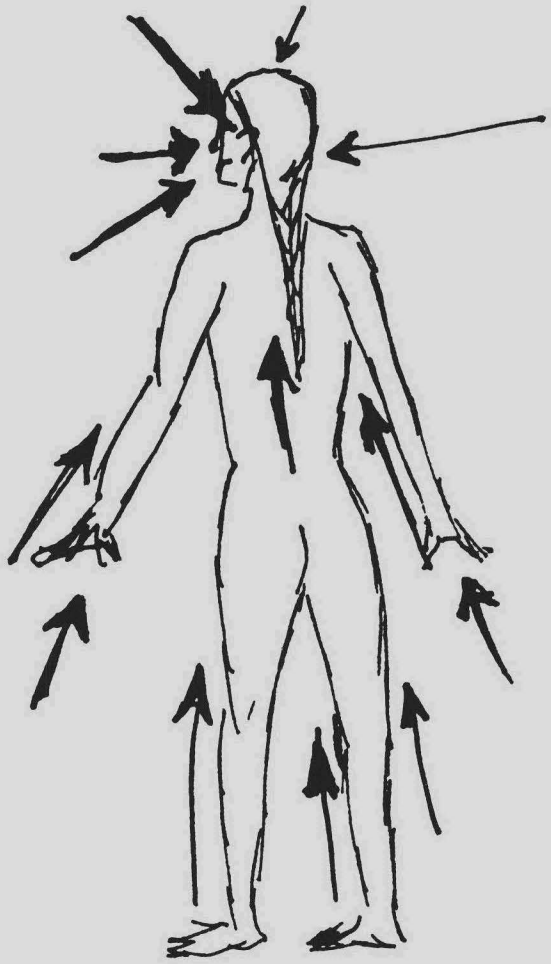
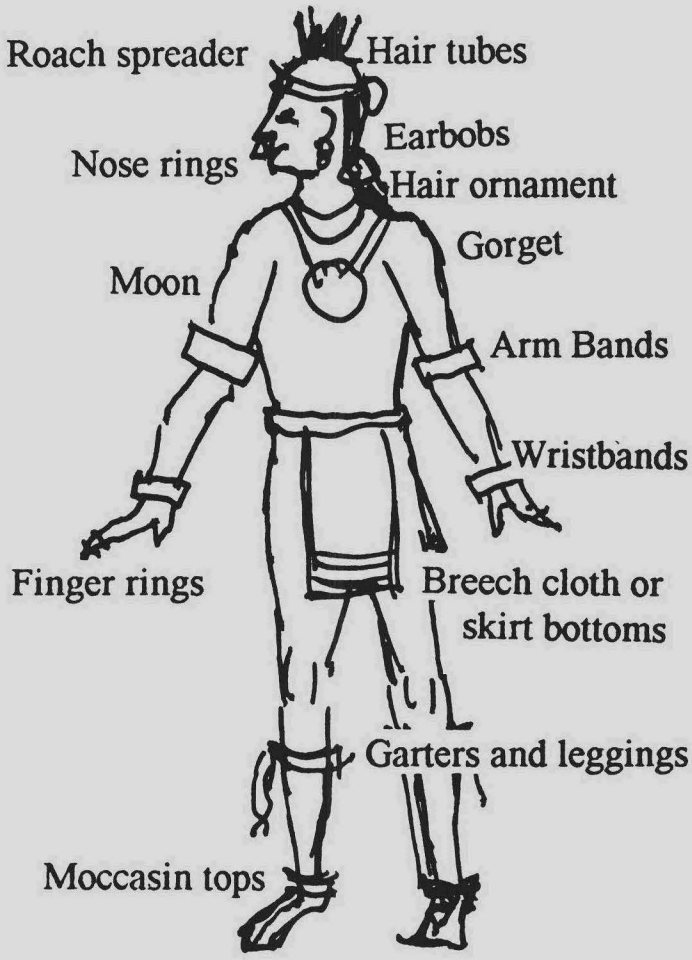


Points on the body at which evil spirits could enter.



Strategic locations at which silver blocks evil spirits.

Silver in the Fur Trade

Martha W. Hamilton

You may be wondering why I am presenting a paper on Trade Silver. There are two reasons. One is that it is my way of thanking so many ASAC members for their contributions to my new book, *Silver In the Fur Trade, 1680-1820.* A number of you have shared information about your trade silver collections and have generously provided photos.

The other reason relates to the functional and spiritual aspects of trade goods in general, including guns, tomahawks, knives, accoutrements, and silver ornaments; these are all fields in which a number of you collect. I will attempt to explain how silver trade ornaments particularly fit into native spiritual purposes, with the hope that it will help you to look at your other Native artifacts with new insight.

