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A Thorny Identification: Rosebuds as Symbols of Native Identity

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Beginning early in the history of European presence in the James Bay region of subarctic Canada, numerous items of native Cree manufacture were sent, or taken back, to Europe. Although many of these older pieces have ended up in European museums, precise documentation of their origins has not. Only occasionally does sparse information identify either the geographic locale or the cultural ethnicity. The identities of the women who are known to have created these items were either unrecorded or ignored and remain forever anonymous. Subsumed within this anonymity are the women's voices, their feelings, reactions, and responses to the European male presence.

Initially, my research on museum collections of this historic Native American material focussed on establishing a tribal identity for most of the items in these collections. With little archival information available, it was necessary to reconstruct an identity through the artifacts themselves, and especially their decorative elements. It soon became apparent that the earliest historic material was decorated with geometric motifs, while after the early 1800s floral designs became dominant. Based on the concept of using symbolic codes to signal identity, both geometric and floral designs may be viewed as identity markers (Barth 15; Hostetler 12; and Ribeiro 190). As symbolic codes, these designs also encapsulate and reflect economic and cultural exchanges, as well as provide a visual means to recognize any changes.

If specific geometric designs on the earlier materials are examined first, it becomes evident that individual and cultural identities have been encoded in the later floral patterns rendered on innumerable items fabricated by Native women for both local use and outsiders from the early 1800s to this day. It is, however, the pervasiveness of roses within this floral imagery—roses depicted as beaded or embroidered rosebuds, full-blown blossoms, leaves and thorns—which attest to a multi-layered and multi-vocal symbol system. Inherent, too, is an embedded symbolism consciously developed to be read simultaneously by Native and non-Native audiences (for a lengthier discussion, see Oberholtzer). Initially adopted by Cree, along with other floral forms used by Native artists to convey a complexity of non-Native values, the consistent and persistent use of rose imagery authenticates both the presence of a deeper meaning and the transformation of that meaning. Transformed into symbols of social and cultural identity, roses—particularly rosebuds—document a subtle but powerful Native resistance to the changes first brought about through the European demands of the fur trade. In addition to an abstract, but intrinsic, regenerative potential of roses in their bud form, rosebuds may be acknowledged as individualistic expressions reflecting a culturally significant ideology. I am proposing, therefore, that, resulting from contact with the whites, the rosebud, as a distinct motif, was transformed, to become, in Native expression, a sign of social and cultural identity.

Geometric Motifs

In general, motifs function as signs of social and cultural identity. Those motifs which are placed deliberately on articles of clothing and accessories visually communicate information about the group to which the wearer belongs, as well as information about the wearer as an individual (Maurer 119). Such information as tribal affiliation, group membership, status, gender, age, sacred power, dream symbols, and artistic expertise may be communicated, often simultaneously, by means of design elements. Therefore, any motif that occurs in strategic and conspicuous positions on clothing and accessories may be considered to be a sign; that is, a non-verbal means to communicate individual and group identity.

Among the Cree, the earliest extant material items such as hide coats, hunting bags, head gear and items of personal adornment had been decorated exclusively with geometric designs rendered in either paint or quill-work using dyed porcupine or bird quills. With the introduction of glass beads acquired through trade with Europeans, geometric designs continued to be used until at least the mid-twentieth century, especially among the geographically and politically remote Naskapi groups of the eastern Subarctic. Relevant here is the consistent use of what I call a "wedge-triangle" motif created by opposing two right-angled triangles and having two points touching (Figure 1). In the negative triangular space thus formed, either a third inverted or stemmed triangle is inserted. Based on the temporal and spatial distributions of this motif, and the manner of its placement on material items, there is justifiable confidence in considering it to have been a sign of cultural identity for all northern Algonquian-speaking groups including the Cree.

With the adoption of floral motifs in most areas, especially in those areas experiencing the greatest impact of European behavior and ideals, the wedged-triangle motif appears less and less frequently. On the other hand, of all the floral motifs used alone or as part of the overall composition, the rosebud appears with the greatest frequency. This frequency, coupled with established positions for placement on garments, strongly suggests that the rosebud replaced the wedged-triangle motif as a sign of identification. Certainly, such a tangible response is not without precedence. A similar occurrence has been noted for the central Algonquian-speaking Mohegan people of the New England States (McMullen 120-121). Their resistance to Euro-American pressures to emigrate was indeed recorded in the motifs used to decorate their baskets. Where once a particular medallion had signified "Mohegan," when removed to Reserves outside their ancestral lands, their altered identity became depicted as a strawberry or a flower. This subtle form of resistance, observed visually in their transition from the "traditional" sign to the floral one, indicative of their change in identity, suggests a possibly parallel situation for the adoption of the rosebud. But what is not clear are the mechanisms, processes and pressures that brought about this change from geometric to floral sign.

