

Cradle Boards for Babies



A baby rests in a cradle board, secure and protected. This device is the creation of Haudenosaunee society, meant to give mothers more mobility and baby's safer care during the era when women tended the gardens.

We do not know how long our ancestors have been using cradleboards, however, they can be seen in historic drawings dating back to the 17th century. It is a very handy invention, extremely useful in the days when the entire family or clan was busy, planting, cultivating, or harvesting. The baby could more easily be carried by older siblings and the cross bar in the front made sure that even if the cradle board fell forward, the baby would be protected.

At the bottom is usually a foot rest to make sure the baby does not slide out the bottom! It also gives the baby something to push on as their legs grow stronger.



1664 image of cradle board



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Onondaga



Tuscarora



Grand River



Tonawanda Seneca

Basic Design

The cradle board has changed through time and we have two basic styles that we will discuss:

- The Mohawk Cradleboard, which is long and narrow.
- The Seneca Cradleboard, which has added side rails.



This Mohawk style of decoration was popular in the last half of the 19th century. The main form lines were carved into the board and then the details were painted in. Usually the designs were asymmetrical, as seen on the left. Yet, even when the images varied, the Mohawk sense of design created a strong visual balance and harmony. There is much symbolism in the cradle's imagery of the *flowering tree holding a mother bird feeding her young*; the Iroquois believe that such a tree full of flowers, fruits, and bright lights, exists in the Sky World. Arches represent the Sky World and images of the celestial tree were sewn into the beaded skirts mothers wore.... the carver may add the clan animal of the mother - as that is also the clan of the child - or clan effigies of both parents which would sit at the base of the tree. (*Creation's Journey*, edited by Tom Hill and Richard W. Hill, Sr., Smithsonian Institution, 1994)



