

# Native North American Seed Beading Techniques: Pt. II Sewn Items

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This is the second of two articles dealing with historical native American seed beading techniques and illustrated with artifacts from the Pioneer and Ethnic Collections of the Claremont University Center in Claremont, California. This section will deal with a category of beadwork that I have designated "sewn" beadwork — work which is done on a foundation other than the fibers that are holding the beads (see *The Bead Journal* 3 [2]: 42-51, 1977). As mentioned in the previous article, this foundation was originally animal hide, but with the advent of trade cloth and later the depletion of game herds, heavy cloth replaced hides for a number of the larger beaded pieces (such as saddle blankets, women's dresses, etc.). Today there are very few people doing the traditional hide tanning and even fewer making it commercially available. As a result, many modern pieces are done on chemically-tanned leather.

The same trend can be observed regarding the traditional sewing material — sinew. Sinew was gradually replaced by cotton and linen threads (and in a few places, horsehair). More recently, clear nylon thread has many modern beadworkers experimenting. This trend from sinew to commercial thread started later than the change from hide to cloth, but in modern (post-1920) beadwork it has more completely replaced its predecessors. (For more details, see Part I of this article in Vol. 3 No. 2 1977 of *The Bead Journal*).

Sewn beadwork falls into fewer categories than the woven work previously discussed. It is possible to divide it into two main divisions — lazy stitch and applique. As always, there are exceptions. They take such diverse forms as pipe stem wrapping and beads used in conjunction with basketry. The vast majority of museum holdings in this country contain more artifacts executed either in lazy stitch or applique (and their various derivations) than in any other techniques.

Lazy stitch can be readily identified by its more or less ridged appearance on the finished piece. Several beads are placed on the sewing thread at once (between 6 and 12 are common, depending on bead size). For the smoothest appearance, the thread is then drawn taut and the beads pushed tightly against the fabric where the thread emerges from the last stitch. The needle is then inserted into the hide or fabric as close as possible to the last bead threaded and work continues in this manner. The finished work will have more pronounced ridging if the needle is inserted into the foundation at a distance less than the length of strung beads, or if extremely long strands of them are used for

individual stitches. Lazy stitch can be accomplished using one thread or three. When three are employed, the first thread is the bead carrier, staying only on the surface of the work, while the second and third are sewn over the first in a "couching" stitch to hold it on the surface (see Fig. 1 for details). This second form most closely parallels quillwork.

When working with hide as a foundation, it is not necessary for the thread to pass completely through the hide. The threads can be sewn through the middle layers of the hide just below the surface, giving a very neat finished appearance on the inside of the piece as well as a sturdy stitch. When sewing on cloth, most native American work was lined after completion (usually with a cotton or linen cloth, occasionally satin) for aesthetic and functional reasons. The bead-holding threads did not wear out as soon when lined this way. Hide horse-blankets which received heavy wear were also lined in this manner when broadcloth became a readily available trade item.

Articles employing lazy stitch are most frequently found in the Plains and Great Basin areas, except for the "encrusting" stitch mentioned below. The illustrations demonstrate the great variety of appearances that this stitch can achieve.

Of the two pairs of moccasins in Fig. 2, one is from the mid-Atlantic seaboard in the Woodlands cultural area. It employs commercial thread to string the very short 4-bead lazy stitch. The checkerboard effect of the design is built up of paired, solid color stitches, giving an unusual instance of a lazy stitch geometric pattern, generally uncommon in the Woodlands area.

There is extensive use of the lazy stitch in the Sioux moccasins in Fig. 2. A fine example of Plains geometric design, the lazy stitch on these moccasins uses solid color as well as multi-colored stitches for the finer details, thus expanding the design capabilities of the stitch. Sinew is the sewing element in this case. In contrast, the Apache child's high top moccasins in Fig. 3 use the lazy stitch as a "banding" element. The designs of these narrow bands are made up of multicolored stitches. The starburst design on the calf is made up of longer, 8-bead strands, while the bands use only 4-bead strands. Cotton thread is used throughout in beading.