Social and Cultural Identity

While we can tentatively conclude that personal and regional identities tend to rely on the naturalistic qualities of rosebuds, the formulation of a social and cultural identity based on roses is far more complex.

I first became intrigued with the various representations of roses on the exquisitely beaded floral patterned hoods of the James Bay Cree (Figure 2) which date from the early nineteenth

century to at least the 1870s. Pre-contact head gear for both men and women was made from hide and decorated with paint and quill-work using geometric designs. With the introduction of trade cloth and glass beads, more elaborate designs were used to decorate these head coverings, and the use became less common for the men. Incorporated into the decorative elements of these later hoods is one or more aspect of the rose plant: rosettes (that is, stylized "full-blown" rose blossoms), buds, tiny opposed leaves and thorns; and each form is placed in a similar location on each hood.

Why were roses, and not some other flower, selected as the one constant floral motif?

Research into the developmental sequence of the hoods in the James Bay region establishes that this particular use of floral motifs may be viewed as a tangible expression of deliberate choices testifying to a Native attempt to "negotiate" outside influence. The fact is that, on the one hand, the presence of outsiders sharpened the Natives' sense of their own identity and distinctness (Brown 22, 27). On the other hand, while they were thus made aware of their own identity and distinctness, in the presence of outsiders the Natives gave the appearance of assimilating European norms. Contemporary Ojibwe poet Alice Williams intimates that for an individual of mixed heritage there exists an intentional construction of this dual identity:

> My mother, who is Ashininabe, gave me the core of my being, my Ashininabe culture; while my white father . . . taught me the norms and values which I should adopt, and adapt to, in order that it be easier for white people to accept me. These non-Indian cultural traits I perceive as clothing to cover up my [Native] self. (49)

Projecting back in time (somewhat precariously) from such personal experiences, we may gain some insight into the negotiation of identity constructed by Native Canadians from the early fur trade period to the present day. In a similar way, hoods retained culturally significant features while at the same time demonstrating an outward acceptance of non-Native materials, symbolic references, values, and expectations. This becomes particularly salient in light of Native and non-Native alliances, both commercial and domestic, during the early historic period. Consequently, the visible rendering of this negotiation reflects, among other things, the interplay between male and female, non-Native and Native, colonial hegemony and indigenous society. The hoods, and specifically, the use of roses, further demonstrate the processes of change, levels of innovation, and expressions of resistance inherent within these social constructs.

Unquestionably, the use of rose imagery implies a number of significant factors derived from non-Native and Native sources. From the non-Native perspective, the symbolism of roses has a long history in Europe, much of it derived from the ancient Middle East, Greece and Rome (Phillips and Rix 10-27). The rose symbolized life, beauty, fecundity, and death (Seward 2, 7, 8). Its beauty represented the ideal of perfection, its thorns the difficulties in reaching this ideal; and the fact that the bushes bloom again and again attest, it was believed, to its tenacity and regeneration. Later in history, Roman Catholicism equated the rose with the Virgin Mary while the Protestants associated the rose with her son, Jesus, whose five wounds on the Cross are represented by the five petals of the wild rose (Mackey 634-635; and Phillips and Rix 28). Through time, the rose became secularized and entwined into the increasingly popular language of flowers (Goody).

With this history, the rose, as a highly charged, multivocal and public symbol in European and British culture of that day, signified the ideals of womanhood as well as of true love, and was used as a symbol of Christianity with reference to both the Virgin Mary and Christ. As such, roses became metaphors for the very essence of European femininity: charm, devoutness and dependence—those very same lady-like characteristics that the British-born fathers of the fur trade period had been endeavouring to instill into their daughters born of Native wives (cf. Van Kirk).

A number of art historians and anthropologists have long been assuming that floral imagery was introduced to Native women by Roman Catholic nuns (see, e.g., Duncan 56, 59). However, the presence of roses in floral beadwork, *before* the arrival of European women in the James Bay region, strongly suggests that the women's magazines and pattern books, ordered by the British fathers through the Hudson's Bay Company, provided at least partial inspiration for this artistry under the tutelage of the Native mothers. For, although indigenous roses bloomed in the subarctic, rose imagery was not apparent before this period. The iconographical evidence thus attests to a conscious adoption of motifs deeply-rooted in European fashion and ideals. It was these floral motifs—especially roses—so expertly rendered on the hoods (Figure 3) and other items, which acknowledged a degree of acculturation, of being "civilized"—at least to the non-Natives.

