

BLACKFEET CRAFTS

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Compared with the quillwork of neighboring tribes to the east, Blackfeet quillwork techniques were both few in number and simple in performance. They seem to have lacked the weaving technique of the Cree and the multiple quill sewing and plaiting of the Dakota. The preference of the Blackfeet for narrow bands of quillwork limited the possibilities for variety in design motifs. Small, angular designs predominate in Blackfeet quillwork.

BEADWORK

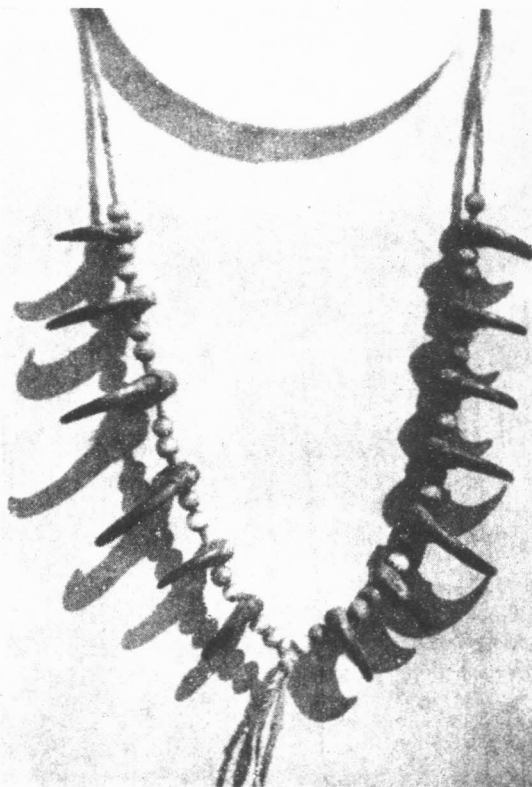
Blackfeet bead embroidery originated within the historic period and had a dual origin. The little glass or china beads themselves, made by Venetian craftsmen in far-off Italy, were introduced by White fur traders. For ways to use these beads the native women turned to their traditional Indian craft of quillwork for inspiration. In the selection of articles and areas for decoration and in the choice of designs, Blackfeet beadworkers followed the traditions of the older craft. Like quillwork also, beadwork has been a woman's craft.

History of Blackfeet Beadwork

The history of Blackfeet use of beads may be divided into three periods. The first period may be termed the Pre-embroidery or Bead Necklace Period, during which large beads were used to make necklaces,



31. Necklace of wild roseberries.



32. Necklace of bear claws and polychrome beads.

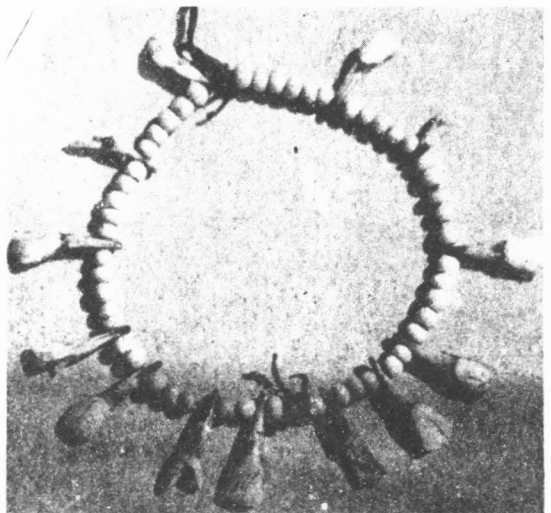
bracelets, fringe decorations and hair ornaments. Before these beads were introduced the Blackfeet probably employed native materials in much the same way. They made necklaces of fish vertebrae, roseberries, silver berries, a certain sweet smelling root, shells, pendant bear or eagle claws, and the teeth of the buffalo, elk, or horse, strung on a buckskin cord. Early in the eighteenth century fur traders of the Hudson's Bay Company and their competitors, the French from Montreal, offered beads in trade to the Indians east of the Blackfeet. A trade list for the several factories of the Hudson's Bay Company in the year 1748, lists "Large Milk beads" valued at one beaver skin for a half pound of beads, "beads of Colours," at three-fourths of a pound for a beaver skin, and "beads of all Sorts," at one pound of beads for two beaver skins. A few of these trade beads may have reached the Blackfeet indirectly through trade with the Indians east of them.