Mohawk style, 1880s



British Museum, Registration number: Am1979,09.1

Seneca Designs



Seneca dated 1868

Decorated Bow



Attributed to Arthur Parker



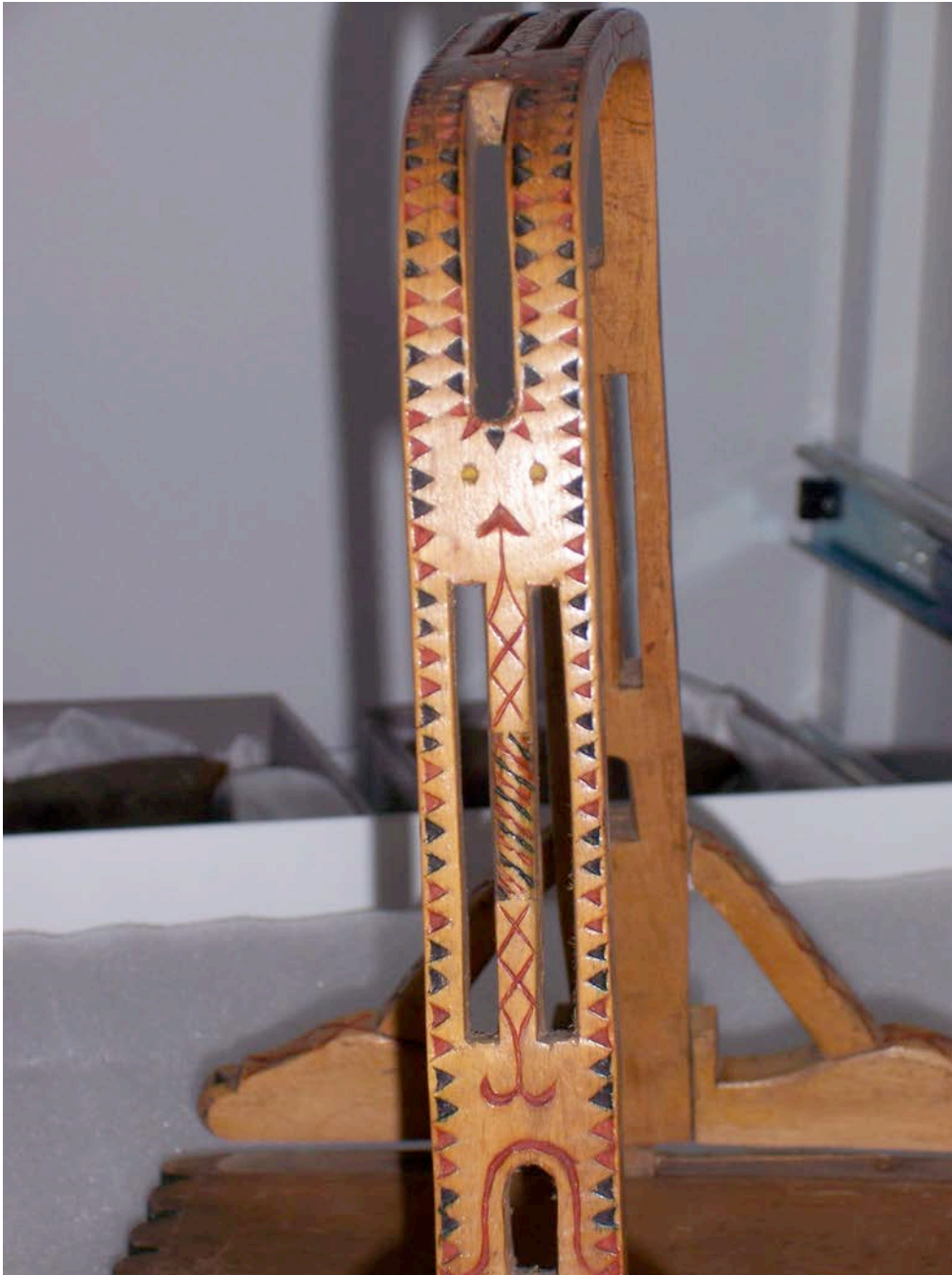
Seneca (as well as Cayuga) cradleboards employed an additional wooden supports that were often decorated with both carved and painted designs. The curved bow could also be carved and decorated as seen below.



The piece also has some small silver inlays. The bow had to be heated in steam to make it pliable to bend, then had to be held in shape for several weeks while the wood dried to hold to the shape.



Wood pegs are used to fit the pieces together. This Seneca cradle board has a few screws that we added later, perhaps to repair some damage it may have sustained.



The bow is made of hardwood that is steamed and bent into shape, then shaved and cut into it final dimension.

Painted Back

Kahnawake Cradle Boards were often painted on the back side. The designs varied by generally followed four different patterns:

- 1) Tree of Life – a flowering tree with ripening fruits to symbolise the new life of the baby.
- 2) Clan Symbols, of the mother and father.
- 3) Sun Flower, or bursting sun symbol to represent they new life. It our oral history, the sunflower was the first food plant created on the new earth.
- 4) Potted flowers – combining popular Victorian and Mohawk symbolism.

