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AMERICAN INDIAN BEADWORK DESIGNS*

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IN this paper certain variations in the beadwork designs used by American Indians and possible reasons for these variations will be discussed.

There was in prehistoric and early historic times one large northern belt of porcupine quillwork which preceded the introduction of glass beads by white men. This was followed, historically, by varying influences, producing, at the height of the great period of beadwork, around 1900, three distinct and different design areas, namely: the north-east, with delicate double curve, geometric and floral designs; the Great Lakes or Middle West, with heavy, colourful floral and geometric patterns in both woven and sewn beadwork; and the Plains, with heavy geometric designs and, to a lesser extent, floral designs. It will be shown how these overlap, the derivations and inter-area influences, and the peripheral variations and adaptations of the designs.

White men brought glass beads of European manufacture to the Western hemisphere to use in trade with the people they found living there, the American Indians. The first record of the introduction of trade beads goes back to Columbus and his landing in 1492, and since then vast quantities of glass beads have been given or traded to the Indians. The early beads were of the large type useful only in the making of necklaces. The first to be imported of a type that could be useful in sewing were the so-called 'pony' beads brought to eastern United States about 1675 to 1750 and to the west about 1800. These 'pony' beads, about $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch in diameter, were followed by the very small 'cut' or faceted beads, brought to the western country in the 1840's and fifty or so years earlier to the east. About 1860 the 'seed' bead, common to-day, was introduced; around 1870 translucent beads were introduced; and about 1885 gilt and silver faceted beads were brought to the United States. By about 1900 the great period of bead decoration was over.¹ Through this period many influences were being brought to bear on the type of designs employed in using these beads.

Prior to the introduction of glass beads, the Indian had for hundreds of years used porcupine quills in decoration. At the time of the first white contacts, porcupine quills were reported as being used throughout the entire range of the porcupine in the northern United States and Canada. The area of the porcupine covers most of the forested area of North America north of the 40th meridian, and south in the Rocky Mountains almost to the Mexican boundary.²

After the advent of glass beads the use of porcupine quills declined, but it continues to-day to a certain extent. Also, before the use of glass beads the Indians made beads of shell, bone, stone, seeds, wood, gum, basketry, clay and dried otter's liver, principally for use in necklaces, breastplates and so forth.³ The use of these other types of beads also was continued along with that of the glass trade beads from Europe. Glass beads were not the only type brought over and traded to the Indians—porcelain and metal were also imported. It is the small glass beads, however, that were used so extensively in decoration. The European centres of glass bead manufacture were Venice, Bohemia (Czechoslovakia), Bavaria, France and England.

There are two main techniques for sewing beads—the overlaid or spot stitch and the lazy

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stitch. The first, or spot stitch has by far the wider distribution, for it is used in the northern United States and in southern Canada, from the Atlantic to the Rockies. In this technique the beads are threaded on sinew or thread and laid in the desired position. Then another thread is used to sew in place the thread on which the beads are strung, sometimes between every two and sometimes between every three beads. The lazy stitch is that of the central and southern Plains. In the lazy stitch the beads are applied in a series of bands, four, five, six or seven beads, according to the taste of the worker, being strung and held on the cloth only at the end of each row of beads. This gives relatively loose loops of beads in rows. This is clearly a survival of two-thread sewn porcupine quill-work. There are variations of both of these techniques.

Woven beadwork is equally important. This technique was used principally by the Indians of the Great Lakes area and to some extent in the East. It was used only slightly among the Indians of northern California. The most widely used type of weave is called the square weave, in which the warp and weft elements cross one another at right angles. This was done on simple heddle looms introduced to the Indians by the Jesuits or early French settlers, and on native-type square and bow looms. There are many varieties of the square weave. Another type of weave is the bias weave, wherein the warp and weft elements change places in alternating lines. There are many varieties of this weave also. Another weave is net-like. Here the bead is made to function as a knot in netting. This weave was used principally in neck ornaments, although bags were also made by this technique. It was most widely used by the Indians of south-eastern California and their neighbours in Arizona, along the Colorado River.

As the history of the designs used in beadwork is complex and varies according to the three areas mentioned above, this must be treated by area.

