

'Clothe Yourself in Fine Apparel'

Mesquakie Costume in Word, Image, and Artifact

THE COSTUMES of the four women on the right immediately tell us something about who they are: women of Native American and European-American descent. We might guess that their clothes are special to them — carefully chosen for a formal studio portrait.

In all societies, costume is a public and private expression of one's self. Costume sends messages about one's stage and rank in life and about individual and cultural aesthetics. Costume can be read as a code. Consider the cultural messages in the red "power" necktie of the early 1990s, of boys' knee breeches in turn-of-the-century America, of bell-bottoms and long hair of the Sixties, of white wedding dresses and black mourning clothes. Consider also the more personal or individual meaning in one's adornment: lodge pins, favorite colors that impart self-confidence, a piece of jewelry with special meaning.

The following presentation was inspired by a fascinating article in the upcoming Summer issue of *The Annals of Iowa*: "Clothed in Blessing: Meaning in Mesquakie Costume" by art historian Ruth B. Phillips. Calling dress "the most personal of art forms," Phillips finds in Mesquakie costume "highly specific statements about the accumulated interior experience [and] psychological state" of the wearer. Appreciating such private meanings "permits us to understand how donning a particular kind of costume could affect the wearer and selected beholders."

Phillips wisely cautions us that costume is greater than the sum of its parts.

Too often we see only isolated pieces of historical costumes in static photographs or exhibits. Absent is the individual and the occasion, the qualities of movement and sound. Missing are the temporal elements of face paint and hair arrangement. Beyond most of us is comprehension of wholistic Native American cultures and their all-pervasive sense of the sacred.

Within these limits, the *Palimpsest* brings together on the following pages the voices, faces, and historic costume of the Mesquakie. Combined they begin to sketch the context from which we might glean insights into Mesquakie culture. Our goals are to find the common ground, respect the differences, and accept an individual's or a culture's right to keep certain meanings private. Finally, we consider some of the limits in using the primary sources of document, artifact, and image.

We direct interested readers to Phillips's sensitive and thoughtful article in the summer *Annals of Iowa* and also to Gaylord Torrence's excellent essay in *Art of the Red Earth People: The Mesquakie of Iowa* (see sources in box on page 82). We also invite the reader to consider one's own costume. What clues speak to others in your culture? What personal and private meanings do you incorporate into your appearance? And how might future historians interpret that costume? "Clothe yourself in fine apparel," one Mesquakie account reads. Hereby lies an expression of one's life and values.

— The Editor

Artifact photography by Chuck Greiner

Left: Silk appliqué ribbon panel for blanket or skirt (6" × 35"). Right: Studio portrait by H. C. Eberhart, Tama, Iowa. All artifacts are from the State Historical Society of Iowa Museum (Des Moines). Although most were probably made between 1880 and 1915, and collected from 1915 to the mid-1930s, they represent a continuity of traditional Mesquakie designs and materials.







Expressions of Skill

“You may now try to sew bead and appliqué ribbon work. If you know how to sew you are to make things to wear when you dance. If it is known that you can already sew, (people) will hire you. Not merely that. You will be paid. You will be benefited by knowing how to sew,’ my mother told me. Then indeed I began to practice sewing. It took me a long time to sew well. It (must have) taken me two years to sew well. From then I was always making something.

“I was sixteen years old when we were making mats in the summer. In the winter we were making sacks and yarn belts, (and) we were sewing appliqué ribbon work and bead work.”

“Autobiography of a Fox Indian Woman”



Mesquakie women demonstrated their skill in beadwork, appliqué, and other textile work in garments made and worn for special occasions, shown here. Right: four Mesquakie young women, circa 1890. Opposite (clockwise from upper left): Beaded wool hair binder with cotton edging and loom-beaded pendants. Blue cotton blouse with ribbon trim and German silver brooches (alloy of copper, zinc, and nickel) on yoke and back. Tubular shell necklace. Wool sash with loom-beaded otter tail pattern, an ancient Great Lakes motif. Front-seam legging with stylized floral, beaded design. Beaded moccasin cuffs. Blanket bordered with silk and ornamented with beads, made by Ada Poweshiek.