However, we must look beyond the overt manifestation of this floral expression in order to gain the Native point of view. Hints that another meaning was embedded within floral patterns have been noted by anthropologists and art historians (see, e.g., Penney), and, as noted above, through the words of Native artists such as Williams. Comparisons of the formal elements, composition, and imagery of floral hoods with those of earlier examples confirm this stance. Elsewhere I have argued (Oberholtzer) that by adopting floral images, and in particular the rose, Natives were able to continue a traditional Native form, which retained its Native significance for them, masked within "acceptable" European iconography. The success of this negotiated expression with its two concurrent symbol systems is reflected by the length of time that hoods continued to be worn long after the adoption of other items of European clothing.

The extensive use of rose imagery, particularly in its bud form, on numerous historic examples of Native items such as leggings for both men (Figure 3) and women (Figure 4), bags of various types, gloves, mittens, and cradle board covers of the same time period, coupled with its continued application into fairly recent times over a wider geographical expanse, intimates further layers of meaning, again from the Native perspective. Certainly the presence of indigenous wild roses (*Rosa acicularis*) throughout the Subarctic region (Figure 5 and Figure 6)—and indeed, much of Canada—suggests this as a possible natural source for these images. And undeniably, the belief among Native Americans in the efficacy of the rose plant for healing has been well-noted (e.g., Densmore 364; and Leighton 55, 56), as has its use as a temporal signal, for "Just when the wild roses bloom, that's the time the Lillooet Nation of the Northwest Coast harvest basket grass and cedar roots" (Turner 38).

Nevertheless, recent conversations with the Cree did not substantiate any such source of inspiration. However, Cree women did hint that the use of roses does indeed hold a deeper meaning. Pressing for clarification, I was tactfully instructed that I must find the answer myself. However, I was told about a woman, renowned for her embroidery skills, who had been asked to create a rose on a bag for a hunter. Returning from a successful hunting trip the following spring, the hunter expressed the depth of his gratitude by bringing her an entire

caribou. To pique my curiosity even more, a story was related to me about another woman who had posed a question to a conjuror while he was in his "shaking tent." Afterwards, when the tent was taken down, all that remained was a single rose. This was the woman's answer. But I was given no further explanation.

Turning to other sources, an Algonquian legend (Cleaver and Knight 1978) discloses how the rose acquired thorns in order to protect itself from being completely eaten by the animals. For, as the legend explains, if the stems are able to survive, the rose can produce new leaves and flowers. As an allegory, the legend illustrates the protective power of the roses' thorns, but more significantly, attests to the regenerative abilities of the Native cultures to grow again, and even bloom. And indeed, these protective qualities of the thorny stems are realized through sanctified practices in the western subarctic. Among the people of the southern Yukon, rituals concerning the killing of an otter which is considered to have strong medicine, include the following:

> A bit of prickly rose bush held in the other hand [than the one carrying it] acts as a protection against the otter spirit; rose branches are also wrapped around the handle of the skinning knife. Skinning is done on a bed of rose branches and young willow or spruce. Later the carcass is laid up in a tree, covered with rose branches, and the skin itself is stuffed with the same efficacious plant. (McClellan 142)

We can then ask: is it appropriate to extrapolate from these two sources that the prickly effectiveness of rose branches as protection from stronger powers could be considered equally as effective in warding off the powerful strength of European hegemony? Based on the premise of embedded symbolism (for evidence of embedded symbolism among Native Americans, see, among others, Brown; Oberholtzer; Pettipas; and Tanner), such an extrapolation of the rose thorns as a protective device certainly yields one plausible interpretation for the presence of prickly or hairy stems in floral imagery.

Rosebuds as Signature

As my fascination with rosebuds as decorative elements on Native objects continued to grow, the geographical research area was extended to include most of Canada, from the time of contact to the present. Based on literally hundreds of examples of rosebuds worked on items ranging from clothing to gun holsters, on indigenous materials from hide to synthetic twentieth-century fabrics, on objects destined for Native use as well as tourist kitsch, the singular variations of these rosebuds overwhelmingly suggest that with increased production during the fur trade era the rosebud functioned as an individual woman's "signature." Certainly, the concept of a signature is not without precedence in Native American material culture. Owners' marks have been noted by scholars on pottery (Bunzel), weapons and tools (Boas; Reynolds; and Fitzhugh and Kaplan 82-85), "owner sticks" (Seton 214-217), and baskets (Dittemore and Odegaard; Herold; Winther, "More About Dau Marks: Visiting Four Pomo Basket Makers," and "Pomo Banded Baskets and their Dau Marks" 51. For individual variation in the archaeological record, see Hill and Gunn). While many studies indicate that personal marks appear isolated from other elements of design, in all these examples rosebuds occur as an incorporated element of a design. Why this should be so is not entirely clear. However, the potential of identifying individuals, or kin groups, or the affiliation of more than one artist working on a particular art work through items of material culture has relevance for identifying both social process and undocumented artifacts in museum collections. For