The first area is eastern North America. One of the types of design found here in beadwork is the linear chain design, serving as borders generally, although often the whole decorated surface is covered with rows of lines with toothed or zig-zag edges alternating with rows of straight lines. They seem to have no fixed or profound symbolism attached to them but are basic to decoration in this region as ornamental devices. These designs are undoubtedly very old in origin, probably antedating other designs. They are found on very early dated skin pieces, in early birchbark and quillwork designs, and survive to-day in the designs painted on leather by the Naskapi Indians of eastern Canada.

The second type of design consists of two symmetrically opposed incurves. It is exclusively characteristic of this region, especially New England, and occurs in many forms and variations from simple to elaborate or in connection with other design elements. Dr. Frank G. Speck⁴ has covered very fully the manifestation of this design in this region. Another variant, related to the double curve, is the scroll design found in the south-east among the Choctaw and others. A related, but differing, curving line style was that of the Iroquois of New York State. According to Arthur C. Parker,⁵ it had deep religious significance to these tribes, symbolizing the sacred world-tree. It is often pictured in beadwork, moosehairwork and quillwork. The curve designs came to have definite political meanings among some of the tribes, notably the Iroquois, where they were prominent symbols of the Confederacy of the Six Nations. The idea is paralleled very strikingly among the Wabanaki alliance in New England, the idea having probably spread from the Iroquois. The use of this design spread also to the Penobscot Indians from the Iroquois. The curves turned outwards in Iroquois design were symbols of living chiefs; those turned inwards represented dead chiefs. The

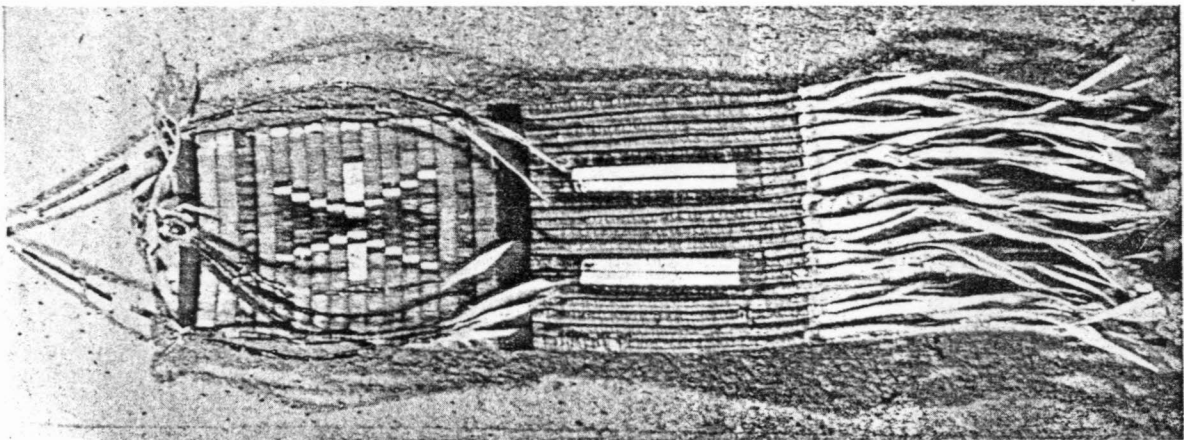


Fig. 1. Sioux pipe bag, decorated with porcupine quillwork.

