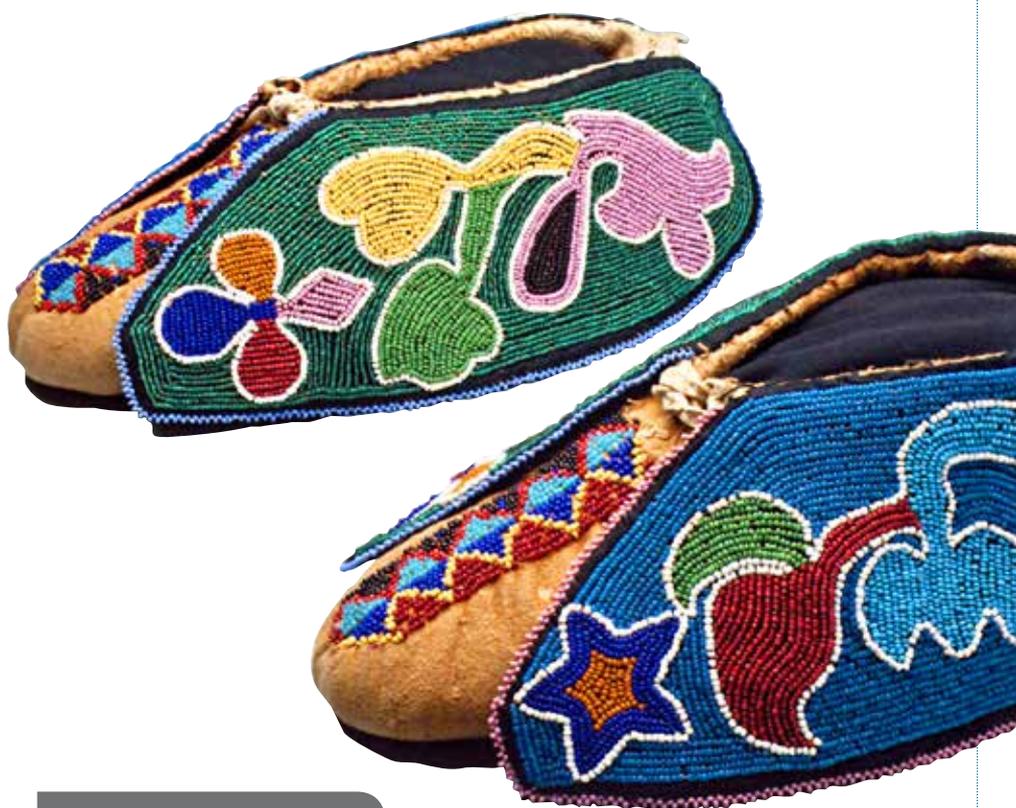


CURATOR: MICHAEL H. LOGAN

BRIGHTLY BEADED

North American Indian Glass Beadwork



THE UNIVERSITY of TENNESSEE 

McCLUNG
MUSEUM *of*
Natural History
and Culture

JANUARY 18 — JUNE 1, 2014

Of the many things American Indians acquired through trade with whites, few items held greater value than glass beads. While this exhibit contains a small sample of prehistoric and historic beads recovered archaeologically from sites in Tennessee, most of the objects represent a small, regionally restricted sampling of art created with glass beads acquired through trade, dating to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The objects, many of which are being displayed publicly for the first time, demonstrate the beauty, techniques, and cultural significance of Native American glass beadwork.

The glass beads so skillfully utilized by native artists were produced by the millions in glass-blowing factories in Italy, France, and Czechoslovakia. Among white traders, these hollow sections of glass represented little more than cheap trinkets, but among native peoples the brightly beaded trade items were in great demand. Female artists throughout much of native North America quickly mastered the craft of bead working, a skill passed down through the generations from mother to daughter, and one widely seen today among Indian women and many men.

The value attributed to glass beads among American Indians arose for three reasons. First, they were colorful and extremely durable, qualities not matched in the natural materials used in the applied arts. Second, these trade goods also freed artisans from the labor-intensive practice of making beads from bone, shell, and other natural materials. Lastly, beadwork became an important symbol of individual status and ethnic identity.

BEADS AND TRADE IN NORTH AMERICA

The lively commerce between Indians and whites during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was largely based on the trade of animal furs and skins. Native men hunted and trapped, and women in their families processed and tanned the skins, which were then taken to trading posts to exchange for beads and other goods that the Indians wanted. During the early 1800s, glass “pony” beads, thus labeled because they were transported on pack animals, were available only in limited quantities throughout much of central and western North America. Due to their scarcity, items embellished with these beads imparted high status for those fortunate enough to have acquired them



Pipe bag, Cheyenne. L. 28 inches, lane stitch, private collection

through trade. The pipe bag shown here is typical of the pony bead period. Only a few colors were introduced, most commonly white and dark blue, and the amount of beadwork was minimal. With each new decade, however, the supply of glass beads increased greatly, and large quantities of small “seed” beads became readily available after 1850. Beadwork became the dominant form of applied ethnic art among American Indians. This was especially true for tribes residing in the Plains and western Great Lakes, although other groups in the eastern Woodlands, Canadian Sub-arctic, and Plateau culture areas also embraced this art form.



Stone-headed club, Lakota. L. 18 inches, wrapped, private collection

BEADWORK TECHNIQUES

Native women employed various techniques to apply glass beads to items they wished to embellish. For example, if decorating a tubular object, such as the handle on a stone-headed club, the artist would simply string several dozen beads on a single running thread, which was then wrapped tightly around the circular base of the handle.