example, the small distinctive rosebuds, worked on a beaded cloth hood, in the National Museum of the American Indian in New York City (catalogue number NMAI 208126), are repeated on each of two beaded panel bags from a single collection now housed in a tiny museum in eastern Ontario (Nor'westers Museum 969.11.1 and 969.11.2). Of the several hundred items I have examined which bear rosebuds, these are the only three examples, thus far, which exhibit this particular form. Of even greater significance is an archival photograph (Smithsonian NAAA 83-3190) which illustrates a Cree woman wearing this very same hood. Although the caption reads "Cree, Albany," suggesting a probable location at Fort Albany on the west coast of James Bay, the photograph was taken in Moose Factory, another James Bay community. This discrepancy raises a number of questions concerning ownership, community ties, regular movement between communities, and so forth.

Even such tentative associations are rare occurrences, as so many of the artifacts in museums lack verifiable geographic locations, and thus the evidence for regional identity remains tenuous. Although some stylistic differences in rosebud form do point to a possible division between eastern sources and those of the western area, we must also consider the physical differences between the indigenous wild rose (Figure 1 and Figure2) and introduced hybrid types. While much of this requires clarification through ethnohistoric records to document the movement of traders, missionaries and the Native women themselves, the sets of evidence are provocative. The examples themselves also demonstrate the stylistic variances generated by the materials used; silk embroidery floss permits a very naturalistic form while the limitations of glass beads necessitate a simpler and more stylized rendering.

The rosebud functions not only as an individual's signature, but also embodies a greater implication. For, although the symbolic referents of the rose in European culture provided an excellent vehicle to "cover up" or "clothe" the strengths of Native beliefs, they do not address the reason(s) for the geographical distribution of rosebuds *outside* the Cree regions. Therefore, as I noted above, I am arguing that the rosebud, as a distinct motif, became transformed into a sign of social and cultural identity. Rather than serving as a sign for a specific ethnic or linguistic group, its wide distribution attests to an association with Native identity in general. No longer simply a symbol accepted by non-Natives as indicative of Native acculturation, for the Native audience the rosebud asserted, "I am Indian." As such it became a subtle, but powerful acknowledgement that despite years of Euro-Canadian economic, political and religious efforts to acculturate and assimilate, the Native identity was kept alive, the core merely masked (cf. Hostetler12). The rosebud became the sign of Native solidarity, of a unified resistance against the effects of colonialism, a collective affirmation of an inter-tribal bond comparable to that found within any given nation.

The Rose in Contemporary Expression

Furthermore, expressions by contemporary Natives attest to a continued use of the rose as a metaphor for Native identity. These expressions encompass a range of written and visual forms beginning with the presentation of instructive literature addressed to Native children and non-Natives. One such teaching focusses on the regenerative powers of Native culture as symbolized by the rose plant (Cleaver and Knight) while another demonstrates and validates Native identity—both individual and tribal—as being encapsulated in floral patterns, although not specifically roses (Mularchyk). Turning to musical expression, the poignant lyrics of Inuit singer and song writer Susan Aglukark lament to her non-Native audience the plight of the "Arctic Rose":

Why would you pick the perfect flower

When you could have watched it grow?

It's such a careless waste of life
when you pick the Arctic Rose . . .

By equating the loss of identity suffered by a young Native man sent far away to school with the picking of the arctic rose, Aglukark illustrates that his very identity as a Native, and his potential for development into a proud, dignified person are held in the metaphor of the rose. Once the rose is picked, or in this instance, once the young are sent away from their communities, that potential can never be attained.

In a similar fashion, the symbol of the rose is used by Ojibwe writer Sylvia O'Meara as a metaphor of hope. She deliberately uses such eloquent phrases as "standing in a field of flowers waiting for the color of the rose," and "I saw the color of the rose" to connote, first of all, the potential strengths of Native identity to be recognized with the blooming of the rose, and ultimately, the fruition of the intrinsic potential of Native blossoming.

