

History of the Metis Sash

By Louise Vien and Lawrence Barkwell

The Assomption (or arrow) sash is a symbolic piece of clothing that has become central to the traditional cultures of the French-Canadian and the Métis. From the late 1700s the finger woven sash has been worn by Metis, Canayens and First Nations voyageurs. The origin of these sashes was partly from the Native practice of finger braiding with nettle fibre, buffalo hair and native hemp and the French Canadian practice of making braided woolen garters.¹ Sashes of indigenous origin can be found with arrow, lightning, diamond and chevron designs. The earliest *ceintures-fléchés* became part of the dress *à la Canadien* emerged from the Quebec weaving villages.² “The fur traders in their own personal adornment, always had to keep a step ahead of their native clientele, if for nothing else than prestige. They had to have finer and more brilliant belts and garters, on top of great coats and flashy red leggings... On special occasions, when a notable voyageur wanted to honour an Indian chief for good service, he bestowed upon him a medal, a gorget, a capot or a sash...³ These sashes and great coats thus became the badge of the *bourgeois* of the North-West Company. These sashes seem to be an art form unique to North America since studies of the technique of finger weaving and its distributions has failed to produce any evidence of its practice in Europe which would account for its introduction into Canada in Colonial days.

Later, eastern Canadian weavers in L’Assomption, Quebec began a cottage industry that produced the Assomption sash, known for its “Ceinture fleché,” or arrowhead design. The Assomption Sash formally got its name in 1857 but was known prior to that as the “North West sash.” In the early 1800s the North-West Company was stocking and trading a variety of worsted sashes and belts. Barbeau notes that they had ceintures a flames (flame like), ceintures a fleches (arrow sashes), in both worsted and fine material. Eventually the name ceinture fleche prevailed although the real arrow sash had almost disappeared. Ceintures a flames (flame like) more aptly describes what became the standardized Assomption sash.

The Assomption and St. Jacques de Achigan sashes are so called from their place of manufacture as a home industry of the French Canadians for the fur traders of Montreal to barter with the Indians. The arrow sash became the standard type, when the Hudson’s Bay Company began to import a cheap manufactured sash from England, as it does still; this ruined the home industry.

Large sashes could be over fifteen feet long including fringes and ten inches wide, whereas the average size made at L’Achigan near L’Assomption in the early 1900s was six inches or even less in width. The first known Voyageur sashes were either made of one set colour such as red scarlet) or a multi-coloured chevron sash.

¹ Marius Barbeau, “Sashes in the Fur Trade”, *The Beaver*, June, 1941: 24-27.

² Sherry Farrell Racette, *Sewing Ourselves Together: Clothing, Decorative Arts and the Expression of Metis and Half Breed Identity*. Winnipeg: Ph.D. dissertation, University of Manitoba, 2004: 75.

³ Op. cit. p. 24-25.

The “Etoffe du pays” at the time of the Habitant of New France just before the 1800’s wore as their daily costume a sort of moccasin, garters made on a loom, wool pants with a cotton or linen shirt, toque, capote and sash to keep coat closed. Actually Thomas Anbury in 1776 wrote in his travel journal while visiting Charlesbourg and Beauport about the colored sash the people wore. This apparel changed very little since it was mostly worn by the lower class peasant. The sash in general was only worn during frigid weather basically it kept the coat closed, nothing else. The sash was never worn during the summer days because it was deemed not necessary to the exception of special occasions in some elite factions.

The French western Métis are known to have adopted the French Canadian attire, while the English country born stayed with British norms of imported textiles. The capote was then adopted by The HBC after the amalgamation of 1821 with the NWC for all its employees. Keep in mind that the NWC had already employed the capote before the merger because of its French employees. The capote had two colors they were blue for the servicemen and grey for the elite, so status was of great importance and what you wore denoted your status. Sashes among the Voyageur also had status attached to it. Clerks wore a certain sash while the agents of higher status wore another, the length of the fringe and the colour helped to determine those factors.

Sherry Farrell Racette notes that: “The North West Company may have been the first to supply yarn for the indigenous manufacture of sashes. The company also commissioned sashes for both an indigenous market and their own employees, stimulating the development of creative centres of production. Between 1804 and 1820, North West Company inventories offered an increasing variety of worsted belts: common, fine, North West, scarlet, fine scarlet, scarlet and crimson North West.”⁴ The NWC accounts show 96 worsted sashes manufactured by Notary at l’Assumption in 1799 and by 1804, L. Venance supplies, 19 fine Cientesures, 28 worsted belts, 6 Cientesures, 70 fine worsted belts, 46 common, 15 broad worsted belts and 5 narrow fine, destined for the June canoes to Athabasca, Fort des Prairies, Lac la Pluie, and Grand Portage.

Sashes do not appear in the HBC inventories until 1818 following the HBC merger with the NWC in 1821. The HBC inventories at Red River between 1815 and 1835 list broad belt, scarlet or crimson, narrow belt, scarlet or crimson and a fine Canadian belt. Alexander Ross commented in the 1850s that the French style had been adopted by the Scots Half Breeds: “The blue capote and red belt, so peculiar to those of French origin in this quarter have become favorite articles of dress among the rising generation.”⁵ The HBC shipment of 1818, out of Montreal, was of 172 sashes in four sizes sent to James Bird at Jack River.⁶

⁴ Racette, op. cit. pp. 75-76.

⁵ Alexander Ross. *The Red River Settlement: Its rise progress and present state, with some account of the native races and its general history to the present day*. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1972, reprint of 1856 edition: p. 208.

⁶ HBA, B. 134/d/15, folio 10.



A Halfcast with his Wife and Child, c. 1825 by Peter Rindisbacher.

