



THE COALITION OF MASTER'S
SCHOLARS ON MATERIAL CULTURE

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Published by: The Coalition of Master's Scholars on Material Culture

URL: <https://cmsmc.org/publications/metis-leather-jacket>

Date Published: January 22, 2021

Citation: Epplett, Abigail. "Metis Leather Jacket: Exploring Syncretic Culture in the Mid-19th Century." The Coalition of Master's Scholars on Material Culture, January 22, 2021.

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Métis Leather Jacket: Exploring a Syncretic Culture in the Mid-19th Century

By: Abigail Epplett

Abstract: This paper will examine a Métis deerskin coat in the collection of the Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield, MA. The coat acts not only as a glimpse into an underrepresented syncretic culture but also demonstrates the impact of globalization, particularly on clothing styles in the mid-19th century. While the Métis' multiethnic French and Cree ancestry and ability to speak multiple languages allowed them to serve as the cultural mediators of the frontier, they faced discrimination for their blended religious beliefs, which combined elements of Catholicism and animism. Nevertheless, their skills as traders allowed them to propagate their distinctive style of clothing, even as they appropriated design elements from other colonies of the French Empire.

Key words: *Métis, Berkshire Museum, Cross-Cultural clothing, Catholicism, French Early America, Cree*

The Métis Leather Jacket at the Berkshire Museum is as attractive today as it was when it was first created around 1850. The intricate embroidery of naturally dyed multi-color porcupine quills compliments the soft brown of the deerskin that makes up the coat. Even with its stunning design, this coat is much more than a beautiful antique, as it is a glimpse into a flourishing yet underrepresented syncretic culture. Although the name of the original designer has been lost, we do know that they were Métis, a person of French and Cree ancestry who lived in rural Canada. Their pride from their unique heritage inspired them to combine elements of European and First Nations design in a single, cohesive garment.

This coat also demonstrates the impact of globalization on clothing styles in the mid-19th century, as the design elements have been borrowed from many cultures. Thanks to recent innovations in communication and travel, fashion-conscious designers could discover visual

motifs from around the world. While wealthy trendsetters in Paris, London, and other European cities might travel to “exotic” locations with more ease than past generations, the rural working and middle class of the United States and Canada had access to magazines like *Godey's Lady's Book*, which featured colorized fashion plates displaying the latest styles of Europe, along with illustrated travelogues chronicling the travels of European explorersⁱ.

With these Eurocentric inspirations serving as guides, the Métis jacket designer added imagery from Ancient Egypt to a traditional style of clothing, itself a blend of French and Cree clothing. This demonstrates access to a wide range of printed material while living on the Canadian frontier, a feat that would not have been possible without the recent impact of globalization. This same force would popularize this style of dress to mainstream culture in years to come, even as its Métis origins were forgotten.

Who were the Métis?

Beginning in the mid-17th century, French traders traveled from their home country to the region we now call Canada. With the absence of European women in Canada, many traders living in the Hudson Bay area of Manitoba had children with local women from the Nehiyawak nations, who are now known as the Cree.ⁱⁱ These children of French traders and Cree women were called Métis, a French word for “mixed”.ⁱⁱⁱ Somewhat surprisingly, given the treatment of mixed-race people throughout the Americas, this name did not hold negative connotations for the people. In fact, the Métis were proud of their unique, multicultural heritage and strove to incorporate the cultures from both heritages into a single, syncretic culture. They also used their identity to become “cultural mediators”, acting as interpreters and facilitating trade between the other groups inhabiting the region, including First Nations like the Cree and Ojibway, along with European colonists from France and Great Britain.

What made the Métis successful in this role? Before this coat was made around 1850, the Métis had settled into villages near the Hudson Bay in Manitoba. They frequently married other Métis, rather than their French or Cree relatives, both because they preferred spouses who shared their experiences and because of the stigma surrounding interracial marriages. Paradoxically, while this stigma prevented the Métis from fully integrating into either French or Cree society, it also marked them as belonging halfway to both cultures, poisoning them to act as mediators between these two groups. By the time this coat was created around 1850, the Métis had formed their own society, living in physically separate areas from the European settlements or First Nations villages.^{iv}

However, the Métis relied on these groups for their livelihood, whether they were bartering with members of the First Nations or receiving monetary compensation from Europeans. The Métis actively participated in fur trading like their French ancestors and worked part-time jobs building houses, chopping wood, and other types of physical labor in settlements built by British and French colonists. They also continued foraging and fishing for their food, as their Cree ancestors had done.^v

In addition to this split in work styles, the Métis spoke several languages. They developed their own language, Michif, which included words from Cree and French. They commonly learned French, dialects of Cree, and sometimes English. Because of their familiarity with both First Nations and European ways of life and language, along with their ability to translate between parties, they were crucial in creating trade agreements and settling disputes on the 19th century frontier.^{vi}

If the Métis were so integral to rural Canada at this time, why were they never fully accepted by the other residents? Besides the discomfort surrounding people of multiracial ancestry, the primary reason was religious differences. The European settlers adhered to different

denominations or sects of Christianity, as the British were Protestant and the French were Catholic. The First Nations of Canada practiced animism, the belief that every aspect of nature has a spirit that must be revered and protected.^{vii} While the Church would become notorious for forcing the conversion of First Nations people during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, at the time the leather jacket was designed in 1850, the few missionaries and priests sent to Manitoba had little influence over the people.

In the center of this pending controversy were the Métis, devout Catholics who incorporated elements of animism into their Christian beliefs to develop their own syncretic religion.^{viii} Although they were eager to share their religion with their neighbors - French, English, Cree, or whoever would listen - and were the most likely to connect with visiting priests, the Métis were distrusted for their unique views even as they worked to bring the many groups of Canada together.

Frontier Clothing

Just as the Métis blended the work styles, languages, and religions of their ancestors, they also combined elements of European and First Nations clothing, as is seen in the deerskin coat. The cut of the garment is distinctly European, a frock coat style popularized in the mid-19th century. Multiple panels create the garment, as piecing together several sections of cloth or tanned hide was easier than sewing a single section.^{ix} Like the fashionable frock coats of Europe, this coat has the distinctive “skirt” sewn to the body with a subtle waist seam. The distinctive cuffs and collar on the coat were also important features of the frock style, as they clearly signaled that the garment was of European origin.

While the general form of the coat is similar to those seen in Paris or London in 1850, that is where the similarities end. The material of the coat is deerskin, a common material on the frontier. While deerskin was utilized by the First Nations for thousands of years, it was a new material for

European settlers. Life on the frontier forced settlers to find a new style of clothing that fit their long, hard schedule and would stay both comfortable and warm in any weather. At the same time, Victorian era clothing norms demanded that outfits be modest and attractive, rather than merely comfortable.

The Métis combined the material knowledge from their Cree ancestors with the Catholic propriety of their French ancestors to create a new style of dress. Trading stores acted like clothing swaps where the Métis mingled with French fur trappers, Cree, and other First Nation traders, along with American cowboys. The cowboys were particularly inspired by these eclectic styles, and a romanticized version of midwestern clothing soon made its way into fashionable closets “back east”.^x

Many Motifs

The motifs sewn onto Métis clothing were images commonly appearing in both French and Cree art, from the Gothic Revival cathedrals of Montreal to the intricate dress worn during sacred Cree ceremonies. The motifs were sewn into the fabric using the First Nations technique of quilling. To create these intricate designs, quills were plucked from the skin of a porcupine and left to soak overnight to soften and remove any hairs. Once clean, the quills were dyed a variety of colors using natural dyes from native plants and animal byproducts or synthetic dyes imported from Europe.^{xi} Quills are a versatile material; they are hollow in the middle and flexible when wet which allows them to be looped into rings or strung together as beads. These two techniques are seen on the coat, with rings around the tassels and beads throughout the motifs.

