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Seminole/Miccosukee Art

by DAVID M. BLACKARD¹

Art of the Florida Seminole and Miccosukee Indians. By Dorothy Downs. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995. xviii, 301 pp. List of illustrations, acknowledgments, introduction, photographs, conclusion, bibliography, index. \$39.95.)

Any general work, and many narrowly focused articles addressing the Florida Seminole and Miccosukee Indians mention their extraordinary clothing, especially patchwork. Dress is the dominant art form for these native peoples. Since the late 1970s several “how-to” books have been published which are devoted exclusively to the “Seminole” patchwork technique. But until now, a book length treatment of the “Art of the Florida Seminole and Miccosukee Indians” has been lacking. Dorothy Downs has assembled in a single volume an ambitious collection of comments and pictorial evidence on all forms of Seminole/Miccosukee art. Extracting material from the historical record, she has added her personal observations of museum collections and the information gleaned from a number of Seminoles and Miccosukees. Unfortunately the result is often characterized by carelessness and conjecture.

In addition to the Introduction and Conclusion, the text is divided into twelve chapters. The first three chapters discuss dress generally; “Evolution of Early Dress,” “Nineteenth-Century Dress,” “Twentieth Century Dress: Patchwork.” These chapters describe not only basic body coverings, but also comment on accessory items, some of which are given additional treatment in following chapters. The next seven chapters deal with specific types of items such as “Fingerweaving,” “Silverwork” and “Pottery.” Chapter 11, “Men’s Work: Village Construction and Wood Carving” describes the various productions of men. Although we may agree that there is an “art” to chickee building, aesthetic decision making is lacking for most of these productions, so they might best be covered in another publication (non-art). The final content chapter deals with

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“Contemporary Green Corn Dress.” It provides a very commendable synthesis of the way dress fits into this most important of Seminole and Miccosukee events.

Many ideas and observations from past observers and those of the author are readily mixed. As a result, at times it is difficult to know when the author is relating further material from a previously quoted source or whether she is proceeding on her own. Substantially more citations would have been desirable. Significant contributions from others, such as Sturtevant’s etymology of the word Seminole (p. 15), are often included without so much as a nod of recognition.

In contrast, her anecdotes and observations from contemporary native informants are often well-written and give the reader many “you are there” benefits. Accounts of Donna Frank’s basket making (p. 206-7) and a visit to “wild” Bill and Frances Osceola’s village (p. 241-2) are particular favorites of the reviewer. Especially welcome is Down’s mention of individual artists whenever possible in both the text and captions when for so many years tribal artists have remained anonymous. At times, however, the native voice is over-employed. Comments extracted from contemporary informants concerning concepts utilized in antique specimens (beaded shoulder bags for instance, p. 167-8) provide only speculation.

Illustrations include historical and artifacts photographs in black and white, diagrams, and color plates. The exposure on a number of the color plates leaves some of the color pages looking washed out, but the black and white photographs are nicely reproduced. Overall, the author selected some fine views for her audience.

Although the “what” of Seminole and Miccosukee art is covered adequately in some cases and thoroughly in others, the “why” of art is often speculative. This begins early in the book with the supposition that several important techniques and some iconography was obtained by the Florida Indians from their African slaves. Comments along these lines begin on page 2 and surface repeatedly through page 266. Among the techniques suggested are coiled basketry (p. 203) cut and fold appliquework (p. 42) and patchwork (p. 88). In discussing the “relationships between blacks and Seminoles” the author states “they did not seem to live among the Seminoles until perhaps as late as 1774,” neglecting to mention McCall recording the continuation of separate villages nearly fifty years later in 1828. Only circumstantial evidence is given to support this

African art link, and no visuals are utilized. Even the authors' statements are hedged with phrases like; "possibly African sources" (p. 3), "appears to be" (p. 34), "technique might have come from" (p. 42), "could easily have" (p. 45), "possible influences" (p. 155), "fascinating possibility" (p. 156), "might have been learned from African slaves" (p. 203), and "almost certainly provided another impetus toward change" (p. 266). Concerning the patchwork, the author herself rules out the possibility of an African link (p. 89) but, by the end of the book, the casual reader has been assailed with this notion so often that he/she just might consider it established fact.