Winnipeg Art Gallery, G-82-215

As can be shown, the Metis adopted the sash as a result of their participation in the fur trade. In the early 1800s in the old Northwest it became a symbol of Metis identity. In 1823, William Keating observes a party of twenty mounted Metis buffalo hunters leading a party of 300 people back to Pembina:

All of them have a blue capote with a hood, which they use only in bad weather; the Capote is secured around their waist by a military sash. They wear a shirt of calico or painted muslin, moccasins and leather leggings fastened round the leg by garters ornamented with beads.⁷

⁷ William Keating. *Narrative*, 1824: 40. Illustration of a Metis buffalo hunter on following page from a pen and ink drawing by Charlie M. Russell, Montana Historical Society (X 1963.01.03).



Brian Cyr demonstrates fingerweaving at Riel House, August 2013.
Photo by Shirley Delorme-Russell.



Pictured above is a finger woven Metis sash in the new colours developed by Manitoba Metis Federation.
This sash was hand woven by Brian Cyr vice-chair of the St. Norbert Parish La Barrière Metis Council.

The new version of the Metis sash developed by the Manitoba Metis Federation replaces the yellow of the old sashes with black. Black represents the dark period after 1870 when the Metis were suppressed and dispossessed of their land by Canada. The Manitoba Metis Federation Senate began a tradition of draping the sash over the table whenever Metis people are gathered for discussion.

The sash is composed of many interconnected threads; the main colours are red, blue, white, green and yellow. Red represents the historical colour of the Metis sash, blue and white symbolize the Metis Nation flag, green signifies fertility, growth, and yellow stands for prosperity. The Order of the Sash is the highest honour bestowed upon Metis by many of the Metis organizations.



A French Half Breed (1901 pen and ink drawing by Charlie M. Russell, C.M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, Montana).

Next, is a description of a Metis horseman representing the Nakota at Treaty Four negotiations at Fort Qu'Appelle in 1874.

...the whole camp came forward in martial array, led by an enormously large man, riding a very fair specimen of the buffalo hunters of that time, standing about sixteen

hands high, dark brown, and showing a strain of good blood, his rider attired in blue cloth capote with brass buttons, cotton shirt (unstarched), moleskin trousers and new deerskin moccasins with broad L'Assomption belt or sash of variegated colours in silk around his waist, Indian pad saddle with heavily beaded saddle cloth, complimented with the "tout en semble" of this would be leader now riding well in advance curvetting and ascribing circles and half-circles, at the canter or lope, and now and then parading up and down the whole frontage until close up to our Marquee tent.⁸



The Metis report many functional uses for the sash, which could be as long twenty feet. It was tied around the waist of the capote for warmth and could also be used as a tumpline for carrying packs or as rope to haul canoes during a long and difficult portage. The sash also served as an emergency bridle when the Metis were out on the hunt. The fringed ends were also useful as threads to make sewing repairs. The sash acted as a convenient pocket to tuck small objects away between the sash and the body.

⁸ *Diary of Bugler Burns*, Archives of Manitoba. MG 1A7:2.

⁹ This is a Northwest Metis Scrip Commission photograph courtesy of the Duck Lake Regional Interpretive Centre, Duck Lake, Saskatchewan.



Metis man wearing capote and sash.
Archives of Manitoba, Rackham, William 190 (N12891)

Cheryl Troupe gives us an explanation of sash construction:

Quality sashes were made from very fine wool, which was waxed and re-twisted. These sashes were woven so tightly that they were often water-resistant and could be used to carry a small amount of water. A top quality sash, using 300 to 400 fine-waxed woolen threads usually took about 200 hours to complete. A lower quality sash made from 100 or so thicker woolen threads could be made in 70 to 80 hours.¹⁰

Some modern Metis sashes are woven on a four-harness loom or on an Inkle loom. The traditional arrow pattern is still used and beautifully coloured sashes have become a symbol of the Metis Nation. Typically, the sash (usually two metres long) was wound two, three or four times around the waist (depending on length) and tied so the fringed ends would hang downward from the point where a man's belt buckle would be. However, Metis women occasionally wear the sash over the shoulder in a more contemporary fashion.

¹⁰ Cheryl Troupe. *Expressing Our Heritage: Metis Artistic Designs, Resource Manual*. Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2002:19.



Louise Vien at Metisfest 2012, Killarney, Manitoba. Photo by Lawrence Barkwell



Inkle Loom weaving



Mary Conway making a sash on her large inkle loom (Metisfest, 2011)

The sash pictured below was given to Margaret Halcrow of the Halcro Settlement in Saskatchewan in 1885, by Louis Riel. After the resistance fighting had ended at Batoche on May 12, 1885, Mrs Halcrow had hid Louis Riel in her root cellar until he surrendered to Middleton's scouts just north of Lépine's Crossing (the St. Louis Ferry).

The Halcrow's held onto the sash through the birth of eight daughters and two sons. The sash went to their daughter Elizabeth who married a well-known Anglican minister by the name of Reverend P.C. Hackworth. The sash was then left to their son Jack who was the father of Marion Hackworth's late husband Collin Hackworth. The Louis Riel Institute of the Manitoba Metis Federation acquired the sash from Marion Hackworth in 2007. This sash was made in England at Coventry sometime between 1850 and 1885. It is a very wide "presentation sash" typical of those sold by the Hudson's Bay Company in the 1880s



The Louis Riel presentation sash given to Margaret Halcrow née Monkman in 1885.
Photograph © Louis Riel Institute.



Close-up of a Metis York-boatman on a Nelson River portage in 1910
Archives of Manitoba, A.V. Thomas 90 (N8164)

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Occasional Papers of the Louis Riel Institute, 2011.
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