Our ability to "read" the visual language of Great Lakes Indian art is still at a rather primitive stage. In comparison with our knowledge of the native art traditions of other regions of North America our understanding of the iconography, artistic conventions, and aesthetic approaches of Woodlands art is uneven and imprecise. Undoubtedly, the poverty of the documentation of contact period art in eastern North America will make it impossible ever to achieve the understanding of these arts which ideally we would like to have. An added difficulty is the way in which surviving early items of costume and ritual use are scattered and dispersed across Europe and North America.

These difficulties, of course, are not unique to the visual art of the Woodlands and, as in other areas of research, many efforts are being made to locate and publish contact period Great Lakes material. By reassembling this body of art it should be possible to define more clearly the aesthetic and iconographic consistencies which are in turn linked to linguistic, mythological, and ethnographic information. These links between the forms of art and contextual meaning make the primary representational imagery understandable. Woodlands art also employs, however, a system of secondary imagery which is geometric and abstract. Most of these geometric motifs have been considered decoration or ornament, and only rarely can they be interpreted directly
with the aid of ethnographic information (Lyford 1943, Skinner 1921). Rather, interpretation must depend on the analysis of the visual forms themselves and the logic of stylization which this analysis reveals.

During the past several years I have begun to assemble and work with a sample of early Great Lakes material. I have been particularly interested in the ways in which the great cosmic spirits, the Thunderbird and the Underwater Panther are represented on bags, pouches, and other related objects. In the context of the present discussion of the Midewiwin such items may appear somewhat peripheral. Artistically embellished objects used by the shaman members of the society, such as drums, rattles, scrolls, and effigies, would seem to be the true Midewiwin art. Hoffman’s description of the importance attached to costume by late 19th-century Ojibwa Mide participants is, however, very clear. “The Ojibwa,” he writes:

vie with one another in the attempt to appear in the most costly and gaudy dress attainable....disregard of dress appears, to the Ojibwa, as a sacrilegious digression from the ancient usages, and it frequently excites severe comment. (1891:298)

Hoffman then enumerates the items of Mide costume and ornament, which include face painting, a cloth shirt, often ornamented with beadwork, and buckskin leggings with quilled or beaded borders. He describes as a necessary item beaded garters tied beneath the knee worked in traditional designs of “wavy or gently zigzag lines” and notes that “bags made of cloth, beautifully ornamented or entirely covered with beads, are worn, supported at the side by means of a broad baldric passing over the opposite shoulder.” (1891:298-299).

Such items of dress as those described by Hoffman are well known in North American museum collections. The shoulder bags, usually called bandolier bags, astonish by their richness and variety of design. In addition to their use in Midewiwin

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I am grateful for the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada under its Post-doctoral Fellowship and Research Grants programs. This support has allowed me to visit and study major museum collections in Europe and North America.
rituals they were often worn together with European dress on important occasions.² The designs of bags dating to the second half of the 19th century are composed of geometric or stylized floral motifs executed in loom-woven beadwork. Toward the end of the century more flamboyant floral designs appliqued on cloth became fashionable and ultimately replaced the earlier type. Garters, armbands, and sashes of various types displaying the wavy and zigzag lines mentioned by Hoffman as well as other motifs similar to those on bandolier bags also survive in considerable numbers.

Despite the emphasis given to these forms of dress in Mide ceremonies, however, the ethnographic literature tells us little of the meaning, if any, which these geometric and floral motifs may have had, and we are left with the impression that the complex designs were intended to enrich the ceremonies and honor the spirits in a general way. Yet, at the same time, it is clear that in other Midewiwin related art forms geometric designs were burdened with symbolic meaning. The schematic pictographs and abstract diagrams on scrolls, drums, and prescription sticks reminded the members of the powers with which they were in contact and the ways in which those powers could be activated. (cf. Dewdney 1975) Is it not, then, a legitimate question to ask whether the designs found on articles of costume might not also be meaningful? Densmore and Lyford both identify a common motif consisting of a chain of linked lozenges and diamonds as the otter tail motif, a name which is immediately suggestive of symbolic meaning because of the importance of the otter in Mide belief (Densmore 1929: Pl. 80, Lyford 1943:141). Densmore also illustrates a group of chevron, crescent, and star motifs and identifies them as dream symbols, but beyond these tantalizing clues few pattern names suggest possible symbolic meanings.