The Crow shirt in Fig. 4 uses both sinew and commercial thread. The large panels of multi-colored lazy stitching use sinew, while the antique brass sequins are sewn down with

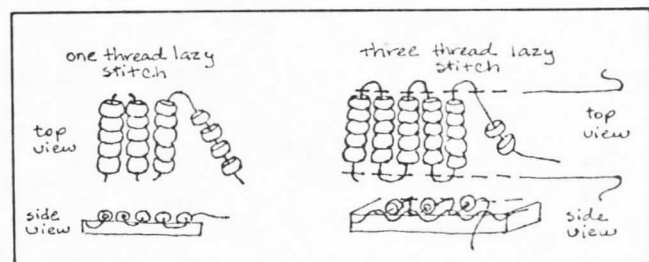


Fig. 1. The technique of lazy stitch employing single and triple threads.



Fig. 2. Delaware buckskin moccasins C. 1900 (#1537) and Sioux buckskin moccasins, showing their preference for beading the entire surface (#2066).



Fig. 3. Apache child's high top buckskin moccasins, Southwestern U.S. (#2073).

a three-bead loop on linen thread. The central chest panel contains stitches with up to 14 beads, as well as exhibiting an interesting curving row of lazy stitches framing the outside edge. The design on the back corresponds exactly with the front.

Another interesting example of the diverse forms that lazy stitch can produce is the modern style Sioux buckskin jacket in Fig. 5. This piece is a unique example of human and animal forms in beadwork. The stitches have been graded in length to achieve the naturalistic outlines of the figures. Except for a blue and white dappled horse on the upper back of the jacket, all the designs are made up of solid color stitches. All the beading is done with cotton thread as this is a rather late piece. A second example using the "graded" lazy stitch is the Sioux saddle blanket in Fig. 6. Stylized floral motifs of solid and multi-colored lazy stitch are bordered by 3 rows of the conventional, equal-length geometric forms in this lovely specimen. As in most saddleblankets, the back has been lined with cotton cloth though the beading is done with sinew.

The piece in Fig. 7 is also Sioux and employs the multi-colored lazy stitch to delineate diagonals; while the backgrounds are of solid color stitches.

An extremely specialized form of lazy stitch, known sometimes as an encrusting stitch, is found on many pieces from the Great Lakes-Woodlands cultural area (Fig. 8). This encrusting technique is executed predominantly in floral patterns with beads being raised as much as one-half inch above the cloth or hide surface (according to Orchard 1929:155 and 157, the Mohegans also used this technique on birchbark). The few research sources that deal with this sort of beadwork state that a paper pattern was attached to the foundation before work proceeded. Upon close examination of the pieces, remains of these patterns can usually be seen. If the design element were to be a leaf, the midrib would be the starting point. For other motifs, a central axis would be used to place the first stitch. More beads are strung on the thread than the length of the design on the surface of the piece. These are then caught down at the end point of the midrib leaving an arc of tightly strung beads. This process is continued, working from the center line outwards, often with decreasing numbers of beads to give a rounded effect. The finished design element is tightly covered with these arcs, which, once properly in place, will be packed together so tightly that they won't lay down flat.

This technique is most often found on small items known by traders as "whimsy" pieces, looking rather like small

woolen, satin, or velvet pincushions in various shapes. This stitch was also used to decorate small picture frames in the late 19th century. It was clearly used on tourist trade items and is found on many items in "pioneer" museums featuring household knick-knacks from the Victorian era. Claremont University Center possesses a unique, large specimen of encrusted work, the velvet blanket in Fig. 8. All of the specimens of this technique use the clear, grayish-white seed bead as the basis of the designs. As these pieces have all been Iroquois, it may be a characteristic of eastern Great Lakes work (though Lyford in *Iroquois Crafts* states that the Iroquois nations preferred opaque, colored beads). Artifacts pictured in a recent book by Vidler, *American Indian Antiquities: Art and Artifacts of the Northeast* support her conclusion, though recent work by Richard Conn of the Denver Art Museum opposes this view.

The saddleblanket in Fig. 8 is truly a tour de force of encrusted beadwork. Not only are the paper patterns discernable under the floral motifs, but the large areas of design on the body of the blanket are reinforced, to carry the weight of the beads, by some sort of stiff material between the velvet and its broadcloth backing.