By the 1780's however, White traders were in direct contact with the Blackfeet and were able to offer them beads in trade. These early trade beads vary in size, color and shape. Most of them were over one-fourth inch in diameter. Many were considerably longer than that. Some were monochrome, while the surfaces of others were covered with patterns of various colors. Indians learned to introduce a few of the new trade beads at intervals on their necklaces of claws, teeth or other native materials. By 1833, these necklace beads were still expensive. Maximilian said the Blackfeet bought them from the American Fur Company in that year for the equivalent of three or four dollars a pound, and that they were highly regarded by the Indian women. Embroidering beads by that time were in use among the Blackfeet, but they were not intended to replace the larger necklace beads. The latter are still worn by some of the older Indians. Elderly Indians say that in their youth a large blue bead with a raised pattern of meandering lines and flower buds in white and red was considered a very old type of necklace bead. These "Skunk beads," as they called them, were then rare. A necklace of them was worth a good horse and a robe. "Crow beads" were a more common type of necklace bead, they say. These are irregular, monochrome, china beads over one-fourth inch in diameter. Light blue "Crow beads" were most popular, although they were available in medium blue, pale green, light red and black as well. Large brass beads, which the Indians termed "iron beads," were also popular. A smaller bead, three-sixteenths of an inch in diameter, transparent red on the outside with a lining of opaque white, was used primarily for children's necklaces. Older Indians call these "under white beads."

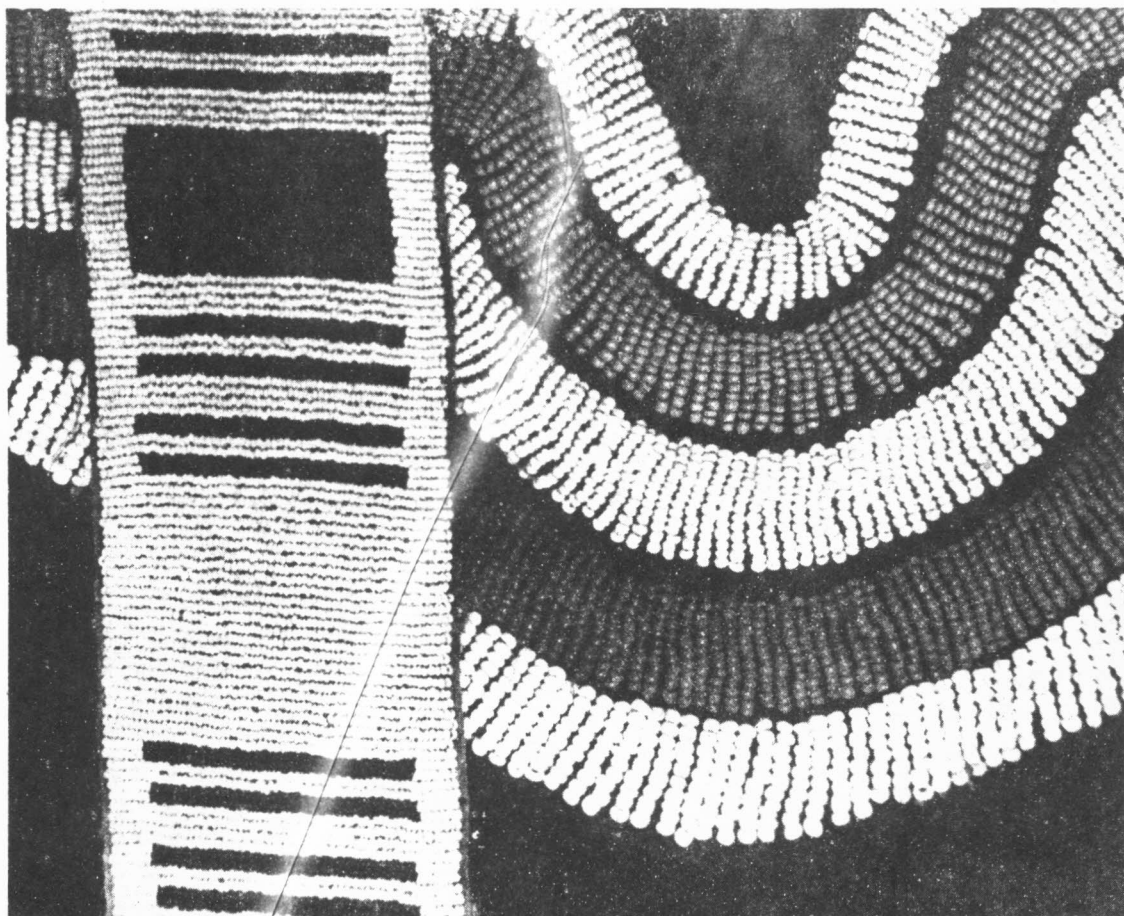
The second period opened with the first use of embroidering beads among the Blackfeet. It may be termed the Real Bead Period, for the Blackfeet called the bead type characteristic of this period "real bead."

