

PAINTED MIDDLE WOODLAND POTTERY FROM WHITEFISH ISLAND, SAULT STE. MARIE

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During the analysis of the Middle Woodland pottery from Whitefish Island, some interesting information came to light. Close examination of several hundred Middle Woodland rims has revealed a number of red painted sherds.

The red paint is an ochre pigment similar to that used at rock art sites. The sherds show deliberate painting and should not be confused with sherds accidentally stained by contact with ochre burials. Nodules of ochre have been found on Whitefish Island and many of the other sites producing painted pottery. These might have been used in the preparation of paint.

Fourteen vessels, or approximately 3% of those so far recovered have some red paint on their surface. In all but one case, the paint has been applied to the lip alone. Traces of paint on the interior or exterior surfaces of the sherds are unknown. A single exception has a faint spot of paint on its exterior.

Painted pottery seems something of a rare occurrence in Ontario. Sherds with a single vertical stripe of black paint or ox-blood colour finger-drawn lines have been recovered from Middle Ontario Iroquois, Glen Meyer sites in south-western Ontario (Wright 1966: 31 and 172, Plate VIII; D. Arthurs, personal communication).

More recently some red painted Point Peninsula sherds have been excavated from the Georgian Bay area of Lake Huron (O'Brien 1976: 66). There are some red painted body sherds from the Middle Woodland component of the LaCloche site, on the north shore of Lake Huron (Conway: forthcoming).

Red ochre painted sherds are found with some regularity on Laurel tradition sites along the north shore of Lake Superior and further to the west in the Rainy River district.

The Pays Plat site (DfIv-2), the Little Pic site (Delp-2), the McLaren site (DcJi-2) and the Rushing River site (DjKn-5) all produced sherds with a red ochre wash on their exterior surfaces (J.V. Wright 1967: G. Rajnovich, personal communication).

Painted sherds from the Long Sault site (DdIn-1) on the Rainy River have paint only on their interior surfaces. Some sherds have a red ochre wash which has been subsequently overlain by carbon encrustations (D. Arthurs, personal communication). This treatment is contrary to the norm for sites in northwestern Ontario where the lips and exteriors are predominantly painted. Red painted Terminal Woodland sherds have also been noticed from Long Sault site.

The Plum Point site, a Middle Woodland site on the Lower Rideau River, to the south of Ottawa, also produced a few red painted sherds (Wright 1967: 113).

The rareness of painted pottery may be more apparent than real. Those from Whitefish Island all have patchy and discontinuous areas of paint and it would be very easy to overlook them. Some only have flecks adhering to the small depressions of the lip surface, all other traces having been eroded away.

All but two of the painted vessels from Whitefish Island have banked stamp decoration on their exterior surfaces. The exceptions show pseudo scallop shell impressions. Two of the vessels have interior decoration, consisting of a single bank of oblique plain tool impressions. These proportions are similar to those found among the unpainted vessels. All the painted vessels have flattened lips but then so do approximately 95% of the unpainted vessels from the site. No clearly distinctive attributes separate the painted from the unpainted vessels. No stylistic trends have been observed whereby one could speculate whether an abraded rim had once been painted.

Apart from the few painted sherds from the Middle Ontario Iroquois sites, it seems as though pottery painting is a Middle Woodland phenomenon in Ontario. Painted Middle Woodland vessels are probably more common than the published literature would suggest, but the problems of abrasion and weathering reduce their preservation. Many may well have gone unnoticed in previous analyses. Obviously it is a trait of Middle Woodland ceramic technology to be considered.

It is tempting to suggest some particular function for painted pots. This may well be true although those from Whitefish Island display clear evidence of thorough use. All but one have carbon encrustations on their inner surfaces.

The illustrations in the article on page 28 show some of the rims from the Whitefish Island site that have painted lips. It must be reiterated that in every other way they are 'normal' Middle Woodland sherds for the Sault Ste. Marie area. In no way do they represent specific forms or decorative styles that are always painted.

Any other information anyone has concerning this aspect of ceramic studies would be most welcome.

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