The next large division of sewn beadwork is applique stitch, sometimes known as "overlaid" or "spot" stitch. A stitch more deserving the name "spot" is described later as a variation of this technique. Applique enjoyed special popularity among the Woodlands area tribes. Their floral patterned beadwork was best expressed with this stitch. It was by no means limited to this area, though, and has been practiced on the Northwest Coast by the Tlingit, on the northern Plains and in the Great Basin areas by the Blackfeet, Sarsi, Plains Cree, Flathead, Crow, Shoshoni, Assiniboin, Sioux, Nez Perce, Gros Ventre, etc., and by Southeastern tribes such as the Caddo (now situated in Oklahoma) and the Hopi in the Southwest.

Lyford's verbal description of the process is very concise and I will quote it at length:

"The technique of this stitch is substantially the same as that of quill work, i.e. a thread of sinew strung with a few beads is attached to the buckskin by another sinew thread sewed across it, just as formerly a thread was sewed across a quill. Two threads are used, which we call the bead thread and the sewing thread. The end of the bead thread is attached to the buckskin, then the thread is strung with one, two, or possibly more beads and laid along the buckskin as the pattern demands . . . Then the sewing thread is stitched at right angles and into the buckskin where it is carried along . . . until a few more beads have been strung on the bead thread and the sewing thread emerges and is stitched across it. The beads, closely pushed together, conceal both threads entirely. The number of beads strung on the bead thread before it is stitched down depends on the fineness of the work and whether it has sharp curves." (Lyford 1940:61)

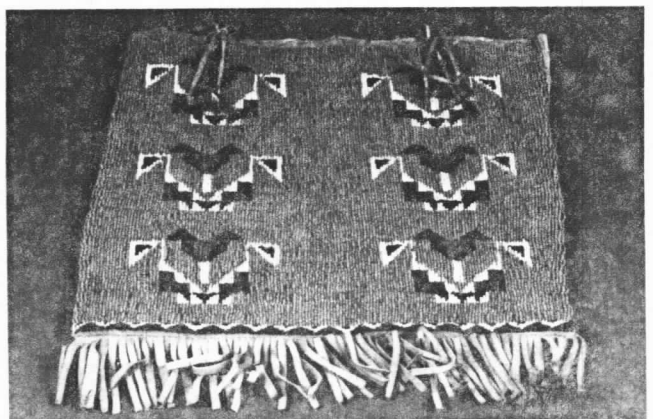


Fig. 7. Sioux buckskin utility bag beaded on one side only with lazy stitch (#2162).

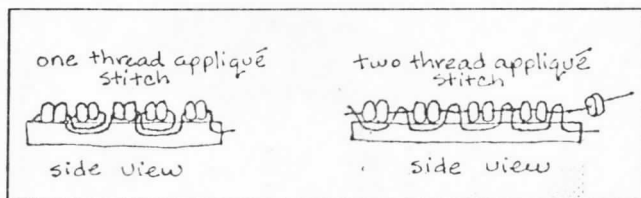


Fig. 9. The techniques of one and two thread applique stitch.

The most common number of beads used between "couching" stitches is two. The same general appearance can be achieved using only one thread and needle, again sewing on two beads at a time. This stitch is similar to the "back" stitch of European embroidery, and is more modern in usage than the two-thread method which was similar to quillwork (Fig. 9).

Fig. 10 shows an over-all application of this stitch on a bandolier made by an Ojibwa woman circa 1900. While the floral motifs in the center of the piece are in applique beading following the outlines of the individual figures, the background has been filled in afterwards with straight lines of the same stitch. The tassels at the bottom of the piece have been woven. Fig. 11 shows two more pieces, men's dance "aprons" circa 1900 from the same tribe. Again, they are a spectacular covering of the total area with beads, an extremely time-consuming task. The designs were greatly influenced by European folk art motifs of the time.

