

The Double-Curve Motive in North- eastern Algonkian Art.

Introductory

In the following brief paper is presented a review of a very characteristic and widespread motive in decorative art, brought to light through investigations during the past few years among the Algonkians of the northeastern area embraced in the valley of the St. Lawrence river and the contiguous regions north and south of it. The tribes of the area among whom the motive referred to is so predominant are chiefly the Montagnais and Naskapi of the Labrador peninsula, the Mistassini of Lake Mistassini, the Micmac of the Maritime Provinces of Canada, the Malecite of St. John river, New Brunswick, and the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy of Maine. Among certain tribes adjacent to these the motive is also more or less prominent. The motive itself is what may be termed the "double-curve", consisting of two opposed incurves as a foundation element, with embellishments more or less elaborate modifying the enclosed space, and with variations in the shape and proportions of the whole. This simple double-curve appears as a sort of unit, capable of being subjected to such a variety of augments, not infrequently distortive, as to become scarcely recognizable at first or second sight. Fig. 1 shows some varieties of the primary foundation element with deep angular, or shallow curves. Fig. 2 introduces modifications of the interior by the addition of ornaments ranging from the simplest to the most elaborate forms, these being from Penobscot, Micmac, and Montagnais specimens, while Fig. 3, from a Penobscot cradle-board, is the most elaborate example so far encountered in this area. Figures of the most confused appearance, produced in beadwork or carved on wood surfaces in the art manufactures of the tribes mentioned, may generally

be resolved into one or more of these double-curve brackets with interior ornamental fillings. An attempt to analyse the highly complex curve designs which appear in intricate combination upon decorated surfaces from this region at first generally results in confusion to the eye, the curved interlacing figures taking on definite outlines only after the underlying unit element has been determined. We find the brackets in different positions, sometimes on end, sometimes in doubles back to back, and sometimes upright. This complexity in the general character of the figures throughout the whole area, appears in the series of plates accompanying this paper (Plates I-X) illustrated from the collection of the Geological Survey of Canada and the Heye collection.

If we accept the double-curve as the primary element in the art of the region, then the floral designs and geometrical figures form a class subordinate in importance, which we may term the secondary class. The realistic floral patterns and the geometrical designs run with great similarity through the whole northeastern region. The former include the three lobed figure, the blossom, bud, leaf, and tendril. The latter include the cross-hatched diamond, circle, oval, zigzag, rectangle, and serrated border. Both classes are easily recognizable in practically all the tribes of the group, incidentally showing, in the geometrical patterns, not a little resemblance to characteristic Eskimo forms.

In some tribes of the northeastern group, particularly the Naskapi, our primary or double-curve element is found almost exclusively, while as we proceed westward the floral elements appear, as among the Montagnais, gradually growing in importance until we reach the Great Lakes region, where the secondary floral forms take up almost the whole field. So, too, south of the St. Lawrence the primary and the floral elements merge, the former losing character and the latter taking on more prominence with each succeeding tribe to the westward.

This transition shows quite clearly in a comparison of the figure groups from the different tribes. It will be seen that among the tribes west of an approximately direct line from the lower end of Hudson bay to New England, the double-curve as a primary motive gives place to the realistic floral designs and becomes merely secondary or extremely modified.

What the origin and history of the double-curve design may have been it seems unsafe to say. It occurs most abundantly

and is most characteristic among the extreme northern and eastern Algonkian tribes. Since it is restricted to them as a fundamental motive, it may be regarded from two points of view: it may have originated in the northeast and drifted westward, or it may have been derived from an original old American design element that became remodelled and specialized to its present form among some of these tribes and was subsequently adopted by their neighbours in general. The latter supposition seems a little more plausible. The outskirts of the range of this pattern embrace the Menomini, Iroquois, Delaware, Pottawatomi, Sauk and Fox, Blackfoot, Cree, and Ojibwa. There may, of course, be other groups sharing it, but I have not had access to adequate collections from the tribes where it might be expected. My direct acquaintance with the motive covers the coast and interior Montagnais, Mistassini, Naskapi, Malecite, Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, and Huron, much of the material available for study being now in the Victoria Memorial Museum, Ottawa. Several other trips, in quest of art motives, were made to tribes related in some ways to those having the double curve, the Cherokee of North Carolina and Mohegan of Connecticut. The other material presented here has been derived largely from the collection of Mr. Heye, University of Pennsylvania Museum, and the Peabody Museum, Cambridge. Concerning the derived material, much, naturally, could still be wished for, especially as regards actual tribal and local identity of specimens and possible symbolism or interpretation. From the fact, however, that those tribes where the design is most characteristic do not have any particular symbolism in art, one might presume that it is throughout much of the region primarily an ornamental rather than a symbolic motive.

For the purposes of this paper it seems preferable to discuss the data we have at hand under tribal headings, presenting a few conclusions in a final summary.

Occurrences of the Motive South of St. Lawrence River.

PRIMARY AREA. GROUP I: PENOBSCOT,
MALECITE, PASSAMAQUODDY,
AND MICMAC.