First Nation peoples (the Canadian term—we say "Native Americans") used symbols and petrographs to help interpret the seen and unseen world that surrounded them. Symbols in many forms were very important to them—whether in the design of animal totems, or geometrics representing various forces in nature. We are even able to see from the records assembled by the M.M.R.P.—Montreal Merchants Records Project—that they asked specifically for a "gun with an anchor mark" (Tulle arsenal). This fits in with their inclination for recognizing the value of symbols associated with a "brand name"—whether it be a *Fusil de chasse de Tulle* or a silver gorget by Robert Cruickshank or Hester Bateman.

At the North American fur trade conference at Mackinac, a man asked in what aspect of the fur trade I was interested. When I answered "Trade Silver," he stated "it was late and not very important and wasn't it all german silver anyway?" During all my research, I found that similar misinformation about trade silver was typical.

In researching silver and silversmiths associated with the fur trade from 1680 to 1820, I found that silver ornaments had developed into a very important trade commodity, which by 1780 comprised as much as 25% of the trade goods. Silver ornaments became equal in importance to guns, blankets, beads and kettles.[1] I was surprised to discover that silver had been traded at an earlier period than has been generally appreciated. This importance had diminished by 1820.[2] German silver arrived on this continent about 1830 and therefore falls outside the scope of my research.[3] The most interesting sidelight to my research was learning that First

Nations beliefs and taboos fueled the need for trade silver and even dictated it's form and function. My research revealed that each of the silver forms had a precontact precedent, relating to Native religious and superstitious beliefs. It has been generally assumed that silversmiths and merchants originated the designs and decorative motifs for trade silver. I found repeated evidence, however, that the natives gave traders preferred patterns, asking that they be made up in silver. In 1752 Cherokee chief Eusteenko requested of South Carolina Governor Glen "that each trader sent among us bring silver wrist hoops, a sample of which we send."[4]

In 1774, trader James Adair recorded "They follow the like customs before they became acquainted with the English."[5] Eventually, over 250 English, French, American and Canadian silversmiths catered to the specific product line of silver articles that remained virtually unchanged throughout the trade period.

I would like to cite a few of the significant Native beliefs that so greatly influenced "trade silver" shapes and designs, and illustrate them.

EVIL SPIRITS

The belief that evil spirits could enter the body at certain vulnerable points necessitated some form of protection. Barrier lines were placed at strategic locations on the bodies of adults and children, on the living and the dead. It was believed that evil spirits could not cross into a circle, nor cross a line that opposed them. Barriers could be created symbolically on the body as tattoos, or with paint, or

SA-GA-YEATH-QUA-PIETH-TOW or BRANT, c. 1710.
Gold braid forms a barrier line along the blanket's edge. Tatoos, consisting of dots, maltese-like cross, triangles and gorget, serve as protection from evil spirits and presage the shapes that trade silver will take. The feathers at Brant's ears, represent the upper world. Courtesy Public Archives of Canada.

physically by wearing an ornament. At the death of an Ottawa, it was customary for close kin to paint circles around the corpse's eyes and mouth to obstruct the return of the deceased's spirit.[6] It was believed that spirits could not cross these lines.

Evil spirits could also be deflected by luminous objects which, until the contact period, had been limited to shell and fresh water pearls, polished wood, bone, stone, and mica or copper. Precontact (Pre-Columbian in U.S.) burials in North Carolina have been discovered having mica covering all bodily orifices in order to prevent the return of the deceased spirit or the penetration of evil spirits.

The property of luminosity was the primary reason why silver was revered. The placement of silver on moccasins, leggings, breech cloth, skirt bottoms and on fingers, arms, ears, nose and hair (protecting the soft spot or scalp lock on the head) served to block evil forces from entering the body at these vulnerable points. Necklaces dangled shiny ornaments over the heart, protecting it from the possibility of an enemy inflicting a disease, or evil hex (the Ojibwa name for the hex is *Muzzinneneen*).

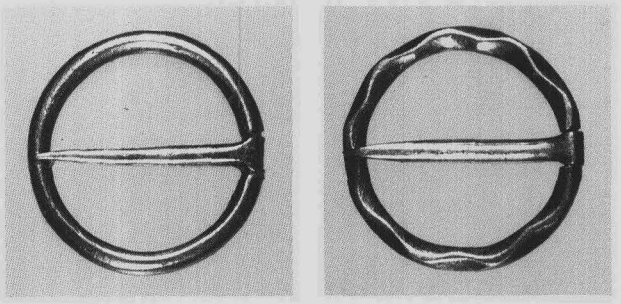
Another belief that dictated a preference for silver was that one must at all times balance the symbols of offerings to the spirits of the upper, middle and lower worlds. This appeasement of natural forces was satisfied by simultaneously wearing a feather from the upper world, leather or fur from the middle world, and shell or silver from the underworld. Silver was a significant gift from the Underworld that could radiate the powers of the Upperworld.

These metaphorical symbols could also be referred to by engraved designs. An eagle, depicted on a silver arm band that was tied with a silk ribbon or strip of fur, would appease the powers governing all three realms.

