ASSOMPTION SASH

FINGER WEAVING IN ARROW SASHES AND GARTERS

WHEN the Canadian fur traders long ago used to meet the Indian hunters gathered for barter, they donned their great coats, beaver hats, coloured sashes and garters, and other finery (Plate II). By this stage-like display, which always accompanied the smoking of the calumet and trade palavers, the white men wanted to impress with

PLATE II

"A gentleman travelling in a dog cariole at the Hudson's Bay", 1825
(coloured lithograph by W. Day, 1825, Public Archives, Ottawa).

their superiority the natives who, poor as they were, none the less craved personal adornment and prestige. The tribal leaders from the first were fond of acquiring similar insignia of power and of emulating their dis-

tinguished visitors, so that great coats with hood, red cloth leggings, beaded bands and pouches, brightly coloured sashes and garters of fine wool with flowing fringes and tufted tips, met with favour in the barter, and very soon formed part of the equipment of each chief worthy of the name.

Thus began a widespread diffusion across North America of trade articles and handicrafts at first foreign in the woodlands and the West, which, after a lapse of time and many changes, lingered in the country of their adoption and were later mistaken for indigenous—articles like bead work, silk work, and other decorative devices.

Are, for instance, the brightly coloured woollen sashes and garters native to America? In other words, is finger weaving, which they involve, a pre-Columbian technique, or is it an introduced feature which adapted itself to new surroundings? To this question contradictory answers, implicitly or otherwise, have already been given, and it is by no means easy to find our way through presumptions and a mass of poorly recorded facts that cover at least a few hundred years.

Ready answers to this historical problem, as in similar cases awaiting reconsideration, are found in ethnographic museums and monographs. For instance, the most noted implicit solution is suggested by the Museum of the American Indian, in New York, where, near the entrance, a magnificent braided arrow sash, 171 inches long and 10 inches wide (14/5102), is displayed by itself in a wall case and labelled Iroquois. On the strength of this, the finest braided sashes in existence (the *ceintures flêchées* of the Northwestern traders) were made by the Iroquois, though not necessarily only by themselves. And in the splendid collection of Indian sashes and garters of that museum, a number of varied specimens are labelled Iroquois, Micmac, Huron, Shawnee, Winnebago, Osage. This statement of cultural facts is corroborated by other museums, in particular the American Museum of Natural History, New York, and the National Museum of Canada. The Director of the Museum of the American Indian agreed, however, that the data in the catalogues were inconclusive, the specimens having been collected among the Indians, in the past 50 years or less, without any information as to whether they had been made locally or purchased elsewhere. In a show-case of the National Museum of Canada, two fine sashes exemplify Huron handicrafts. Yet these actually were made, the first on a heddle loom by Joseph Garneau, of Sillery, near Quebec, and the other, owned by a Montreal bourgeois, presumably was made at L'Assomption. These two sashes never were located on an Indian reserve. Upon close examination, Indian specimens of sashes in our museums may afford little or no evidence as to where they were made, nor even as to whether the Indians themselves practised finger weaving under any form whatsoever.

To find our way to certainty we must proceed from one established fact to another, so that, as a result, we may later bridge gaps and perhaps fathom the unknown. A number of such facts here are at our disposal. They enable us to observe the beginnings, growth, and diffusion of at least some types of garters and sashes. The others about which data are lacking may find their natural place in the scheme already outlined or remain outside, challenging attention. All this comes within the scope of the present study.

ARROW SASHES OF L'ASSOMPTION OR L'ACHIGAN

The best known of the facts under consideration concern the woollen sashes of the Montreal fur traders and bourgeois, these being called *ceintures fléchées*—arrow sashes or arrowed sashes—or as Assomption sashes, *ceintures de L'Assomption*, or again, *ceintures de Saint-Jacques de L'Achigan*, from the names of the localities where they were made.

These arrow sashes were woven in large numbers first for the North West Company and then for the Hudson's Bay Company, as they were an important article of barter all over the northern parts of this continent.

