

# The Art of the Mocotaugan

**S**MALL-SCALE SCULPTURE, THE CENTRAL DISTINGUISHING ART FORM OF THE WOODLANDS Native culture, is quite different from that of the tribes in any other part of North America. And the art that graces the handles of some mocotaugans typifies that art form superbly well.

Like all other art forms, the Woodlands' small-scale sculpture was the product of its physical and social environment. The Natives had no choice but to move between summer and winter camps several times every year for the best hunting and gathering according to the seasons. Such movement meant traveling light over difficult terrain, so the art they created had to be durable and easily portable. Furthermore, with few exceptions, such as a shaman's fetish, small-scale sculpture was rarely fashioned as stand-alone works of art. Rather, the art was incorporated into everyday utilitarian objects such as bowls and ladles and peace pipes. In addition, as Robert Ritzenthaler points out in *American Indian Art* magazine (V1, No.4, 1975), "[T]he life of the Woodlands Indian required that an inordinate amount of time be devoted to the food quest, with little leisure to spend on the development of the arts or the creation of specialists." As a result of these factors, Ritzenthaler adds, the keynote features of Woodlands small-scale sculpture are clarity and simplicity.

## Portrait of the Artist

We will never know the *name* of the anonymous man in the past who made a particular embellished mocotaugan, but we can know the *kind* of man he was.

This man would be a man, like all other Woodlands men, who strived daily to provide for himself and his family by hunting and gathering in a primeval wilderness. This man made his own tools and weapons, and learned how to do this by watching elders in his tribe.

Unlike most of his fellow tribesmen, however, this man possessed an inherent urge and skill to become a true artist.

**embellish** (ěm-běl'ish) To make beautiful as by ornamentation; decorate. — The American Heritage Dictionary, Third Edition

This man was almost certainly a member of the Micmac or Penobscot of the far Northeast, or of the Seven Nations of the Iroquois of New York, or the Massachusetts of New England; the Huron, or the Ottawa and Potawatomi of the Eastern Great Lakes; the Winnebago, Mesquakie and Menominee of the Western Great Lakes; or the Cree, Ojibwa and Chippewa of Central Canada.

If this man was an Iroquoian, he was one of a geographic group that created some of the Woodlands' most beautiful, delicate and intricately carved bowls, ladles and masks — art unsurpassed by any other Woodlands tribe.

In creating his art, he selected subjects and forms that caught his eye where he lived and where he traveled. Often, his carvings were personal: One could mark an important date in his life, another reproduce a lucky symbol, and another memorialize a loved one.

This man did not create an embellished knife for any ceremonial purpose, nor to be used as a weapon, nor for scalping as at least one author claimed. He might occasionally have used his ornamented knife as a gift, perhaps to sell or trade, and very likely to display his skill to impress family, friends, rivals and strangers. It is likely that, in keeping with the Native Americans' profound sense of higher powers, this man sang or prayed as he crafted his knife, to appease or appeal to some spirit he believed existed in every part of his endeavor. These spirits would be contained within his own creative process, the object he was making, or the natural object that would affect or be affected by his man-made object, such as the winds, or the waters over which his new canoe would travel.

### **Examining the Art Whole**

In judging whether any given mocotaugan is a work of art, there is no question that the one most important element for a viewer is a matter of the heart — the emotional response, the special surge of surprise and pleasure, that comes simply from viewing the object.

But full appreciation of the mocotaugan as art is a matter of the mind, too. The Viewer who gets the most out his or her viewing experience has some understanding of the physical and social environment, the *context* in which the knife was created. (It is this context that this essay tries to provide to some degree.) The Viewer also gains more from the viewing experience by analyzing in some detail all the physical elements of the object itself.

To “examine the art whole,” the prepared Viewer notes closely the originality of the design, the composition of the several parts, the workmanship of the finished product, and

*Originality ...* the evidence of its antiquity/provenance. Typically, the Viewer sees that the most  
*Composition ...* important element of the art is displayed in that part of the handle that extends  
*Workmanship ...* above the grip itself. This of course makes the art proudly conspicuous even  
*Antiquity* when the knife is in use. At the same time, the extension seems to accentuate the  
fundamental “form follows function” nature of the tool.

