under, as it is always the opposite of what was last done.
- III) After each row: Separate front from back. Pull the one that was up there, and the one that is up there.

- IV) To finish: Using the last two strands used for weaving, tie them together close to the weaving. Tie each front and back strand together until all of the strands are tied. This will keep the weaving from unraveling.
- V) Finishing the ends: Longer fringes look best and provide more options. Choices include braiding the ends, unraveling them, unraveling and braiding them, leaving them as they are, or evenly trimming them.

Basic patterns covered include:

RAINBOW (example set up: 8a 8b 8c)

FILMSTRIP (example set up: 8a 2b 2a 2a 2b 2a 2b 2a 2b 2a 2b 2a 2b)

SALT AND PEPPER (example set up: 8a b a b a b a b a b a b a b a) 8a, which will provide a one colour solid strip, is optional. For all salt and pepper, omit 8a, add ab x 8

## 2) Advanced Métis Finger Weaving

Advanced patterns are more difficult to weave. The technique is similar to weaving two sashes at the same time, and having them join and exchange strands when they reach the centre of the sash. Advanced patterns covered include: ARROWHEAD DIAMOND ARROWHEAD DIAMOND

The set up for each of these patterns is the same. You must decide ahead of time, which pattern you want. For the Arrowhead pattern, which will have continuous arrows all pointing in the same direction, tie the wool on the dowel with only enough wool left for the fringe. For the Diamond Arrowhead, tie the wool on the dowel with an equal amount on either side. In other words, half of the wool is on either side of the dowel. This will produce the diamond in the middle, and arrows continuing to each end in opposite directions, the same as each end of the centre diamond. For the Diamond pattern, which will have continuous diamonds, tie the wool on the dowel as you would for the Diamond Arrowhead, but remember that as each diamond is completed, you must follow the instructions in the video to create another diamond, rather than an arrowhead.

After you have decided which pattern you are making, set the wool up as follows: Arrange the predominate colour on the outsides of the stick (example set up: 8a 4b 8c 4b 8a). You can have fewer or more strands, as long as the numbers are even, and the set up is copied on either side of the centre colour, c. Once you are familiar with this pattern, you can vary the number of colours as well.

### DIAMOND ARROWHEAD

To make the diamond: Turn it over. Take out the stick. Loosen it. Pull out the stick. Pull the loops. Fasten the weaving. It will look the same. Continue on from what will be apparent from what the strands are already doing.

### DIAMOND

Weave from the outsides in until the predominate colour gets to the outsides again, making the wool set up look the same as when you started. Take the outside strand and wrap it around the strand beside it, so you could start weaving towards the centre with it. (This only has to be done once, then the rest of the strands are properly aligned until the diamond is finished.) When they

meet in the middle, they will cross over and become a strand in the other side of the weaving. Continue on as before from the middle outward to make the lower half of diamond, then repeat the above step (until you have as many diamonds as you want, or until it's time to make the fringe.)

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