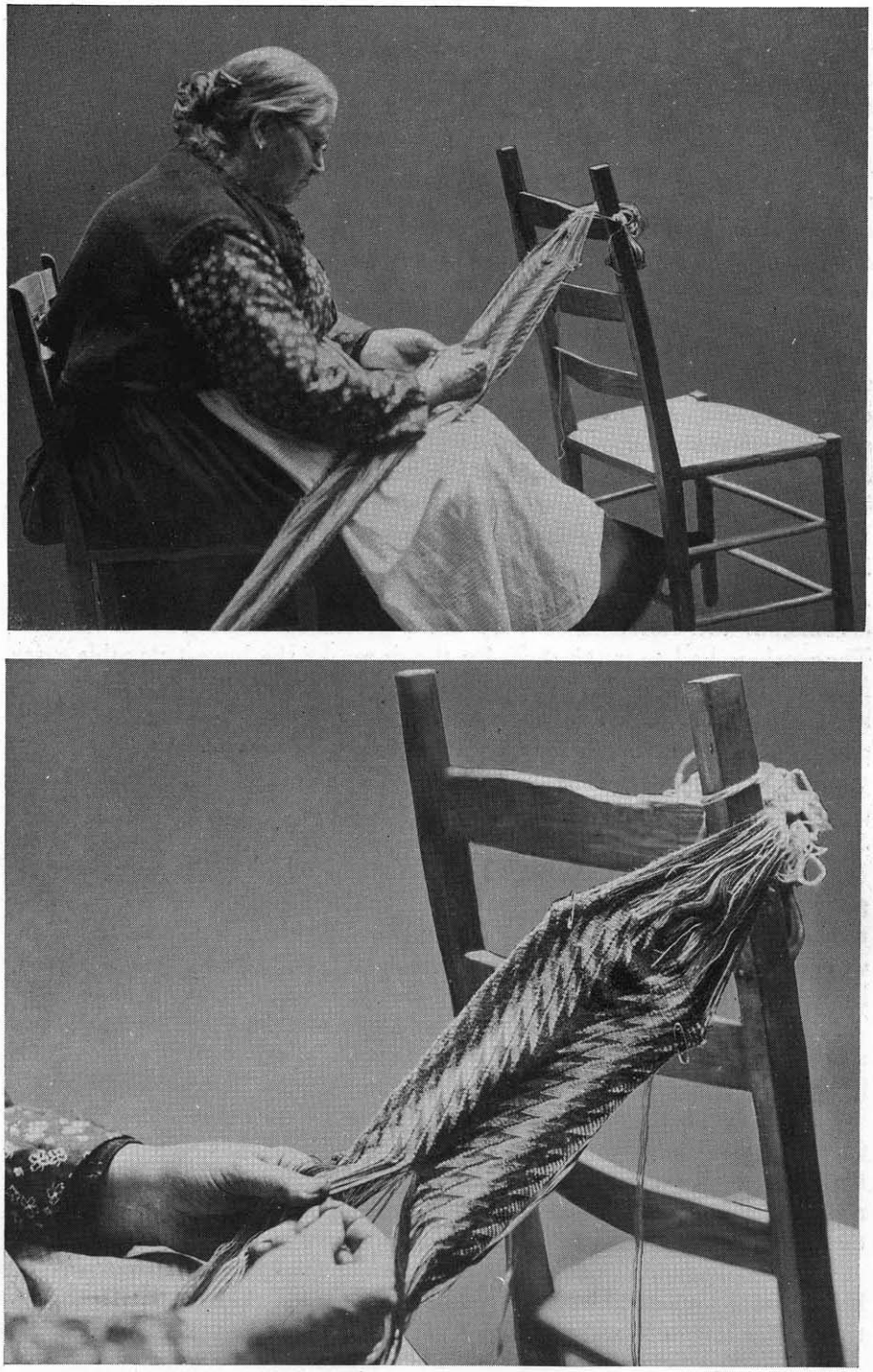
In the later stages of their home manufacture at St. Jacques de L'Achigan, for convenience they were produced in standardized form. The workers had to make them by the dozen at the lowest possible price. Middle-men, who controlled the production, hastened it by means of the specialization of the makers; some of them spun the wool hard and into double strands, others warped the double strands (*ourdir*) into sets, and the weavers, in the winter, worked at home from early dawn until ten or eleven at night, for less than 30 cents a day, to be paid in goods (for details *See* Achigan Sashes).

The result of standardization and trade abuses, of low prices and growing demand for cheap articles in the end—nearly 40 years ago—ruined the craft and brought about the production of a mechanically woven sash in England for the Hudson's Bay Company, which activity is still pursued.

A home-made sash of good quality that used to retail at $15 is now replaced by a brilliant textile for sale at $3.25, and most people are no longer aware of the difference between genuine and imported sashes.