Real beads were considerably smaller than the majority of necklace beads, but larger than the seed beads used in Blackfeet embroidery in more recent times. The beads are irregularly shaped, about one-eighth inch in diameter, made of china. They are monochrome. The color range includes light blue, dark blue, dark red, deep yellow, white and black. The blue and white beads seem to have been most favored by the Blackfeet. These beads were sold by the bunch or hank. Each hank consisted of 10 strings, all about eight inches long. About the year 1870, eight hanks of different colored "real beads" were worth a good robe. In earlier times they were probably much more expensive.

Maximilian in 1843, was the first writer to mention Blackfeet bead embroidery. He noted their preference for sky-blue and white beads in the decoration of women's dresses and men's suits. Alexander Henry, in his detailed description of Blackfeet clothing two decades earlier, made no mention of the use of beads in its decoration. It is probable that very few embroidering beads were used by the Blackfeet before the American Fur Company opened its trade with them in 1831. "Real beads" were most commonly applied in narrow bands to articles of costume, women's dresses, men's



33. Necklace of buffalo teeth and Crow beads.



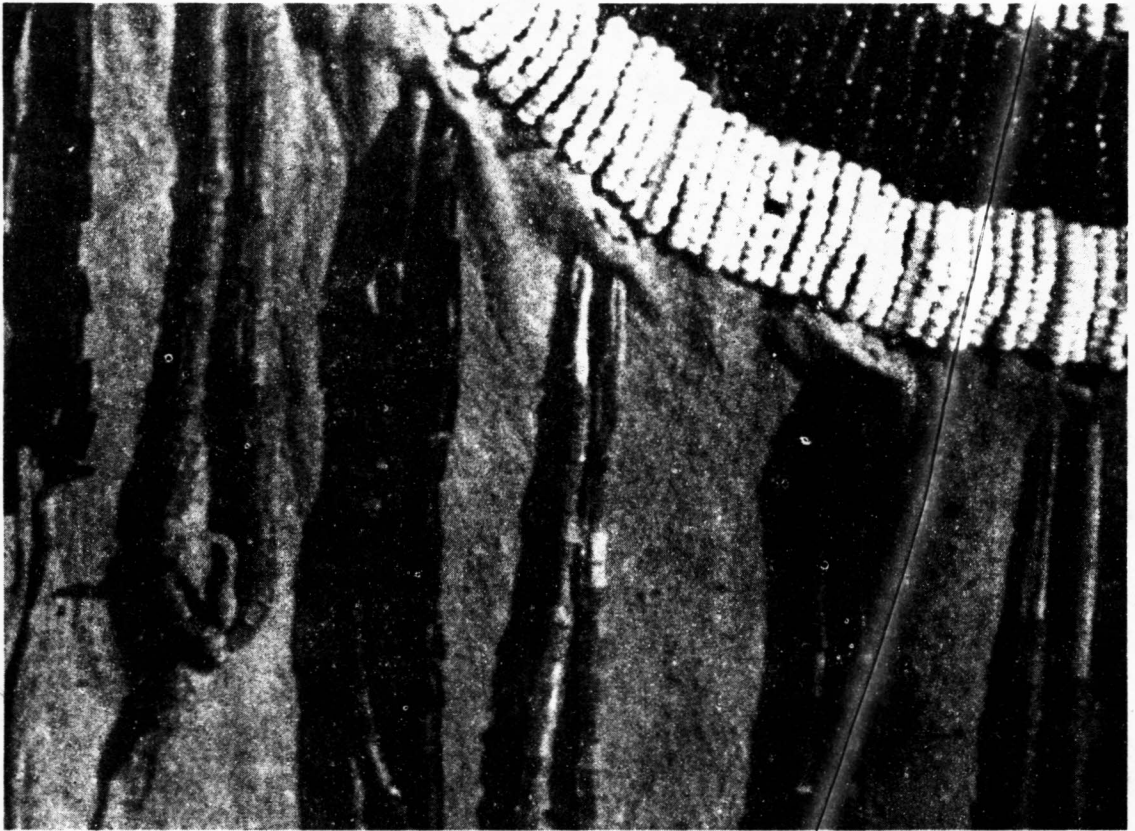
34. Comparative sizes of real beads and seed beads.