For *originality*, the Viewer looks for the fresh expression of a vision or concept; either in an imaginative variation on a traditional design or an inventiveness inspired by some object of European origin.

For *composition*, the Viewer considers the way the knife’s individual components — the blade, the grip, the binding, the ornamentation — are sized, shaped, and finished, then combined to create a harmonious overall design.

For *workmanship*, the Viewer takes into account the level of expertise shown, in the selection of materials, in the complexity of design, in the precision of the cut of every angle and curve, and in the smoothing or texturing of the finish.

For the *antiquity* of a mocotaugan, the Viewer rarely has any documentation to help the examination. Sometimes there is a date inscribed on the knife, but Viewers must rely mainly on physical evidence. They examine the nature of the overall patina, the decomposition of the component materials, such as a leather lashing, and the degree of wear in both blade and handle. The blade shows how frequently the knife was sharpened; the handle shows to what degree that constant strong gripping has gradually worn down the material, especially on the back of the grip and in its thumb rest.

## **The Special Appeal of the Embellished Mocotaugan**



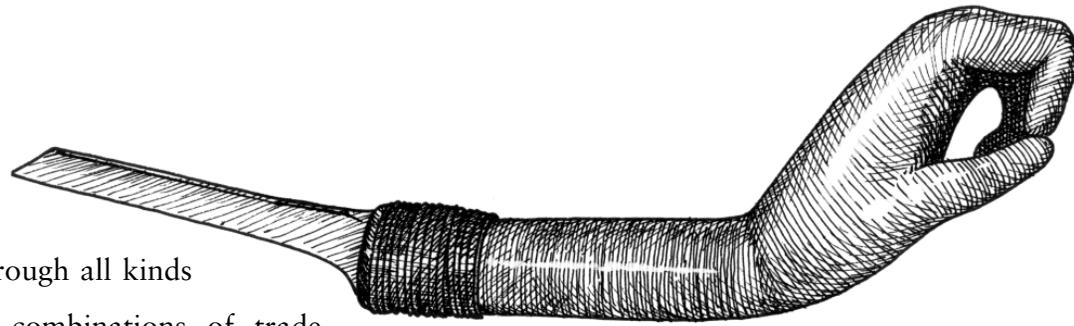
The combination of emotional response and informed analysis contributes significantly to the Viewer's response to any work of art. But the embellished mocotaugan offers one rare characteristic that can carry the Viewer to an even more profound response. The mocotaugan can elicit in the Viewer a purely physical experience, an innate ritual of tactile discovery, that may be unmatched by any other Woodlands art form.

Usually, when an even lightly-informed Viewer has an opportunity to hold an antique art object in hand, such as a quilled basket or a painted robe, he or she handles it carefully, even gingerly, with minimum contact of fingertips. But when the object is a mocotaugan, the same Viewer almost always, instinctively, viscerally, grasps the knife firmly with a whole hand around the handle. The Viewer almost invariably spends time in adjusting palm, fingers and thumb into the same working position as the Native who made it would have held it. The Viewer then, almost always, is prompted by his or her own unconscious to duplicate the Native's traditional toward-the-body motion. Such response to the knife generates an unforced contemplation, a kind of virtual reality, a physical and vivid connection between the mind of the Viewer and the world of the long-ago Native. Such a response is rare indeed with any other Woodlands art object.

## **In Search of Provenance and Tribal Styles**

As with most Indian artifacts collected before the 20th century, it is extremely rare to obtain even fragmentary documentation of the provenance of any historic mocotaugan. The maker's name was never known, and the time, place and circumstances of making the knife were rarely recorded. A mocotaugan-as-art carved in Delaware tribal country, for example, could have eventually been found scores of years later somewhere in Northern Cree coun-

try, arriving there through all kinds of possible combinations of trade, gift, and spoils of war. It is possible, too, that in its journey, one successive owner or another might have, for better or worse, in some way altered the original design.