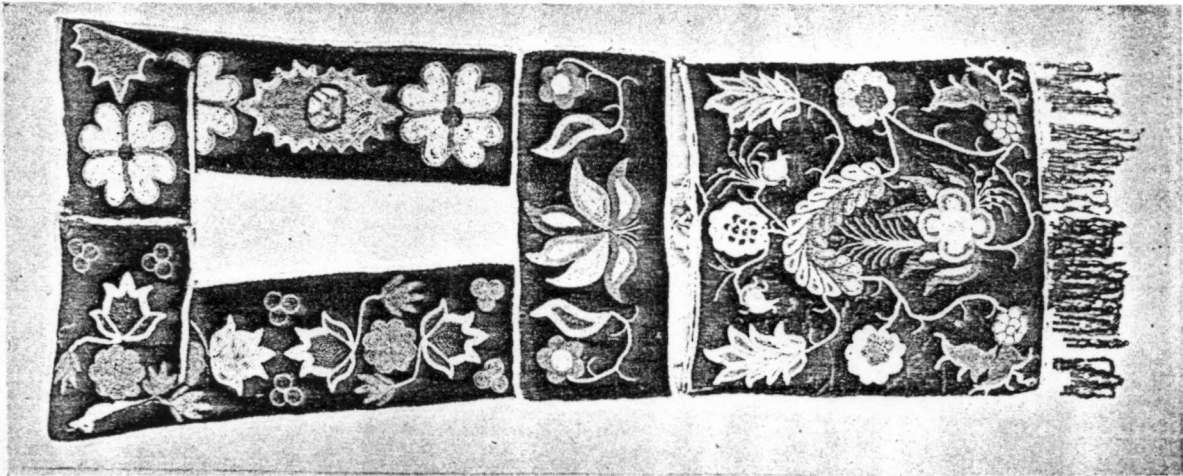


Fig. 2. Ojibwa bandoleer bag.

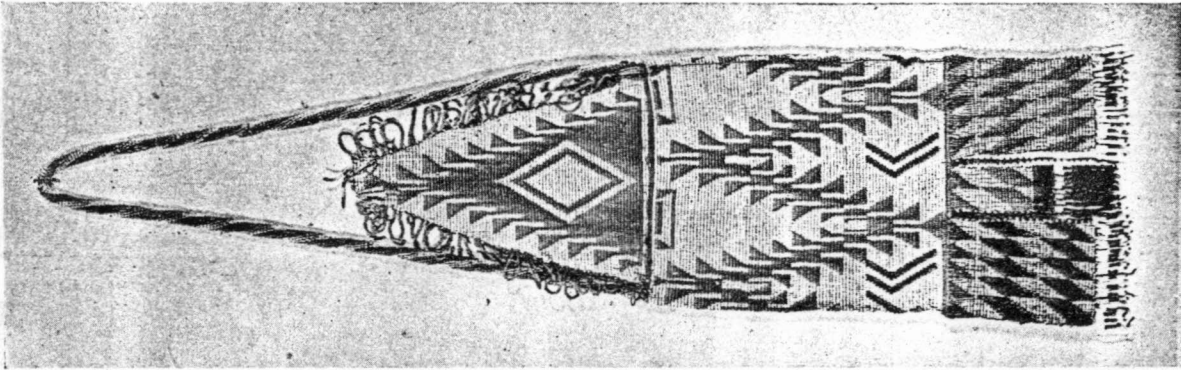


Fig. 3. Pit River woven beadwork bag.

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curve designs may originally have been plant representations throughout the area. However, Dr. Frederic H. Douglas of the Denver Art Museum reported to me that he has seen those same double curve designs on French palaces of the seventeenth century. This suggests that, perhaps, the design was introduced by the French who settled in this area, and the symbolism was subsequently applied by the Indians.

The third important design type found in this area is that of the realistic floral designs. These designs are used in another decoration technique not mentioned earlier in the consideration of the history of decoration materials. Moosehairs were employed, and Frank G. Speck⁶ states that moosehair embroidery probably followed porcupine quillwork in the historical sequence, continuing, along with the use of porcupine quills and glass beads, into recent historical times. There are two schools of thought regarding the derivation of these floral designs. Some researchers have proposed a European origin for them, principally Marius Barbeau.⁷ He points out that the Ursuline nuns of Quebec in the seventeenth century taught the Indians to do embroidery work and that much of the moosehair floral embroidery and beadwork of that and later times shows a definite likeness to, and influence by, the embroidery of these French nuns. On the other side, Clark Wissler⁸ and Frank G. Speck⁴ have stated that, because of the therapeutic value attached by some tribes to these designs, and the apparent derivation of them from freehand work on birchbark and skins previous to white contact, they believe them, in part at least, to be of native origin. No doubt, the floral designs were more highly developed after and during the period of European contact when once the idea of separating them from the curved figures and using them as units had occurred to them. Traders' chintz and lace may have had a definite influence, but it was certainly on designs already floral and native in origin. According to Speck, the realistic floral designs were, before the decadence of native ideas, associated with the protective and curative properties of the medicinal herbs which are so important to these Indians in the treatment of diseases. It would seem that these designs were put on objects with the purpose of invoking magic protection. Among the Penobscot an interesting association for the names of 'medicine' and 'leaves' bears out the idea of the relationship. Here, again, we may have the introduction of a design with later application of symbolism to them by the Indians using them. In more recent times this reason for the application of floral designs has died out. The change has been accompanied by the increase in realistic floral portrayal which is characteristic of more recent beadwork. These modern designs have developed more like those used by the Great Lakes tribes, with the dropping, almost altogether, of the double curve and simpler designs.