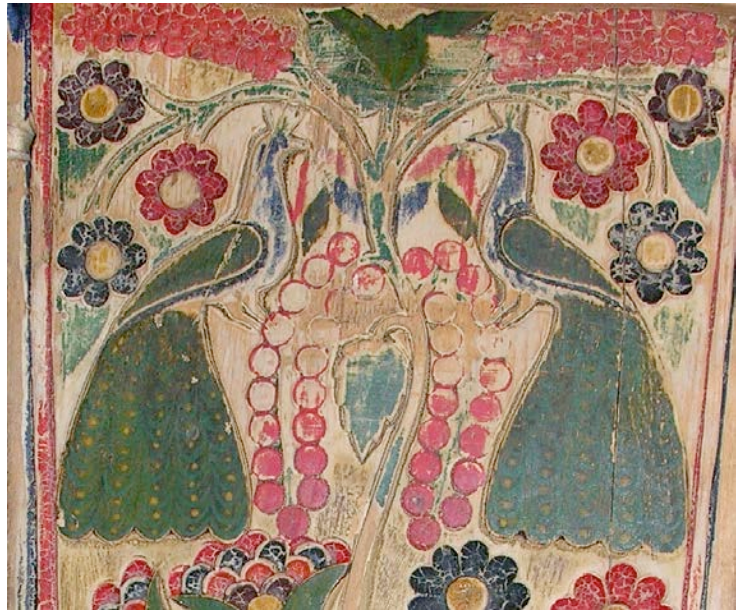


The Bear and Beaver gather at the base of the growing berry bush, from which the birds feast and share food with their young in the nest.

The flowering “tree” is a reference to the Tree of Life in the Sky World. The red line that frames the entire image could be a reference to the older spirit line seen in ancient work. The color red has special significance to represent the blood line connection, but is also a protective color, keeping the bay from any spiritual harm.

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The cradleboard above is at the Woodland Cultural Centre, Brantford, and the one below is from the National Museum of the American Indian.



The peacocks became shared icons of the era in which the board was made. The well-to-do white families often kept peacocks as pets. The symmetry of these birds recalls older patterns of depicting animals and birds in the same way, facing each other.

(National Museum of the American Indian)



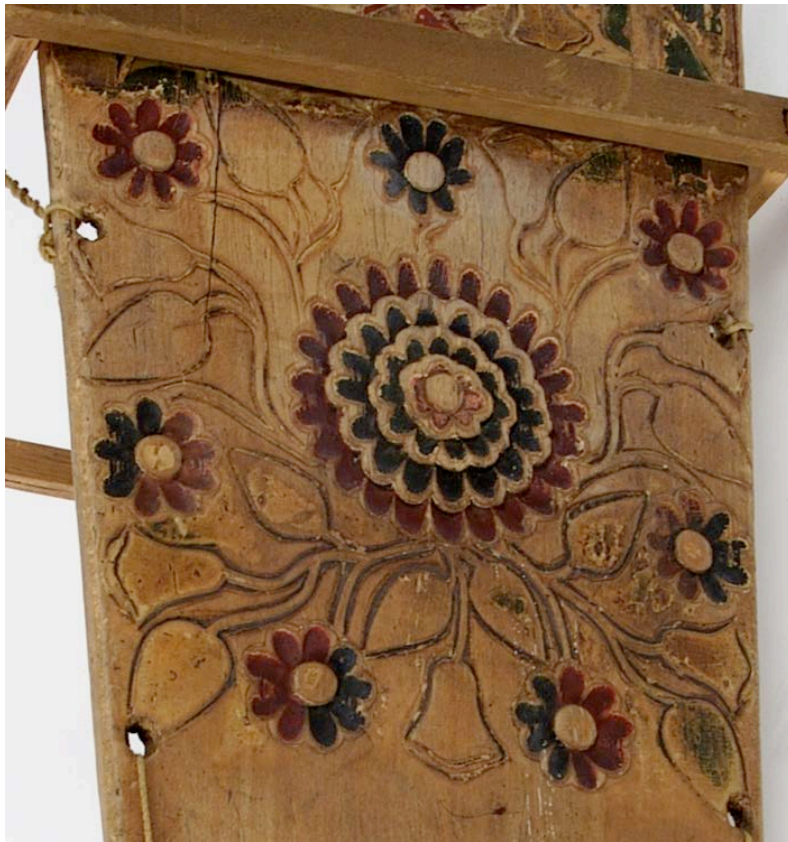
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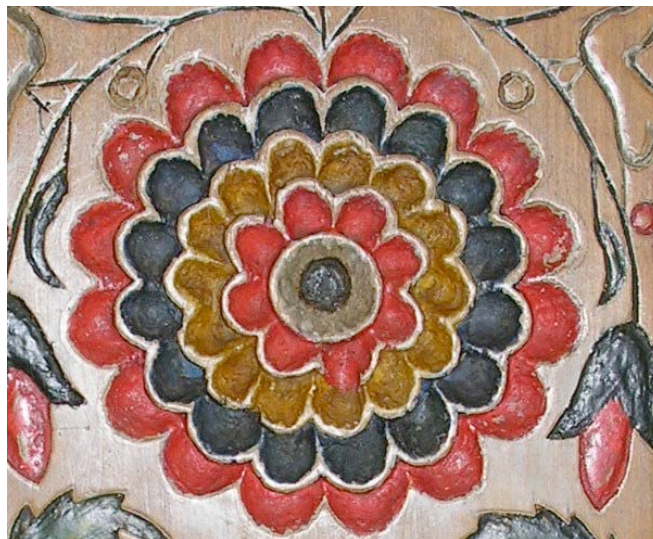


