

The Sash of the Metis

The Metis developed many unique cultural and national characteristics, one of which was the “Metis Sash.” From the late 1600s the finger woven sash has been worn by Metis, Canayens and First Nations voyageurs. In Eastern Canada weavers in L’Assomption, Quebec made the Assomption sash. This was known for its “Ceinture fleché,” or arrowhead design. The Metis sash is a finger woven belt made of wool worn by the Metis for both traditional and ceremonial purposes. 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.¹



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.

¹ 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).



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.²

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

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

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.



Sashes were quite individualized at one time. Families and communities would develop their own patterns and colours. At one time a person could identify a stranger,s home community by the colour and pattern of their sash. To the Metis of the Red River Settlement, the sash was a colourful and distinguishable part of their apparel. Traditionally it served a functional use and 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. The original sash was finger woven using an arrowhead or lightening bolt design on either side of a red band down the centre called the heart or *coeur*. The only other area with a similar form of weaving is in Scandinavia.

³ 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.⁴

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.

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

⁴ Cheryl Troupe. *Expressing Our Heritage: Metis Artistic Designs, Resource Manual*. Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2002:19.

Federation Senate began a tradition of draping the sash over the table whenever Metis people are gathered for discussion.



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

The sash pictured above 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



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

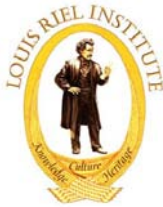
References:

Barkwell, L.J. and Audreen Hourie. "Metis Clothing", in L.J. Barkwell, Leah Dorion and Audreen Hourie (Eds.) *Metis Legacy Vol. II: Michif Culture, Heritage, and Folkways*. Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute and Pemmican Publications, 2006: 71-84.

Keating, William. *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River, Lake winnepeek, Lake of the Woods & etc. in the year 1823*. Philadelphia: H.C. Carey & I. Lea, 1824.

Préfontaine, Darren. "The Sash." Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute Virtual Museum of Metis Culture and History, 2003. <http://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/00741.pdf>

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



Occasional Papers of the Louis Riel Institute, 2011.
Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute