

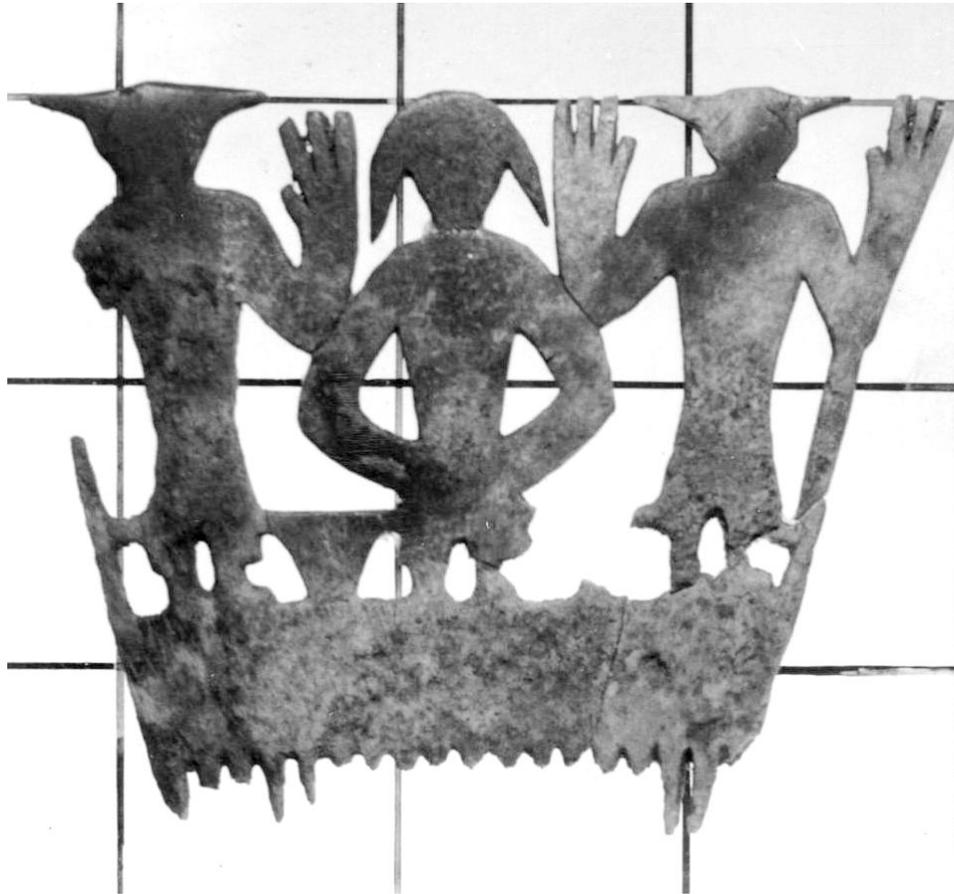
Antler Hair Combs



Waving Hello or Singing a Song?

This unusual figure, carved from a section of moose antler, was found on the Seneca site of the village of Ganondagan, near present-day Rochester, NY. It was made before the year 1687 when the village was destroyed by the French. It is mysterious in that we don't know what its intention was. The artist captured the figure in a dramatic pose, using simple shapes and details.

The figure almost appears to be singing, or calling, as he waves his right hand. Note that there are six fingers on the raised hand. Was this a mistake? Notice how three simple shapes form the expressive face.

