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Panthers and Thunderbirds

Twined Bags, Fabric-Impressed Ceramics, and the Great Tradition of American Fabrics

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The masculinist standpoint in archaeology, part of Western culture's hierarchy placing men above women, privileged hard durable stone above soft stuff. Naked classical marble statues dominated the halls of art museums, icons of purity brought to edify the public (Davison and Khubchandani 2009: 129). Even in America, archaeologists themselves dressed appropriately for their social class—laborers and their supervisors are easily distinguished in field photographs until the mid-twentieth century—without showing much interest in presumed "women's crafts" of textile production and sewing. North American First Nations were pictured dressing in simple hide tunics and breechcloths. Few archaeologists researched the considerable, often beautiful textile arts of indigenous American societies, physically generally perished but preserved as impressions on millions of sherds.

This chapter looks at a part of American textile traditions: twining and twined bags. The earliest of these artifacts in America were made earlier than any other preserved complete ancient textiles, as evidenced by fabric impressions that can be seen on sherds and historic twined bags analogous to the sherd impressions. In addition, an example of the importance of a fine twined wrapping, and its maker, can be seen in Osage ceremony. My theme is that twined textiles were not only ubiquitous in North America but also could be charged with icons of power.

American twined bags may have woven into their faces the figures of panthers and thunderbirds (figure 1.1), signifying the invisible and awesome power of these mighty beings. Such bags were made and used by midwestern First Nations people to store and carry ritual paraphernalia such as rattles and tobacco. Both simple and finely crafted twined bags,

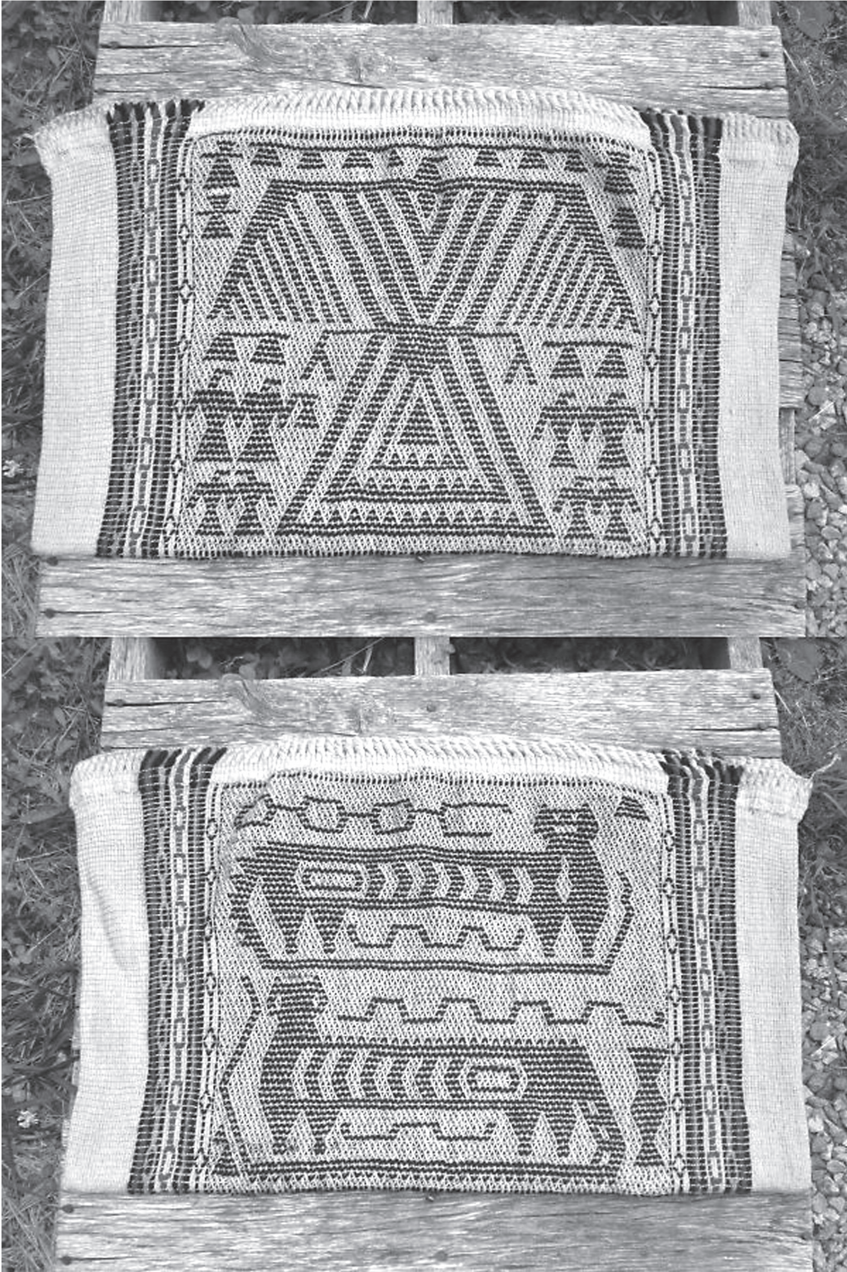

Figure 1.1. Twined bag with Underwater Panther on one side (*below*) and Thunderbird (*above*) on other side. Photograph courtesy of Conde Trading Company (Tom Conde).