Date: ca. 1860 Geography: Canada, Quebec
Culture: Mohawk Medium: Wood, rawhide, pigment
Dimensions: H. 26 x W. 10 1/2 x D. 10 1/2 in. (66 x 26.7 x 26.7 cm)
Classification: Wood-Sculpture
Credit Line: Ralph T. Coe Collection, Gift of Ralph T. Coe Foundation for the Arts, 2011
Accession Number: 2011.154.60 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



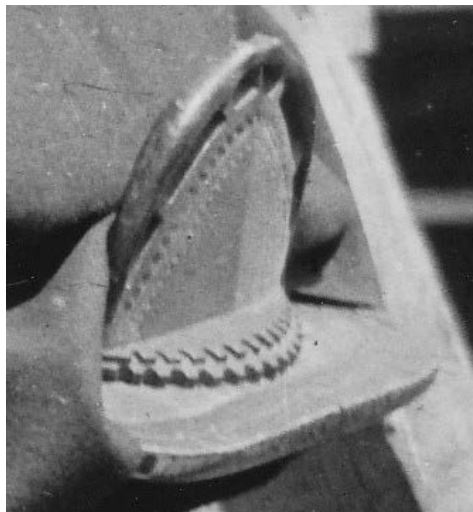
The designs are first drawn, and then outlined with a carving knife, to create a low relief carving of the main features of the design.





Footrest





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An unusual example of a large footrest. Carved into it is the image of a man wearing a peacock feather headdress that was popular among the Haudenosaunee in the later 19th century.



Both examples from National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution.

