



MicMac Oval Box

An oval box, which is a fine, early example of Micmac or (Mi'kmaw) decorative porcupine quill work. The sides of the box and lid, as well as the top, are composed of several sections of thick birch tree bark which is bent, formed, and sewn to hold the shape. The base of the box is a thin oval wood plank. The assemblage of the parts is done by sewing them together with spruce root and other natural flexible, but resistant, fibers. The decor for which the Micmac people are renowned is composed of geometric forms assembled to form a pleasing arrangement the includes chevrons all around the outside and diamond and snowflake forms on the top. These decorative elements are made by assembling and inserting specially prepared porcupine quills. The quills are collected and graded by the women who are also responsible for the dying of the quills in various colors. These hues are obtained by soaking the prepared quills in the juice of certain fruit and plant or in mineral dyes. The quills are flattened, and their ends are inserted into minute holes pierced in the bark sheets. After piercing the bark swells around the inserted quill retaining it as if glued. The cover of this box appears to be made of bleached quills forming a white-on-white decor although it actually results from extensive exposure to sunlight which has completely faded the original colors.

Micmac Amerindian community (also known as Mi'kmaq), Northeastern USA and Canada.

Birchbark, wood, spruce root, porcupine quill with minor damage, glueing and loss due to age and use.

25.5 x 11.5 x 14.5cm

Late 19th century

Literature:

See the very similar example in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts collection shown here and others in the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth.

Porcupine quill work is one of the oldest aboriginal art forms. It is a time-consuming and multi-step process. First, the quills must be sorted according to size, cleaned, and dyed. In the traditional manner, the artist would draw the quills repeatedly through her teeth, making them supple. The quills, split in half down the middle, are then applied to the design. They can be arranged in zigzag pattern, plaited, parallel folded, banded, or woven.

The Micmac (Mi'kmaq) arrived in eastern Canada from the north and west during prehistoric times (about 10,000 years ago). They are members of the Algonquian band of First Nations that includes the Abenaki, the Passamaquoddy, the Penobscot, and the Maliseet. They settled in villages along the Atlantic and inland rivers where they fished and hunted for subsistence. They have communities in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, Labrador, and Maine.

Like many native bands, the Micmac more or less gave up decorative quillwork with the advent of European glass beads. However, French Canadians called the Micmac "Porcupine Indians" because of their skill at quillwork.

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