

CHRISTINA MORRIS: MICMAC ARTIST AND ARTIST'S MODEL

by Ruth Holmes Whitehead\*

A well-known citizen of nineteenth-century Halifax was the Micmac artist, Mâli Christianne Paul Mollise (anglicized to "Christina Morris"). She did exquisite work in all the traditional Micmac crafts, but she contributed to Nova Scotian art in another way as well: at least seven portraits of her, by various artists, have survived.

Christina, the daughter of Hobblewest Paul of Stewiacke, was born ca. 1804 either at Stewiacke or at the Indian Reserve near Ship Harbour, N.S. When still very young she married Tom Mollise, a Micmac whose family traditionally camped on McNab's Island in Halifax Harbour. Her husband died shortly thereafter and although she never remarried she later adopted and raised a son, Joe.<sup>1</sup> Not much is known of her early life except that she combined beauty with a reputation for virtue and piety, which could not have been easy for a Micmac woman living alone in the 1820s.

Christina would have known Joseph Howe, Commissioner of Indian Affairs and later Premier of Nova Scotia. Two mayors of Halifax were her personal friends, as was another Indian Commissioner, Col. William Chearnley. Christina was, unofficially, "quillworker to Her Majesty the Queen," having provided Victoria with examples of her work from time to time.<sup>2</sup> The City of Halifax even presented a portrait of her to the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII. After 1850 her history is surprisingly well-documented and it provides fascinating glimpses of Nova Scotia in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In 1854 she appears in the Provincial Exhibition Catalogue as "Christina Morris, residence Dartmouth, winner of the First

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Prize for best full-sized birchbark canoe and worked paddles."<sup>3</sup> She won second prize for a nest of six quilled boxes. Shortly afterward she moved to Chocolate Lake, on the Northwest Arm, Halifax. "At that lake she first camped on a grassy hill where an old powder magazine once was...later she had a little house, it was painted green and had shutters...."<sup>4</sup> Both land and cottage were said to be a gift from Queen Victoria:

She did beautiful porcupine quill work and once she sent a pair of moccasins ornamented with quill work as a gift to Queen Victoria. In return for this the Queen obtained for her a piece of land and built a little cottage thereon for her use...While living there, she, in her native costume and pointed cap, was well-known to the people of Halifax.<sup>5</sup>

She was well-known to Nova Scotian artists as well. One could take a picnic out to the Arm, perhaps buy some of her beautifully-made quillwork, and spend a few hours painting, with a picturesquely-garbed Indian model:

On Saturday last we were shown a full-length portrait, in Indian costume, of Mrs. Christy Ann Morris, of the Micmac tribe. It is painted in oil colours, and is the work of Mr. Gush, the talented London artist, who visited our city about a year ago. Ladies and gentlemen visiting Mrs. Morris at her romantically situated villa on the west bank of the Arm, are shown this picture as one of her household treasures. We understand that the Portrait can be seen at Wetmore's during the present week.<sup>6</sup>

A rival paper, the Halifax Evening Express, had this to say, "The Sun of this morning speaks in flattering terms of a likeness, painted by Mr. Gush, of that well-known squaw, Mrs. Christianne Morris...we do not agree with our contemporary as to the merits of the picture; in fact it is hard to recognize at all the feature of this good woman."<sup>7</sup> This sounds a trifle exaggerated. However, William Gush generalized her costume; perhaps he romanticized her face as well.



Fig. 1 (Photograph by Gauvin & Gentzel, courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum)

According to H. Piers, an early curator of the Nova Scotia Museum, there were two copies of this painting. One of these was the work presented to the Prince of Wales on his visit to Halifax in 1860.<sup>8</sup> The second became the property of Samuel R. Caldwell, Mayor of Halifax and a friend of the model. In 1918 Piers was able to examine this second copy, which had passed to Caldwell's nephew. It was an unsigned oil on canvas, 14.85 inches x 11.00 inches, with the back stretcher marked "Christina Morris". The model is seated on the ground, by what was assumed to be Chocolate Lake, the site of Mrs. Morris' "villa". The jacket was blue, trimmed with red; the skirt black with horizontal bands of red, yellow, black and white.<sup>9</sup> Piers had the painting photographed by Gauvin and Gentzel of Halifax; figure 1 is copied from this glass negative.