Realistic figures are found, but these are not characteristic of the designs of these tribes. The Indians of the eastern area had a predilection for white glass beads, and many more of this colour were used than any other; perhaps because the first beads traded in great quantities to them may have been white.

Moving westward to the tribes living around the Great Lakes, and down the Mississippi Valley region to the south, the picture is very much the same as is found to the east in earlier historic times. One finds here the old linear and double curve designs, but with no apparent religious significance and certainly not utilized to the extent they were in the East. These designs, as well as the floral patterns of a later date, may have been spread to the west earlier by the Indian employees of fur trading companies, and later by the railroads which penetrated this northern area in the 1870's and 1880's, eventually carrying floral designs as far west as the Tlinkit of south-east Alaska.

The older floral designs were an interpretation of nature through conventional flower

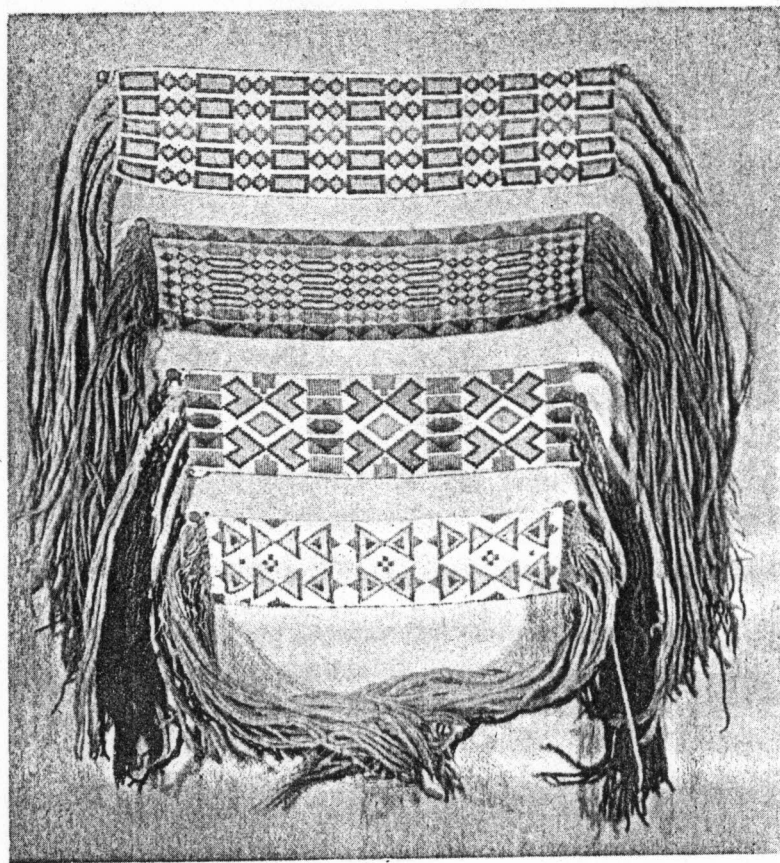


Fig. 4. Woven beadwork garters. Top to bottom : Kickapoo, Ojibwa, Ojibwa, Menominee,