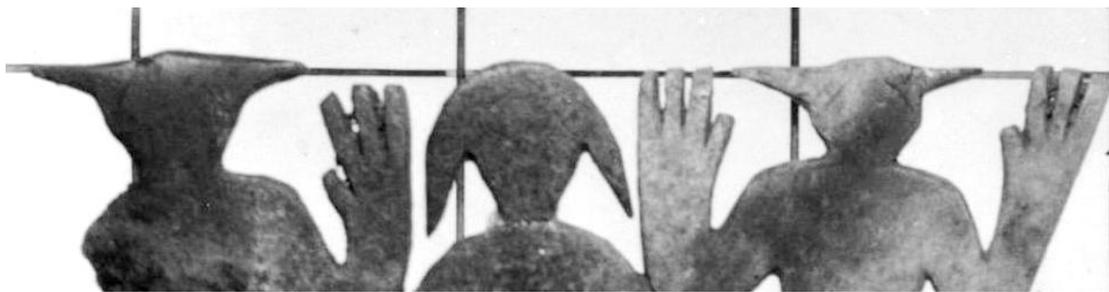


This carved moose antler comb depicts three men, mostly likely colonist in their long waistcoats and Tricorn hats, more commonly called "three cornered hat. These men also appear to be waving. Notice that they only have four fingers. The flow of the outlines keeps our eye moving over the entire design. Despite the exaggerated proportions we can still tell that it is three humans. There is also a creative use of positive and negative space. The areas that are cut out are just as visually significant as the shapes they define.

There is symmetry to the design – with the right side being a reflection of the left side, as well as a visual balance from top to bottom.

There is a great artistic tradition of making hair combs from antlers that became an interesting way to record the world that the 17th Century Haudenosaunee experienced. It is a world of mystic animals, ancient stories and eyewitnesses to cultural change. Several combs depict the first colonist to arrive in the communities with a surprising eye to detail.

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This comb was made over 300 years ago. It may have been the first time that the artist saw men wearing these kinds of hats. They did not have a lot experience in making images of these men, so maybe that is why the figures seem out of proportion. How are the depictions of hats accurate? How are they not accurate?

Seneca Art Reflects Colonial Dress



The European colonists wore knee-length black wool coat, with knee breeches, buckled shoes, and a short vest. These figures stand within the outer framework that was most likely a device to help support the carving, rather a depiction of any real object.



Notice how the simple dots added to the design can create a sense of the face, represent buttons, or reinforce the overall shape. The series dots tend to help our eye move across the hair comb and create as sense of movement.

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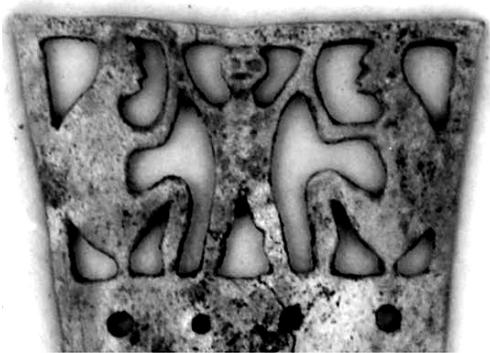
Some combs appear to tell a story, like the one shown above. It looks like a woman greeting a visitor. The comb on the right shows a man holding the neck of two birds, perhaps herons, with their long beaks. There is a Seneca story about a trickster character that fools geese into helping swim across a lake by holding on to their necks, only to keep them afterwards for his meal. Yet this figure appears to be dressed like the colonists in other combs, so we wonder who it really is?



The same kind of scene is seen in the comb on the left. The central figure appears to be the main character in the story of these combs. While we cannot say for sure what story is being told, we can see how the artist tried to capture the essence of the story in a small tableau – a motionless performance in theatre - on the top of the comb.

The middle comb has a man on the back of a long-tailed panther, with what we can assume were two other panthers forming an archway overhead. From Baby Point Crescent, a 1660 Seneca site near Toronto, ON.

The comb on the right has a small man or boy in between two seated figures, which appear in profile.



Positive and Negative

With this type of carving what you take away is just as important as what is left in place in helping to create an overall visual effect.

The combs were meant to be seen in the hair, so the darkness of the hair would help the figures become clearer.