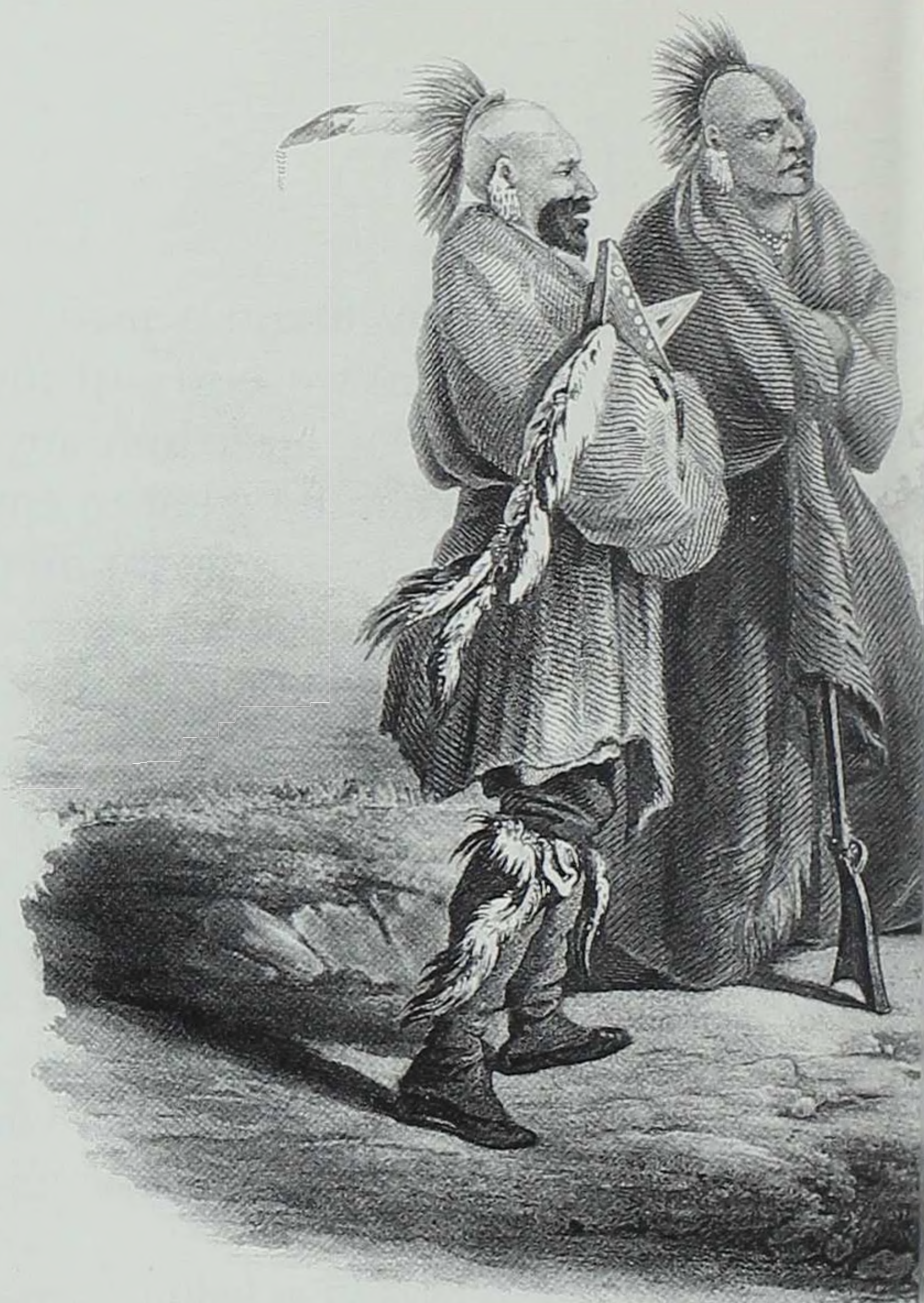
Gifts of Finery

“Well, I have surely found a man,’ I thought. ‘If this (man) were to cast me off to-day, I should tag after him anyhow,’ I thought. When he went to any place for a long time, I yearned for him. And I thought, ‘He has made me happy by treating me well.’ Then I began to make things for him, his finery, his moccasins, his leggings, his shirt, his garters, his cross-belt. After I had made finery of every kind for him, (I said), ‘These are what I have made for you as you have made me happy as long as I have lived with you, (and) because you have never made me angry in any way.’”

“Autobiography of a Fox Indian Woman”

Top: Women made wool yarn sashes, to be worn by men and women for ceremonial occasions, either belted at the waist or, for men, sometimes wrapped around the head or over the shoulder. Jagged and zigzag patterns symbolize transmission of spiritual powers. The shortest sash, ornamented with turtle bones, was made by Mrs. John Young Bear. These three range from 2 1/8" to 7" wide. Below: Detail from wool side-seam leggings, trimmed with ribbon and beads, made by Mrs. Harry Wasekuk for son-in-law John Young Bear. Panels of silk ribbon appliqué were often sewn onto dark backgrounds for dramatic effect. Left: John Painter and family (Duren Ward Collection, SHSI-Iowa City).