BRAID

The Montreal Merchants Records at Minnesota Historical Society refer to gold and silver braid as a trade item as early as 1745. Braid or lace would have been observed on officers uniforms, and was thus regarded by Native warriors as appropriate adornment that would also create a formidable barrier line against evil spirits. In 1752 Cherokee Chief Eusteenko requested of South Carolina's Governor Glen, "that every trader sent among us, to each of the seven towns, bring with them tape or ribbon to lace their matchcoats."[7]

The Ojibwa name for lace meant "made with very much work." *Niski-kitchi-qan;* (niski: with much work, kitchi: big). Natives readily appreciated the difficulty they would experience in producing a similar product.[8]



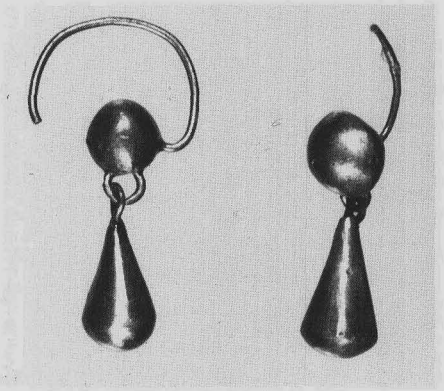
RING BROOCHES

Dots were depicted as body tatoos, or painted on garments, lodges, horses, and drums. Some tribes used dots to represent hail, a force of the thunder beings. Warriors might paint dots on themselves to emulate the power of the thunder beings during warfare. Dots also represented successful *coups* (blows) against the enemy. Dots could also represent animal tracks, and by depicting them on clothing, weapons or ornaments, would assure good hunting.

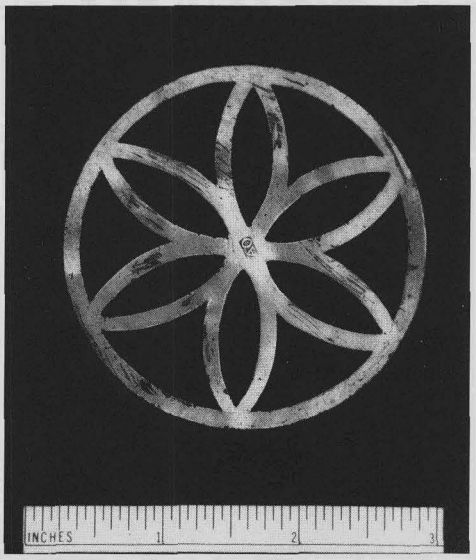
Silver ring brooches were viewed as representing these dots, which also alluded to the upper world and celestial entities such as the sun, cycle of life, or sequence of the four seasons.

Native Americans dance in a sacred circle, draw circles around their homes, burials, and sweat lodges. To them, the circular brooch represented more than a geometric form: it embodied many powers and symbolized nature in its many cycles. In 1752 Eusteeneko also requested that "the Charleston traders bring silver breast rings for the bosoms of his people's shirts."[9]

The Ojibwa word *Paunea* (silver) was used to designate ring brooches and later came to mean "money." The earliest archeological burial sites in which silver ring brooches have been found include the 1665 Strickler site (Susquhanna R); the 1714 Fletcher site (Saginaw, MI); and the 1680 Charlestown, RI, site. There were only one or two ring brooches in these early burials, but by 1800 there were often as many as 80 contained in a prosperous person's burial.



Shortest variation of ear bobs.



Classic ear wheel shape depicted by General Johnston in 1808.

The spider motif denotes a spirit that could bridge the upper and lower worlds. It could walk on water and in Native creation stories is considered important as he successfully carried fire over the water. [U Tenn]

EAR ORNAMENTS

To inhibit evil spirits from entering the ear canal, precontact males slit and bound their ears; the women pierced their's, and both attached short strings of shiny pearls or wampum. The Ojibwa word for ear ornament was *Nabishebison* (bison: to hang) relating to these strings of pearls.

The earbob consisting of a ball and cone (European-style earring) was worn by men and women. Earbobs were also used as pendants and to create fringes. Only three earbobs were found in the 1680 Susquehanna site, but by 1757, a three-year contract was placed with Quebec silversmith Ignace Francois Delezenne to make 12,000 of them.

By the late 18th century, the earwheel had become a popular male ear ornament.[10] In 1799 traveler Issac Weld wrote "Some of the tribes are very select in the choice of the (earwheel) pattern and will not wear any but the one sort." In 1810 General Johnston at Fort Wayne sent four earwheel patterns to the Office of Indian Trade in Georgetown, VA., stating they were "the patterns that sold well" inferring that any other patterns were likely to be rejected.[11]

NOSE BOBS

The nose is another obvious entry point for evil spirits. Many Native Americans pierced the septum of the nose and inserted broad based triangles, rings, earbobs or crosses. Many sites contain triangular artifacts that archaeologists have considered scrap silver, but these Native adaptations should be considered significant in themselves as nose bobs. Triangles were also used at the end of trailing ribbons (hair and ear ornaments), their broad bases impeding the path of evil spirits.