Finally, the visual imagery of full-blown rose blossoms painstakingly beaded or embroidered on outfits intended to be worn during Pow Wow performances, that is, outfits used in one of the most overt, highly visible, and unified display of the strengths of Native identity, communicate their Native identity loud and clear.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the rosebud, as an embodiment of fertility with its regenerative potential encoded and encapsulated in its form, and with its essence protected by its thorns, takes on added significance as an encoded and encapsulated Native expression of resistance to the suppression of their values. Metaphorically, just as the full-blown rose is released from the rosebud by the sun's warmth, Native values, clothed by this "acceptable" imagery await their time in the sun. Or, as O'Meara so poetically crafts it, "standing in a field of flowers waiting for the color of the rose."

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Figures

Figure 1 Cree painted hide coat
Note wedge-triangle motif.
Berlin 12823.
Photographed by Ron Oberholtzer

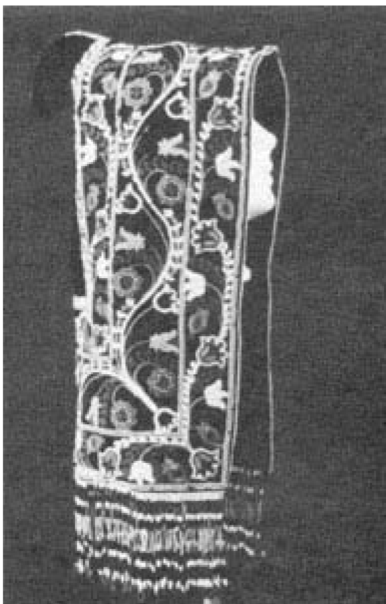

Figure 2 Cree beaded cloth hood
No location.
PMA H64.64.34
Photograph courtesy of the Provincial Museum of Alberta

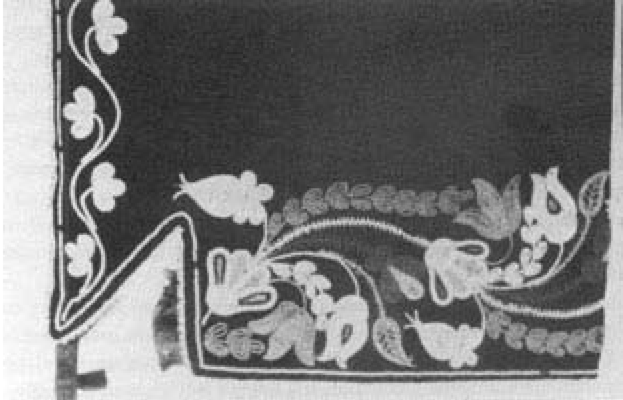

Figure 3 Man's beaded legging bottom
Location unknown.
McCord Museum ME938.1, 1 and 2. Photographed by the author.

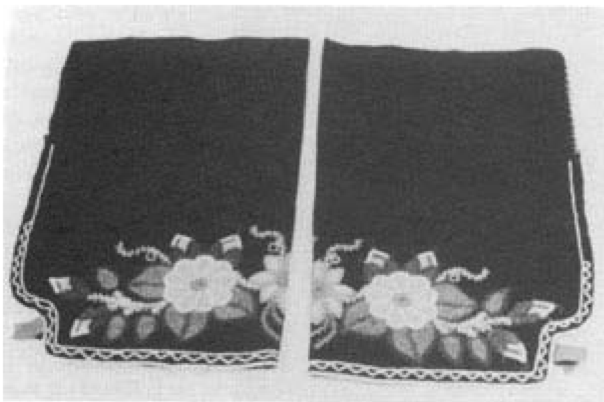

Figure 4 Woman's beaded legging bottom
Circa 1860 Little Whale River on the east coast of Hudson Bay.
Edinburgh 1968. 731 A.B.
Photographed by Ron Oberholtzer.

Figure 5 Rosebud
Photographed by the author at Kashechewan on the west coast of James Bay.

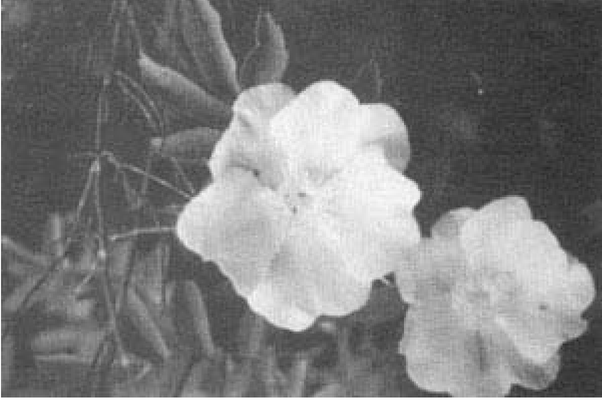

Figure 6 Wild rose Photographed by the author at Kashechewan on the west coast of James Bay