In chapter 1 the writer revisits a previous supposition of hers, that Creek/Seminole men's clothing was patterned after Scottish highland dress worn by traders in the Southeast (Downs 1980). Even though a piece-by-piece inventory of Scottish dress is presented, along with an impressive collection of circumstantial evidence, an honest appraisal can only conclude that the similarities are superficial at best. Her inclusion of colonial military uniforms, which could have been expanded, provides a much more accurate source of inspiration for Creek/Seminole men's dress (and for the Cherokee and other southeastern tribes as well).

Finally, mention should be made of the author's constant explorations into symbolism and iconography. When shoulder bags are discussed, the many designs encountered are given meanings by the author. As always, secondary information is brought into play. I frankly believe that Downs may be correct in many of her interpretations, but they are presented so matter-of-factly that it is important to remind ourselves that they are hypothetical. It is unlikely at this late date that much will ever be firmly established.

Room does not permit a chapter by chapter review of the various inaccuracies which surface in the text, but a look at two chapters (2 & 5) will illustrate this pervasive weakness. Chapter 2 "Nineteenth Century Dress" includes the statement "only the most important leaders seem to have worn turban bands" (p. 42). Although it may be a quotation, it is uncited and unsubstantiated. Viewing the 1826 McKinney and Hall prints and the 1838 George Catlin paintings, the reader finds that some leaders are wearing turban bands while others such as the great Neamathla are not. In neither portrait of head chief Micanopy does he wear a turban band, nor does King Philip in his Catlin portrait. The images of Billy Bowlegs (fig. 2.8 and 9) show him with and without a turban

band. There simply isn't enough evidence to confirm such a claim, even if a historical source were cited. It is certain that in the 19th century the turban band carried no such status other than being a fashion statement.

When the first evidence of appliquework in an 1826 portrait is mentioned, ties are again drawn with west African cultures. The difficulty with this view point is that there was similar cut and fold appliquework being done around the Great Lakes, far outside the plantation south with its African slaves. Known as ribbonwork among the peoples of the Great Lakes and prairie, the craft is still done with great artistry by some tribes. The fancy Osage work, done with thirteen ribbons, and used today for men's "Straight-Dance" outfits, employs the same principles as the simpler Seminole appliquework.

On page 46 Downs quotes Horan's mistake that Osceola killed Tukose Emathla. Osceola actually killed Charley Emathla. Tukose Emathla, overall chief of the Seminoles, died earlier, just after returning from inspecting the western lands which resulted in the controversial Treaty of Ft. Gibson. Further, on the same page, the author states that "The Indians were counselled by their black 'sense bearers'." In truth, the ceremonial position of "sense bearer" was, with rare expectations such as the cited Abraham, a duty which fell to fellow tribesmen.

Later in the chapter, readers are confronted with the curious idea that "dietary preferences, such as fish versus beef" provided the names for the various "family camps" (p. 67). I suppose the author is referring to places like Cow Creek, Catfish Lake, and Fisheating Creek. Possibly resource concentrations were responsible for these location names but certainly not dietary preferences.

In discussing men's ruffled dress coats, the reader is told that the misnomer "doctor's coat," indicating a garment specific to a "medicine man," came into use in the 19th century. The introduction of the term at this early date is not substantiated by any citation. Certainly the term originated much later. Photographs from the 19th century indicate that the coats were in widespread use. At that time nearly every adult male owned one for dress-up occasions. Hence, any adoption of a name alluding to some special status of the wearer would have been inappropriate. Collections and photographs for the first decade of the 20th century suggest they were still in common use. In fact the author mentions this herself in the next chapter (p. 84). It would have been some time after that

when the term “doctor’s coat” gradually worked its way into the native vocabulary. Modern Mikasukis do have a native name meaning “doctor’s coat,” but its original Mikasuki name, “fokshekbachke” (meaning only “long shirt”) is still used by tribal conservatives.