Symbols of Status

A man's rank as a warrior was conveyed through certain aspects of dress, such as bearclaw necklaces or tomahawks (akin to dress swords worn by European-American military officers). Above: Sauk and Mesquakie leaders are depicted carrying such symbols here by artist Karl Bodmer on April 10, 1833 and are described below by Prince Maximilian zu Wied on their expedition up the Missouri River. Left: Mid-19th century pipe tomahawk, 21" long, brass head with stamped design and bands of pewter or alloy. The hardwood handle was decorated by applying a heated file. Several companies made pipe tomahawks, in varying qualities, specifically for trade since the mid-18th century. Another symbol of a Mesquakie man's stature is the roach, described by Maximilian here. (See also artifact photo, page 78).

"The Saukies and Foxes had shaved their hair off the whole head except a small tuft behind, the greater part of which was cut short, like a brush, and



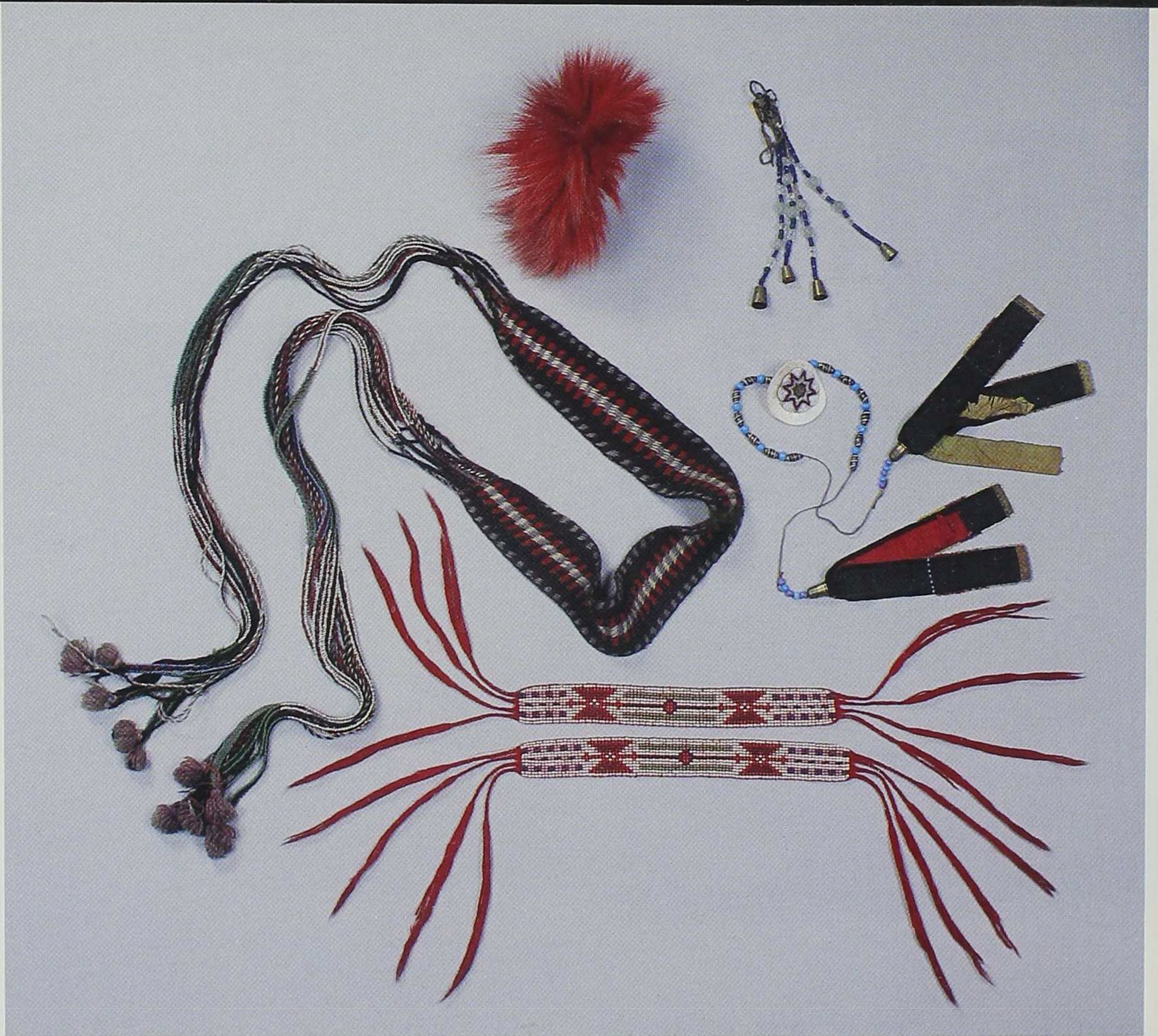
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which terminated in a thin braid, to which was fastened the chief ornament of the head, the deer's tail, which is a tuft of hair from the tail of the Virginian stag, white, with some black hair, the white part being dyed red with vermilion. It is fastened in an ingenious manner, with some strings and pegs of wood, to the tuft of hair at the back of the head; and in the middle of it, concealed between the hair, is a small piece of carved wood, to which a small bone box is affixed, into which a large eagle's feather is fastened, projecting horizontally behind; this feather is often dyed with vermilion, and is the characteristic distinction of a brave warrior."