SHELL OR MOON

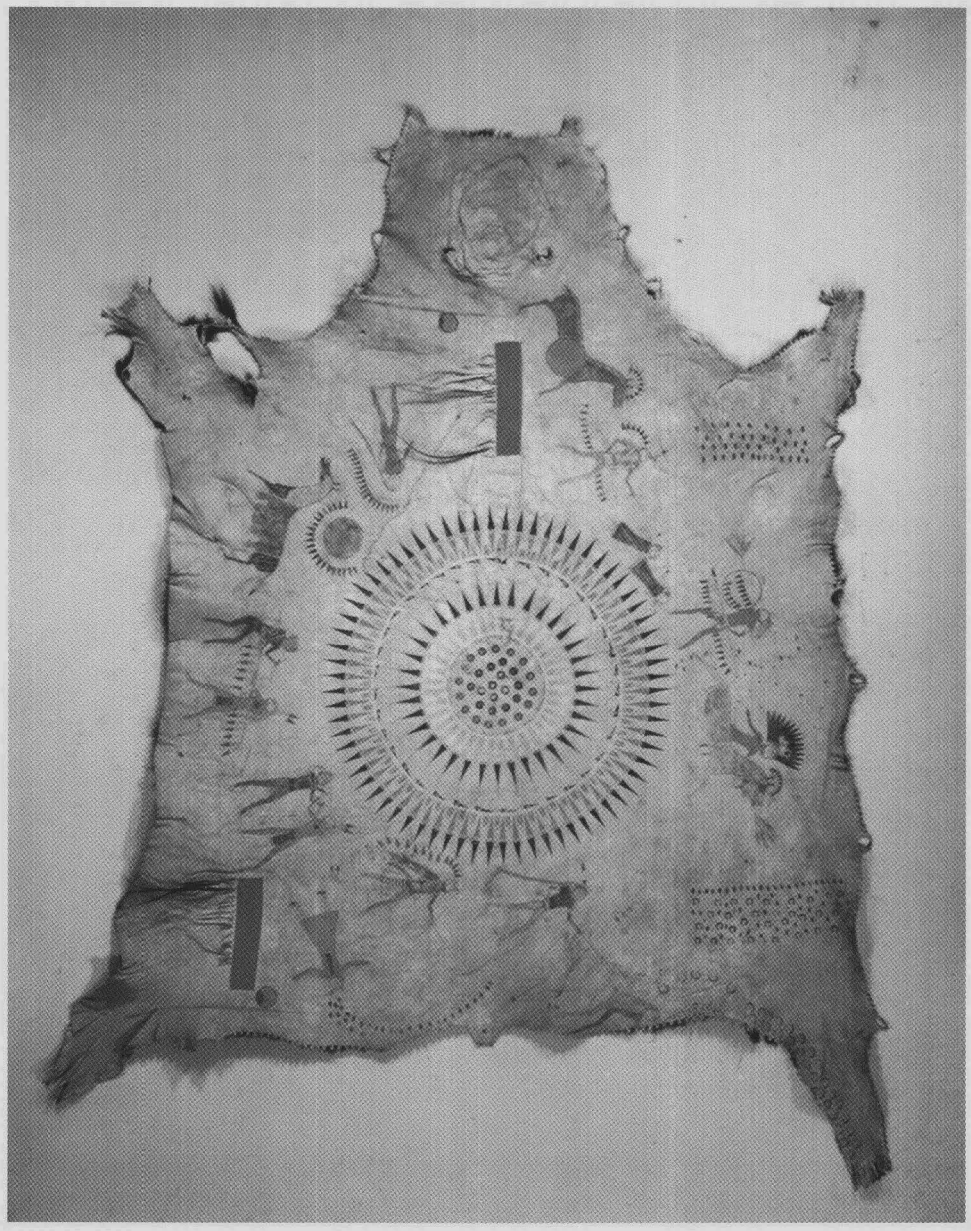
From Florida to Ontario, precontact burials have produced round discs made of shell. Shells were exchanged across great distances via established trade routes. The North Carolina explorer Lawson noted "they often times make of this shell a sort of gorge which they wear around their neck on a string; whereon sometimes is engraven a cross or some sort of figure. There are sorts valued at a doe skin, yet they will sometimes sell for three or four buck skins ready dressed."[12]

The Ojibwa name for this chest shell is *Essimig* (ess: shell and imig: chest) When silver "shells" were introduced they differentiated *Joniiawessimig* (jonii: silver).

An alternate Ojibwa name for the shell was *Tibigisiss* (moon or night sun). The powers of the moon were equated to those of the sun and the upper world, but to a lesser extent. The round shell represented the moon and symbolized the concepts of the sacred circle. Shells were usually worn over the heart to ward off an evil hex. Sometimes men wore shells at the back of the head as a hair ornament. Both the rounded shells with natural luminosity and the silver "shell" were enduring trade forms. These round silver moons foreshadow the importance a warrior attached to medals presented by various colonial governments and later the pierced trade brooches. In 1762, English trade equivalents listed:

1 silver breast plate = 9 pounds of skins;

1 breast plate, chased [engraved] = 12 pounds of skins.

