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PLAINS INDIAN BEAD AND BUCKSKIN

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North American Plains Indians
Hide Dressing and Bead Sewing Techniques

THE PLAINS INDIANS may be defined as the members of those tribes which ranged between the Rockies and the Missouri river from northern Texas to southern Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

KINDS OF SKINS USED. While the Indians utilized the skins of all animals killed by them, the following varieties provided most of the materials for their garments and other hide objects made by them: Buffalo, deer, elk, moose, antelope, beaver, bear, mountain lion, wolf, coyote, badger and ermine.

ARTICLES MADE FROM SKINS. The thick, heavy hides of buffalo, elk and deer were used to make tepees, women's dresses, saddles and saddle covers, and robes of soft dressed hide; war shields and moccasin soles of rawhide.

The medium weight hides were used for girls' dresses, men's shirts, knee and hip length leggings, quivers, rifle scabbards, pipe bags, capes and papoose carriers.

Hides of small animals were made into medicine, tobacco and other small pouches, bags and sheaths. Moccasins and dolls were made from remnants of every sort of skin. The skins of animal heads and paws were made into medicine bags.

METHOD OF SKIN DRESSING. The following method of skin dressing was almost universal among the Plains tribes. There were local variations in the ingredients of the braining mixture, the shape and materials of the tools, and the amount of labor expended. Skin dressing was performed by the women.

First the wet hide was staked out on the ground, hair side down, and the flesh, fat, coagulated blood and fragments of tissue scraped off with a toothed gouge or fleshing tool of bone or iron. Second, the hair was removed and the skin reduced to a uniform thickness by scraping, each side being worked over in turn with an adze-like tool. If rawhide was desired, nothing further was done to the hide. If soft, flexible skin was needed, a third step was taken. A mixture of brains and anyone or several of the following materials, cooked ground-up liver, fats and greases of various kinds, meat broth, and various vegetable products, was thoroughly rubbed into the hide. When well saturated with this compound, it was allowed to dry, then soaked in warm water and rolled up into a tight bundle. The final step was the stretching of the hide, as the braining process caused great shrinkage. The hide was alternately soaked in warm water and pulled with hands and feet, pulled down over a rounded post, or stretched by two persons if the hide was large. Friction caused by rapidly pulling through a small opening was also resorted to to give greater softness. The dressing process was complete when the hide was nearly its original size and thoroughly softened and smoothed.

Fur robes were dressed in the same manner, except, naturally, that the hair was not scraped off. War shields of unusual thickness and hardness were made of sections of raw buffalo hide by alternately soaking and drying them out over a slow, smoky fire, the heat causing them to shrink and thicken. When finished they were from one-quarter to one-half an inch in thickness.

METHODS OF TAILORING. The skins were cut without pattern or measurement to suit each individual requirement. In cutting every effort was made to prevent waste. Remnants were cut into moccasins, pouches, fringes, etc. These fringes were sewed on coats, shirts, dresses, moccasins and bags. Fringes were also cut directly on finished articles. Sewing was done with bone awls and sinew made from the tendons of the larger animals. Sometimes vegetable fibres were used. The awls were not threaded, having no eyes, but were used to punch holes and to poke the sinew through these holes. In recent times steel awls have replaced those of bone and thread is used in place of sinew.

PREPARATION OF SINEW. The tendon was removed from the body as intact as possible and thoroughly dried. When desired for use it was soaked till free from all natural glue. It was then gently pounded until the fibres were completely separated. Each fibre was twisted into a thread.

HIDE DECORATION. The majority of the articles so made from hides were decorated in some way by the Indians. Painting and embroidering with beads or porcupine quills were the commonest methods of applying decorations. The coming of the white man with his endless supply of manufactured beads gave an immense impetus to an art which the Indians had long practised to some extent with quills and beads of their own manufacture.

BEADS. China or glass beads are all of European origin. Venice has always been the chief source of beads and until comparatively recent times nearly all beads came from there. In fairly recent years they have also been imported from Czecho-Slovakia, France, Germany and Japan. The various kinds of native made beads are listed in the following paragraph. Bead embroidery began in the East about 1750 and in the West about 1800. Its main development has been since 1850.

The small, round, so-called seed beads used in most sewed bead work are made in three sizes from porcelain, glass, cut steel and silver and gilt glass. The last three types are very modern. Larger beads were used for necklaces, and to decorate fringe ends. Brass French trader beads of fairly large size were introduced by the Hudson Bay Company and universally used. Inch long tubular glass beads were extensively used for necklaces and for decorating dresses. Cylindrical bone beads, called pipe bones, ranged in length from one to four inches and were used in necklaces and breastplates. They were originally made from the small bones of the front legs of deer or from turkey legs, but in the last twenty-five years they have been made by machinery by the whites. Articles which are not properly beads but which are very similar in their manner of usage include dentalia shells, the teeth and claws of many wild animals, dried berries and fruit pits, colored and sometimes polished. In recent years buffalo, horse and cattle teeth, have supplanted those of elk, deer and wolf.

METHODS OF USING BEADS. Beads were worked into designs in two ways: by weaving on a small hand loom and by sewing directly

on to the dressed skin. The latter method is the one ordinarily employed by the Plains Indians. Two varieties of stitch are in common use: (1) Overlaid or spot stitch. The beads are threaded on a piece of sinew. This is sewn to the skin or cloth with a second piece of sinew, passing over the first string between every second or third bead. If the sewing is on skin the second string does not pass completely through the material, but runs just under the surface. On cloth the stitch goes entirely through. (2) Lazy stitch. The sinew is poked through a perforation just under the surface of the skin, but not through it, and the required number of beads is threaded on. The sinew is then passed under the surface by the last bead through a semi-circular perforation which leads it to the surface just above the first row of beads and facing the starting point of the sewing. This zig-zag course is repeated as often as is necessary, each row having the same number of beads. The overlaid stitch produces a smooth mosaic like surface with all the beads fastened down. The lazy stitch gives a pattern arranged in bands, made up of rows of beads sewed down only at the ends. In both cases no stitching appears on the under surface of the skin.

Compiled from the following sources by Jean Allard Jeancon and Frederic H. Douglas.

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