Men in Boats

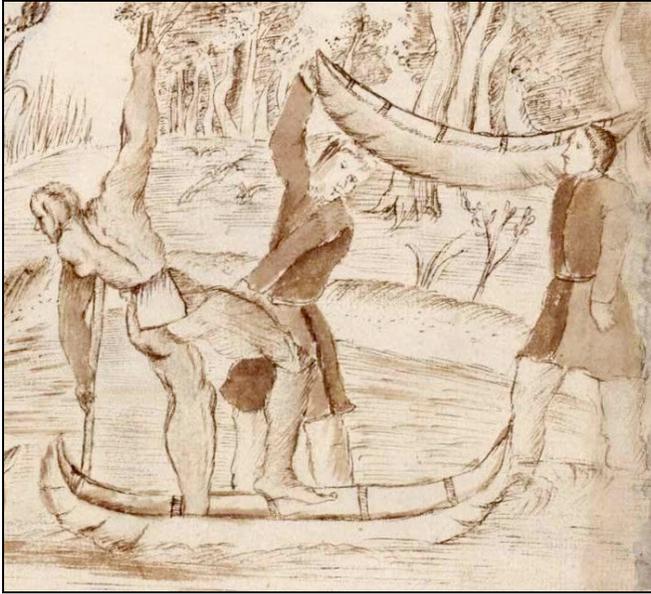


These combs show two men in bark canoes. Again we can see the three-cornered hast, so these are colonists who came visiting by canoe. On the right, we can also see the oars they use for rowing the canoe. The center shaft could be for sail, or just a stylistic convention. It actually strengthens the comb and reinforces the symmetry of the design. Notice the lines carved into the surface that give more definition to the canoe and the oars. The comb on the left shows the figures standing holding a forked stick in the middle.

Compare the depiction of the canoe above with that of a French artist from the same era. How are they the same? How are they different? Which one is more realistic?

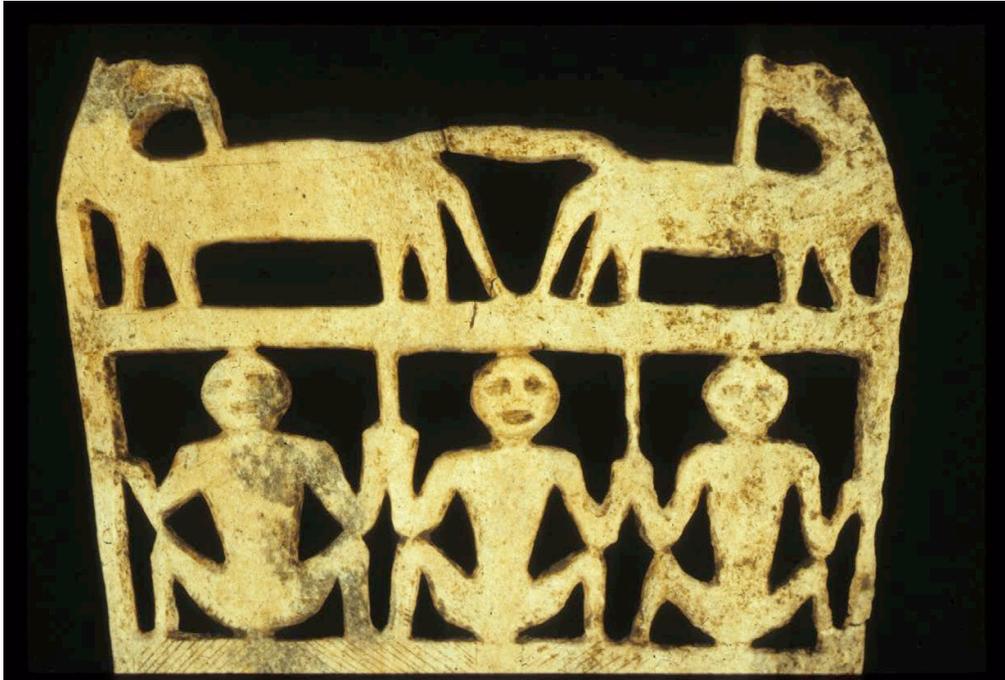
Published in *Les sauvages vont s'établir à la Prairie de la Magdeleine avec les François* [The savages going to settle in the Prairie of the Magdeleine with the French], from the *Narration annuelle de la mission du Sault* [Saint-Louis]..., Père Claude Chauchetière, 1667-1686

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This Theodore de Bry or Matthaus Merian, engraving, commemorating the initial encounter between John Guy and the Beothuk people in 1612, dated c.1627-28, in *Historia Americae sive Novi Orbis*, ed. Matthaueus Merian (Frankfurt: Caspar Rotel, 1628, 1634, 7, plate XIII.) In the background we can see men standing in their canoe, holding a sail or flag.

