

Metis Octopus Bags

By Lawrence J. Barkwell



Octopus Bags from the Canadian Museum of Civilization Collection, K89-805, photo by Harry Foster

Metis “fire bags” now called octopus bags are based on the animal skin bags made by the Algonquian Indians. These are case-skinned bags which the Saulteaux of Manitoba used to call “Many Legs Bags” because the legs and tail were left on and were quill-worked or beaded. Shown below are otter skin bags used in Midewiwin ceremonies. Although otter pouches such as these are often associated with the Midewiwin or Medicine Society of the Great Lakes region, they were also widely used on the Plains as tobacco and pipe containers.



Midewiwin style otter bag.

The Metis originally called these “fire bags” or shot pouches because they were used to carry flint and steel, tobacco and pipes or for ammunition. Art historian Kate Duncan argues that the tabbed fire bags of the Metis developed among the Metis people of the Lake Winnipeg area and gradually through trade made their way to the Tlingit people of the Northwest Coast. Because these bags had the eight arms of the “devilfish” or octopus they were used to catching, these bags with their four double pendants suggesting the tentacles of the octopus eventually became known as octopus bags and the name made its way back east to the area of origin.¹

¹ Megan A. Smetzer, “Tlingit Dance Collars and Octopus Bags: Embodying Power and Resistance,” *American Indian Art Magazine*, Volume 34, No. 1, Winter 2008: 64-73.



Otter bag with quill-worked legs and tail

Noted curator Ted Brasser² explains the origin of octopus bags thus:

Ancestral to these peculiar bags were similar bags made of skin and decorated with painted designs, made by the Ojibwa Indians of the western Great Lakes region in the eighteenth century. After the American War of Independence developments in the Great Lakes region forced the local fur traders to move to more western frontiers. With them went many of the Ojibwa Indians as well as a large number of Métis, the half-breed

² Dr. T.J. Brasser, in a 2006 write up for an octopus bag in the Warnock collection featured in the Splendid Heritage Exhibit at the Utah Museum of Fine Art, downloaded January 4, 2010 from www.splendidheritage.com

“children of the fur trade”. The Métis were employed as canoe peddlers, while their women made a living with the production of snowshoes, moccasins, and other garments for the traders and their native customers.



Detail of quill-worked tail

After their settlement on the Red River in southern Manitoba these Métis adopted the tabbed skin bags of their Ojibwa relatives as the prototype in creating the first octopus bags. Utilizing the floral style of embroidery taught in mission schools the Red River Métis developed a distinct style of floral beadwork. By c. 1850, their colorful firebags became popular all over the northern Plains, northwards into the Yukon, and westwards along the Colombia River.

Octopus bags of Red River Métis origin have been collected from all these regions, but it did not take long before the Indians created their own versions as well. Along major trade routes from southern Manitoba, Métis firebags reached the northern Cree by the

1840s. The floral art of the Métis bags appears to have strongly appealed to the Cree women; it motivated them to develop a floral style of beadwork that became a hallmark of Cree art in northern Manitoba and northern Ontario.



Octopus bag made by L. Barkwell, #10 beads on purple velvet.
Photo by Leah Dorion. The white beaded edging is done in “zipper stitch” style.

Construction:

Metis bags were usually constructed of two panels of black woolen Stroud cloth (or black velvet) which was beaded before sewing the panels together. The panels are usually edged with silk ribbon. All beadwork was usually done in the two-needle spot stitch style of appliqué. A double thread is used to lay the line of beads down on the fabric and it is then couched down with a second needle and single thread with a whipstitch usually between each bead or every second bead. For strength and longevity the double thread is waxed with beeswax.

The Metis floral designs are distinct in that all the motifs are usually connected with tendrils or stems. They also exhibit the Ojibwa pattern of always representing four parts of the plants. Floral patterns included 'four states of vegetation,' seed, leaf, bud, and fruit or stem, leaf, bud and flower. This cycle of four corresponds to myriad other 'four quarters' analogies in Ojibwa/Chippewa thought.

Metis designs sometimes contain the "X" and cross motifs which suggest the cardinal directions as well as Ojibwe spiritual concepts. According to David Penney³ the designs are "pictorial or diagrammatic metaphors of a larger, sacred universe;" the four quarters and asymmetrical design reconcile opposites, just as the cosmos creates balance and harmony. Asymmetrical yet balanced designs and compositions are also suggestive of male-female balance and harmony. The asymmetry and alternating elements express Ojibwe spiritual concepts; they visually reconcile opposites, just as the cosmos creates balance and harmony. For a discussion of how Native American women transformed missionary-taught floral designs into their own stylized beadwork see "Floral Decoration and Culture Change: An Historical Interpretation of Motivation" *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 15:1 (1991): 53-77.



Octopus Bag, Southesk Collection, Royal Alberta Museum
Red River Metis attribution.

³ David Penney. "Chippewa Beaded Shoulder Bags" *Bags of Friendship: Bandolier Bags of the Great Lakes Indians*, Morning Star Gallery, 1996

The Red River Metis octopus bag, shown above, collected by the Earl of Southesk in 1849 is beaded on brown Stroud with very small beads (#18). The design is asymmetric yet balanced. The X pattern formed by the placement of the motifs is quite evident.



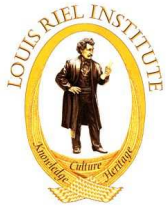
Octopus bag made by Lawrence Barkwell, from a design by Jennine Krauchie, 28cm x 49cm. On black velvet with wool tassels.

The bag shown above shows a balanced asymmetry and the placement of the motifs forms a cross. The beaded elaborations along the stems are commonly called “mouse tracks” or “pickerel guts.” The bag is lined with calico cotton cloth, a common technique because historically calico was very inexpensive.



A Dene-Cree-Metis Octopus Bag circa 1870, the Haffenreffer Museum #57-42,

The bag shown above was collected by Emma Shaw Colcleugh in 1894. It is made of black wool broadcloth, 25.5 cm x 48 cm, with a navy ribbon border with zipper stitch edging. This design is symmetrical with each side the mirror image of the other. The five-petal “Metis” or Prairie Rose motifs were considered to be the trademark of Metis women.



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