

Uncommon Threads: Wabanaki Textiles, Clothing, and Costume.* Bruce J. Bourque and Laureen A. LaBar. Augusta, ME: Maine State Museum with the University of Washington Press, 2009. 192 pp.

Reviewed by Rhonda S. Fair

In May of 2009, the Maine State Museum launched an exhibit of 100 Wabanaki objects; Bruce Bourque and Laureen LaBar curated the exhibit and wrote the companion book, *Uncommon Threads: Wabanaki Textiles, Clothing, and Costume*. Much more than a catalog of the objects on display, this book provides an examination of the history, art, and culture of the Maritime Peninsula's indigenous population.

After a very brief introduction, Bourque and LaBar divide their subject matter into four chapters, the first of which provides an overview of the Native peoples of the Maritime Peninsula. Though related to other Algonquian-speaking tribes along the eastern seaboard, the Wabanaki differed in some significant ways. For instance, the Wabanaki groups did not practice agriculture based on corn, beans, and squash, preferring instead to hunt and gather a significant portion of their diet. As did other Native peoples on the coast, they had early contact with Europeans, first with fishermen and fur traders, and later, with colonists and soldiers. Also like their neighbors, the Iroquois, the Wabanaki formed a coalition of affiliated tribal groups. Frank Speck described this as the Wabanaki Confederacy. He observed that the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac had an identifiable national identity and met in common to discuss matters that would impact the confederacy as a whole. Agreements by the confederacy were documented not by written words, but with woven shell beads, or wampum. However, conflicts, alliances, and negotiations with the emerging nation-states that surrounded the Wabanaki led to the decline of the importance of wampum as a diplomatic symbol; it was replaced with silver and ink. Interestingly, both wampum and silver also served as personal adornment—as necklaces and collars, gorgets, brooches, and hat bands, and excellent photographs of objects and historic paintings illustrate this.

As stated in the introduction, “Only the broadest definition of ‘textile’ captures the full range of fiber-based technology that was central to” Wabanaki life (p. 5). Bourque and LaBar’s second chapter illustrates the breadth of their definition. They begin with the evidence of textiles in the archaeological record, including impressions left by textiles on pottery, fragments of woven materials used in burials, and “ghost images” left on slate bayonets that were in extended contact with twined mats. Given the fragile and perishable nature of textiles, examples from the prehistoric period are scarce. Those types of items that saw use during the historic period receive the most attention here. These include the obvious, such as pack baskets and tump lines, as well as the lesser known, like snowshoes and lacrosse sticks. Given their broad definition of textiles, Bourque and LaBar even include houses made of sheets of birch bark, bows and arrows, canoes, and fish weirs in their discussion. Perhaps stretching the definition of textiles to include canoes is a bit tenuous, but all of these items are “vivid symbols of Wabanaki identity” (p. 79). They

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transmit important insights into Wabanaki life and culture and the adaptations people made as their circumstances changed dramatically over the centuries.

The historic period transformed almost every aspects of Wabanaki life, and in their third chapter, Bourque and LaBar examine these changes through the lens of clothing and costume. The introduction of fabric and glass beads dramatically altered styles of dress among the Wabanaki, and craftspeople embraced the creative opportunities that these new material provided. Initially, European materials were used to construct clothing that differed very little in structure from prehistoric forms; for example, trade cloth was used in place of buckskin to make men's leggings. Soon, though, Wabanaki clothing was influenced by the style of European clothing, not just by its construction material. For example, in paintings and photographs, women are often shown wearing a peaked cap, perhaps "the most distinctive article of Wabanaki costume" (p. 101). These caps are strikingly similar to the caps worn by Basque women (p. 103). While making broadly interpretive statements about the influence of European forms of costume, Bourque and LaBar are careful not to erase the differences between Wabanaki tribes. They do an excellent job of illustrating the similarities between these caps, while pointing out the differences between Penobscot, Maliseet, and Micmac examples. Throughout this chapter, the authors demonstrated how "Wabanaki costume provided multiple layers of information about the wearer's position in a complex social world" (p. 83).

Bourque and LaBar's final chapter discusses the survival of the Wabanaki textile tradition from 1850 to the present. Along with the previous one, this chapter presents some of the most beautiful and stunning objects included in the exhibit. By the 1850s, many Wabanaki people were thoroughly integrated into the American economic system; they worked in the timber industry, as guides for hunting trips, and so forth. While traditional Wabanaki costume may have fallen into disuse, the textile arts survived in myriad forms. Wabanaki snowshoes were still seen as far superior to others available, and their potato baskets remained in use at many farms until harvesting was mechanized in the 1950s. Additionally, Wabanaki craftspeople adapted many of their traditional techniques in order to create items suited for the tourist market, thereby trading on their identity as Indians. They created miniature doll families, complete with birch bark canoes and babies in cradleboards. They beaded or added quillwork to all manner of European items, such as chair backs, wallets, tea cozies, and smoking caps. And they wove baskets of ash-splints and sweet grass, one of the few weaving techniques to survive as an economically viable activity.

In just a few chapters, Bourque and LaBar demonstrate how Wabanaki textiles "originated as activities that sustained life and communicated group identity," "evolved into economically important crafts," and today "foster a greater sense of cultural identity" (p. 132). In a truly holistic fashion, the authors use textiles to illuminate the Wabanaki people's prehistory; their political involvement with other tribes and nation-states; their adaptation to European trade goods, styles, and market demands; and their ability to keep their textile traditions alive over several centuries. The breadth of coverage is impressive, but does not sacrifice a focus on individual objects or the distinctions between Wabanaki tribes. As a museum anthropologist, a student of Eastern Woodlands ethnology, and a textile artist, I found Bourque and LaBar's book absolutely fascinating. Beautifully illustrated, their work provides an important contribution to the study of the material culture of the Eastern Woodlands' Native peoples.

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