The man's shirt in Fig. 12 displays another form of floral

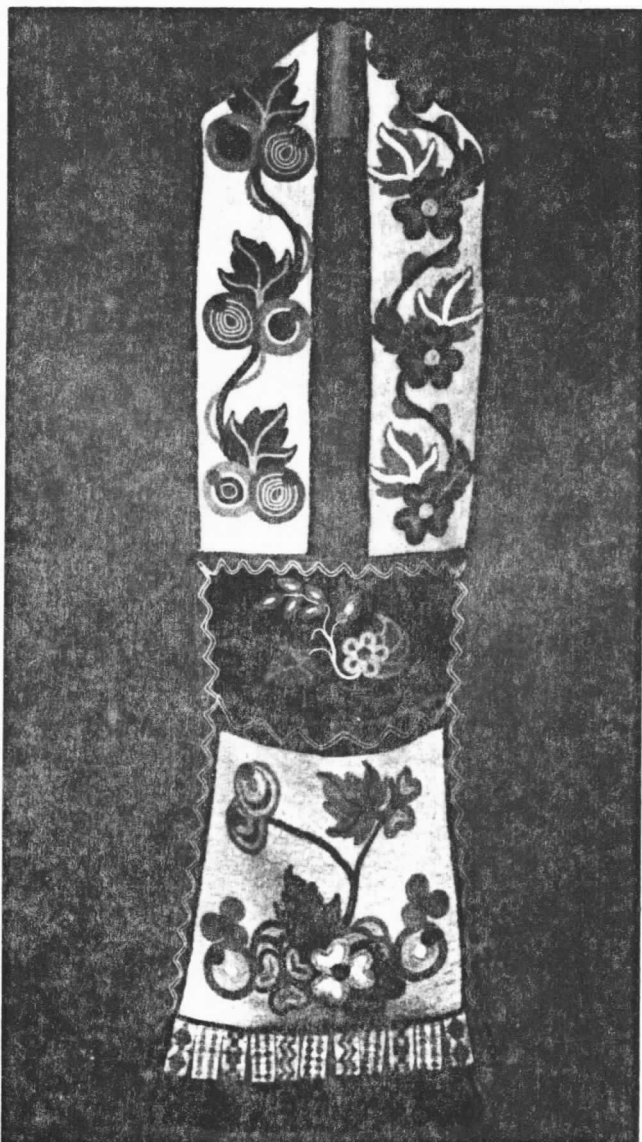


Fig. 10. Ojibwa (Chippewa) bandolier bag worked with commercial thread on wool and velvet (#2127).

applique. The design motifs are not filled with solid beadwork but with sequins, beaded V-shapes, "ladders," and lines resembling veins on leaves. There is no background work. The original museum catalog lists this shirt as Ojibwa, though recent research implies a possible Northwest Coast origin, specifically Tlingit (see Conn in Koeninger & Mack, 1979:81). This is typical for large pieces.

Moving west from this area onto the plains, we see an example of geometric applique on the Plains Cree woman's leggings in Fig. 13. All the stitching here has been done in straight, parallel lines running from top to bottom of the pieces, the design elements being slowly built up row upon row. A separate cloth panel actually holds the beadwork while a buckskin edging for the upper calf has been seamed on at the top and the edges of the beaded panel have been trimmed with red bayeta wool.

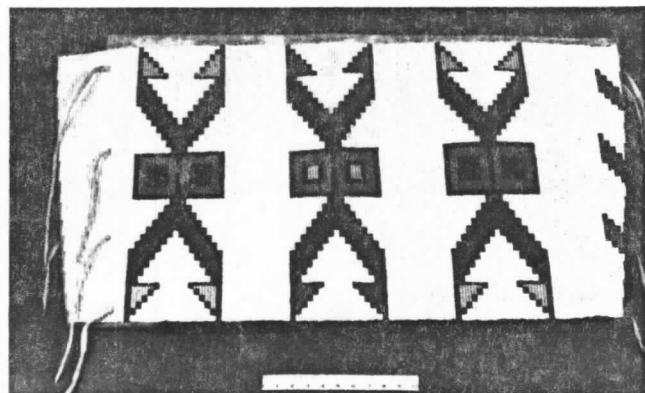


Fig. 13. Northern Plains (possibly Cree) women's leggings, applique stitch on cloth with cotton thread and buckskin trim (#2019).

