



Mocotaugan

The Story and Art of the Crooked Knife:
The Woodlands Indian's indispensable survival tool

RUSSELL JALBERT AND NED JALBERT



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The Woodlands Indian's Indispensable Survival Tool

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*To Lois and Keith.
Thank you.*

*“The most valuable things I own are my axe,
my wife and my crooked knife.”*

—Blue Coat, a Northern Cree

“Almost unknown today, this knife is one of the most distinctive antiquities of the ‘Man of the North.’”

—Carl Russell, *Firearms, Traps and Tools of the Mountain Men*

“No [Northeastern Woodlands] man ever goes off on a journey without this knife, no matter how short the distance ... and [he uses the knife] to make one thousand and one indispensable objects.”

—John Wesley Powell, Curator, U.S. Bureau of Ethnology, 1898

*Every object has a story. The better we know
the story the more we appreciate the object.*

—Axiom of curators and collectors

*In the realm of material culture, the tool for making an
object is often as important as the object itself.*

—Axiom of anthropologists

*“I used to use a two-handed drawknife.
That goddamned thing. You’ve got to use a vise
to hold the work. With the crooked knife,
I can work in the woods if I want.
It almost feels as if it’s part of me.
If anyone ever comes out with a tool
that rivals a crooked knife,
I’d like to know about it.”*

—Henri Vaillancourt, modern master birch bark canoe maker

“Why, out of the handy and useful objects which were the first tools of primitive man, did forms progressively emerge until they surpassed the utilitarian purpose of the formed object and became a form for the sake of form, that is to say, a work of art?”

—Sir Herbert Read, art critic

*“No one will know
why such a dull stub of a blade
found such a fanciful
handle, as if the one who gripped it
fought with ghosts.”*

—From a poem, *Worn Tool*, by Stephen Sandy

T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

| | |
|-----|---|
| 24 | List of Illustrations |
| 25 | Acknowledgments |
| 27 | To the Reader |
| 29 | Why Call It <i>Mocotaugan</i> ? |
| 32 | The Importance of the “Man’s Knife of the North” |
| 34 | The Anatomy of the Mocotaugan |
| 38 | How a Modern Master Uses a Mocotaugan |
| 41 | The Mocotaugan’s Ancient Origins |
| 44 | Evolution of the Mocotaugan |
| 46 | The Revolution of the Iron Age |
| 50 | The Art of the Mocotaugan |
| 58 | Categories of Designs in the Mocotaugan Handle |
| 59 | A Portfolio of Photographs of Mocotaugan Art |
| 148 | The Mocotaugan in Modern Times |
| 158 | Embellished Mocotaugans of Modern Times |
| 162 | Afterword |
| 163 | List of Portfolio Plates with Annotations |
| 167 | Bibliography |
| 170 | Sources of Antique and Modern Embellished Mocotaugans |

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 28 Reproduction of first known use of the word *mocotaugan* in written English
- 34 Illustration of the technique for using the mocotaugan
- 35 Exploded drawing of a typical Woodlands mocotaugan
- 40 Map of the areas in which the one-handed drawknife is found
- 36 Photograph of an Eskimo “crooked knife”
- 44-45 Drawings of the knife’s evolution, from the Stone Age to the present
- 54-56 Drawings of three tribal styles of embellished mocotaugans
- 59-147 A Portfolio of Photographs of embellished mocotaugans
- 154-155 Photographs of contemporary Woodlands art created with a mocotaugan
- 159-161 Photographs of three embellished mocotaugans of modern times

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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To the Reader

At first glance, the Woodlands Indian's typical "crooked knife" appears drab and commonplace and at best, as one early New World explorer put it, "peculiar." Under the surface appearance, however, this knife is one of the earliest and most significant of all material objects known today from the entire history of native North Americans.

This essay tries to provide a helpful overview of the knife as an especially distinctive example of the Natives' material culture. For tens of thousands of years, the knife was a truly essential tool for survival; then it also became an instrument for creating some of the Woodlands' finest art. The Natives used this knife to embellish any number of objects that were indispensable for their lifeway, but no object was embellished more fully than the handle of the knife itself. In words and pictures, the essay traces the long history of the knife — from its Stone Age origins, through its transformation with the iron the Europeans introduced to the continent, down to the present day. One portion of the overview provides a context for the reader to examine the role of the knife as a significant factor in the Native American's urge for self-expression through the medium of a visual art. The other portion presents full-page photographs that display that art, plus some facts and ideas that perhaps can help the reader better appreciate that art.

This essay is a work in progress. Our aim is to encourage further exploration of this distinctive knife in all its anthropological and aesthetic aspects. Our hope is that in the not-too-distant future another knowledgeable person like Carl Russell will write something like this:

"More people than ever recognize that this knife stands as one of the most distinctive antiquities of the "Man of the North."

Russell Jalbert and Ned Jalbert