with or without iconic designs, were made and used in North America for ten millennia. The craft of twined fabrics was a vital part of First Nations economies until the mid-twentieth century.[1] It was primarily a women's art, and in some ceremonies, the woman who wove a twined fabric was a priestess essential to her nation's success.

Anthropologists have, with a few exceptions, overlooked the importance of the twined fabric tradition in indigenous North America. Scholars of the history of weaving, such as Elizabeth Barber (1995: 53), have summarily dismissed the American fabric tradition. Both bias toward weaving as differentiated from twining in fabric construction and the uncritical prominence given to Eurasian technologies have obfuscated the significance of 9,400-year-old textiles from Nevada dry caves that are the oldest complete textiles known and are remarkably fine work. Fabrics impressed on ceramics demonstrate that these textile techniques continued through ten millennia into the present (among Plateau First Nations), as can be seen in the historic Osage Wa-Xo'-Be, or war bundle, ritual, for which a priestess constructs its shrine. Tellingly, as Thorstein Veblen would have predicted (Kehoe 1999; Veblen [1899] 1931), this woman of power wore no finery or ornaments as she created a shrine invoking success for her nation's soldiers.

Earliest Fabrics

Catherine Fowler (Fowler et al. 1997: 3; see also Barker 2013; Dansie 1997; Hall 1997) lists the types of fabrics found in Spirit Cave, Nevada, and dated to 7400 BCE:[2]

- plain-plaited mats and bags with paired cordage wefts;
- close plain-twined fringed bags with cordage warps;
- open plain-twined mat with cordage warps;
- open plain-twined mats with whole-tule-stem warp;
- and a twisted rabbit(?)-skin robe.

Wefts appear to be dogbane (Indian hemp), sagebrush, and possibly juniper (Fowler et al. 1997: 7). One of the fringed bags was decorated with interwoven leather strips and a band of sage or juniper cordage, two of the fringed bags had inserted feather decoration, and another fringed bag had only interwoven leather strips (Fowler et al. 1997: 12–13). The warp-faced plain-weave textiles are shrouds wrapped around a corpse, one around the upper half and one around the lower half of a middle-aged man, with the wrapped corpse then enclosed within a twined mat, and two of the twined

bags contained cremation remains of a young woman (Barker et al. 2000: 12–13).

Farther afield, Early Holocene dry sites in Mesoamerica and Peru also contain twined fabrics (King 1979: 266), with a recent calibrated calendar-year dating of fragments of cloth from Guitarrero Cave in the Andes at 12,100–11,300 BCE (Hill 2012: 19). Mary Elizabeth King noted that in the Andes, weaving replaced twining as the principal fabric technique after the Initial period, during the second millennium BCE, while twining continued in use in Mesoamerica through the European invasions; she stated that in the "strong and distinct Mesoamerican weaving tradition . . . emphasis [was] on warp rather than on weft and a heavy reliance on twill," with twining "a supplementary technique" (King 1979: 274–75). Although twining is commonly considered a more primitive method of textile making and is slower than loom weaving with shuttles, it produces a strong fabric and, as in the Spirit Cave cloths and bags, can use finely spun thread and create fabrics comparable to expert historic weavings.

Fabric-Impressed Ceramics

Because fabrics are constructed of perishable organic materials, they seldom are encountered in the archaeological record. Interiors of dry caves in the desert West, such as Spirit Cave, will preserve fabrics but are not sites of daily residence, so they offer limited information to researchers. What have been preserved are impressions of fabrics in clay on millions of sherds throughout eastern North America.