Moving south, we see floral applique being used in the Southwest (Fig. 14), in an area more known for its weaving, pottery and basketry than beadwork. Only the X-shapes on the pockets of this buckskin vest are of lazy stitch; the remainder of the work is applique.

There are two rather specialized aspects of applique that demand attention. The first aspect has been named alternately "beavertail" and "ottertail" stitch. Lyford (1943: 144) states that Ojibwa women have described the patterns as representing "the track left by an otter when it crossed the ice in Spring" (Fig. 15). This pattern and its several variations seem to have been quite popular with many of the tribes of the Algonquin linguistic group in the Woodlands areas. The design is said to have precursors in older Woodlands quillwork, and is done most often in the two thread applique stitch. Although this stitch is usually employed in



Fig. 14. Southwestern man's buckskin vest of floral applique (#5321).



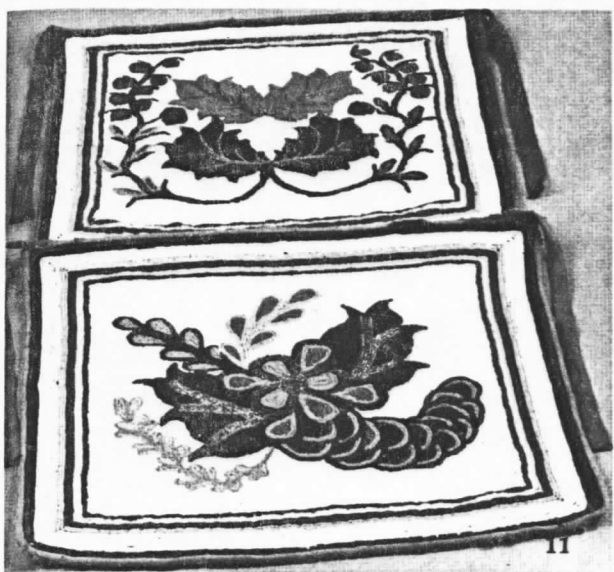
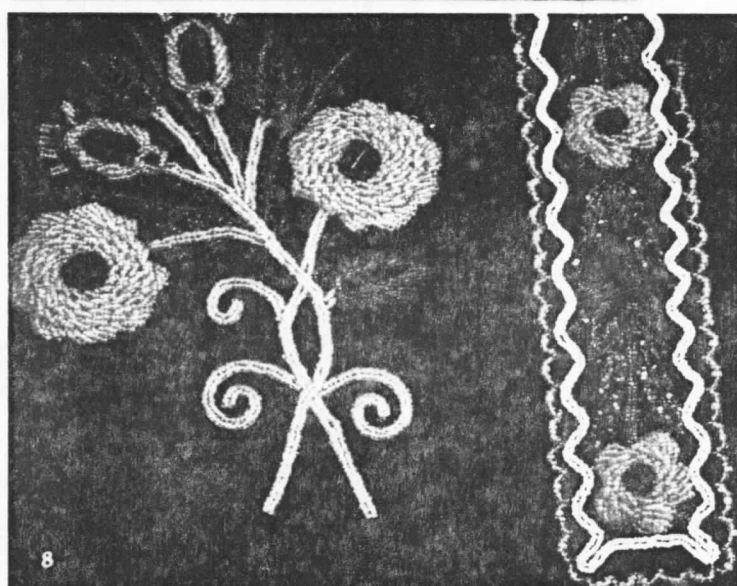
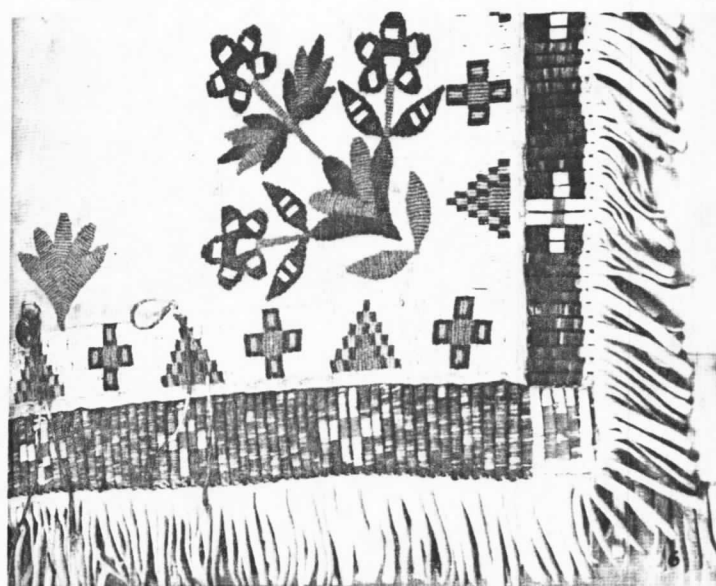