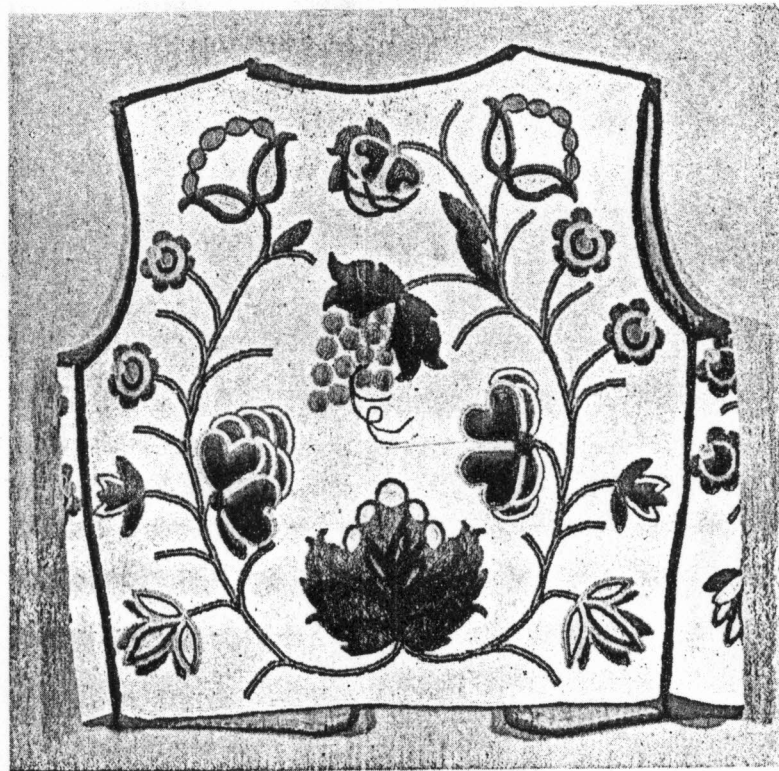


Fig. 5. Sioux man's vest.

and leaf forms. These were followed historically by a more florid misrepresentation of nature. Frances Densmore⁹ says that 'it appears that the spirit of real art decreased as the imitation of nature increased until the floral patterns in use among the Chippewa of 1929 have no artistic value. The Chippewa women distinguish clearly between the old patterns of flowers and leaves and those which have prevailed since 1860-1870. These dates are approximate and differ among various bands of the tribe, but they represent the period when the Chippewa came extensively under the influence of the white man. . . . At that time the whole culture of the tribe changed, the old standards were discredited, and there arose a tolerance of poor workmanship in design and technique. . . . One of the chief characteristics of early floral patterns was their truthfulness. The chief characteristic of modern Chippewa art is its lack of truth and its freedom of expression. Roses are placed on the same stems with oak leaves, and we are shown bluebells growing on grapevines.'

Sister Bernard Coleman¹⁰ in a monograph on the Ojibwa states that the designs were simple, native and uninfluenced in the period from 1830 to 1870. The characteristics of them during this period are geometric and floral, showing cohesion, simplicity, smallness and soft colouring. Then around 1870 a great change took place. The period from 1870 to 1920 is marked by white influence. Sister Coleman feels that the Sioux Indians to the west influenced considerably the designs of this later period. Characteristics of the designs during this time are showiness, largeness, elaborateness, dominantly floral, lacking cohesion and unity. These statements apply in general to the other tribes of this area.

As stated earlier, this was the area of the greatest concentration of woven beadwork, although a certain amount of it is found, also, to the east. In this type of beadwork can be seen the use of a fourth type of design, that of large areas of filled-in geometric designs coming directly from porcupine quillwork, and related, perhaps, to the Plains type of beadwork (the Sioux influence proposed by Sister Coleman). It differs, however, from it in not having such large areas of a one-colour background and not giving the impression of numbers of geometric elements put together to make a design so much as an all-over geometric repeated pattern.

In this whole area, then, there is a derivation of designs from quillwork, early paintings on skin and designs on birchbark, just as there was to the east, with some late influence by white settlers who brought flowered cloth and lace designs. In fact, lace-making was introduced among these Indians in 1887 by missionaries of the Episcopal church. This late influence by white men has led to the development of a floral beadwork different from that found to the east—a heavy, flamboyant rendering, with filled-in beaded backgrounds.

Conventional birds and animals or other realistic subjects can be seen, but are not characteristic, as the situation here is much the same as in the area farther east. Beads of every colour were used, no one colour assuming a dominance over the others, except for the use of white beads for backgrounds.

In the Plains area¹¹ the dominant design style is that using purely angular, geometric or abstract patterns derived, without doubt, from the earlier widespread base of porcupine quillwork. Some of the Plains tribes were, before their movement out on to the Plains about the middle of the eighteenth century, living around the Great Lakes, and must have carried the knowledge of porcupine quillwork from their former homes. These tribes acquired quills by trade, while living in the prairie area, or from porcupines living along the rivers; and so quillwork continued even after the introduction of glass beads. Floral patterns from the east passed to the north around the 1880's; the Crow, Blackfoot and others took them