At the conclusion of Chapter 2, the author mentions the subtle elaborations which eventually led to patchwork design bands. The time assigned for this innovation was “late 19th century” (p. 82) which is a little too early. For instance, the Stranahan collection dating from 1897 at the National Museum of Natural History does not exhibit any use of the “multiple wide and narrow bands of fabric.” Further, the photograph used to picture this adoption of wide panels (fig. 2.19) was not taken in the 1890s as stated but rather on April 4, 1910 by J. F. Brown. This very gradual trend makes Deaconess Bedells’ hypothesis that the “multibanded clothing was inspired by the colorful banded tree snails” very unlikely instead of “highly plausible” as Downs suggests (p. 82) It would be plausible *IF* the garments *ABRUPTLY* changed from the basically plain late 19th century styles to the post-1915 styles which displayed a plethora of horizontal stripes. Instead, a subtle elaboration began in the first years of the 20th century.

Turning to the chapter illustrations, figure 2.2 shows a late 19th century long shirt rather than “early 20th century” as stated. The specimen was collected by Vincent Gilpin at the same time as the woman’s blouse in plate 1. Figure 2.18 shows a photograph taken in 1904 not the 1890s.

Chapter 5, “Beadwork” starts out with a survey of prehistoric beads and early trade beads used in the Southeast. Later, when coin necklaces are discussed, it is stated that they were in vogue “from the late 19th century through the 1920s.” In fact, they were in use several decades earlier in the 1830s and 1840s as shown by the excavations at the Fort Brooke Cemetery. These necklaces remained popular into the 1940s at least on Brighton Reservation. Discussing “Embroidered Beadwork,” the writer states that there are “very few examples of either leggings or breechcloths . . .,” whereas there are numerous examples of Creek or Seminole bead-embroidered sashes or straps and shoulder bags” (p. 143). It is true that beaded shoulder bags are much more common, but that is not true of the distinctive sash form (as pictured in Plate 20.) These are nearly as rare as the leggings and breechcloths.

The statement about the adoption of a “new style of fringed hide leggings worn without garters” “by the beginning of the 20th

century” is lacking in precision (p. 146). This distinctive form of legging, (which almost always includes a fringed hide garter) clearly appears in an engraving from 1858 showing Billy Bowlegs’ lieutenant “Long Jack,” many years before the 20th century. The style may be much older as it is of a very simple pattern.

When loomed beadwork is discussed, the designs are accurately summarized, but the technique is not. The technique described is employed by Seminole and Miccosukee beadworkers today, but was not in use during the heyday of loomed beadwork (circa 1880-1915). Downs mentions “the two thread method” (p. 147) but explains it incorrectly, as if it makes use of a single weft thread. The “two thread method” uses two weft threads. The beads are strung on one weft and then held in place around the warps by the use of a separate second weft going through the beads in the opposite direction, not the same thread as described. Her statement about “one bead sitting between each pair of warp threads” (p. 147) is also erroneous for this time period. Three beads between warps was the norm, but, two, four and even five were utilized. The sash illustrated in Plate 21 uses this method, with three beads between warps. The ends of the loomed panels are described as being finished off with “hide” ends (p. 147). In the case in the illustrated examples (plate 21, fig. 5.7) this is so, but by far the most common method is to use the cotton cloth. The technique described for fabricating the tapered beaded fobs is also wrong. The author states “the number of warp threads is gradually reduced to produce an object of tapering shape.” In fact the taper is produced by gradually adding more beads between warps as the work progresses. Additional warps are added, if needed, as the work progresses by tying them to wefts. Although hide ends may be sewn to the ends of the fobs, as stated, a number of other materials may be used. Once again cotton cloth is common. Both the examples in plate 22 show yet another possibility. Here, the fobs are attached to extensions made of heddle woven yarn.

Unfortunately, these comments do not exhaust the flawed material included in these two chapters. It must be mentioned that some chapters, such as “Pottery” and “Silverwork” are nearly error free. The book ends on a bright note as the “Conclusion” chapter is smooth and a joy to read, providing a sensitive assessment of the contemporary Florida Indian scene. In this volume it is the illustrations, the art and artists, that speak with eloquence and truth of the creative genius of these first Americans.