Fig. 4. Old-style Crow man's shirt of buckskin (#2003). © Time-Life Books, Encyclopedia of Collectibles, reproduced by permission of Tree Communications. Photo: S. Maus.

Fig. 5. Sioux man's buckskin jacket after 1900 (#5339).

Fig. 6. Lazy stitch Sioux buckskin saddle-blanket with quillwork border

Fig. 8. Iroquois velvet and broadcloth saddle-blanket C. 1910 (#2116).

Fig. 11. Two Ojibwa men's dance aprons with commercial thread on broadcloth backgrounds (#2227, #2228).

Fig. 12. Great Lakes, possibly Ojibwa, man's velvet shirt with floral applique C. 1910 (#2022).

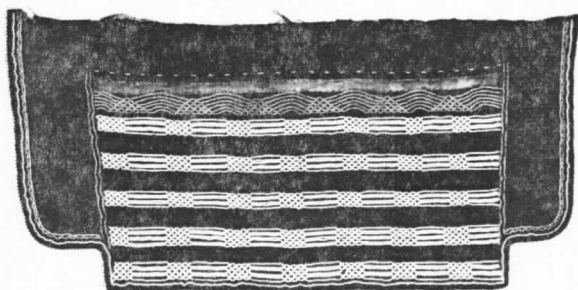


Fig. 15. Woodlands (possibly Ojibwa) women's leggings of ottertail stitch on wool (#2020). Photo: Steven & Barbara Schenck, Claremont, CA.

borders, two variations of the stitch are used in an over-all design on the leggings in Fig. 15.

The ottertail as a border stitch is of a similar category as the 1, 2, or 3-bead "spot" stitch mentioned above. This stitch, I feel, is more deserving of the name "spot" than the regular applique stitch, as its appearance is that of several spots or clumps of beads spaced along the edge of a piece. Note its appearance on borders of several items already mentioned (Figs. 2, 12, 15). The Claremont collection also contains an Ojibwa piece (not illustrated here) that uses this spot stitch as an entire background on a small floral applique pouch. The tight appearance of the spot stitch has caused me to place it in the Applique category, though its short length (barely long enough to take one couching) could also place it in the lazy stitch category.

The second specialized form of applique is commonly known as the rosette technique. Many modern necklaces and hair ties are made in this manner. Before 1900, decorations for blanket-robos and tipis employed this form. It was worked in porcupine quills before the introduction of trade beads. The rosette (referring more to the finished shape than to the stitch) is a design executed in the round by consecutive rings of beadwork or less commonly by an increasing spiral. The largest percentage of artifacts in this technique came from the Plains areas and to a lesser extent from the Southeast (mainly Caddo, who were removed in the 19th century to Oklahoma). Most older examples incorporated simple geometric designs (steps, frets, diamonds, triangles, straight lines, etc.) with true circles occurring usually in the beginning or central part of the work. Recent work has expanded this to stylized floral and animal motifs (such as turtles, eagles, thunderbirds, and flowers) through a unique use of the curved lines of the beading stitch.

Because the rosette is built from the center out of increasingly larger rounds of beads, it presents the unique design problem of an ever-expanding surface for the artist, not unlike three dimensional basketry work (see Figs. 16, 17). Though rosettes were probably executed in the past with a two-thread stitch, most modern beadworkers use one thread and the back stitch mentioned above. To keep the piece flat, pieces of brown paper sacking are held to the back and stitched right to the leather or fabric. Consecutive rows are sometimes anchored to previous rows for greater strength and tightness by running the thread under the top stitching of the inner row, up, over, and back to the outer before completing one backstitch. In the past, many large rosettes were also executed with the lazy stitch, the consecutive rows being made up of outward facing strands of beads (see Fig. 17). The modern equivalent of this uses long, cylindrical bugle or shot beads in place of the long string of beads in the lazy stitch.

This brings us to the miscellaneous group which comprises "wrapping" and beads woven into baskets. Bead wrapping was most often employed on narrow, cylindrical or conical objects such as riding quirts, hat bands, awl cases, pipe stems, fan handles, etc. Whereas peyote stitch (See Part

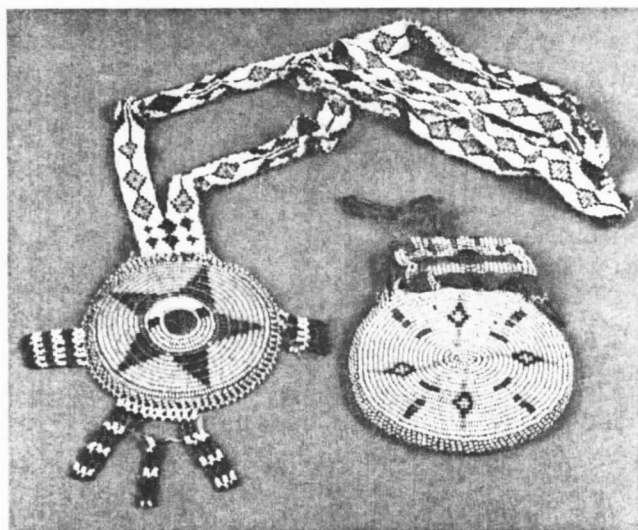


Fig. 16. Two examples of rosettes — on the right a Crow spiral rosette pouch, on the left (#2166), Sioux circular rosette necklace with woven neck strand and remains of netted fringe (#2187).



Fig. 17. Three Sioux blanket strips of lazy stitch rosettes spaced with rows of regular lazy stitch (#2175, #2172, #2174). Photo: Steven & Barbara Schenck, Claremont, CA.

I of this article in Vol. 3 No. 2 1977 of *The Bead Journal*) has largely replaced this technique in modern work, wrapping was used extensively in the past. Wrapping uses two threads: one, a long strand holding the beads and wrapped tightly around the object to be covered and a second strand which catches the first down, usually at long intervals, to the hide or cloth foundation (Fig. 18). As with the previous techniques, this can also be done with one thread by using the back stitch through the core (usually hide) at intervals to catch down the wrapping. The use of sinew to wrap pieces has the advantage that sinew shrinks as it dries, pulling the work tighter around the core (Fig. 18). The use of modern thread makes it difficult to duplicate this tight, durable wrap.

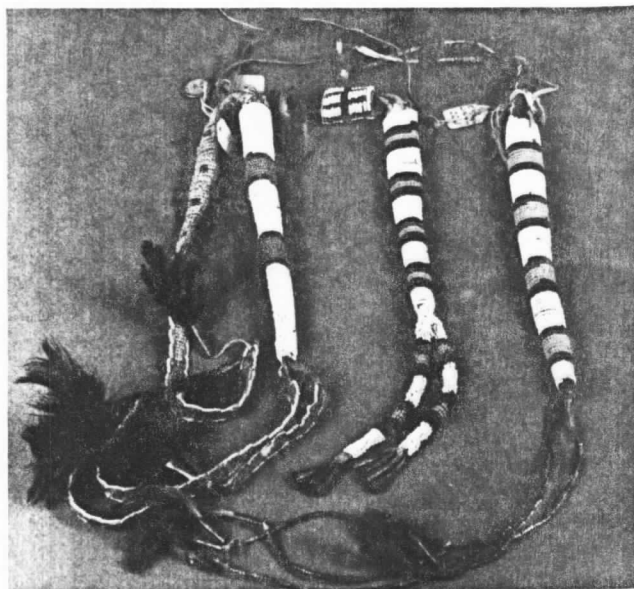


Fig. 18. Four Sioux awl cases, all sinew wrapped (#5184, #2220, #2221, #2222).