Lane-stitch was the primary technique throughout most of the Plains, where it was often used to apply beadwork to large areas with relative ease. A stitch was created in the leather, and several beads were strung to cover the desired width. Then, a second stitch was taken to secure the row. In this way, “lanes” of beadwork eventually covered the surface.

Tribes in the east favored appliqué, or “spot-stitch” technique. This was the method of choice when creating curvilinear motifs, usually floral compositions. Using a cloth base, the artist would string a limited number of beads and place them along a small section of the design. These beads were then secured by using a second needle and thread to cross over the first running thread at an interval of three to four beads, and then pulled snugly to the cloth surface. Tribes in the Great Lakes region regularly employed the appliqué technique to decorate clothing, moccasins, and many bandolier bags.

Looms were also used to fashion strips of beaded art, including belts, garters, and some bandolier bags. Nowhere else was loom beadwork more commonly seen than the Great Lakes region. The artist would string numerous long warp threads (the vertical threads supporting the beadwork) to each end of a loom. The number of

Woman's bonnet, Cree. L. 20 inches, appliqué, private collection



Man's dress
apron, Ojibwa.
Panel W. 20
inches, appliqué,
McClung Museum



warp threads would determine the width of the finished product. Then, using a single weft (horizontal) thread, she would string the exact number of beads needed (one fewer than the number of warp threads), and this running thread would be passed under the warp threads and pulled tight. Each bead would be pushed upward between two warp threads. The artist would then pass the running thread through each bead, but on top of the warp threads. This process would be repeated until the desired length of beadwork had been completed. Designs were created by simply counting out the precise number and color of beads required by the composition created by the artist.

Man's belt/sash, Ojibwa. Beaded L.
30 inches, loom, McClung Museum



THE FUNCTIONAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NATIVE BEADWORK

Among American Indians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was no “art for the sake of art.” Rather, the diverse array of articles that were artistically embellished with beadwork always held functional roles beyond that of aesthetics. Perhaps the most basic of these was utilitarian. A knife case, for example, stored this tool when not in use, making it easy to grasp when next needed. Many types of bags served a similar utilitarian role. Someone’s personal belongings, for example a comb and mirror, or a flint and steel for making a fire, were kept in bags. However, the functional significance of certain containers extended far beyond their utilitarian role. Pipe or “tobacco” bags widely seen among Plains Indians are a clear case in point. When used, these items held great ritual importance. Much the same can be said regarding the elaborately beaded bandolier bags made by Indians in the Great Lakes region. These accessories functioned as highly visible status markers, both for the women who made them and their male kin who proudly wore them during culturally important events.

Many other functional roles are associated with the works featured in this exhibit. These range from parenting and so-

Knife case,
Cheyenne.
L. 10 inches,
lane stitch,
collection of
C. William
Boyd



Man's vest, Lakota.
L. 19 inches, lane
stitch, collection of
Michael H. Logan



Toy doll, Lakota. L. 9 inches, lane stitch, McClung Museum



cialization of children to expressions of political strategy. Some pieces—for example, an eagle feather bonnet—served as a visual mnemonic celebrating a man's war record. Something as seemingly simple as the American flag motif on a beaded vest is robust with symbolism. While it signaled the Indians' desire to coexist peacefully with whites, when inverted and executed in incorrect colors, it also served as a "hidden" gesture of the Indians' immense displeasure with governmental policies that so adversely affected them.

Even a small toy possessed a larger role. These miniatures were created, of course, for amusement. Through play, however, a young girl would also learn much about her future adult role as a wife, mother, and artist. This is certainly the case regarding the Lakota toy cradle and doll featured in this exhibit.

Another functional aspect of beaded art revealed by these beautifully crafted objects is tribal identity, which was

demonstrated by certain stylistic conventions. Through a specific bead-working technique, choice of colors and motifs, and selecting which objects should be embellished in a particular manner, these artists of the past signaled their ethnic membership. Just as flags symbolize a particular region and its residents for contemporary nations, so, too, did beaded art. Perhaps nowhere is this expression of ethnicity more clearly seen than moccasins, where stylistic differences between tribes were pronounced.



L: Ojibwa moccasins, appliqué, McClung Museum. R: Lakota moccasins, lane stitch, collection of Jeffrey Hubbell. On the cover—Potawatomi moccasins, appliqué, collection of Richard Pohrt Jr.

CONCLUSION

It is important to keep in mind that the late-nineteenth century beaded objects in this exhibit were made and used by Native peoples living during a period of great cultural upheaval and political turmoil. Tribal arts flourished precisely when Native peoples most needed a sense of cohesion and stability. Native peoples had been forced to endure so many hardships: mass killings, loss of lands, broken promises, and the numbing poverty, hunger, and sickness that characterized life on reservations. Art became a venue through which oppressed peoples shielded themselves from much of the racism of white power holders. Even so, white collectors frequently acquired objects, such as the Crow cradle pictured here, for incredibly cheap prices, while the women who produced them spent, in many cases, several months of daily labor working to complete a given project.

While we can enjoy the inherent beauty of American Indian beaded art, we should not lose sight of the fact that these pieces, as well as the individuals who made and used them, were products of a very dark chapter in the history of Indian-white relations. Their brightly beaded art served as a highly visible expression of ethnic identity and pride, and continues to do so today throughout the American Indian community.

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Cradle, Crow, L. 57.5 inches, lane stitch, Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas

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McCLUNG
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1327 Circle Park Drive
Knoxville, TN 37996-3200
865-974-2144
mcclungmuseum.utk.edu

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ON THE COVER: *Potawatomi moccasins, appliqué, collection of Richard Pohrt Jr.*