shirts, leggings, and moccasins. The older technique of quillwork was never replaced by beadwork throughout the "real bead" period, save possibly for the decoration of women's dresses. Rather the two crafts existed side by side. Some costumes were decorated with beads, some with quills. The areas of decoration and the designs were much the same in both techniques.

The real bead period came to a close with the adoption of smaller sized seed beads by the Blackfeet about 1875. A few Blackfeet women married to White men may have begun to use the smaller beads by 1870. Seed beads seem to have been employed by the younger women in the 1870's, while some of the older, more conservative women continued to use the older "real beads" in the 1880's. Women's dresses continued to

be decorated with "real beads" until near the end of the century. Thus the change from "real beads" to seed beads was gradual. We may date the Seed Bead Period from the year 1875, by which time seed beads were in fairly common use among Blackfeet beadworkers.

Seed beads are made of glass or china. They were supplied by traders in a number of sizes, all of them quite small. The largest are about one-sixteenth of an inch in diameter, about half the size of "real beads." The older seed beads were generally irregular in size and outline, and opaque. More recent ones are even, and some of them translucent. Beadworkers had a choice of a wide range of colors and hues in seed beads. For a brief period of a little more than a decade, following the opening of



35. Comparative sizes of real beads and basket beads.

trader's stores in the new town of Browning in 1896, a larger, transparent bead, three-sixteenths of an inch in diameter and either three-sixteenths or one-half of an inch in length, known as a basket bead, was very popular with the Montana Blackfeet. It was commonly used in the decoration of women's dresses made during that period. However, its popularity waned almost as quickly as it had grown. The little seed bead is still favored by modern Blackfeet women in their bead embroidery.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed a florescence of Blackfeet beadwork and a decadence of quillwork. Most of the articles of soft skin or cloth used by these Indians were decorated with beadwork. Beadwork was applied liberally to dress clothing (men's shirts, leggings and breech cloths, women's dresses and leggings; moccasins, blanket bands, and teath-

er bonnet headbands); to many kinds of containers (awl cases, gun cases, quivers, and tobacco, paint, toilet and shot pouches); to horse equipment (women's saddles and pad saddles, saddle bags, martingales and cruppers); to cradles, to the cloth edges of willow back rests, and to a variety of religious paraphernalia. Many specimens of traditional Blackfeet beadwork made during this period are preserved in museum collections.

Beadwork Techniques

The common Blackfeet technique of bead embroidery is very similar to the older technique of quillwork. In decorating an article of skin or cloth with seed beads two threads are used, one for stringing the beads, the other for sewing them down. In the geometric designs the beads are arranged in parallel rows, massed tightly together. One