Pottery appears in the Terminal Pleistocene, 12,200–10,200 BCE (calibrated radiocarbon dates), in several regions of Siberia and northern Japan. Surfaces are incised or decorated with impressions of combs; string or cord impressions appear several millennia later (Kuzmin and Vetrov 2007). Northern North America's earliest pottery is remarkably later, during the first millennium BCE for northeastern North America (Taché 2005).[3] Although conventionally labeled "cord-impressed," many Vinette I sherds seem to show twined fabric impressions (e.g., Taché 2005: figs. 6, 11). That cord impressions on Early Woodland sherds could have been from fabrics was acknowledged by James B. Griffin in his summary chapter in the landmark 1951 *Archeology of Eastern United States*: "Finely-woven cloth makes its first appearance [in the Early Woodland period] along with short tooth bone 'combs' which may have been used for weaving rather than hair ornaments. They bear a striking morphological relationship to the 'combs' used

for weaving in the Southwest. . . . In the south-central area the surfaces of the pottery are plain or cord-marked, but much more commonly are fabric impressed" (Griffin 1951: 356). Identifying the fabrics themselves, beyond categorizing ceramics, was less interesting to this generation of archaeologists.

The question of distinguishing "cord-wrapped paddle impressed" from fabric-impressed pottery was addressed by George I. Quimby (1961), whose experiments concluded that positive impressions made by pressing a medium such as plasticine on the sherd surface are generally necessary to see the material that was impressed. My own experiments, prompted by my analyses of Northwestern Plains ceramics and accounts of nineteenth-century observers (Schaeffer 1952), suggested that pots were constructed within twined bags placed in a shallow depression. Paddling the pots to meld and even the walls impressed the bag fabric on the clay. The completed pot could be easily carried to a place to dry, and the next day shrinkage through drying would let the bag fall from the pot. While a small group of researchers, most affiliated with the Society for American Archaeology's Fiber Perishables Interest Group, is studying fabrics through mold impressions from sherds, the vast majority of American archaeologists have followed disciplinary tradition by labeling sherds evidencing cords as "cord-impressed" or "cord-roughened," ignoring the information that could be obtained by—admittedly time-consuming—examination of impressed fabrics.

If archaeologists did regularly identify and analyze fabrics visible on millions of Woodland sherds, we still would face a gap of millennia between the Early Holocene fabrics from dry western caves and the introduction of fabric-impressed ceramics in the first millennium BCE. It is reasonable to assume that twining continued in use in North America throughout the Holocene, with confirming data absent because of fabrics' perishability. It is also reasonable to assume that during these millennia, there was a range of twined fabrics from fine cloths and bags comparable to the Spirit Cave artifacts and to historic First Nations examples, to coarse utilitarian bags used in First Nations households well into the twentieth century. Besides bags, cloth for clothing was manufactured: "Native blankets resembling shawls, some being made of the inner bark of trees and some from a plant like daffodils which when pounded remains like flax. The Indian women cover themselves with these blankets, draping one around themselves from the waist down and another over the shoulder with the right arm uncovered

in the manner and custom of Gypsies" (Clayton et al. 1995: 76, citing the Gentleman from Elvas's account of De Soto's 1539 expedition). Featherwork cloaks were also created on netting bases, usually using turkey feathers.

Twined bags do survive today on the Plateau, called sally bags (the term *sally* refers to willow bark fiber) or cornhusk bags (decorated with cornhusks) (Schlick 1994: 37, 146–51). They are utilized for women's plant production and in ritual and also are traded to other First Nation people to store and carry ritual paraphernalia.

Historic Twined Bags

Surveying ethnographic collections of twined bags, art historian Ruth Bliss Phillips noted that "a number of the bags were found in their original contexts as containers for medicine bundles. . . . [T]wined bags constitute one of the richest iconographic complexes in all of Great Lakes Indian art. Many early bags are adorned with beautifully rendered images of Thunderbirds and Underwater Panthers" (Phillips 1986: 27). For these peoples, thunder is the sound of a huge bird flying, or its voice; it is the messenger of the never-seen Almighty that gives and sustains life. Opposed to the Thunderbirds are Underwater Panthers, monsters of the deep with a feline body and head, a long serpentine tail, and antlers. Sometimes they closely resemble a Mesoamerican Feathered Serpent with a feline head. Underwater Panthers roil waters by lashing their tails and cause storms, and they devour humans venturing too close to, or upon, rivers, lakes, or seas. Picturing the two types of powerful beings on the two sides of a bag keeps them in their eternal contest.

A century ago, Alanson Skinner worked with the Menomini community to document their material culture. His detailed descriptions of twined fabrics, still being made at that time by Menomini women, led him to exclaim,

> It is truly astonishing that the ability of the Woodland tribes in the matter of textile arts has been so little recognized by students. The cleverness displayed by the Menomini in these crafts is no doubt not greater than their Algonkian and Siouan neighbors, yet little has been recorded of it. . . . Had the variety and complications of the textile art as it exists [c. 1911] among the Menomini been fully realized, no doubt more examples of their weaving might have been obtained in the field. (Skinner 1921: 230)