Mocotaugan embellished in Northeast Maritime style.

Drawing of artifact #HM6304 in the Hudson Museum, Orono, Maine

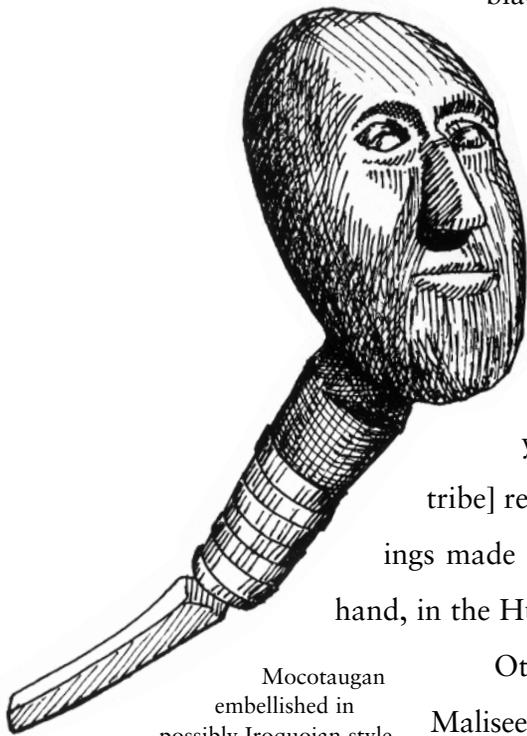
There might, however, be some possibility of identifying a general differentiation of *tribal styles* among Natives in at least three regions of the Woodlands: the Northeast Maritime, the Iroquoian and the Western Great Lakes.

*The Northeast Maritime* style is found among the Micmac, Penobscot, Maliseet and Passamaquoddy tribes. Overall, these knives are generally shorter than most, with the

blades not usually curved at the tip. The handles tend to be shorter, more compact than most, with squared edges. The most prevalent treatment seems to be chip carving. The decorative extension above the grip is commonly of fiddlehead form or a volute closed with a simple cylindrical pass-through opening. Bear, cod and moose were frequent motifs.

Another common form was of a three-dimensional, partially clenched human hand. Frank Speck, who worked for years among the Penobscots, wrote that “The specimen [from that tribe] representing a closed hand is probably among the finest wood carvings made by natives in eastern America.” A knife with a similar clenched hand, in the Hudson Museum in Orono, Maine, is perhaps even finer.

Other forms, however, were not uncommon. For example, one Maliseet knife shows stacked hearts. (For more examples of the Northeast Maritime style, see Plate E87 in *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of*

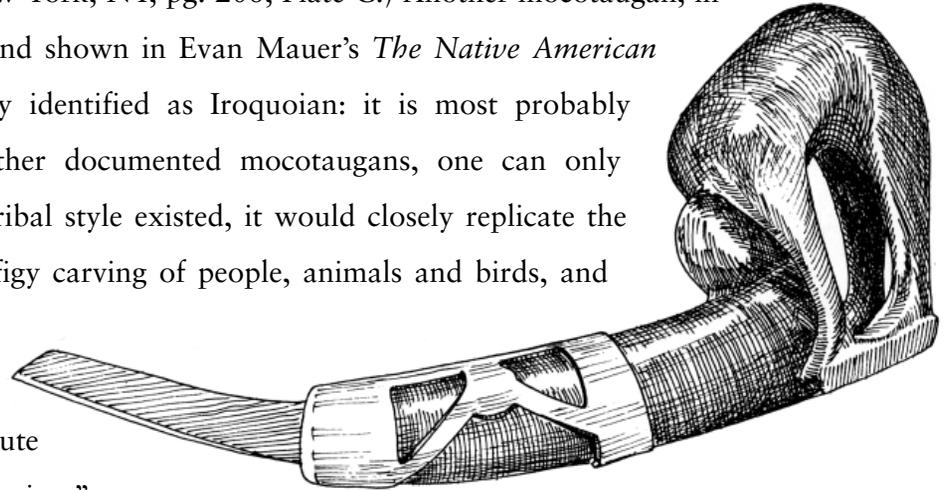


Mocotaugan embellished in possibly Iroquoian style.