A more productive line of approach to the possible meanings of these geometric designs is, I believe, to begin with a group

² In late 19th-century photographs of individuals in studio settings and of groups of native people meeting with white officials the bandolier bag is by far the most prominent item of native dress worn with European suits.
of earlier pouches, bags, and items of costume whose quilled and woven designs frequently can be seen to be sources for the later woven beadwork. On a number of these early bags the two great cosmic spirits, the Thunderbird and the Underwater Panther, Missshipeshu, are depicted with great explicitness and beauty. Although there is a sizeable group of such objects scattered through museum collections I should like to concentrate my discussion initially on a group of six bags in the National Museum of Ireland. Five of these come from a collection made by a British army officer named Jasper Grant during the first decade of the 19th century (Phillips 1984). Grant was stationed for several years at Fort George, near Niagara-on-the-Lake, among Iroquois and Ojibwa bands and from 1806 to 1809 at Amherstburg, opposite Detroit. Amherstburg at that period was an important fur trade post and was at the center of British alliance-making with many different Indian allies. Groups of Ojibwa, Potawatomi, Munsee, Nanticoke, and Wyandot attended one council held at Amherstburg in 1808, for example, and there were also Shawnee, Winnebago, and Sauk and Fox in the vicinity (Horsman 1964:167).

This complex situation makes specific attribution of the items in Jasper Grant’s collection difficult. However, the crucial point for this argument is that we are examining a group of iconographic representations of cosmic spirits which were in use concurrently during the first decade of the 19th century just prior to intensive white settlement and accelerated disruptions of traditional religious systems. The objects were made, furthermore, by peoples who were and had been for some time in close contact with each other, so that a shared and widespread world-view can reasonably be assumed.

The bags to be discussed are of two different types. Three are oblong pouches of black-dyed deerskin, the lower third being divided into separate tabs. A number of such bags are known and have been variously attributed to the Ojibwa, Delaware, and other related peoples. All of these bags are beautifully embroidered with dyed porcupine quills and many display fully de-
scribed images of Thunderbirds on one side and, on the other, Underwater Panthers or abstract designs. It is a constant feature of these bags, however, that both front and back surfaces are ornamented.

Of the three examples under discussion the most explicit imagery is to be found on a bag on whose front is a Thunderbird holding a beaver-like animal with one talon (Fig. 1). Below the “X-ray” depiction of the heart, at the center of the hourglass-shaped body, is a spiral worked in yellow quills. The other side of this bag shows a large hourglass-shaped outline with an Underwater Panther at its base and a motif of concentric circles at the narrow point of the hourglass. The bag as a whole seems to contain a sort of map of the cosmos with the two opposed sides representing the upper and lower realms of the universe. As if to make this positioning even clearer, one side shows the Misshipeshu, or Panther, to inhabit the lower zone, beneath the sun-shaped spiral disk. That disk, too is placed directly opposite the spiral on the other side of the bag, which is located in the middle of the Thunderbird torso. The disks on the two sides of the pouch can perhaps be understood as cross-sectional views of the world axis connecting the two supreme beings of the under and upper realms through the space inside the pouch and its contents. We would thus be looking at a three-dimensional model of the spiritual universe—from on top and from underneath, spiralling down the connecting axis, and also in vertical cross-section on each of the bag faces.

Similar notions appear to be present in a second bag from the Grant Collection (Fig. 2). On one side of this bag is a Thunderbird with four small birds beneath it. On the bottom border is a row of dome shapes and pairs of opposed hooks. This motif, identified in Iroquois art with the dome of the cosmos pierced

3 This is the only example of the six bags discussed which is not from the Grant Collection, having come to the National Museum of Ireland from the Royal Dublin Society. It is so close in overall type as well as in specific details that it might even have been made by the same person or family as the Grant Collection pouch shown in Fig. 2.
by the top of the great world tree, appears consistently in Great Lakes art in connection with upper world spirits. Placed in a row below the Thunderbird representation, these motifs locate the sky manitos above the dome of the heavens. The other side of this bag has two opposed semi-circles which define a spatial zone reminiscent of the "hourglass" on our first bag.