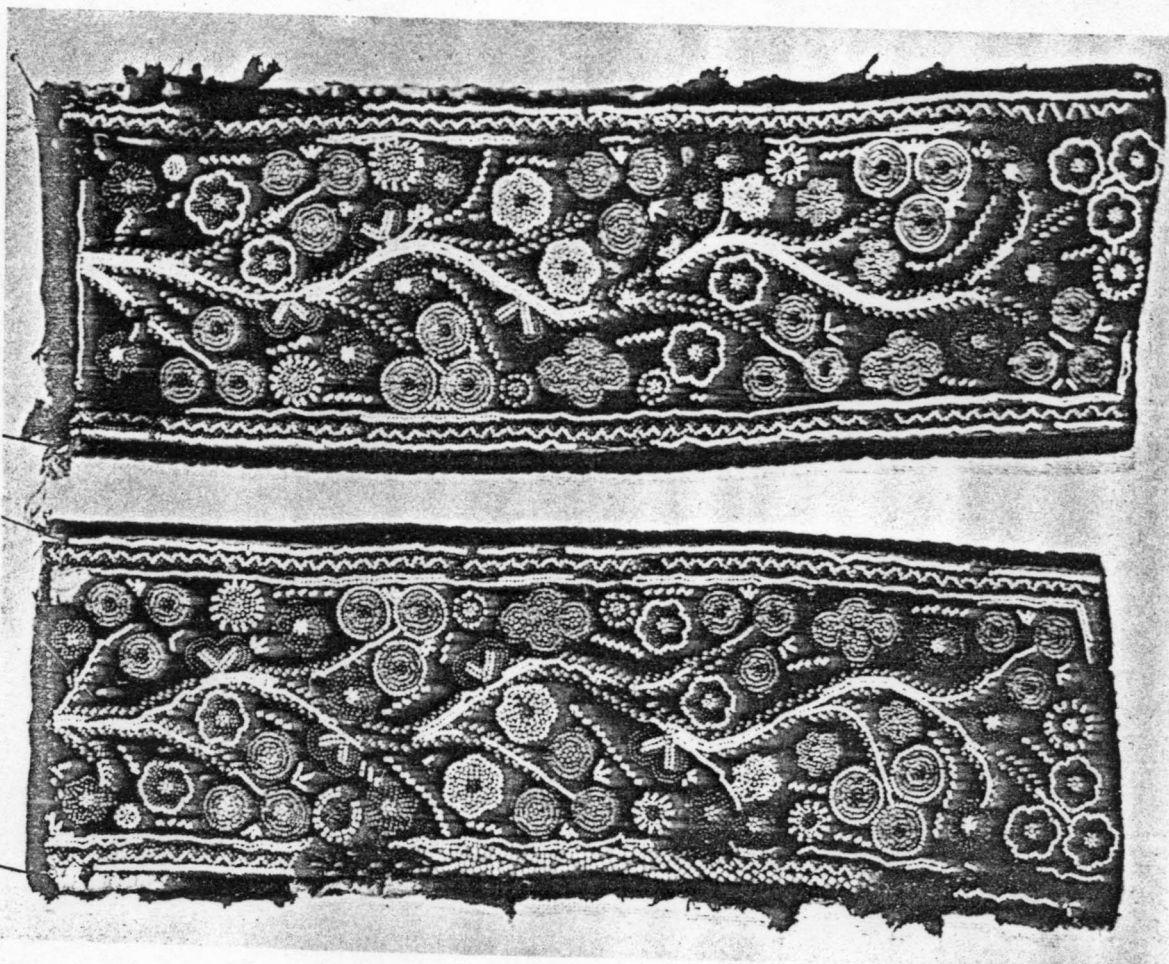


Fig. 6. Penobscot cuffs with beaded floral design.