Prince Maximilian zu Wied (1833)

"The [Saukie and Fox] men, who were between thirty and forty in number, never appeared without their arms; they carried tomahawks, or else the common Indian club, which has, at the upper end, a steel plate, sharp on both edges, and pointed. We did not see any bows and arrows among these Indians, because they had not come out on a warlike expedition, but on a festal visit; many of them had a kind of lance, made of a long sword blade, fastened to a pole, which was covered with red cloth, and ornamented with many black raven's or eagle's feathers, hanging down either in a long row, or in long bunches."

Prince Maximilian zu Wied (1833)



Costume elements for dancing imparted kinetic qualities. Clockwise from top: Roach, made of deer hair dyed with vermilion (further described on pages 76-77). Hair ornament, leather thongs with glass beads and brass thimbles (to be tied to back of scalp lock). Clamshell medallion or gorget necklace (the strings of blue and Venetian beads, ending in brass thimbles and ribbons, were tied behind the neck and trailed down the back). Pair of red and green beaded garters, in colors denoting the two original Mesquakie clans, Bear and Fox. Sash, with beaded streamers.



Kinetics of Costume

“You must dance vigorously,’ I thought. That is why I made [these garments] for you.”

“Autobiography of a Fox Indian Woman”

“Not only the ritual, but the aesthetic of costume depends on the animation, rhythmic movement, and music of the dance. The choices made by the makers of costume for particular textures, colors, and decorative elements are determined not only by their visual qualities but also by their kinetic and auditory qualities. One has to hear the tinklers on moccasins as well as see them, to see fringes and feathers sway and nod, and silver, beads, and ribbon shimmer in shifting light and shadow.”

Ruth B. Phillips
“Clothed in Blessing”



Dancers at the 1948 powwow at the Mesquakie Settlement near Tama, Iowa. Left, Eagle Dance. Above, Rabbit Dance. Below, Pipe Dance. Opposite, another scene. (Killy Collection, SHSI-Iowa City.)



Private and Sacred Meanings

“The private meanings of costumes are rarely recorded, but they are, in every culture, a part of the totality of meaning that is being expressed.”

Ruth B. Phillips, “Clothed in Blessing”

Right: Charm bag, 4½" × 6". Charm bags carried amulets, charms, and medicines and often bore designs of spiritual guardians. The underwater panther (on the left bandolier strap and detail) is a mythic spirit often depicted by Great Lakes tribes and capable of great destruction and great blessings. The design of four parallelograms (right strap) is a classic Mesquakie pattern.

Below: Beaded hair binder (center, 12½"), and beaded band and pendants. Mesquakie women wore their long hair parted in the middle and bound in the back with ribbons or binders. The rectangular binder was wrapped around the hair and held with a short, beaded band. From this hung long pendants almost to the ground. “The hair binder and pendant were regarded as talismans,” notes art historian Gaylord Torrence. “The pendant was also believed to be transfused with the woman’s soul. It was regarded as her most important possession, equal to all other sacred objects she might possess.”





Mesquakie warriors Kishkekosh (above) and Nesouaquoit (1837 portraits by Charles Bird King). Face and body painting conveyed various meanings, according to art historian Gaylord Torrence: "Although some designs may have been purely decorative, most were symbolic of religious society or clan association, military achievement, or visionary experiences." Changes in one's life, such as marriage and mourning, were also signified by costume, as in the three autobiographical passages here.



"Black . . . was worn in the face of danger or the threat of death, and it was associated with the absence of ornament and the poorest clothing. . . . The Mesquakie thus humbled themselves in encounters with the spirit world in order to induce the spiritual beings to pity them and to bestow their blessings."

Ruth B. Phillips, "Clothed in Blessing"

[For a marriage]: "Then he gave me his horse, and the clothing which he used at dances, his finery. . . . I arrived where we lived clad in finery."

