



## THE EVOLUTION OF THE WATER MANITOU AS SEEN THROUGH ITS PRESENCE IN WOODLANDS BOWLS & LADLES

At the time of European settlement in North America, the aboriginal natives who had occupied the continent for tens of thousands of years already had in place centuries-old traditions within their way of life, mythologies, and material culture. They had distinct regional vernaculars within the applied arts, incorporating carved, drawn, and woven depictions of animals, humans, and mythological spirits into aspects and objects of everyday and ceremonial life. Evidence supports naturalistic, stylistic, and reductive interpretations of life forms and symbolic devices on myriad materials ranging from wood, native metals, fibers, animal skins, and pottery. Acculturation between the American Indian and Europeans forever changed these traditions and eventually all but forced them out. This writing focuses on the evolution of abstract depictions of a mythological Manitou on wooden carved bowls and spoons (ladles) from the Woodlands people from the time of the first European settlements in New England (early- to mid-16th century) through the early- to mid-19th century.

Important to the mythological belief system of the Woodlands cultures were water spirits or Manitous. Some Manitous were realized in the form of what the Ojibwa called the Mishipizheu or Underwater Panther (also called Gitche-anahmi-bezheu). This guardian and keeper of the rivers, lakes, and oceans was both feared and revered and is often depicted on effigy bowls, ladles, and ball clubs as a snake-like feline with horns, power lines, sharp teeth, and a spiked tail.

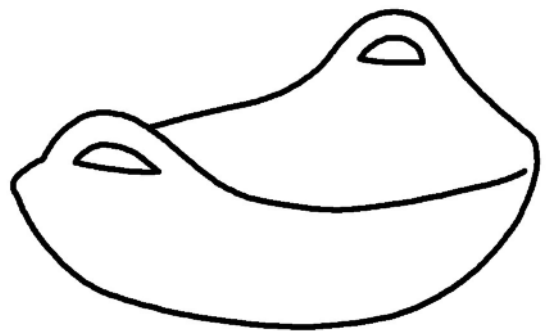


Fig. 1. Hudson River Valley Double Handled Ash Burl Bowl  
Circa: 1660-1680 (or earlier)  
Size: 25" L x 22" W x 8" H.

Collection: Private

A large mid- to late-17th century ash burl feast bowl (Fig. 1) gives us one of the earliest woodcarvings of an Eastern Woodlands interpretation of this Manitou. In the understated and reductive style of the Woodlands people, the bowl is masterfully executed with consistently thin walls and an engaging line quality—a large oval with sweeping rounded tabs at either end, of which demilune cutouts are incorporated to serve as handles. If we only had this singular example, we may interpret these handles as nothing more than utilitarian handles. However, given a body of related Woodlands carvings, it will be shown that these demilune cutouts are abstract depictions of the eyes of the water spirit or Manitou.

A very large ash burl feast ladle (Fig. 2), also of the same period, displays a large terminal composed of an oval tab with cutout demilune. This ladle and the previous bowl are likely two of the earliest non-excavated examples displaying this diagnostic carving.

A bowl (Fig. 3) in the collection of The Museum of Civilization, Gatineau, Canada provides similar cutouts, albeit within a more complex composition. This important bowl is masterfully designed and executed with bold representations of these characteristic half-moons. Additionally, the openwork handles are stepped and have an incurvate lead to the rounded end castellations.

With a bridge of three-quarters of a century and a distance of over a thousand miles, a complexly carved ash burl bowl (Fig. 4) displays castellated terminals of lobes and points, each delineated by in-cutting. These lobes and points represent the head of the Manitou—the lobes and demilune cutouts are seen as its eyes, and the points, its horns. This particular representation is the most complete abstract depiction of the Manitou discussed herein and can be seen almost as

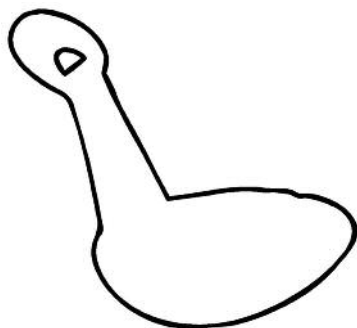


Fig. 2. Northeastern Woodlands Ash Burl Effigy Ladle  
 Circa: 1660-1680  
 Size: 11 1/2" OAL

Collection: Private

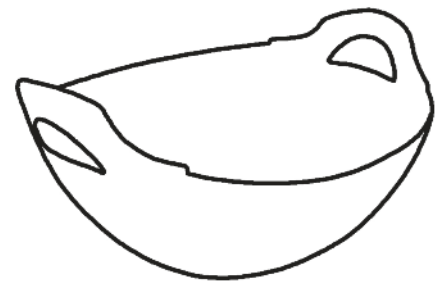


Fig. 3. Eastern Great Lakes Doubled Handled Ash Burl Effigy Bowl  
 Circa: 1740  
 Size: 17 1/2" L x 14 1/2" W x 8 3/4" H