Piers added a postscript to his note on the Gush oil: "I think Mrs. Jas. T. Egan of Dutch Village, owns a miniature of Christina Morris by Valentine (?)."<sup>10</sup> About 1920 the ceramic artist Alice Egan Hagen<sup>11</sup> portrayed a Micmac woman on one of her bowls. Mrs. Hagen's daughter remembers that this painting was copied from a borrowed portrait labelled "Christy Ann" which the artist had obtained from her own mother, Mrs. T.J. Egan (the mother-in-law of Mrs. Jas. T. Egan). In 1931, when Mrs. T.J. Egan died, a cut-out watercolour of a Micmac woman's head and shoulders (fig. 2) was discovered inside the frame of a painting by William Valentine.<sup>12</sup> This portrait reads "Christy Ann" in faded brown ink on the reverse. Beneath is pencilled "By W. Valentine" in a later hand. It seems probable that this is the work referred to by Piers. It matches the painting on Mrs. Hagen's bowl.<sup>13</sup>

Recent research has provided circumstantial evidence to identify three other portraits of Christina Morris. A pastel (fig. 3) from the New Brunswick Museum is identified only as "Micmac Women/Unknown Mid-19th-Century Artist". This is a beautiful work and the artist has faithfully reproduced every detail of the costume with its intricate ribbon appliqué and





Fig. 2 (Photograph by Scott Robson, courtesy of Miss Margaret Chisholm)



Fig. 3 (Photograph by Stackhouse Studios, courtesy of the New Brunswick Museum, Webster Canadiana Collection 3975)



Fig. 4 (Photograph by J.S. Rogers, courtesy of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia)

beadwork. This detail is invaluable in that no two such costumes were ever the same. Micmac women of the elaborate-appliqué period can be accurately identified in contemporary photographs by the design on their clothing and sometimes appear in the same dress over a period of forty years.<sup>14</sup> With this in mind, look at the studio photograph (fig. 4) of the woman and boy. The costume details, particularly noticeable on the jacket edgings, are identical -- line for line. The women's faces are similar, allowing for a greater age at the time of the photograph. For these reasons it is reasonable to say that the woman in the photograph was, earlier, the model for the pastel.

The photograph was taken in Halifax by J.S. Rogers, ("The People's Gallery"), between 1863 and 1874,<sup>15</sup> years in which Christina Morris was well-known in Halifax, was winning Firsts in Provincial Exhibitions, and was accompanied everywhere by her young adopted son, Joe (the boy in the photo?). She was publicized as having posed for Gush, so perhaps it is not too far-fetched that the pastel's unknown artist and the photographer, wanting an Indian model, would have turned to her as well.<sup>16</sup>

In the collection of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia is a photo of a drawing of a Micmac woman (fig. 5) attributed to Rebecca Crane Starr (1917-1902) of Halifax. The model is seated on the ground holding a basket. The pose is similar to the Gush oil (fig. 1), the skirt has the same type of banding, and the strong face resembles that in the Rogers photo (fig. 4). Again, the place and time suggest Christina Morris. On one corner of the photo is a pencilled "Christy Ann?", added many years ago by the Assistant Provincial Archivist, Phyllis Blakeley. She thinks it likely that the identification came from some of the older Micmacs who visited the Archives from time to time.\*

Christina would certainly have caught an artist's eye. Her native costume was evidently such a walking advertisement

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\* Phyllis Blakeley, 1977: personal communication.





Fig. 5 (Photograph by Ron Merrick, courtesy of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia)