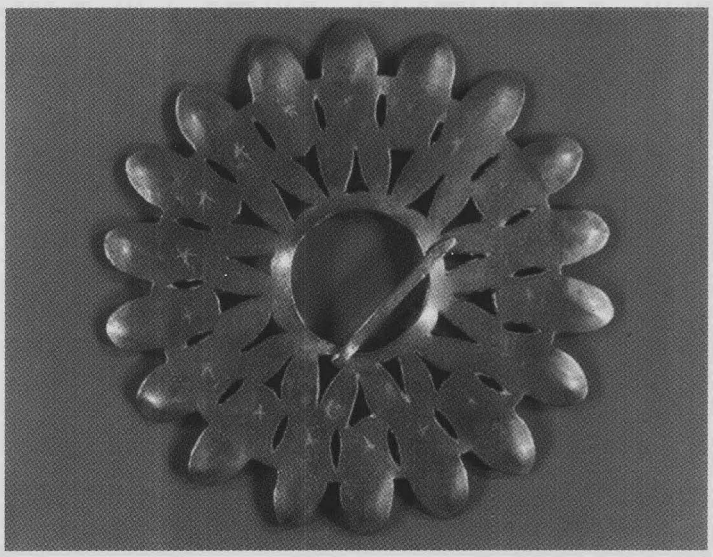


DEERSKIN
The painted design consists of a central sun motif using radiating patterns of triangles and dots. It foreshadows the pierced patterns in brooches. Bern State Museum, Switzerland.

BROOCH

Brooches with elaborate piercing techniques were a product of the industrial revolution and appear after 1780. The pierced shapes were significant. Triangles represented rays of sunshine, flames, or projectile points or points of power. The crescent depicted the moon or an altar. Squares and half-round shapes might represent houses, lodges or villages. The Ojibwa word for brooch was *Kashkakiganeon* (covers the breast: kashkaki: cover, ganeon: breast).

As the availability of silver ore increased so did the size and quantity of ornaments used.



Simple punched triangles form the design, reminescent of the deer skin. By Ignace Francois Delezenne, Quebec.

OTTAWA CHIEFS VISITING FROM MICHILIMACINAC c. 1820
The chiefs are wearing sets of large brooches, matching wristbands, armbands, and a hatband.
Courtesy Public Archives of Canada.

HALF MOON OR GORGET

In 1580 Jacques Le Moyne drew the earliest views of Native Americans wearing both shell moons and half moons and tattooes of half moons. Naturalist Mark Catesby observed that in the Carolinas "the military men especially wear at their breasts, a concave shell, cut to the form of, though somewhat less than a gorget; this is a universal decoration with all the nations of the northern continent; and as all their mechanism, for want of good tools, is performed with great labor, these gorgets bear a great price in proportion to their largeness and carving."[13]

The Ojibwa name for gorget was *Wagisi,* bent shell (wag: bent; isi: shell). The European military officer's gorget happened to coincide with the native concept of an appropriate warrior's ornament. Silver gorgets were given further status when the Europeans formally presented them, together with certificates, declaring the recipient a "Gorget Captain."

ARM BAND

Arm bands and the smaller wrist bands restricted the flow of evil spirits up the arms.

The Ojibwa word for arm band is *Kitchie Waybesun,* large goes around (kitchi: great or large, and besun: goes around). Father Frederic Beraga also translated "kitchi wa" as Holy so another meaning might be "Holy goes around."[14] The Mesquakie (Fox) people, associated silver with spiritual power because of its shining resemblance to white shell, a substance they equated with the all powerful spirit *Manitou.*[15] Mary Owen observed that all silver ornaments were regarded as amulets and functioned in the same manner as a prayer. Bracelets were refered to as holy bands, which to the Fox were the most important form of silver. Owen stated "it is significant that a silver bracelet was always included in a new costume presented to a woman in an adoption ceremony."[16]

FINGER RINGS

Finger Rings in Ojibwa are called *Zenzeebisson* (small goes around; sinsi: small, bison: goes around).

Wrist Band in Ojibwa is *Annan* (wrist) or *annank* (wrists).

The only gorget noted with official French engraved design. The French officials preferred to give medals. Courtesy Henry Ford Museum, Greenfield Village. Joseph Mailloux, Quebec

RICHARDSON ARMBAND, c. 1780.
Eagle relating to the upper world and the shells to the under world. Courtesy of the Deitrick Foundation, Philadelphia, photo courtesy of Christies.