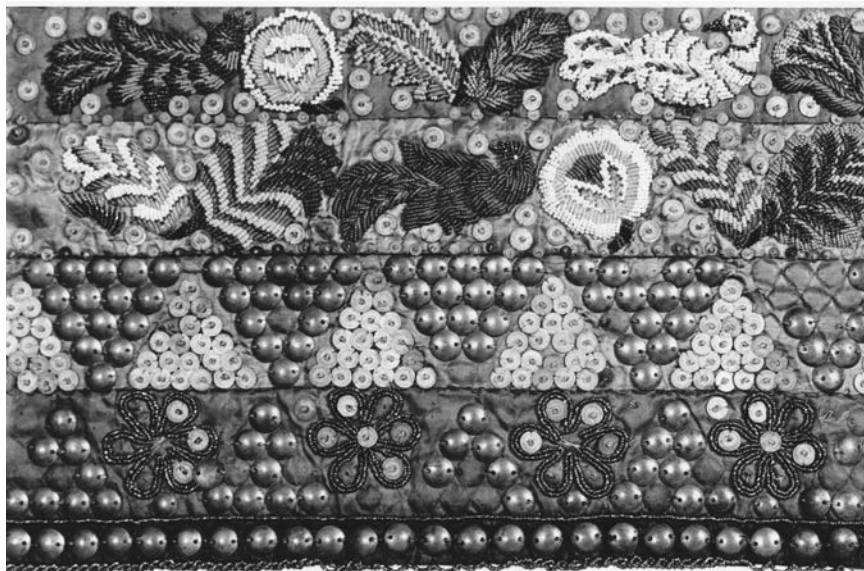
Decorated Wrap

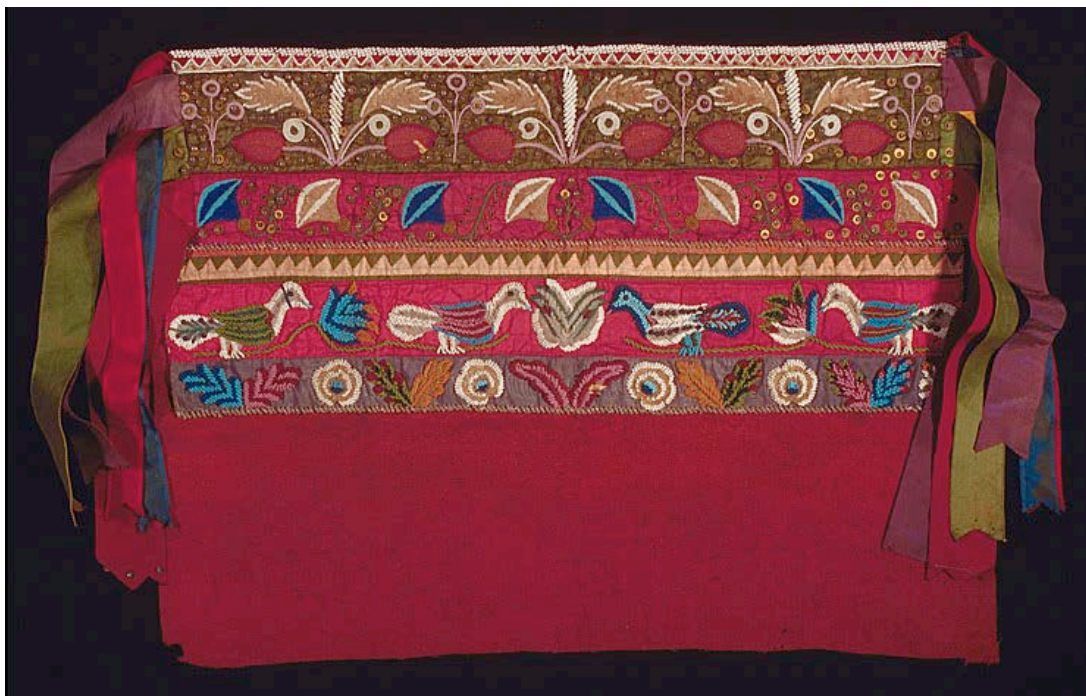


Appliquéd cloth, glass beads, and silver bands on this Mohawk cradleboard.

The baby was secured to the cradleboard by wrapping cloth around the entire board. Sometimes there were rawhide lacings along the sides so a cord could be used. A long wrap, like a sash was often used to wrap the baby. These wraps were then decorated at the end that would show.

Kahnawake Mohawks created fully beaded and decorate wraps such as this one.





The longer ribbons were used to tie the wrap together. These two examples are from the McCord Museum, Montreal, PQ, dating to about 1870s.

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This wrap is a piece of cloth that has been decorated in moose hair embroidery. This is the only example of this usage. New York State Museum, Albany, NY.



One of the earliest examples of beaded Seneca cradleboard wraps was published in 1850. Other long strips of wool were beaded along the edges, much like the beading on leggings.

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Seneca Cradle Board and wrap, Rochester Museum

Cradleboard Dolls

There are a number of examples of miniature cradleboards made for children.



Onondaga



Seneca



Mary and baby Margaret Beauvais,
Kahnawake c. 1900



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Compiled by Rick Hill, Research Projects Coordinator, and Roxanne Sky, Program Assistant, Deyohahá:ge: - Indigenous Knowledge Centre, Six Nations Polytechnic, P.O. Box 700, Grand River Territory, Ohsweken, ON, N0A 1M0

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