The last of the three black bags is the most enigmatic. The center of one side is occupied by a large diamond, and two down-slanted lines are worked on the lower sections. The other side has a design of semi-circles very similar to that on the example discussed above. In isolation the elegant geometries of this pouch would seem perhaps to be merely decorative. Yet when compared with the careful cosmic mapping which appears to occur on the other two closely related examples, the inference that the abstract design, too, contains symbolic references to zones of cosmic power is difficult to avoid. Densmore's identification of similar geometric motifs including a chevron and a crescent as "dream symbols" indicates a source for abstract motifs such as these in visionary spiritual experiences (1929: Pl. 80). Indeed, the wearing of a pouch of this sort across the body probably had the same significance as the tattooing of spirit images on the skin which many of the early writers report to have been widely practiced in the early contact period (Bressani in Kinietz 1965:15). Skin decorations, these sources state, were also derived from dream experience.

A second group of early 19th-century bags in the Grant Collection, executed in the medium of twining (or finger-weaving), displays a similar alternation between figurative design and abstraction. There is also a parallel relationship of complementarity and differentiation between the two faces of the bag. Twined bags of this type were finger-woven on a warp of nettle stalk fiber or string, with motifs worked in buffalo wool, raveled blanket yarn, or other dyed fiber. They were used primarily as containers for medicine bundles. The weft was woven as a continuous band, and the designs were commonly changed halfway along so that the two sides of the finished bag displayed different patterns
The woven bags in the Grant Collection display a fascinating range of imagery. One example shows a Thunderbird on one side whose torso is depicted as an hourglass shape. On the other side is an Underwater Panther with a long prominent curled tail. On another of these bags a group of Thunderbirds occupies one side, adjacent to a bold, irregular, zigzag line representing lightning (Fig. 3). The reverse of this bag displays the lower half of a Panther, but the top half of the image dissolves into rows of castellated lines, a motif frequently found associated with the Misshipeshu. Other Misshipeshu depictions on quill-embroidered bags of the same period represent Underwater Panthers juxtaposed with wavy lines. These undulating lines, too, are often interlaced. The resultant forms suggest serpentine images which were, of course, closely associated with both Misshipeshu and with water. These wavy and castellated lines appear to be variant motifs which express the turbulence created by the Underwater Panther, just as zigzags express the chief manifestations of the powers of the sky spirits, lightning and thunder. Although the dissolving away of part of the Misshipeshu’s body into castellated lines seen on the woven bag in the Grant Collection is a relatively rare representation, it is analogous to a number of Thunderbird representations in which rows of zigzags dominate the upper portions of the image.

A woven third bag in the Grant Collection represents the powers emanating from the Underwater Panther in another manner (Fig. 4). While a family of eight long-tailed Panthers occupies one side of the bag, the other is covered with a bold set of concentric circles suggestive both of the whirlpools created by the Misshipeshu and of its coiled tail which stirs up the waters. Indeed, this bold image is the same motif, writ large, as the set of concentric circles placed above the Misshipeshu at the narrow neck of the hourglass outline on the first of the black bags we examined. (Fig. 1).

The iconography of this last woven bag, then, projects not only a descriptive image of the manito, but also an image of the
field of force generated by the great cosmic spirit. The two images, furthermore, appear to be inextricably linked; they are two faces on one bag, two expressions of one being. Other early art from the Great Lakes region displays similar features of iconography and overall design. A woven shoulder bag in Edinburgh (Royal Scottish Museum 184.26), for example, has on one side a Thunderbird and zigzag lightning motifs on the shoulder strap. On the other side of this bag a pattern of chevrons radiates out from crossed horizontal and vertical axes. The image is dynamic with energy. Like the op-art of the 1960's it provides no point of rest for the human eye, and, in fact, the central axis is not a static fixed design, but a center which is continually being relocated by the waves of movement flowing inward from the edges and outward from the middle. The Woodlands artist who created this design achieved a rare thing—a visual image which exists in time as well as in space.

The conclusion that this abstract geometric design is an image of spirit power emanating from the being depicted on the other face of the pouch seems to me inescapable. According to this argument, then, the iconography of other pouches of the period bearing similar abstract geometric designs may also be interpreted as symbolic rather than decorative. A quill-embroidered hide pouch in the Hunterian Museum (Hunterian Museum, Glasgow, E245), for example, bears a central hourglass image, radiating chevrons, and interlaced wavy lines on the two edges, motifs which would also seem to symbolize zones of cosmic energy. So, too, might we logically interpret a sizeable group of woven bags, sashes, and garters from the 18th and early 19th centuries which are ornamented with similar geometric beaded patterns. A representative pouch in the British Museum (British Museum +6993) has parallel zigzags on one side, interlaced wavy lines on the other, and alternating patterns of zigzags and wavy lines on the straps. Many other examples could be brought forward, but the previous discussion makes clear, I hope, that such design elements were the common vocabulary used to describe spirit power in Great Lakes art from the early contact period through
the first part of the 19th century.