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Compare the image of three sitting Seneca men with that of the colonists. It is the seated position that is interesting as it appears that this is an artistic device used by Haudenosaunee artists to represent spiritual or personal power. Compare these figures that in the wampum belt below.



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Both figures are based upon a basic hour-glass shape for the main part of the human body. Both have their hands up, and joined with other – a symbol of peace, unity and strength. Both have asymmetry that adds to its sense of internal strength.



Seated Figure of the Buddha

Ladakh, Himalayan, 12th - 13th century <http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/7/680/682/220>

The squatting figure is termed a “hocker,” and is found throughout the world. . . Hockers are apparently rare east of the Mississippi River, although they are common in Seneca Iroquois art (especially on bone combs) during the period from 1670 to 1700 (Wray 1963; Hamell 1979). Robert Funk reports that—even at ca. A.D. 1460—our specimen would represent one of the earliest hockers ever found in the East. George Hamell states that the earliest specimen he is aware of comes from the Northern Iroquoian region of New York. The specimen consists of continuous bas-relief hockers (a frog alternating with a headless human) around the bowl of a ceramic elbow pipe, representative of Canandaigua Phase Owasco, ca. A.D. 1130.

In their study of ancient symbolism, Schuster and Carpenter (1996:82-83) view hockers—especially when used as part of a repeated design—as an element depicting genealogy. Each hocker represents an ancestor, and the headless nature of some hockers is seen as deliberate and symbolic, i.e., ancestors, in general, are dead. They (Schuster and Carpenter 1996:104, 113) also discuss the use of “excerpts” where a single figure taken from a genealogical pattern is used as a medallion and, in some societies, assigned the name of a deceased person.

(Dennis C. Curry and Maureen Kavanagh, Maryland Historical Trust, <http://www.jefpat.org/CuratorsChoiceArchive/2010CuratorsChoice/May2010-ACarvedBoneFigure.html>)

The depiction of their faces in the comb gives them a sense of humanity, almost playfulness. Compare their face with that on this sculpture of Buddha. While the Himalayan sculpture is more realistic, we can still get a sense of spiritual strength from both figures. Some have suggested that the three figures are chiefs of the Wolf Clan, who may be sitting in council, with the guardian totem above them. Notice the use of positive and negative space.

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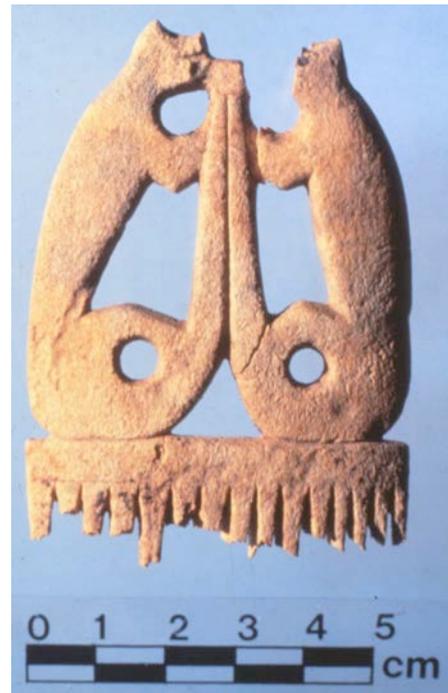


We can see how extra pieces were left in place to give support to the head and neck of the wolves. The combs are fragile and get more brittle through time. It is likely that the artist experienced breakage in their previous work and added the support pieces, or was advised to do so by more experienced carvers. Either way, the support pieces do not distract from our ability to see the wolves. As they appear to be looking back at each other we can almost imagine a conversation taking place between them



