



*Kleedinge Van Canada* [Costumes of Canada], ca. 1650  
CA ANC Peter Winkworth Collection P2001



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## Encounter

When Europeans arrived in the eastern part of Canada, the inhabitants belonged to three distinct linguistic groups. The Inuit (Eskimo) were nomadic hunters, who occupied the north shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence River and the Arctic region. Until the 19th century, they had only sporadic contact with white people. The Iroquoian population, which included the Huron-Wendat (Huron) and the Iroquois, were concentrated in the Great Lakes basin region. A semi-sedentary people, they farmed, fished and hunted. The Algonquian population, which included nations such as the Innu (Montagnais), Mi'kmaq, the Abenaki and the Algonquin, were distributed throughout the rest of the territory. The majority were nomadic and lived by hunting, fishing and gathering. The society was communal, and property was collective. Despite frequent trading, the various nations were often at war. From the start, the Aboriginal peoples of North America made themselves essential to the French as suppliers of pelts and furs, and played a key role in the economy of New France. They also took part in the conflicts between the French and English in North America. The arrival of the immigrants—with evangelization, attempts at cultural assimilation, technical progress and diseases brought from Europe—resulted in a profound upheaval in the way of life of the Aboriginal population. Because their culture was oral, it was through accounts written by missionaries and explorers, and the iconography they used to describe them, often not based in reality, that Aboriginal traditions and language were revealed.



Declaration to the admiralty of La Rochelle, made by David Lomeron and Samuel Georges, merchants, about the passengers on the ship *Renard-Noir* who embarked for Acadia, among them two "native savages," Quichetech and Nenougy, April 28, 1633  
FR AD17 B 5654

## Two Aboriginal Persons in France

From the time of the voyage of Christopher Columbus to America in 1492, European explorers brought back a few inhabitants from the places they had visited on their voyages. Living proof of these unexpected discoveries, the Aboriginal peoples of the New World appeared unusual to European observers. In the 16th century, Jacques Cartier did likewise with the Aboriginal inhabitants he encountered in the St. Lawrence Valley, as did Champlain and others after him. Across the expanses of its colonial territory, France wanted to make French subjects of these North American Aboriginal peoples, so indispensable were they to the exploration of the territory, to the fur trade and to the survival of newcomers. French policy therefore encouraged the avoidance of violence, and favoured diplomacy and exchange.



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## Languages of the Aboriginal Peoples

It was necessary for the French to learn the North American Aboriginal languages, in order to trade, explore the territory, forge alliances, resolve conflicts and, of course, spread the Gospel. Jesuit missionaries played a leading role in the codification and diffusion of the Aboriginal languages. By means of grammar, vocabulary and a writing system, they committed a number of languages to paper, including those of various nations from the large Algonquian linguistic family: the Mi'kmaq (the Gaspé peninsula and Acadia), the Illinois (the region southeast of the Great Lakes) and the Montagnais (the north shore of the St. Lawrence River, from the Saguenay to Labrador). In this way, Aboriginal expression in North America made the transition from oral to written form.



Montagnais dictionary by the Jesuit missionary  
Antoine Silvy, 1678  
CA ANC MG18-C10



## Iroquois Families

Politically, the Iroquois were divided into five nations. However, their social division consisted of nine clans, or families. Each nation was composed of individuals belonging to different clans, whose members claimed to be descended from a common ancestor. Each clan was represented by a totem, usually in the form of an animal that possessed particular qualities. For example, the wolf, which lives in packs and often explores its territory, symbolized the idea of family and curiosity.

Report on the nine Iroquois families, with totems, 1666  
FR CAOM COL C11A 2 fol. 263-269



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## Iroquois Gifts

Faced with an imminent and forceful attack by the French troops, a delegation representing three tribes from the Iroquois League of Five Nations went to Québec in December 1665 to negotiate peace with Alexandre de Prouville de Tracy, the King's Lieutenant-General in North America. Garakontié, Chief of the Onondaga, headed the delegation. As was the custom, the diplomatic talks between the First Nations peoples and the Europeans followed traditional Aboriginal protocol. The highly symbolic gifts presented by the Iroquois were part of the preliminary rituals they practiced before peace talks.