"[Later my husband] became sicker and sicker. I cried in vain, as I felt so badly about him. And he died. Soon it was terrible for me. I undid my hair and loosened it. For several nights I could not sleep as I was sorrowful. . . . And then the female relatives of my dead husband came to comb my hair. And they brought other garments for me to wear. I wore black clothing."

[After an adoption feast, in which a new person fills the place of one who has died]: "Then they began to clothe me in fresh clothes, and my hair was combed and my face was washed. And then I was told, ' . . . You may begin to wear finery. You may go and do whatever you please. If you are desirous of marrying anyone, you may marry him.'"

"Autobiography of a Fox Indian Woman"

Beware of Cultural Viewpoints

HISTORIANS rely upon primary sources, or first-hand accounts of historical events, to impart the facts and flavor of our past. Sources vary in value, however, and in weighing the potential contribution of a source, one must consider many factors. Especially when investigating the juncture of two cultures, a researcher must remain aware of the cultural prejudices of the speaker. Ruth B. Phillips makes this point in "Clothed in Blessing: Meaning in Mesquakie Costume" (*Annals of Iowa*, Summer 1991): "Western observers have been struck by the strangeness and splendor of the costumes, and by the high level of craftsmanship employed by their creators, but writers of a less subtle turn of mind have commonly used words such as *gaudy*, *grotesque*, or *barbaric* to characterize elements of costume they did not understand and an aesthetic they could not appreciate."

European-American accounts of encounters with Native Americans are often laced with this ethnocentrism. In the 1830s, trader's wife Caroline Phelps wrote: "The Indians got up and then the squaws all commenced dancing around and around the fires. . . . Their faces were differently painted, some red with little black bands marked on each side of their mouth, and some with one eye black and the other white, and grass enough about their necks and their legs to feed a mule all winter, they went round & twisting and jumping and screaming and singing as loud as they could holler, and clapping their hands upon their mouths to make the sound more awful, they appeared more savage in their amusement than any other time." Phelps disregards the values and aesthetics outside her own culture that

govern the native dancers' dress, sounds, and actions.

Likewise, in 1837 a Boston journalist described a "war dance" by tribal chiefs: "Their war exercises were not very striking. One beat a drum, to which they hummed monotonously, and jumped about grotesquely." Did the reporter expect to be entertained by rituals meaningful to the participants?

Language can also affect the value of a primary source. "The Autobiography of a Fox Indian Woman" is a detailed account of a Mesquakie woman's life on the tribal settlement near Tama, Iowa, published by ethnographer Truman Michelson in 1918. As Gretchen M. Bataille and Kathleen Mullen Sands comment in *American Indian Women: Telling Their Lives* (1984), the interview was "told in Mesquakie to Harry Lincoln, corrected by his wife, Dalottiwa, translated by Horace Poweshiek and finally edited and published" two years later. The layers of translation and interpretation, and the researcher's interests, increase the dangers of serious omissions or misinterpretation in such sources.



Keokuk's wife (artist: George Catlin).

Regarding photography and artwork, might subtle errors be introduced when the image-maker works out of context? Prolific frontier artist George Catlin captured the personality of his subjects but sometimes confused important details of specific tribal costumes; perhaps he sketched in details later. Artist Charles Bird King painted visiting tribal chiefs in Washington, D.C.; were their costumes chosen by the subjects or by the artist? Many of the Mesquakie photographs collected by Iowa minister Duren Ward in 1905 were studio portraits; Mesquakie in native dress are seated on ornate Victorian wicker chairs.

To be useful, artifacts also require context: origin, maker, and function, at the least. The tendency to view native traditions as static may obscure evidence of change and contact between other tribes and cultures — especially if artifacts grouped in an exhibit or photograph represent different time periods or tribes. Artifacts require sufficient documentation to be interpreted correctly.

When using primary sources, be alert to the biases, context, and personal or cultural viewpoints inherent in anything recorded or collected by human beings. With these cautions in place, then relish the immediacy and texture that primary sources and materials lend to history.

— The Editor

NOTE ON SOURCES

The Annals of Iowa summer issue, featuring Ruth B. Phillips's article, can be purchased from SHSI, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240 (319-335-3916). SHSI staff Jerome Thompson, Marvin Bergman, and Christie Dailey helped shape this photo essay. Gaylord Torrence's sensitive and thorough essay in *Art of the Red Earth People: The Mesquakie of Iowa* (U of I Museum of Art, 1989) was invaluable. Barbara A. Hail's *Hau, Kola!* (Brown University, 1983) discusses Catlin and other frontier artists. For "The Autobiography of a Fox Indian Woman," see Truman Michelson, *Fortieth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (1925).