If we now return to Hoffman's description of Mide costume toward the end of the 19th century, we find that it is precisely these patterns of wavy and zigzag lines which he singles out in describing the armbands and garters worn by participants. The continued life of these designs would seem to show that despite changes of technique and materials the motifs on ritual costumes still expressed symbolically the cosmic powers whose protection was reaffirmed in Mide ceremonial.

Symbolism in costume becomes still more meaningful when we turn to Hoffman's description of the bandolier bag. Like the weft of woven medicine bags, the strap of the beaded bandolier bag was a continuous band which was nearly always divided by the bead-worker at the mid-point into two distinct areas of pattern and color. On most examples both motif and color change, while on others the same motif continues in a different color combination in much the same way as ribbonwork of the period. Within the overall balance created by the partition of the design field into two equal halves, two distinct groups of geometric motifs—often the by now familiar wavy and zigzag lines and hourglasses—are contrasted to each other. This division of the design field is also, in conceptual terms, a front/back division since the bandolier was divided so that when worn one design appeared across the wearer's back and the other across his chest.

On the bag front a complex composition was woven, often structured spatially by a large central cross. While explicit depictions of Thunderbirds or human figures are sometimes incorporated, most examples display the same geometric motifs we have been discussing. The cross which dominates the design of most bandolier bag fronts is a motif conventionally used in the art of the Great Lakes region to symbolize centrality. It suggests the four winds which blow across the surface of the earth from the four cardinal directions and also signifies the transition between upper and underworlds. On some late 19th-century bandolier bags, then, there may well be a mapping of the cosmos and the spirit forces which energize it analogous to that suggested for the
earlier Great Lakes pouches and bags.

There are, however, many ambiguous examples of beadwork which do not reflect this neat cosmic mapping, as well as many loomed bags which display geometricized floral motifs. It may well be that a clear iconographic reading of all these motifs and their spatial coordinates is not possible. Furthermore, as we have mentioned, by about 1900 large curvilinear floral designs in appliqued beadwork had replaced these transitional loom-woven bag types. Yet even in the late floral bags the ancient geometric motifs survive intact in the fringes at the bottom of many examples. Is this a vestigial remnant of the old art tradition? Were the designs still sacred and meaningful to their owners? And why did the clear and explicit depictions of the spirits disappear before the Midewiwin and other traditional religious practices had really gone into decline? A possible hypothesis is that the threat to traditional religious institutions posed by intensified white presence and missionary activity during the 19th century caused an intentional masking of the visual imagery. Obscure symbolism and hidden meanings may be the marks of a religious system increasingly forced to go underground.

I doubt, however, that the whole explanation of these changes is to be found in such a theory. I have tried to demonstrate in this discussion that the expression of certain religious and spiritual concepts through abstract motifs was always an aspect of Great Lakes Indian art. We have examined, briefly, the diagramming of beliefs about the spatial organization of the cosmos, and the locating of force fields within this spatial model by means of geometric imagery. It has been noted, furthermore, that writers from the early contact period on record the relationship of artistic imagery to personal dream experience. Artistic expression in such a context must respond to two contradictory imperatives; visionary experience had to be given concrete visual form in order to retain the blessing of the guardian spirit, yet the vision had, at the same time, to be kept private lest its power be forfeited. Ambiguity of visual imagery was thus necessary and desirable. Ambiguous imagery, furthermore, could express the
ability of the spirits to transform their appearance which was a basic aspect of Great Lakes Indian belief. Iconographic conventions were at the same time a means of expressing this belief in transformation, and of resolving the visual ambiguity which resulted from this belief into an image which recorded a specific experience. In Great Lakes art of the 19th century, then, stylizations verging on the abstract became, it would seem, a way of expressing the concept of multiple levels of reality and also particular visionary perceptions of these realities.
Figure 1(A)

Figure 1(B)
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