The motifs on the coat though are not traditional quilling designs, but instead are European. While the image of a “spirit benefactor”, usually in the form of an animal, had traditionally decorated these items,^{xii} they were replaced by iconography of saints and European motifs. In this

case of this coat, the motifs represent the fleur-de-lis, a *rondelle* — the French word for a round window found in Catholic churches — and a lotus flower.

The fleur-de-lis is a common symbol throughout French Catholic culture. The flower symbolizes several saints but is most recognized for its association with France and the French nobility, emphasizing allegiance to the current ruler of France.^{xiii} Although the maker of the jacket has chosen to incorporate a well-known French symbol into the object, it has been recreated in a new form distinct from the original motif. The fleur-de-lis appliquéd on the coat is not in its standard form as a three-petaled flower but is instead broken into sections. The design may reference the spirit of France that remained in Canada even after British conquest.

Similarly, the pair of *rondelles* or wheels on the shoulders of the coat bear similarities to stained glass window designs of French Catholic parishes. At the same time, the design bears a resemblance to the Medicine Wheel used by the Cree and other First Nations as a symbol for human development and for determining one's place within society.^{xiv} The standard design of the Cree Medicine Wheel is divided into four quadrants, each of a different color—black or deep blue, white, red, and yellow—with an inner circle of green. These quadrants are associated with stages of life, seasons, directions, animals, or deadly sins.^{xv} The *rondelles* on the coat maintain some of the original colors of the Cree Medicine Wheel, with spokes of black, white, red, and yellow running across the wheel, but it has replaced green with light blue in the center, perhaps to show off the aniline dyes recently acquired from Europe or simply to reflect personal taste. The shape also does not follow the design of the original wheel, colors make up narrow bands instead of quadrants. However, the outer rim and inner circle of the wheel remain.

The lotus motif is not French or Cree in origin, but Egyptian. This is evidence of the far reaches of Egyptomania, the Victorian era obsession with Ancient Egyptian culture. From 1798 to 1801,

about fifty years before the coat was made, French emperor Napoleon invaded Egypt and took many of the artifacts to Paris as a symbol of French imperial power.^{xvi} Artists throughout Europe and its colonies reproduced Ancient Egyptian designs in their own media. Possessing an Egyptian-style artifact was a sign that the owner was well-educated in history, understood international politics, and appreciated good design,^{xvii} along with symbolizing support of the French Empire. This application of iconography shows that Egyptomania was not limited to Europeans; any member of the colonies might follow the trend and appropriate Egyptian imagery for their own uses.

Conclusion

The Métis deerskin coat represents a people proud of their international heritage who strove to incorporate multiple aspects of their ancestry into daily life. Their ability to act as cultural mediators between ethnic groups, even when not accepted by them, had a positive impact on Canadian life well into the 19th century. Through their work as language interpreters and their understanding of vastly different cultures, the Métis facilitated communication among different groups despite uneasy relations between the French, English, and Cree of rural Canada.

While their influence on frontier clothing styles is underreported, their contribution to the popular western style of dress is undeniable, since they were the first to popularize the combination of European and American materials, cuts, and motifs. Today, the eclectic nature of Métis clothing lives on as Western or Country clothing. Thanks to westward expansion in the United States after the American Civil War, this leather-based clothing became popular among pioneers as a durable alternative to factory manufactured cloth, a rare luxury on the frontier. Jackets initially purchased at trading posts from French, Native American, and Métis traders were altered or replicated to better fit the tastes of ranchers and farmers.^{xviii} The look was popularized by the singing cowboys

of the 1940s and 50s, and seen today in the outfits of country music performers.^{xix} From the romanticized rancher getup of classic stars like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers to the bedazzled and embroidered fringe jackets of Dolly Parton and Lil Nas X, the merger of European and First Nations design continues, but without credit given to the sartorial pioneers of Canada.

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