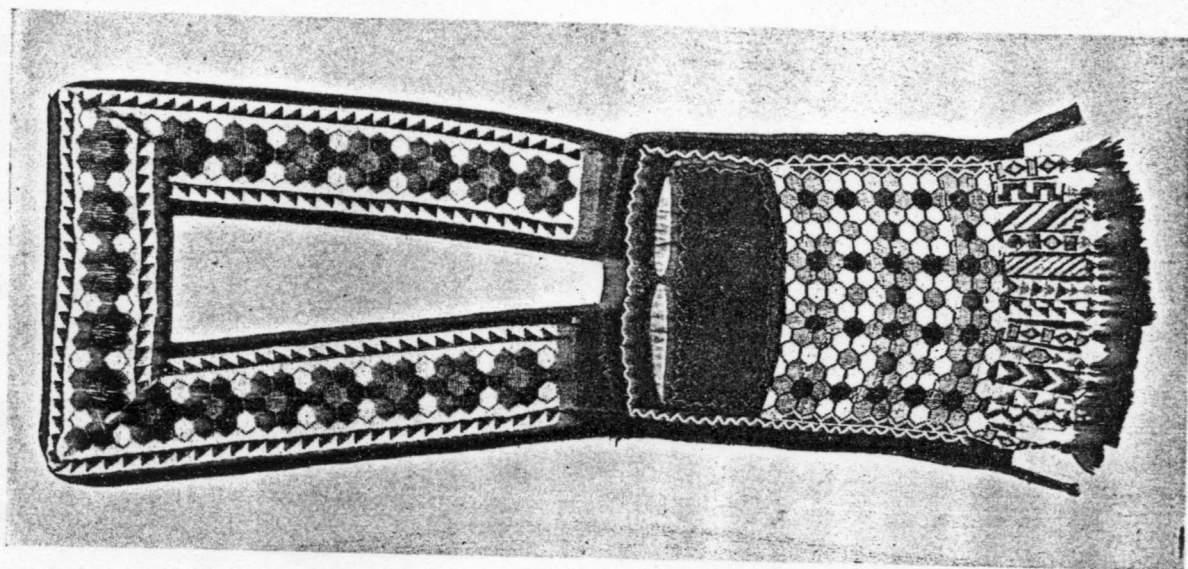


Fig. 7. Ojibwa bandoleer bag.

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over, and there are many pieces from these tribes on which floral beadwork can be seen amid the other more prevalent pieces of geometric work. However, the tribes in the central Plains and to the south were very little affected and continued to use geometric designs. Carrie A. Lyford¹ reports the sudden appearance of new elements of design about 1870 among the central Plains tribes, often differing from the old in fineness and delicacy of line. Characteristic figures are the thin line, terrace and fork spread out on a solid background. The suddenness of its appearance speaks of some outside influence. There is no positive proof as to what this influence was, but Dr. Douglas suggested to Miss Lyford that these designs are similar to those found on rugs made in the Caucasus and brought to the west by settlers at the time the new designs appeared in beadwork. In some instances the designs are identical. Many of these designs came to have, in a few tribes, specific meanings—meanings which, however, varied from one Indian woman to another. This was, in general, merely a decorative art, not a symbolic one.

In the southern Plains area, among such tribes as the Kiowa and Comanche, geometric designs are found, but beadwork was used much less extensively than on the northern Plains; there are no floral designs.

Realistic designs do occur, but they are not characteristic of this area. Many different colours of beads were used throughout the Plains and some tribes showed a liking for particular colours.

In the far West—northern California—some woven work was done. In the south-east California and neighbouring Arizona areas beads were used in netting techniques, using geometric patterns, in many different colours—blue and white dominating. Wide collars are the most common form. Here it was probably the penetration of the railroads, about 1880, which brought the beadwork designs and techniques to this section. If so, the floral pattern did not appear, perhaps because of the nearness of an entirely geometric design area.

In the beadwork of the Western area there was an early Great Lakes porcupine quillwork complex, with simple, tribal undifferentiated, geometric designs. Following the introduction of glass beads, which were first used in the designs adapted from the earlier quillwork, there was a rapid development of tribal styles over the ensuing fifty-year period. These varied in the north and central areas as a result of the introduction of European floral designs in the north and, possibly, Caucasus rug designs in the central section. There is scanty occurrence of beadwork in the south, because of the peripheral nature of the area. There is also a peripheral manifestation of geometric woven and net beadwork in the far West.

To summarize, an attempt has been made to show a great north-eastern belt of early porcupine quillwork, with simple geometric, linear designs, on which was introduced, by the coming of the white men, a beadwork complex which in its early stages employed the same designs used in porcupine quillwork, but which subsequently, because of varying influences, broke up into three large design areas, each distinguishable from the other because of the use of delicate geometric scroll and floral work to the east, geometric woven work and heavy floral work in the Great Lakes area, and continuing, but changed, geometric designs in the west.

* Thanks are due to Dr. Frederic H. Douglas, Dr. Omer C. Stewart and Mrs. Dorothy Ellis for reading this paper and making suggestions; and to Mr. Otto Karl Bach, director of the Denver Art Museum, for placing the facilities of the Museum at my disposal.

† All photographs used in illustrating this paper are of objects from the collections of the Denver Art Museum.

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