Penobscot.

The Penobscot Indians of Maine are about at the southern boundary of the area of distribution. The double-curve with them is the unit of design, embracing practically all their patterns except a few realistic floral and a few geometrical ones. Fig. 4 shows a selected set fairly typical for this tribe. Here the field of decoration includes clothing, birch bark articles, and handles of utensils. The technique was formerly in moose hair embroidery and painting, which were later replaced by beadwork. Etching on the surface of birch bark and incising in wood and bone also display the same designs. Gently rounding curves characterize the Penobscot examples, which range from comparatively simple forms to the most elaborate. Taken as a whole they show little uniformity.

They term the decorations in general *beskwasawek* "flower or blossom," but do not attach any particular identity to form, except to class the ovate leaves as willow leaves, and the spirals as fern shoots and tendrils in the most haphazard way. There seems, however, to have been in the past, if not now, judging from surviving ideas, a slight tendency for the women to connect the figures with medicinal plants, as though there might have been some feeling of protective magic underlying their use as decorations upon personal property. This feature, however, is not by any means an emphatic one.

Realistic floral figures, leaves, buds, blossoms, merge with the curve types, as augments, and also appear separately as design elements, though they remain secondary in importance to the double-curve motive.

The primary significance of the double-curve and scroll figures among the Penobscot was a sort of political symbolism. The double curves represented the bonds uniting the different

members of the chief's family, the subdivisions of the tribe, or the officers of the council. This symbolism has, however, been almost totally forgotten except by a few of the older people. It has been completely submerged by the vague floral symbolism mentioned before. Where the simple double-curve represents an enclosure, the interior ornaments, in the shape of leaf-like ovals, diamond, spurs, or zigzags, stand for the particular things conceived of within the enclosure. These may be persons, officers, villages, or tribes. Where clusters of the double-curve figures appear—it may be back to back, side to side, or in other relations—they denote the bonds of alliance in a general way. It is only in a few special instances that definite interpretations can be given to the ornaments within the curves, as in some of the chief's regalia capes or collars, where the interior ornaments stand for the members of his family who may be eligible to inherit his office, his councilmen and subordinate chiefs.

Where these designs function most seriously is upon the articles of regalia worn by chiefs during the ceremonies. We have several interesting specimens of these. One in particular is a mourning cape to be worn by one of the chief officers in the ceremony of electing a new chief (Plate I). The idea here is that the assembly is in mourning for the deceased chief and the mourning remains on the people until the new chief is elected. This example represents that stage of the ceremony preceding the actual election, while the mourning is still on. The cape itself may be divided into three areas, the outer area, with a purely decorative ribbon appliqué, the whole inner circumference, including the long ends, embroidered with a maze of scrolls and double-curves, and the lower central area in which may be seen double-curve enclosures, within which are a number of minor ornaments and a diamond shaped figure, the whole filled in between the lines of white beadwork with a dark ribbon interior. The inner border area (Fig. 5, b) represents in general the different villages, family and tribal units gathered for the occasion and bound together by the ties of friendship. It is in the lower central area (Fig. 5, a) that we strike the main significance of the design. Here the darkened central triangle denotes the place of mourning, that is, the village at Oldtown where the deceased chief is being replaced by his successor. The other oval-like ornaments, spurs and trian-

gles, represent the officers, headmen, and members of the chiefs' families, all marked in mourning by the black ribbon filling.

A few remarks applying to the Penobscot designs, which may incidentally have a bearing upon the art of neighbouring regions, may supply a few helpful details. A realistic plant and political symbolic foundation here seems to have become the ruling motive in the double-curve figures, while geographical and landscape representations are, nevertheless, not lacking among them. The interpretations, however, as may be imagined from the complexity and random character of the curved interiors, are by no means rigid or even general. Each artist, after starting the decoration with the conventional double-curves, falls, it seems, upon his or her own ingenuity in filling in the middles with what looks to him like this or that plant or some picture or representation of alliance. In consequence of this individual play of fancy it is hard to get interpretations for designs and their parts except from those who have executed them. Nevertheless, through all the freedom of style a number of conventionalities are maintained which give a homogeneous tone to the designs as a whole and make them decidedly distinctive for the tribe. Such, for example, are the cross-hatched ovals and triangles, the spreading curves, the hump in the middle of the curves with the central embellishments on it, the embellishments midway on opposite vertical sides and those flanking the central elevation, and the peculiar little parallel lines so often seen in the last mentioned places. By thus assembling the common peculiarities which run through most of the designs in each tribe, one may hope to obtain a basis for a comparative study. The determination, however, of any particular type may have to be decided by the eye, since the designs appear to vary about as much in the same tribe as between tribes in proximity to each other.

Malecite and Passamaquoddy.

The Malecite Indians of St. John river, New Brunswick, are the next people encountered east of the Penobscots. South of them, on Passamaquoddy bay and St. Croix river, in Maine, are the related Passamaquoddy. In the art work of both tribes the double-curve predominates, though no particularly distinctive

characteristics occur. The designs are found in beadwork, moose hair work, bark etching, and, rather rarely, in wood carving. Realistic floral designs of the usual form are also common. No symbolism has so far been met with in either tribe,¹ the patterns in general bearing the name of flowers.