Drawing of a knife in a private collection

*Canada's First Peoples*, Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta, 1987.)

*The Iroquoian style.* Master carvers of the Iroquois created some of the Woodlands' most beautiful, delicate and intricately carved bowls, clubs, ladles and masks. But of all known published examples of mocotaugans, only one, that of a beautiful fully-formed human face, has been identified as Iroquoian. (See *Guide to the Arts of America*, Johnson and Harmer, Rizzoli Press, New York, NY, pg. 208, Plate C.) Another mocotaugan, in the Peabody Essex Museum and shown in Evan Mauer's *The Native American Heritage*, has been incorrectly identified as Iroquoian: it is most probably Chippewyan. Absent any other documented mocotaugans, one can only assume that if an Iroquoian tribal style existed, it would closely replicate the tribes' artistic traditions of effigy carving of people, animals and birds, and would exhibit what noted Iroquoian ethnographer Lewis Morgan called "the minute delicacy and beauty of [the] carving."



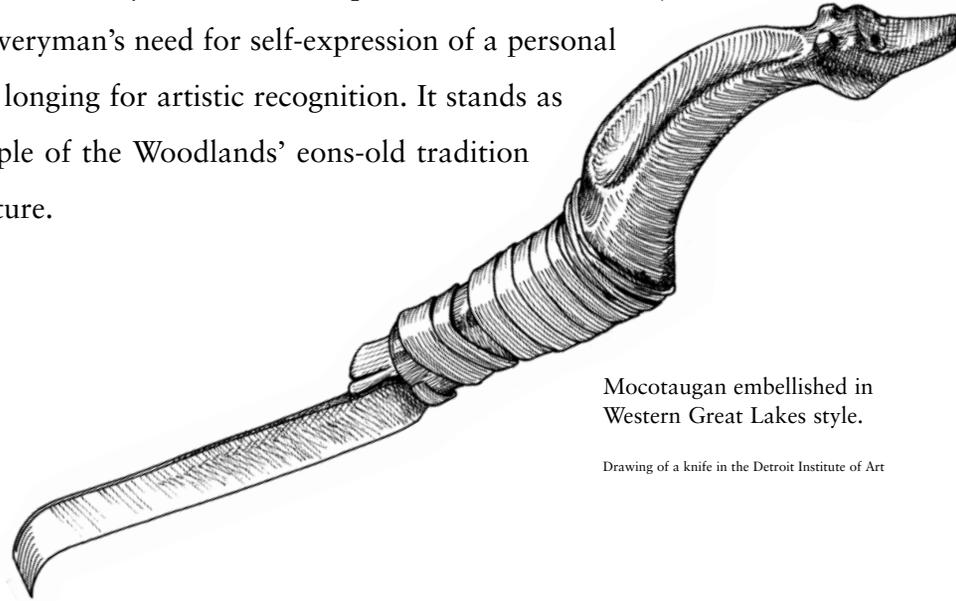
*The Western Great Lakes style* is fluid and carefully executed, and usually appears to be more elegant than the knives of other regions. Two examples, both now in the Detroit Institute of Art, show that the horse was a common motif. One knife was collected from the Ottawa on Beaver Island, off the west coast of Michigan; the other from the Mesquakie of Tama, Iowa. Each knife shows a beautifully elongated horse's head and neck, detailed shaping of the mane, and life-like eyes, ears and muzzle. Similarly, both knives have beautiful long blades, with curved blade tips. The Museum properly classifies both knives as sculpture.

Another outstanding example of the mocotaugan embellished in Iroquoian style.

Drawing of a knife in a private collection

It may be that more Woodlands tribes than these three exhibit some unique features in the art of their mocotaugans through design repertoire, subject matter or treatment, but to date no one has provided much if any conclusive evidence of such differentiations.