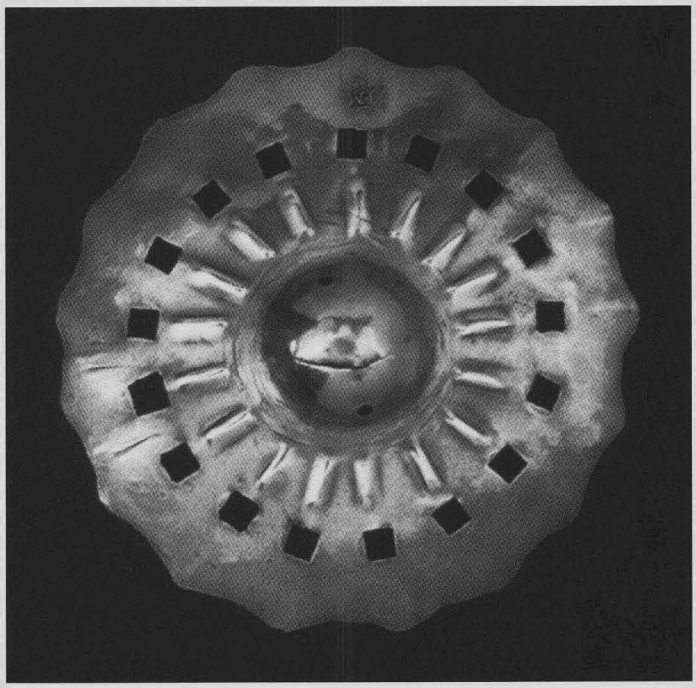
The statue MISSISSIPPIAN WOMAN
This clay statue of a Mississippian woman c. 1200-1500 AD also shows the hair pulled back, tied up and bound. Vanderbilt University, at Tennessee State Museum

HAIR ORNAMENTS

Hair Ornaments have not been discussed in previous research on trade silver, so hopefully this will prove especially interesting.

Hair plates have long been confused with armbands even when found in burials. The 4-inch rectangular plates were worn behind the head and neck to help hold the hair in place and stop a flow of evil spirits up the hair and into the head. Great importance appears to have been attached to hair plates since they were often adapted by the natives from larger silver pieces, such as armbands, the womans hair need being more necessary than a man's armband.

Dr. Charles Hudson illustrated an Etowah statue of a seated woman wearing a back pack like object on her pulled back hair. Hudson explained "perhaps symbolizing an infant on a cradle board."[17]



Another hair ornament Joseph Mailloux (1704-94). Quebec. Courtesy Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village.

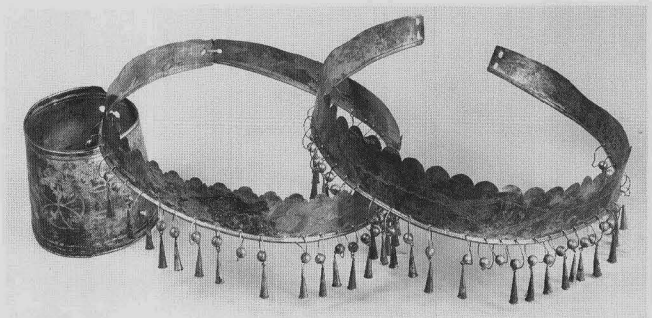
Hair ornaments in the form of round silver discs were also produced in graduated sizes, with small holes, or with two D shaped holes. Ring brooches, pierced brooches and "shells" were hung from the hair by men and women.

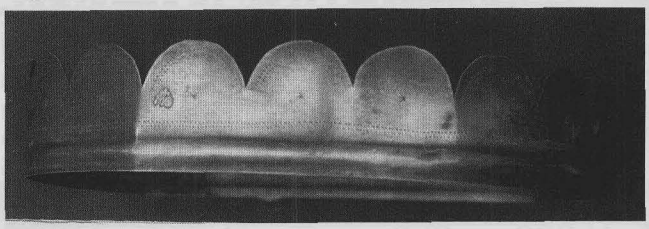
Men also wore hair pipes which were tubes of hollow silver, the size of a finger, open on both ends and strung on a narrow braid of hair. Their precedent was the revered shell centers that Puchot mentions as being most treasured by men.