In Fig. 6 and Plates II and III are shown some Malecite and in Fig. 7 some Passamaquoddy examples.

Micmac.

The Micmacs of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick express their artistic feeling by decorating the surface of birch-bark receptacles with dyed porcupine quills forming a sort of quill mosaic, and by embroidering the surface of cloth or leather with bead-work. In the former, practically all the designs are geometrical. It is in the latter, that we encounter the typical double-curve motive as the predominating design. Floral designs are here subordinate. While the double-curve figures of the Micmac are practically the same as among the other tribes south of the St. Lawrence, as far west as the motive is found, we nevertheless meet with a few distinctive features. Chief among these is a beautiful symmetry in outline. Evenly rounded marginal curves and elaborate interior fillings characterize the work of the tribe. Another point of distinction is the horizontal bar in the centre of the enclosed area supported upon two out-curves from the bottom. This interior pedestal, as it were, seems to form a mark of identity for the Micmac designs, though we are, as yet, at a loss to explain it. Figs. 8 and 9 and Plates IV and V show typical forms taken from Micmac chiefs' coats, women's capes and caps, and shoulder ornaments.

While one might expect to find a similar interpretation of the figures among the Micmacs as among the Penobscots, yet nothing definite in the way of interpretation or symbolism seems to have come to light, even after repeated inquiry. Vague floral representations are the only ideas suggested by informants.²

¹ Mr. W. H. Mechling has not as yet reported any symbolism among the Malecite.

²Information from Mr. W. D. Wallis.

*GROUP III: ADJACENT AREAS SOUTH OF THE
ST. LAWRENCE.*

South and west of the true double-curve area, terminating with the Penobscots, we encounter related forms of the motive among the Iroquois and Delawares. Though somewhat outside of our field of direct investigation, a few comparative remarks may be appropriate.

Iroquois (including Wyandot.)

Though we have as yet no complete study on Iroquois art, some features are, nevertheless, apparent enough in the Iroquois material in museums to warrant a few comparisons. The Iroquois have the double-curve motive very prominently displayed in their beadwork and former quill work. A few of their figures are identical with those of the Algonkian tribes east of them. The greater portion, however, exhibit the curves turning outward instead of inward. We find these designs in abundance upon leggings, moccasin flaps, skirts, and bags. Here, incidentally, as among the Penobscots and their eastern neighbours, the floral type of art seems to have gradually come to supersede the double curve in later times. Regarding the symbolism of the curved figures it is reported that they are primarily representations of celestial, geographical, and mythical phenomena, such as sky dome, world tree, scroll or helix, chiefs' horns and sun.¹ The scrolls themselves denote horns of chieftancy, those curving outward symbolizing a living chief, while the in-curved forms are emblematical of a dead chief. The border curve or scroll decorations of beadwork in general are, as I have learned, known among the Mohawks as *tekana'karar^m* "horned trimmings", even by individuals who are not aware of their symbolism.

The Tuscarora call the scrolls violets (literally, "bowing the head") and regard them as a sign of good luck, deriving the idea from a children's game of locking the flower heads together. The scroll violet is the symbol of the winner. The Mohawks of Deseronto call them "fern heads".

¹ Information, Mr. A. C. Parker; see also N.Y. State Dept. of Education Museum Bulletin No. 149, p. 47.

Technically it is not a difficult task to identify at sight the double curves of the Iroquois as distinguished from those of the Algonkians. Among the former the outcurves and series of drooping scrolls or half curves, as appear in the figures (Fig. 10), are very distinctive. The Iroquois figures are smaller and there is, moreover, a dearth of the interior embellishments so frequent in Algonkian design. (See also Plates VI, VII, XVI, XVII.)

The almost total absence of similar designs among the related Cherokee seems significant. Only in a few figures stamped on pottery do we meet with anything at all like them.

Delaware.

Closely related in form to the Iroquois curve designs are those of the Delaware. Specimens from both the Canadian and Oklahoma Delawares show the same features, so we may regard them as fundamental in Delaware art until some one gives us a closer study of the field. Fig. 11 (a) shows examples, though unfortunately we have no definite data at hand from the collectors concerning the possible symbolism or even naming. One is, however, almost tempted to guess, judging from neighbouring instances, that the domes surmounted by the curves are geographical and celestial representations.

Mohegan

Only the most fragmentary evidence comes to hand to show that the southern New England tribes shared the motive. In the floral beadwork designs executed some years ago, by a very old Niantic woman, living among the Mohegan, a modified double-curve pattern was often manifested. Also in the designs painted upon old Mohegan baskets we notice some figures almost identical with the Iroquois curves.¹ They evidently belong to the same series. Examples are shown in Fig. 11 (b, c.) In Fig. 11 (d) is given a St. Francis Abenaki derivation of the motive, though perhaps the interpretation is rather far-fetched.

¹To be dealt with in a subsequent paper of this series.