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One of the primary design features of this antler hair combs is the use of bi-lateral symmetry. This means that the design is visually balanced; in this case, the right half is almost identical to the left half. In addition, the string use of positive and negative space enhances the overall design as does the designs scratched into the surface. Their seated position recalls the same “power” position of the human figures. We don’t normally see four legged animals sit this way. These high contrast images help us understand how the artist used the basic hour-glass form to create the seated panthers. The cut shape almost becomes another figure being held by the panther. It is difficult to speculate what the artist had in mind; Haudenosaunee logic tells us that this is some kind of spirit figure, representing the power of the panther.



Variations on the same theme, yet the animals depicted also appear to be greeting, or singing to one another.

The Horse



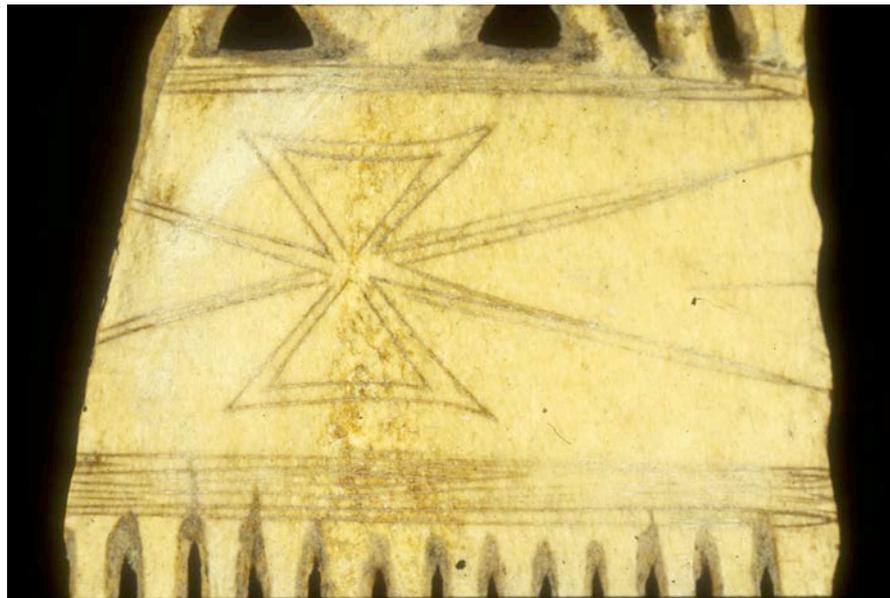
In 1677 Dutch census taker Wentworth Greenhalgh made an extensive journey on horse through Haudenosaunee territory. The first time a horse was seen in Seneca territory, a local artist carved a likeness of the horse and the rider on his back. The rider wears a three-cornered hat, and carries what might be a gun. The artists exaggerated the snout of the horse.



Another horse and rider, the details of which have been corroded due to the antler being in the ground for nearly three centuries. Horses are not depicted with the bi-lateral symmetry seen in other animals. Because they were new to the artists, a new way of showing them may have been considered more appropriate, to distinguish them from the animals that were more familiar to the Haudenosaunee.



This Double horse comb is interesting because we see another kind of hour-glass shape in the panel under the tableau. The central figure has four large protruding spines exploding from the center, like a star or flash of light.



A similar design can be seen on this haircomb.

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The design repeats in the body tattoo from 1710.

The tattoo was said to be that of a crawfish, the totem of the warrior, which always faces forward, even when it retreats.

There was no explanation of the “exploding” hour glass.



**Seneca 1670-1700
Minneapolis Institute of Arts # 2001.194.2**

The Horned Serpent



Haudenosaunee stories tell of a giant horned serpent that causes the water waves to upset canoes, contaminates waters and stalks the land in the form of disease, famine and death. What makes this depiction interesting is the fact that antlered head was carved as if emerging from the framework. This gives the impression of the serpent emerging from some kind of portal that connects its world to ours.

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