Weaving beads into baskets was done most extensively in the California area, though it extended through the Northwest Coast region into Alaska, south into the Southwestern U.S., even to modern Seminole work in Florida. Most baskets decorated with beads used large shell beads, tin cones, etc. However, many of the smaller, dainty "treasure" baskets and exhibition pieces used seed beads. The seed beads were usually woven into the basket as work progressed on a separate thread or fine fiber, which gave the appearance of later embroidery. Among the Paiute and their close neighbors in the Great Basin area and California, however, a peyote stitch outer shell of beads would completely enclose a previously woven basket. There are isolated cases among the northeastern California/southern Oregon tribes of an outer casing around the basket of a not-tension square weave technique using single warps and double thread and needle wefts.

A recurrent theme in many early source materials dealing with native American beadwork is the theory that the techniques mentioned above and in the first part of this article are European creations. This assumes that these techniques were simultaneously introduced with the glass seed beads brought by European traders and settlers. This view ignores the ingenuity of the native peoples of this continent. With few exceptions, these techniques were developed in Pre-Columbian times with native materials and were merely modified to accommodate the new materials available with the advent of European trade. To give but a few examples: one of the techniques of square weave used in Pre-Columbian times can be seen in the so-called wampum belts of the Iroquois league. The famed "Powhatan's robe" (housed in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England) is an early example of sewn applique beadwork using sinew and ground shell beads on hide. A few pre-Columbian burials in the Southwestern U.S. have yielded netted shell beadwork (usually in the form of bracelets). Fringes of native materials such as abalone shell beads, mescal beans, olivella shells and several other kinds of seeds, shells, bone, etc., were used in the pre-Columbian era. Many seed beading techniques such as wrapping, applique, lazy stitch, braiding, etc. had earlier porcupine quillwork counterparts.

Archaeological preservation of many of these native beading forms, however, has not been complete with respect to the vegetal and animal fibers and/or foundations that accompanied the more durable bead types. Often we are left only with the beads and small indication of their original arrangement, let alone technique of weaving or sewing.

Of course this does not negate the important role of intercultural contact between Europeans and native Americans. The introduction of the glass trade bead, especially the seed and pony beads, broadened the horizons of the native worker immensely. Design ideas, not from European beadwork, which was scanty until Victorian times, but from printed, woven and embroidered textiles also expanded the range of motifs. New designs and materials intrigued and stimulated the crafting and artistic imagination of native workers.

The fineness and patience of execution of many pieces of native American beadwork should include this media in the rank of the fine arts. Because the native motives, standards, and inspirations for this art form have never been clearly understood by other cultures, it often is not recognized as the truly great asset to world art that it is. In the past, viewers from a European culture mistakenly assumed that native artists desired to express themselves in exactly the same manner as Europeans, that is, in a naturalistic, pictorial form complete with perspective, etc. They attributed the often abstract, symbolic, and stylized art forms to "primitive," "child-like," and "savage" minds struggling to grasp the so-called "civilized," "intellectual" modes, also so-called, of the "higher" (in this case, European) cultures. Of course,

with this attitude as a measuring stick all tribal art, whether from Africa, the Americas or the Pacific fell short.

This view of the definition of "Art" has only given way to a more tolerant one in the latest years of this century. Only in the last couple of years has this attitude begun to wither as more enlightened and enlightening exhibits of ethnic artifacts have appeared.

Viewers of ethnic art from outside the cultural context of the object being viewed are learning not to assign their own cultural values of good, bad, beautiful or ugly to the artifact. Such judgments have little meaning in the broader context of world art taken as a whole; or even in the smaller context of what constitutes (or constituted) "good" in the culture of the maker.

The patience, skill and effort expended by native American beadworkers is truly admirable. There are many levels at which the non-Indian observer can appreciate this art: its harmony of design, interplay of color, even the form of the object. I hope that these articles have introduced the reader to yet another level of appreciation, that of technique.

Special thanks to Kay Koeninger Warren and the Claremont University Center for the use of artifacts from the Pioneer and Ethnic Collections.

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Fig. 5. Sioux man's buckskin jacket after 1900 (#5339).

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