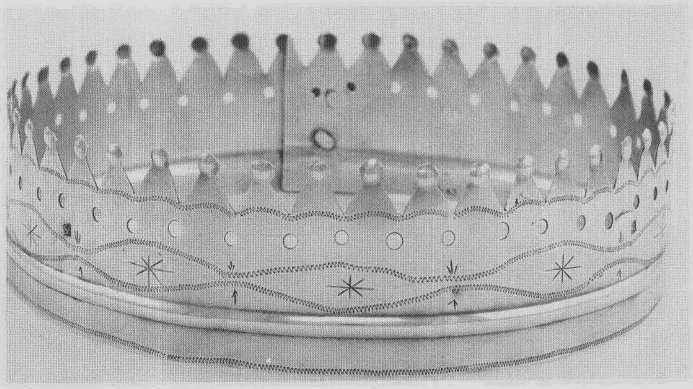
HAIR PLATE

These rectangular hairplates were probably intended to symbolize cradleboards or the concepts of fertility, motherhood and growth. They were often worn in sets of two or five. The Ojibwa word for hair plate, *Soggobanwan* (leaves come forth), perhaps alludes to the graduated sizes of the hair plates. The word *Sagibidon* also means "to tie it" or "bind it" as the hair was bound or babies were bound to the cradleboard. In 1784 Carver wrote "Most of the females who dwell on the East side of the Mississippi, decorate their hair either in ribbands, or in plates of silver; the later is only made use of by the higher ranks, as it is a costly ornament. The silver they use in this occasion is formed into thin plates, of about four inches broad, in several of which they confine their hair. The plate which is nearest the head is of considerable width; the next narrower, and made so as to pass a little way under the other, and in this manner they fasten one to the other, gradually tapering, descend to the waist. The hair of the women being very long, this proves an expensive method."[18]

The c.1840 portrait by Rudolf Friedrich Kurz (1818-1871), shows a young St. Joseph Indian woman with her hair pulled back at her neck, wrapped with a piece of cloth, and clasped with a silver ring. It is possible that only single women wore the clasps, as the plates would be expensive for a maiden to afford, or that the silver plates were reserved for married women or mothers. Napkin rings were listed on a bill submitted to the Crown by British agent-trader George Crogan, at first I thought he might have mixed his personal charge account with the Crown's, but now I realize that napkin rings could also be used as and best describe hair clasps.

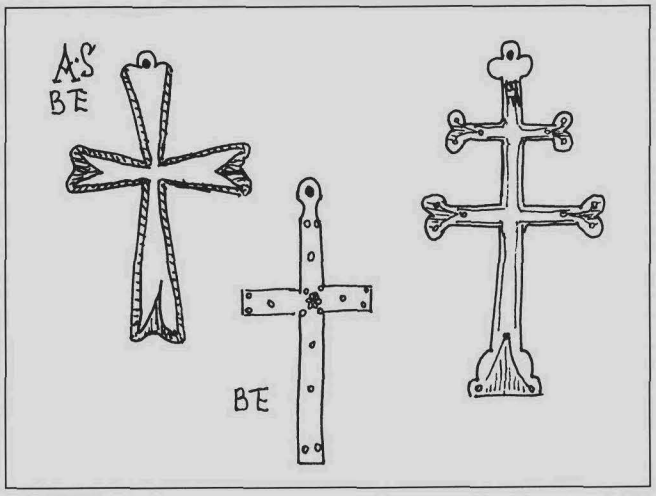




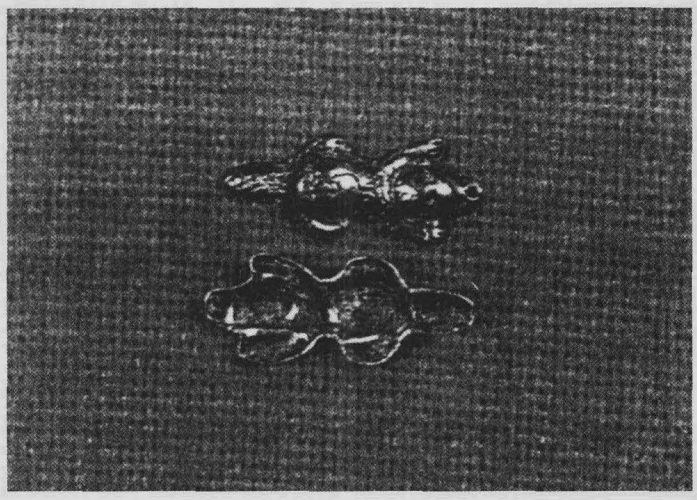


CROWNS

Traditional leather bases for the *gustoweh* or feather headdress were also copied in silver. These silver "crowns" adopted the geometric outlines or quill decorations that represented specific tribes. When the Cherokee were accused of killing a white man they denied the incident saying, "those Indians kill white and Cherokee indiscriminately" and subsequently proved to Sir William Johnson, by producing the murderer's scalp and headband, "This which I hold in my hand, the rogue who killed the white man wore, by which we know his country (Ouatanon)."[19] The Ojibwa word for crown is *Kitchi ogima wiwakwan* (big chief's hat; kitchi: big, ogima: chief, wiwakwan: hat or bonnet).



Cross variations by Albany smiths, found at the Fletcher site. a. Barent Ten Eyck (1714–1795), two crosses, height: 7.40 cm. and 7.60 cm. b. Abraham Schyler (1735–1812), height: 6.95 cm.



Die-struck beavers. Author's collection (back of book cover).

CROSSES

Early writers on trade silver explained the significance of native cross symbolism with Christian bias by simplistically attributing the introduction of crosses to the natives as the work of Jesuits and other missionary Orders.