*Explication des onze presens faits par les Ambassadeurs Iroquois* [Explanation of the eleven gifts presented by the Iroquois Ambassadors], December 1, 1665  
FR CAOM COL F3 2 fol. 17-20



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## The Treaty of 1701

The Great Peace signed in 1701 by Louis-Hector de Callières, Governor General of New France, his Aboriginal allies and the Iroquois put an end to nearly a century of bloody conflict. Gathering together for the first time, representatives of some 40 nations came to Montréal from regions as far away as Acadia, with the Abenaki, who spoke an Algonquian language; from south of Lake Ontario, with the Goyogouin, who spoke an Iroquoian language; and from west of Lake Michigan, with the Puant, who spoke a Siouan language. The orators' speeches and chiefs' pictogram signatures sealed an agreement that brought peace to a vast territory.

Ratification of the treaty of 1701; account of the speeches of each party involved, totems and words, August-September 1701  
FR CAOM COL C11A 19 fol. 41-44



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## Letter from the Abenaki to the King

With the Treaty of Utrecht, signed in 1713, France ceded a large part of Acadia to England and, consequently, also the Abenaki lands on the French side. Already disturbed by the gradual incursion of New England colonists into their territory, the Abenaki tried to seek help from their "father," the King of France, in terms that conveyed the eloquence, poetry and metaphors so prevalent in Aboriginal discourse.

Letter from the Abenaki to the King of France, seeking his support against the English, who were trying to take over their lands, ca. 1715

FR CAOM COL C11A 1 fol. 266-267v°



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## A Huron Address

Near Fort Detroit, many Aboriginal tribes lived in the fragile peace of an uneasy alliance. After major conflicts which brought them into opposition with the Outaouais in 1738, the Huron wanted to leave Detroit, because they no longer felt safe there. Consequently, they asked the Governor, Charles de Beauharnois de La Boische, for land where they could live undisturbed. In keeping with the Aboriginal social tradition of referring to lineage or family, the Governor General of New France was named Onontio, "father protector and provider."

*Paroles des hurons du Détroit à Mr le Marquis de Beauharnois, Gouverneur général de la Nouvelle France, parlant à M. de Noyelle commandant au dit Poste*  
[Address made by the Huron of Detroit to Monsieur le Marquis de Beauharnois, Governor General of New France, speaking to Monsieur de Noyelle, Commander of the said Trading Post], ca. 1740  
FR CAOM COL C11A 74 fol. 72-76



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Account of a meeting with the Iroquois envoys at  
Château Saint-Louis, November 2, 1748  
FR CAOM COL C11A 92 fol. 172-175

## Iroquois Envoys

By ratifying the Treaty of 1701, or Great Peace of Montréal, the Iroquois agreed to remain neutral in conflicts between the French and English in America. This required endless diplomacy on their part, in order to stay on good terms with both sides. In 1748, the Governor General of New France, Michel Barrin de La Galissonière, assembled the Iroquois in Québec to have them reaffirm their intention of remaining at peace with the English and the French.



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## Journal of La Vérendrye

During their voyages, explorers encountered new Aboriginal nations. Pierre Gaultier de la Vérendrye went west to find out whether the river that flowed near the Mandan's territory (North Dakota) could be used to reach the "Western Sea." On the way, he met the Cree and the *Assiliboilles* [Assiniboine], allied nations whom he entreated not to deal with the English at Hudson Bay, and to remain loyal to the French fur traders. Once he arrived among the Mandan, a nation with whom the French had never had any contact, friendly relations were established.

