



GABRIEL DUMONT INSTITUTE

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Colour Symbolism in the Métis Sash is a Modern Idea — by Karon Shmon, Gabriel Dumont Institute

The clothing item most associated with the Métis is the sash. Most cultures have some type of belt or sash, especially those that existed at a time when zippers, Velcro, and even buttons were not part of how clothing was fastened. The sash enabled the wearer to keep their clothing at their waist, to tighten layered clothing for warmth, and to support the carrying of heavy loads as either a tumpline or a lumbar support . . . and the sash looked good! The sash had many other uses and this is documented more thoroughly elsewhere as I want to focus on the sash colours in these few paragraphs.

Both the wampum belts used by some First Nations and the ceinture fléchée of the early French Canadians influenced what became an iconic piece of clothing for the Métis. During the fur trade, sashes were very popular and Métis women often made finger woven sashes to supplement the family income. Several factors influenced the colours used in the sashes. First and foremost would be what the most popular colour was at the time. In those days, red sashes were very popular. The next influence would be what was available for yarn and how much a weaver could afford to have on hand. Unless one was fairly wealthy, choosing colours on a whim or by personal preference was not an option for those looking to sell their sashes. At the time the Métis Nation was thriving, we did not have “dark times in our history” or times we wished to commemorate through red yarn symbolizing bloodshed. In the last 25 years, modern sash aficionados are ascribing symbolism to the sash colours. There has been a wide variety of meanings given to sash colours but they are not traditional because traditionally there was no meaning to the colours. If the Métis of Scottish and Irish ancestry had the means to have wool in the colours associated with their tartans, those colours sometimes showed up in the sashes woven by the women in these families. If wool of a different colour was used for making other items of clothing, such as sweaters, scarves, mitts and hats, this wool might also show up in a sash because it needed to be used up. Métis women wanted to invest their time and effort into making sashes that would sell. This resulted in a market driven approach dictating what colours of sashes to make. When time and the availability to create and experiment was available, weavers would create new patterns or sashes of unusual colour combinations, but whether they would sell or not was a bit risky.

Individual sash weavers are certainly able to say, in their own unique creation, that certain colours mean particular things. For example, in the last decade, pink sashes were made as a form of support for the women and families who have experienced breast cancer. Some sashes are made in school or flag colours. Other symbolism takes a route similar to that of the various coloured ribbons people wear although this can vary in a sash too because what a ribbon stands for, and what an individual weaver says a colour in a sash stands for, can be completely independent. I cannot say a weaver from days gone by hasn't said this colour symbolizes this, and another colour symbolizes that, but I feel confident those instances were rare and that there is no commonly known colour symbolism to the sash except that which seems to be gaining momentum in popular culture. To say this symbolism is traditional or long-standing creates a modern myth.

The bottom line is, anyone can proclaim what the colours in their sash stand for, but it is incorrect to say it has meant that for a long time or that it applies more universally to the Métis.