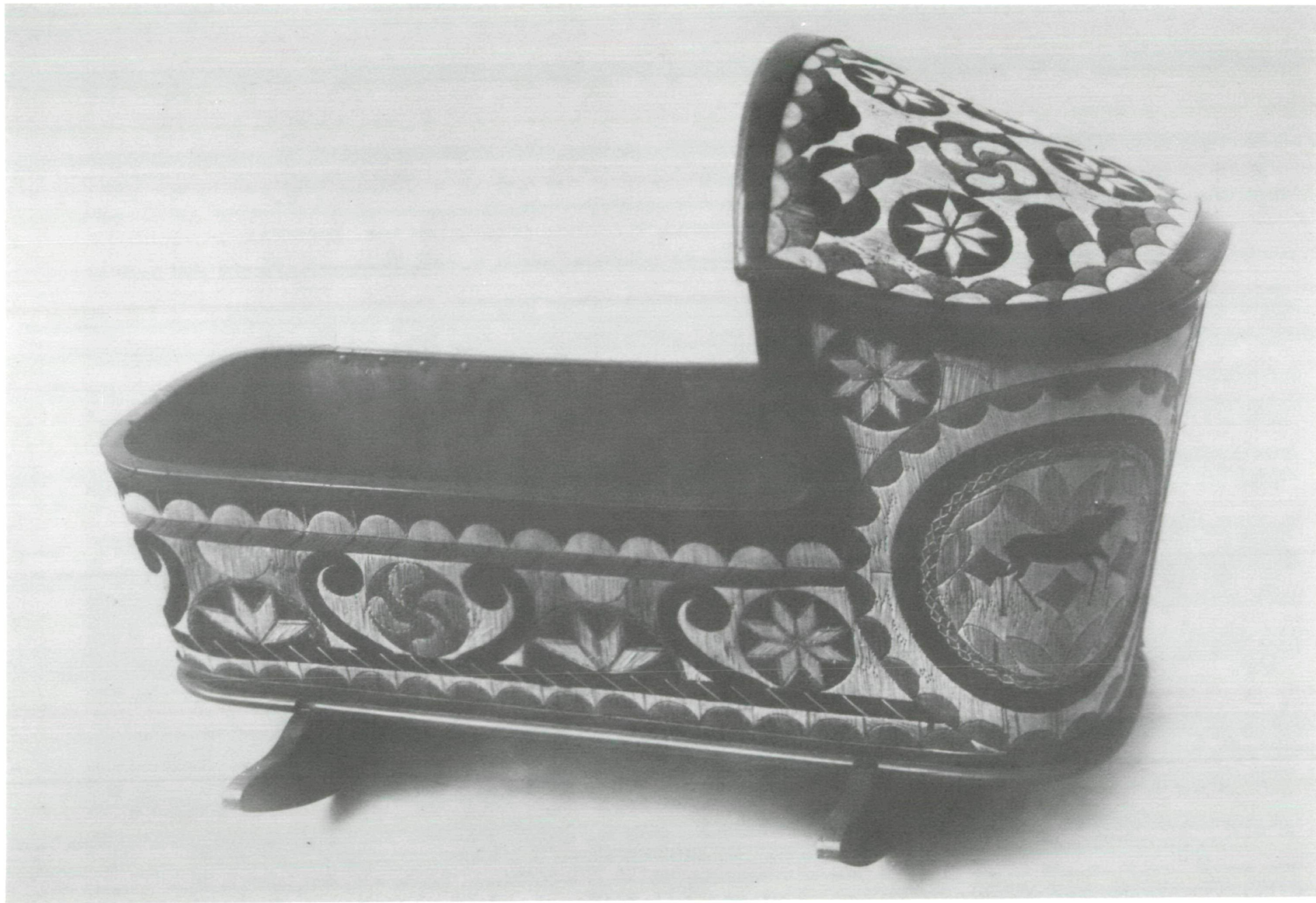


Fig. 6 Length 90 cm; height at highest point 70 cm. (Photograph by Gauvin & Gentzel, courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum)

for exotic needlework that Indian Commissioner Col. William Chearnley, who was interested in Indian art, commissioned her to make two complete Micmac women's outfits -- one for his collection, the other for his wife to wear to fancy-dress balls. For these he paid the then staggering sum of \$300;<sup>17</sup> they must have been magnificent. Another costume of Christina's making won First Prize in the Provincial Exhibition of 1854.<sup>18</sup>

Christina Morris was evidently an excellent artist in her own right. The Exhibition Catalogue for 1868 mentions her as "Christine Morris, residence North-west Arm; winner of the First Prize for best nest of six quilled boxes, best large and small (splint) baskets, and best covered clothes baskets."<sup>19</sup> The Nova Scotia Museum has a pair of her snowshoes, made during this period for Mayor Caldwell's brother William, who was also a Mayor of Halifax. Piers judged them to be a marvel of the snowshoe-weaver's art with six to seven thongs to the inch, "very finely done" in caribou rawhide.<sup>20</sup>

When a son was born to her friend Reuben Rhuland in 1868, Christina began making a cradle for the baby. This cradle (fig. 6), now in the DesBrisay Museum, is the only piece of her quillwork which survives; it shows her to have been a master quiller. When it was done she told Rhuland that its panels matched those she had once done as a gift for the infant Prince of Wales.<sup>21</sup> Mrs. Rhuland's brother, Alexander Strum, made the wooden frame and mounted Christina's panels. A Strum family story says the actual quilling took a year to complete;<sup>22</sup> Christina was assisted in this by her son Joe. In 1917 an elderly Micmac, Tom Labrador, told of seeing her at work:

Me know Mary Christiann Tom Murrays  
(Mollise) wife, has made cradle for old  
Queen Victoria, where King Edward was  
rocked in as Baby. As me was 50 years  
old me come from Labrador and stoped  
[sic] over night to Mary Jane Paul that  
time Frank Paul was Ingin chief over  
Micmac tribe, me seen old Mary make

Porcupine quill Cradle for Rubin (Reuben) Rhuland, this Rubin Rhuland and (Frank) Paul was allways Trout and Salmon fishing together.<sup>23</sup>

