

Basic Detail Report



Doll

Date

1700-1800

Primary Maker

Leverian Museum

Medium

Wood, hide, hair, beads, quills, glass

Description

Jointed wooden doll with a painted face made in England in the 1700s. Dressed in Canada by Woodland Cree women in the clothing on an adult female of the

Woodland Cree nation from the late 1700s and early 1800s. One of a pair. With cape and hood. These dolls are very rare and provide a unique opportunity in the study of North American Cree cultural history. Their costume is an exact replica of that worn by Cree women in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. They were acquired by Richard and Henry Cuming in 1842 from a local Walworth family, the Bonners. The Cumings incorrectly identify the dolls as Ojibbeway. Recent study of the dolls has confirmed that they are Cree. The dolls were probably either made as a teaching aid for girls to instruct them about Cree identity or as important presentation pieces. The dolls are very sophisticated and were made with care and an attention to detail that shows pride in Cree heritage and culture. The dolls eventually found their way to England and became part of the displays at the Leverian Museum sometime before 1806. The dolls are an example of the two way exchange of culture that took place in Canada between the native North American people and Europeans. Leverian Museum & the Cree dolls The Leverian Museum, one of Britain's early museums, was located on Blackfriars Bridge road, a mile or two from where the Cuming family lived on the Walworth Road. This museum was a rival to the British Museum and housed the collection of Sir Ashton Lever. It closed in 1806 and its contents were sold at auction. The Cree dolls were on display in the Leverian Museum as late as 1806, and appear in the sale catalogue as Lot 3645, 'Two small figures dressed in the costume of the N American Indians'. They were bought for 18 shillings by Mr Atkinson. They later appear on sale at the auction of another London museum, Bullock's which was located at the Egyptian Hall Piccadilly, 27 Feb 1821. The sale catalogue entry for the dolls is: Day 2, Lot 90 'A Male and Female figure, in the costume of North American Indians, formally in the Leverian Museum'. There is no note of the buyer in the catalogue copy available to us. The description of the dolls is very interesting as the two dolls are described in the Cuming catalogue as being male and female while they are actually both female. The Cree and the Hudson Bay Company The Cree live in two areas of North America. They originated in the sub arctic area between Hudson Bay and the Great Lakes. Part of the Cree living in the southern border of the sub arctic region migrated to the Plains and began hunting buffalo. The dolls were dressed by Woodland Cree women who lived in the central parts of north Canadian forests, in the area

where the Hudson Bay Company had trading forts. The Hudson Bay Company established trading posts on the Great Lakes and Hudson Bay as early as 1670. The Woodland Cree acted as middle men in the fur trade between the Hudson Bay Company and other tribes in the region. Many English and Scottish men who worked for the Hudson Bay Company married Cree women. The dolls were probably dressed at the York Factory trading post by the Cree wife of a company employee. The extraordinarily detailed books of the Hudson Bay Company still exist and give an insight into the trade between Europe and the Canadian Native peoples. The records include requests for materials on the part of Hudson Bay employees.. Orders of wooden dolls from a toy supplier in London appear in the Hudson Bay Company's records, along with orders of sewing materials, silk sewing threads, scissors and ribbons which could be used to dress dolls. The carefully kept records help to pinpoint the period 1800- 1820 as the time when the dolls would have been brought to Canada. For example, in 1805 a William Felt is listed as ordering two dolls and is known to have been married to a Cree woman who could have dressed them, although this is a little late for the date of the Cuming dolls. The wooden dolls. Both of the dolls are typical 18th century English wooden jointed dolls, circa 1790 to 1820. The dolls were made on a lathe, the wood was covered with gesso and painted and a human hair wig was nailed onto the head. The hands with fingers carved like a fork, the glass eyes and the tiny dots painted around the eyes to represent eyelashes are typical of dolls made in this period. Both dolls wear female Cree dress but in different styles. The hood and cape of the second doll has probably been lost. The hide dresses are sewn with sinew and decorated with painted motifs, trade beads and several techniques of quill work. The dresses represent two types of styles, one older and the other a newer adaptation. The cape or wrap is an important part of Cree women's dress. Photographs taken almost a century later than the date of the dolls, show Plains Cree women wearing blanket capes around their dresses. Wool trade blankets had by this time replaced the traditional hide capes. The beaded chest pieces are called Taapiskaakan and are a significant part of Cree dress. The designs were given as a gift by a spirit who visited the hunter while he slept. His wife would make up the design on the chest piece which he would wear while hunting. It would be placed on the dead animal to appease its spirit. The wife's Taapiskaakan identified her with her husband and would employ similar motifs. The women's piece also helped tie the detachable sleeves to the dress at the neck. Bibliography: Oberholtzer, Cath 1999, 'All Dolled Up: the Encapsulated Past of Cree Dolls', Papers of the Algonquian Conference, Ed. David H. Pentland, Winnipeg, University of Manitoba. 2009, 'Cree Dolls, Miniature Ambassadors of the North', American Indian Art Magazine, Vol 35, No 1, Winter 2009.

Dimensions

Object/Work: 330 x 110 x 70 mm