Collection: Museum of Civilization, Gatineau, QC, Canada

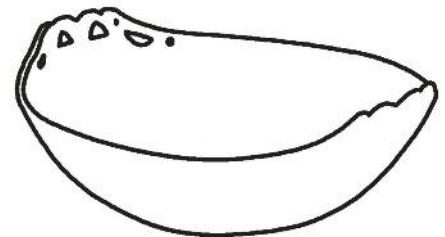


Fig. 4. Great Lakes Ash Burl Effigy Bowl  
 Circa: 1820-1840  
 Size: 17 1/2" L x 15 1/2" W x 6 1/2" H

Collection: Private



Fig. 5. Great Lakes Ash Burl Effigy Bowl  
 Circa: 1850  
 Size: 16 1/2" L x 13" W x 5" H

Collection: Detroit Institute of Arts (81.624)



Fig. 6. Great Lakes Ash Burl Effigy Bowl  
 Circa: 1850  
 Size: 17 1/8" L x 15 1/2" W x 5 1/2" H

Collection: Detroit Institute of Arts (81.625)

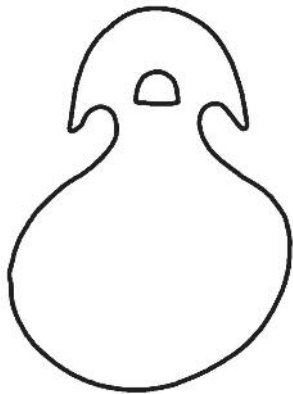


Fig. 7. Great Lakes Effigy Scoop  
 Circa: 1800  
 Size: 8" OAL

Collection: Private

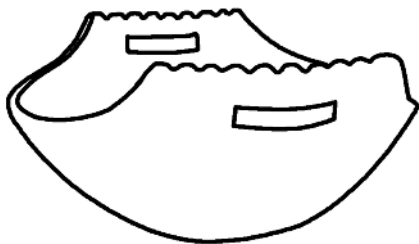


Fig. 8. Great Lakes Ash Burl Effigy Bowl  
 Circa: 1840  
 Size: 13 3/8" L x 11 1/2" W x 5" H

Collection: Powers



Fig. 9. Ojibwa Pictograph, Darky Lake, ONT

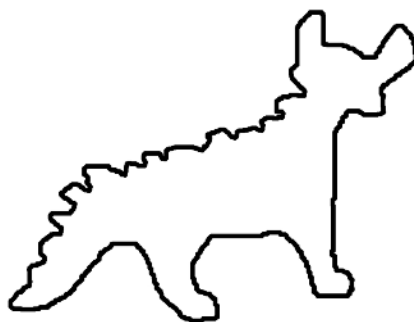


Fig. 10. Ojibwa Pictograph, Agawa Rock, ONT

the Rosetta Stone of understanding more abstract or partial depictions of the Manitou.

In *GREAT LAKES INDIAN ART, Representational and Symbolic Forms in Great Lakes-Area Wooden Sculpture*, Evan M. Maurer writes of two bowls in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts that share similar lobed features and cutouts (Figs. 5 & 6). Also from the Great Lakes region, a large belt cup or scoop (Fig. 7) illustrates the Manitou's eye within a dynamic form of dramatic scale.

A recently discovered ash burl bowl (Fig. 8) from the Ojibwa has a serrated or notched border along the handled ends, which appears to represent the spiky backside of the Manitou. Ancient Ojibwa rock drawings (Figs. 9 and 10) illustrate horned serpents with spiked bodies similar to the carving of this bowl. An Eastern Great Lakes ladle (Fig. 11) also exhibits this heavily gouge carved characteristic on the handle.

It is likely that the prototypical Iroquoian double open-handed bowl with squared-off castellated ends (Fig. 12) is a simplified modification of the more complex double-handled bowl seen in Figure 1—the handles cut solely for utilitarian performance versus the dual purpose of mythological inspiration and function.

Fig. 11. Great Lakes Abstract Effigy Ladle  
 Circa: 1840  
 Size: 8 7/8" OAL

Collection: Powers

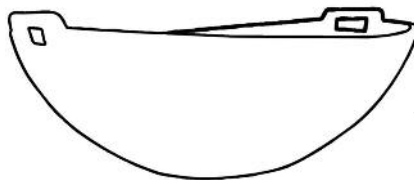
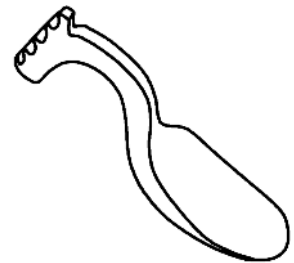


Fig. 12. Iroquois Double Handled Ash Burl Bowl  
 Circa: 1780-1800  
 Size: 25 1/8" L x 20 1/4" W x 8 5/8" H

Collection: Private

♦ Obj. 28: Ojibwa Double Handled Ash Burl Bowl  
 Circa: 1840  
 Size: 13 3/8" L x 11 1/2" W x 5" H

Provenance: Alan Clairman, Toronto, ONT;  
 Gardner Galleries, London, ONT (found on a  
 local house call in eastern London, ONT).