After the collapse of the Assomption or Achigan home industry (L'Achigan is the subdivision of L'Assomption where the weavers resided), the impression prevailed in Montreal and elsewhere that the art of sash-making had already vanished; indeed, that the secret of its complex technique was on the verge of being lost.

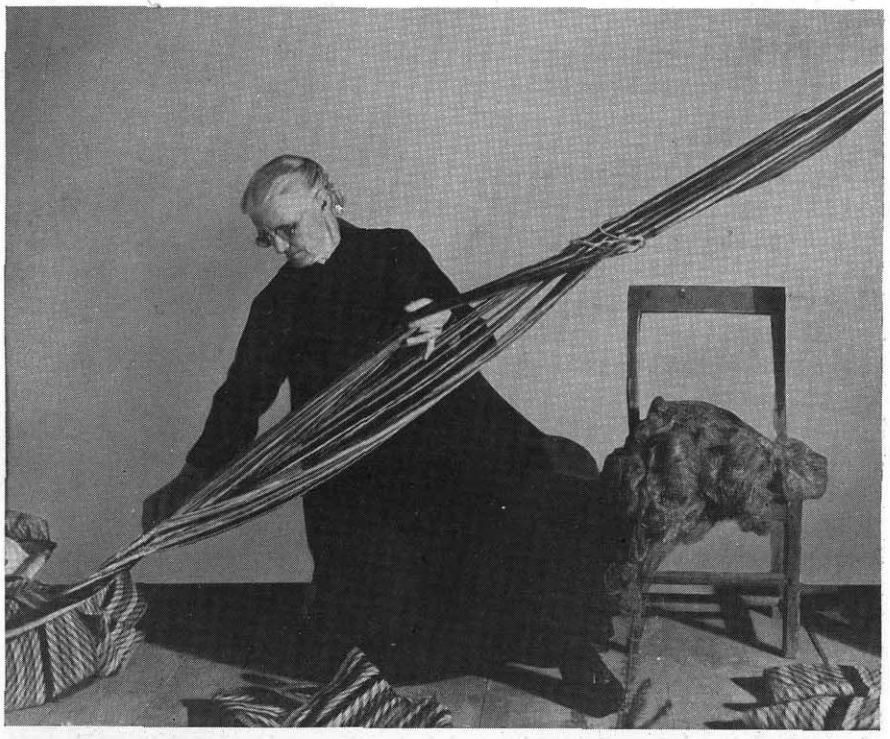
As a tribute to a remarkable Canadian craft of the past, the Canadian Handicrafts Guild exhibited a number of picked Assomption sashes at the Art Gallery of Montreal, in 1907, and had Mme. Venne, an old Achigan



Mme. Françoise Venne, of St. Jacques L'Achigan, weaving a sash, about 1907
(Canadian Handicrafts Guild, Montreal).

weaver, give public demonstrations of her work; she was considered the last representative of her type of weavers. This demonstration so entirely impressed Dr. E.-Z. Massicotte, Archivist of the Montreal Court House, that, in 1919, he brought out a few Assomption sashes at Folklore Evenings, which we both organized at Salle Saint-Sulpice, Montreal, and he published a short monograph on the sash and its history in Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society, 1924, pages 1-13. These were the first steps in an effort to save the technique of sash-making from oblivion. Mme.

PLATE IV



Mme. Napoléon Lord, of St. Jacques L'Achigan, weaving a sash at the Quebec Festivals in 1927-28 (Associated Screen News).

Napoléon Lord, of L'Achigan, was then discovered and led to reintroduce the craft into a Montreal convent; and she later appeared with two other weavers at the Quebec Folk-song and Handicraft Festivals. Public attention, as a result, was sufficiently aroused to prepare for later developments. And now, chiefly because of the teaching of finger weaving at the Quebec School of Domestic Handicrafts, sash weaving has become common knowledge to many women throughout French Canada.

Most of the wide sashes called *ceintures fléchées* are of the same kind as those shown in Plates III, IV, VI, and VIII. Many of them belong to private owners and collectors, who fondly treasure them. The specimens measured and analysed for the Museum suffice to give a fair idea of the type.