However, to First Nation people, a cross with equal length arms represents the cardinal directions with a host of significant stories. When the Cherokee light a fire, logs are set in place from the north, south, east and west, and fed into the center. Thus a cross could symbolize a council fire, center of a sacred dance circle, or a family fire or home. It could also represent a chief, a religious meeting or council, or the center of a Nation. Crosses were depicted on body tattoos, shells, pottery, and garments long before contact with white men. The Ojibwa word for cross is *Tchibaiatig* ghost wood: tchibai: ghost, atig: wood. Sacred smoke (from special fire wood) was a means of sending messages or prayers to the Upper world spirits.

The two arm cross is still referred to as a dragon fly by some tribes and represents the four winged beings that could fly into the Upper world. Dr. Ruth Herrick said dragon flies were active and free, they are also quick, all desirable attributes in a warrior.

The maltese like cross represents the Breathmaster spirit, who could call up the four winds. The Breathmaster is revered by Native peoples as part of the Creation stories. The maltese cross is also viewed as being composed of two opposing thunderbird symbols and represents the Upper-world.

EFFIGIES

Animals were considered spirit emissaries who were willing to bestow gifts of their powers or attributes on those who sought them. Native clans and personal names often referred to them. Native religions deal with the interaction of animals and nature as part of every day life. To eat deer meat gave one swiftness, to wear eagle feathers brought one closer to the spirit of the Upper world, to wear a beaver pendant would ensure good hunting of beaver, hence good trade, and prosperity. At the Lasanen site (1671-1698) in the U.P. of Michigan, beaver and turtle effigies made of catlinite were unearthed. Beaver and turtle effigies proved the most popular silver forms, but not all animal forms were considered appropriate for such use.

BELLS AND THIMBLES

Buttons, bells and thimbles were mentioned as early as 1660 in the records of Massachusetts trader William Pynchon. Although seldom used as intended, these items were used as ornaments, pendants and tinklers. The Ojibwa word for bell is *Jinawoadjigan:* jinawe, rattlesnake. Thimbles were inevitably drilled and strung with beads or wampum and used as tinklers whose noise was associated with the thunder being who could chase evil spirits away. In 1539, Spanish explorer Hernando DeSoto used brass bells as tokens of friendship and as trade items. These bells have been retrieved in Mississippi.

It is my premise that the forms of silver used through out the trade period were unchanging and dictated by the Natives, to satisfy their need for ornament, based on precontact religious beliefs. My research further leads me to believe that trade silver had a deeper significance for First Nation people than has been recognized by modern scholars of the fur trade.

NOTES

1. Hamilton 1995. 54-55. BWM invoice.
2. Hamilton 1995, 13.
3. Hanson 1979 15: #2, 9

"Dr Lewis H. Feuchtwanger, a German scientist who came to America in the 1820s, introduced german silver to the United States about 1831 and is credited with being the first manufacturer of the alloy in this country." Edgar H. Adams, editor of the Numismatist 1913.

4. McDowell 1958 p 253.
5. Adair 1775, History of American Indians, 170-171.
6. McClurken 1991, 15.
7. McDowell 1958, 253.
8. Lace was made of drawn silver or gold filaments spun on silk sold by the spool, and handmade in Dieppe France, the same way silk and cotton laces were (MMRP). Native handwork was exquisite and subsequently they appreciated and expected quality workmanship.
9. McDowell 1958 253.
10. Hamilton 1995, 62.

Earwheel designs evolved from European floral engravings. There were no floral designs on precontact Native American artifacts.

11. Office of Indian Trade Washington DC Johnston Papers.
12. Swanton 1979, 518-19.
13. Swanton 1979, 519. See Mark Catesby's *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and Bahama Islands.* London, 1731-43.2:ix.
14. Father Frederic Beraga was a Roman Catholic priest who worked among the Ojibwa and wrote the most comprehensive Ojibwa dictionary. His biases prevented the inclusion of words that referred to Native religion.
15. Torrence and Hobbs 1989, 19.
16. Ibid., cites Mary Owen's 1904 work.
17. Hudson 1976, 397 399.
18. Karklins 1992,22. (See Jonathan Carver, *Three years Travel Through the Interior Parts of North America.* Philadelphia, 1784, 101.
19. Johnson papers 7: 338 339.

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When illness prevented Bill Williamson from giving his talk, "The Origin of the Bowie Knife," at the Albuquerque meeting, Ron Peterson suggested that Martha Hamilton's recently published book, *Silver in the Fur Trade,* might make the basis for a most interesting talk. She consented to do so, and this is the result, which certainly was an interesting talk and *is* an interesting article. The talk was based on information she has in the 236 page book, and all illustrations are taken from it.

Silver shell, probably South Carolina, c. 1760. rocker engraved with a waved motif. A design composed of two opposing triangles that represent a thunderbird of the upper world; the four diamonds represent a rattler of the underworld; in the middle, a cross represents the four cardinal directions. Alabama Department of Archives and History.