Journal of an expedition in the West, by  
Pierre Gaultier de La Vérendrye, addressed to  
Charles de Beauharnois de la Boische,  
July 1738—May 1739  
CA ANC MG18-B12



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*Inhabitants of North America near Hudsons Bay with their manner of Killing Wild Fowl, ca. 1650*  
CA ANC Peter Winkworth Collection P293

## The Inuit

A term of contempt of Algonquian origin, the word Eskimo means "eater of raw meat." However, this nation referred to itself by the name Inuit, that is, "human being." At the time of New France, the Inuit occupied the northern region of present-day Quebec, from the shores of Hudson Bay to Labrador, as well as the northern reaches of the North Shore of the Gulf of the St. Lawrence River. Though they were widely dispersed over an immense territory, these great hunters of sea mammals were well adapted to the harsh conditions of their environment. The Inuit maintained their traditional way of life much longer than other Aboriginal peoples. Until the 19th century, they had only sporadic contact with the English of Hudson Bay, and the French who had settled farther to the south. The knowledge the French had of the Inuit—their customs and environment—was based as much on imagination as on reality.



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## The Birchbark Canoe

The French had to adapt to their new surroundings. They soon adopted a number of Aboriginal implements, such as snowshoes for walking in deep snow, the *traîne sauvage*, or sled, for carrying heavy loads across the snow, and the birchbark canoe, a light, easily handled craft, ideal for travelling the territory's many waterways. The Aboriginal inhabitants retained their expertise in canoe building, while the French gradually became highly skilled at handling these craft.



*Les sauvages vont s'établir à la Prairie de la Magdeleine avec les François* [The savages going to settle in the Prairie of the Magdeleine with the French], from the *Narration annuelle de la mission du Sault* [Saint-Louis]..., Père Claude Chauchetière, 1667-1686  
FR AD33 série H Jésuites fol. 8



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Report concerning the manitous, ca. 1720  
FR CAOM COL C11A 122 fol. 116-118

## Aboriginal Spirituality

Europeans discovered a rich and complex spirituality among the Aboriginal peoples, who believed in the existence of a supreme being. The Iroquois called this being "the one to whom all things belong;" the Outaouais referred to "the master spirit of life." Nearly all the Aboriginal peoples shared a belief in the flood, "a worldwide deluge in which all mankind died [except] one elder from each nation [who] was saved with his family and a few animals because he had the presence of mind to have a great canoe built." As soon as a boy could use a bow and arrow, he underwent an initiation rite meant to put him in contact with the *manitou* [spirit] that would guide and protect him all his life. Fasting played an important role in ritual practices; it induced dreams in which the spirit appeared in animal form.



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## Letter from a Nun

Through various writings sent from New France, including correspondence with families and friends, an image of the "savage" developed. It stirred the European imagination and appeared in their literature and art. Although evangelization was only partially successful in New France, the clergy was appreciative of Aboriginal culture. They often provided excellent accounts. Describing the way the Aboriginal people cared for their appearance, Mère Sainte-Hélène emphasized "that they take just as long in making themselves ready as do the most curious coquettes in getting dressed."

Letter to a friend, from Mère Marie-Andrée Regnard  
Duplessis de Sainte-Hélène, a nun from the Hôtel-Dieu in  
Québec, October 17, 1723  
FR CHAN T 62



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## The "Imaginary Indian"

From the 16th century, the naked "Indian" wearing a feather headdress appeared in European iconography. Artists could base their works on the several Aboriginal people brought back by the explorers to be shown as curiosities at court and for entertainment in shows. The image of Aboriginal peoples formed by Europeans was largely the conception of artists who had never been to America. The European attitude was divided between the image of a "noble savage," virtuous and pure, and that of a barbarian in need of civilizing.

*Le Grand Sacrifice des Canadiens à Quitchi-Manitou ou le Grand Esprit* [The Great Sacrifice of the Canadians to Quitchi-Manitou or the Great Spirit], engraving after Bernard Picart, 1723  
CA ANC Peter Winkworth Collection P2003



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