In all, the art of the mocotaugan does not immediately strike a viewer as something spectacular, like a beaded war shirt or a false face mask. Yet it is art that can please the eye, engage the mind, stir the body and exalt the spirit. It is a material object that demonstrates everyman's need for self-expression of a personal world view and the longing for artistic recognition. It stands as a remarkable example of the Woodlands' eons-old tradition of small-scale sculpture.



Mocotaugan embellished in Western Great Lakes style.

Drawing of a knife in the Detroit Institute of Art

## The Influence of European Folk Art

Just as the Natives helped themselves freely to Europe's goods and technology, they borrowed freely from the variety of folk art designs that early settlers brought with them. Many embellished mocotaugans include design elements that can be traced to England, France, Germany, Holland, Ireland, and the several Scandinavian countries. Typical of these borrowed elements are the fleur de lis, the shamrock, and floral patterns. After the Dominion of Canada was founded in 1876, Natives began to use the new nation's emblem of the maple leaf.

In terms of total context, the informed Viewer of an embellished mocotaugan keeps in mind that the transfer of cultural characteristics worked two ways. The Natives borrowed from the non-Natives; the non-Natives borrowed from the Natives. For instance, virtually all voyageurs, trappers, traders and soldiers — then settlers themselves — found the mocotaugan so functional a tool in the Woodlands environment that they made the Native knife their own. (Up to one or two generations ago, relatives of this essay's authors kept at least one well-worn *couteau croche* in their tool boxes.)

This transfer applied not only to the *everyday* use of the mocotaugan: It applied also to the *embellishment* of the handle. Some collectors and anthropologists today have concluded that this two-way transfer of cultural design elements was so extensive that no significant differences can be detected between the carvings of Natives and non-Natives.

The early settlers of every nationality took part in this extensive cultural transfer, but it was the French who were the major influence. The French were the first newcomers in any number; they happened to settle in the Eastern Woodlands, where a relatively high proportion of Natives lived; and the general settlement policy of the French was to befriend, cultivate and cooperate with the Natives. In some ways, too, the French folk art aesthetic was similar to that of the Natives. For example, both the French and their Native neighbors had traditionally made frequent use of the chip carving technique.

This intertwining of New World with multiple Old World cultures adds another dimension to the appreciation of the embellished mocotaugan. Here now was both a work of art and a splendid example of acculturation, where the encroaching cultures helped to preserve and enrich the aboriginal people's traditional customs and spirit.



## Categories of Designs in the Mocotaugan Handle

Woodlands mocotaugan artists embellished their handles with a variety of design characteristics. Sometimes, but not often, they combined different characteristics into one piece of art. For the most part, the stylistic characteristics that the Natives created can be classified into these nine broad categories.

**Animal Effigies:** Realistic carvings of animals, either etched, in relief, or in three dimensions. The animals were mostly beavers and bears, but with a good showing of birds of prey and other birds, dogs, frogs, horses, fish, lizards, moose, otters, snakes and turtles.

**Chip Carving:** Mostly bas-relief shapes of circles, squares and triangles, often stacked.

**Clubs, Diamonds, Hearts and Spades:** Euro-American symbols and forms, including playing-card suits and iconic symbols, such as the Canadian maple leaf.

**Commemoratives:** Mark both personal and tribal special events; and include, with and without other embellishment, lettering of dates, names, photographs and other forms of mementos.

**Human Effigies:** Realistic carvings of both men and women. Rarely forms of complete figures; more commonly, individual features such as faces, hands and heads.

**Mixed Media:** Combine inlays of materials such as bone, glass, lead, mirrors and silver; more frequently, paints and stains.

**Nautical motifs:** Realistic carvings of such objects as anchors, barrels, canoes, compass roses and sailing ships.

**Pictographics:** Illustrate inanimate objects such as flowers, insects, leaves and trees, but also action scenes, buildings and even other mocotaugans.

**Scrolls, Volutes and Curves:** Include the so-called fiddle or violin handle, both adorned and unadorned, and other fanciful curved designs such as concentric circles and three-dimensional spirals.