The *ceintures fléchées* seldom vary from the norm, which seems to have been fixed about 1830 or 1840; and they were all made at L'Assomption, more precisely, at St. Jacques de L'Achigan and Ste. Marie Salome, which are parish subdivisions of L'Assomption, and other localities in the neighbourhood, all of them northeast of Montreal. The three girls weaving sashes at the Nicolas Brisson establishment of Montreal, in 1825, no doubt were outsiders, presumably from L'Assomption.[1] Only one or two authentic makers of Assomption-like sashes have been mentioned for other localities (one for instance, at Orleans, near Ottawa), and it is probable that a forgotten link between them and the Assomption makers has existed. The bulk of the Assomption sashes were made for the Montreal fur traders; at first, in the early days after 1780, for those of the North West Company who recruited many of their voyageurs at L'Assomption, and later, after 1821, for the bourgeois of the Hudson's Bay Company. They were worn by bourgeois and voyageurs in their long journeys throughout the North West, and were also available as a trade article, as other garters and sashes had been even as early as during the French period.

The largest and finest examples of Assomption or Achigan sashes are over 15 feet long (including the fringes—the Iroquois sash, so-called, of the Museum of the American Indian, in New York, is 171 inches long), $10\frac{3}{4}$ and 10 inches wide, 2 pounds 9 ounces in weight, and with 32 arrows, 16 on each side. A number of them are about 9 inches wide; and the average trade sash made at L'Achigan, 40 years ago, was 6 inches wide. A few were even narrower.

The wool that the weavers used was different from that which the "habitants" now produce for knitting or weaving; it was dyed with old dyes, presumably vegetable and wood dyes, and indigo. So far as can be remembered it was sent to the weavers by the Montreal merchants, one of whom claimed, unreliably, it seems, that it was imported from France. Before being woven into sashes, it was spun over and twisted hard in double strands; that is, two, sometimes three, strands were spun into one.

The pattern in the *ceintures*, with very few exceptions, consisted of a wide red band or core (called *cœur* in French) in the centre that ran from one end to the other; this band was barbed along the edges, like a series of continuous arrows. On both sides of this core ran a series of parallel

[1] Livre de Dépouillement du Recensement fait de la cité en 1825 (MS. in the Archives of the Seminary of Quebec).

zigzags in varied colours, some of which were termed *flèches nettes* when in lozenge form. The arrow proper is so little in evidence in the prevailing sash of this type that it is to be wondered why it was ever known under the name of arrow sash (*ceinture fléchée*). The reason for this can be found in the oldest specimens, in which the arrow, often beaded, appears in full. In the early stages of the fur trade, about 1800, sashes of different types appear under distinct names on the invoice books of the North West Company, now preserved in the Archives of the Seminary of Quebec, thus: worsted sashes or belts of various sizes and prices, fine worsted belts, ceintures à flamme (flame-like)[1], ceintures à flèches (arrow sashes), fine ceintures, common worsted belts, common belts, N.W. worsted belts, scarlet do., fine scarlet do. Eventually the name of *ceinture fléchée* (arrow sash) came to prevail to the exclusion of other names, such as ceinture *à flamme* (flame-like), although actually the real arrow sash virtually disappeared and the ceinture à flamme (flame-like) would more fitly designate the type later standardized at L'Assomption.

All these sashes, on account of the length of the strands, were made from the middle towards the ends; the garter being short, could easily be woven from one end, although it usually was from the centre.

The Assomption sash is so complex and so uniform in all its manifestations that it constitutes a compact unit from the standpoint of history and manufacture, and the odd specimens recently collected among the Indians within the former domain of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company can form only part of the whole. This includes such sashes as the so-called Iroquois, Huron, and Micmac sashes of the Museum of the American Indian, in New York, of the National Museum of Canada, and of several other museums and private collections.

EARLY BRAIDED SASHES

Some of the sashes of the Assomption type, when they are old, have a story of their own to tell. Different from the others, they disclose the processes of their early growth and some of the features of the craft that later disappeared.

Among the sashes of this exceptional group are the "Sash so-called Acadian" (Plate VI), the "Beaded sash" of the kind worn about 1830 by the Huron chiefs of Lorette, "Sir Isaac Brock's arrow sash", made before 1812, the "Quebec sash", and the beaded arrow sash owned by Dr. Chénier in 1837 (Plate I).

The "Sash so-called Acadian", thus known for no explicitly stated reason, consists of four separate bands, each about $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide, like

[1] M. l'abbé Provost, of the Seminary of Quebec, states that his mother, Rosanna Pouliot, of Ste. Anges, Beauce, used to give the name of *à flammes* to a type of weaving with dented patterns.