Rhuland sold the cradle to a John Doering a few years later. In 1917, when Doering wished to dispose of it to the Provincial Museum, he asked a Bridgewater lawyer, W.E. Marshall, to write to Piers for him:

Mr. Doering tells me that the Indian woman who made it or rather upholstered it was named Christina Morris and that years ago she was well-known as living near Halifax, at the Arm I think he said.<sup>24</sup>

Christina Morris was said to have died in 1886. Micmacs who still remembered her in 1917 told Piers she might have been living at Newport Station, Hants County, at the time of her death.<sup>25</sup> Piers, however, interviewed one of her neighbors, who said her death occurred at Chocolate Lake:

George Kline knew her very well, and he positively says that she died in her little house there. He thinks she was taken for burial to an Indian graveyard at Enfield or Shubenacadie.<sup>26</sup>

"She was a pious woman, of excellent character,"<sup>27</sup> writes Piers, summing up rather dryly. From the portraiture that survives her, she was also a beautiful and intriguing woman. She deserves a place among the Nova Scotia artists who painted her as an artist in her own right and a place in the history of Halifax as one of its more interesting nineteenth-century citizens.

#### NOTES

1. Harry Piers, Notes on Accession 4603, Nova Scotia Museum Accession Books, vol. 2, Nova Scotia Museum, Halifax, N.S.
2. Harry Piers, Notes on Micmac genealogies and biographical material, Printed Matter File, Nova Scotia Museum, Halifax, N.S.



3. Prize List, Nova Scotia Provincial Exhibition, 1854.  
(Halifax: James Bowes, 1855), pp.35-36.
4. Piers, Accession 4603.
5. Piers, Notes on Micmac genealogies.
6. Halifax Daily Sun, 4 July 1859.
7. Halifax Evening Express, 4 July 1859.
8. Piers, Accession 4603. A number of items presented to the Prince of Wales on this 1860 visit were placed in his private collection at Swiss Cottage, Osborne House, on the Isle of Wight. However, a visit in the summer of 1976 to what is now Swiss Cottage Museum failed to find this second oil of Christina Morris.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. For further information on Alice Egan Hagen see Marie Elwood, "The State Dinner Service of Canada, 1898" in this issue.
12. William Valentine (1798-1849) was an Englishman who worked as an artist and occasionally as a decorative house painter in Halifax from 1818 until his death.
13. The whereabouts of this particular bowl is presently unknown. A photograph of it appears in Kay Hill, "Nova Scotia's Pioneer Potter", The Atlantic Advocate 49, no. 12 (August 1959): 47.
14. The author studied Micmac costume details from over 350 photographs, covering the period 1861-1930; in no case were there found two alike. Identification based on costume was later confirmed by research or by interviews with surviving members of the particular family.
15. J.S. Rogers, photographer, appears in Halifax City Directories between the years 1863 and 1874; obviously the photo was done during this time.
16. Another carte-de-visite photograph of Christina Morris (?) -- the model is the same woman who appears in the Rogers photo and the pastel -- turned up after this article was written. The photographer was W.D. O'Donnell of Halifax (working 1863-1912), who entered a "near-life-size" photograph of "a squaw" in the Dublin International Exhibition of 1865. (See Report of the Secretary on the Dublin International Exhibition. [Halifax: A. Grant, 1866], p.17.) It was framed by Wetmore's, and coloured by a Mr. Chambers. I feel certain that he would have used the

same model for this portrait as appears on his smaller photograph, now in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia. Since Mr. Chambers used pastels to produce the colour portrait, perhaps one has a clue to the origins of the New Brunswick Museum's pastel.

17. Piers, Accession 4603.
18. Prize List, Nova Scotia Provincial Exhibition, 1854, pp.35-36.
19. Nova Scotia Provincial Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition Catalogue, 1868. (Halifax: James Bowes, 1869), p.35.
20. Piers, Notes on Accession 4591, Nova Scotia Museum Accession Books, vol. 2.
21. Piers, Notes on porcupine quill cradle, Printed Matter File.
22. Unsigned note found among the personal papers of the late W.T. Ritcey, a former Mayor of Bridgewater, N.S., and donor of Christina Morris' cradle to the Desbrisay Museum. The note gives family tradition about the cradle (Ritcey's wife was a Strum by birth). (Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. G.E.K. Feindel, Bridgewater, N.S.)
23. W.E. Marshall to Piers, 24 January 1916, Printed Matter File.
24. Ibid.
25. Piers, Accession 4603.
26. Piers, Notes on Micmac genealogies.
27. Piers, Accession 4603.