268

INDIAN HANDCRAFTS • 1

QUILL AND BEADWORK OF THE WESTERN SIOUX

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Illustrated with
Photographs and Drawings

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BEADS

EVEN before the European travelers came to this country with glass beads, crude native beads wrought out of shell, stone, bones of fish and animals, deer hoofs or toes, teeth, and seeds had been in use. From such materials Indians made necklaces, pendants, belts, costume fringes, and other decorative objects. The Sioux and other Plains Indians made a tubular bone bead which has always been popular for use on breast-plates.

In addition to beads, other ornaments have been similarly used on Sioux costumes. The milk teeth of the elk, threaded on a skin thong or piece of fringe was the most costly of ornaments for the dress of the Sioux woman of rank. A bead cut from bone to imitate the tooth of the elk has been used in recent years on the woman's ceremonial dress as a substitute for elk's teeth, because it is now illegal in many areas to kill the animal.

Most of these native beads had been prepared at such great expenditure of time and labor that they were eagerly replaced by the bright, manufactured beads of glass and metal in varied forms and sizes which were brought into the country from Europe. Most glass beads are Venetian or Bohemian. The variation in the types of beads is reflected in the products made by the Indians.

From about 1800 to 1840 a large opaque irregular china bead came into use on the Plains. It was known as the pony bead because it was brought in by the pony pack trains. The pony bead was made in Venice. It was about ⅛ inch in diameter, about twice as large as the beads used later. White and a medium sky blue were the colors in which the pony beads were commonly used. Black pony beads also appear in the old pieces. A few deep buff, light and dark red, and dark blue pony beads have also been noted.

The pony beads were first used by the Plains Indians on bands to decorate skin robes, shirts, pipe bags, cradles, saddle bags, moccasins, and the head bands on war bonnets. The bands were usually less than six inches wide and were solidly

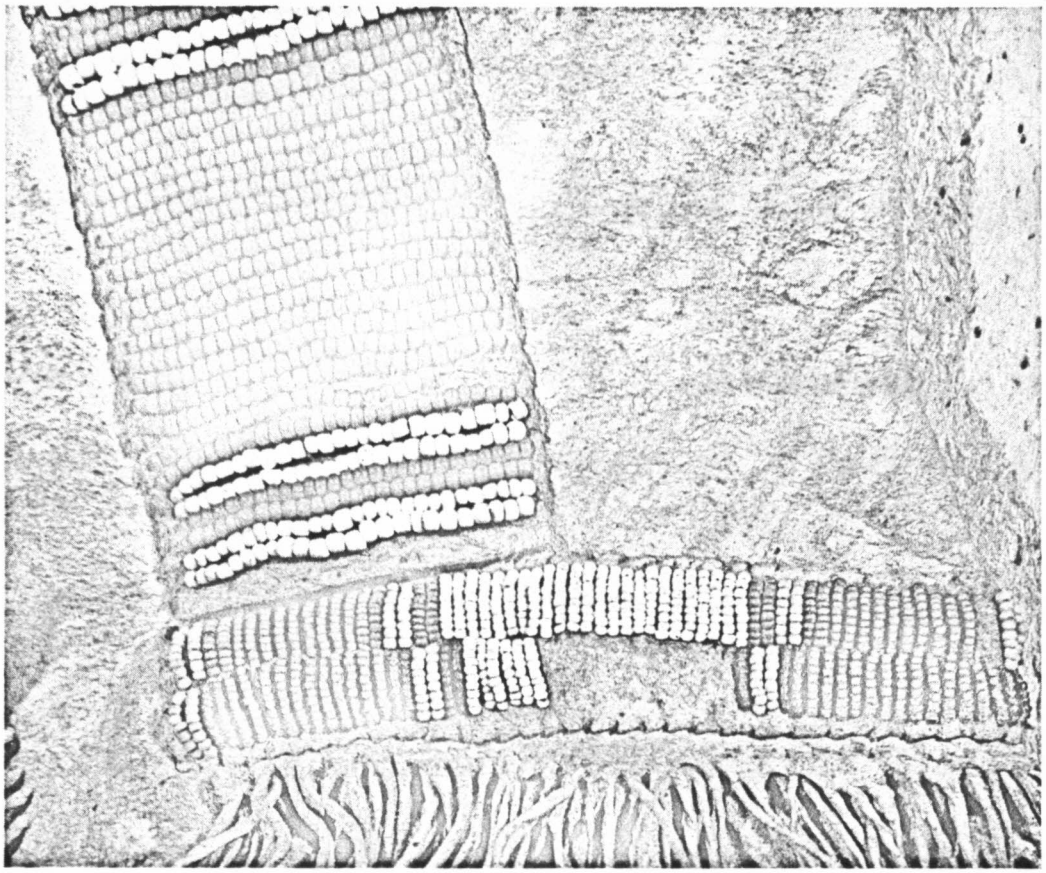


Plate 31. Examples of seed and pony beads on a man's legging.

beaded with designs consisting of bars, tall triangles and concentric squares and diamonds similar to the early quill work designs. Examples of the early work with pony beads are to be found on the articles collected by Lewis and Clark in 1805 and they are mentioned in the journal of their expedition.

About 1840 a smaller, round, opaque Venetian bead known as a "seed" bead came into use and has continued popular up to the present time. (Plate 31 shows examples of pony and seed beads.) The seed beads have always been sold in a great variety of colors in bunches of five or six strings each, the strings varying in length from four to six inches. There are four or five bunches to the pound. The beads come in three sizes varying from one-sixteenth to three-sixteenths of an inch in diameter. The delicacy of the pattern to be embroidered determined the size of bead chosen. Because the beads were partly made by hand they were somewhat irregular in shape and the old bead worker found it necessary to exercise care in using

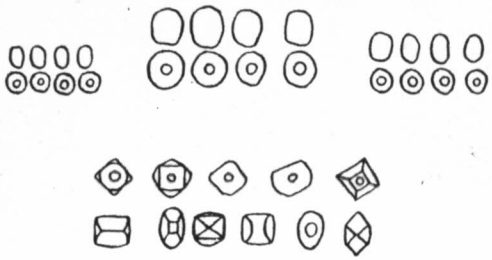


Figure 9. Shapes of trade beads.

those of equal size. The colors of the old beads were richer and softer than the colors of the modern beads, though the latter are more regular in size. The small seed beads continue in favor with the conservative Sioux beadworkers. (*Figure 9.*)

The first use of the seed beads was to make bands, very like those made with pony beads and often with the same general pattern. They were put on hip length leggings, skin robes, pipe bags, cradles and saddle bags. Not only the Sioux but the Crow and the Blackfoot made similar bands which appear in old pictures from the whole region.

Toward 1860, when settlers began to crowd into the Sioux country, beadwork took a sudden spurt. Beads were to be had in quantity and women began to decorate all their possessions not in bands but in huge all-over patterns. They put these on garments, (*Plates 8, 10, 12, 13*) bags of all sizes and shapes, (*Plates 14, 15, 19, 20, 25*) cradles, (*Plate 21*) horse furniture, (*Plates 16, 17, 18, 32*) toys, tipi furnishings and ceremonial objects. They made beadwork not only for themselves but for the Whites who often furnished the garment to be decorated and dictated the style. Also, they saw new objects belonging to the Whites and used them, at least insofar as these coincided with their own taste. This second period is marked by a profusion of beadwork and a sudden change of style to be discussed further below. As it advanced, the traders began to bring in Bohemian (Czecho-Slovakian) beads, which were a trifle darker than the Venetian and inclined to a slightly bluish tinge. One acquainted with both types of beads can recognize this coloring and guess at the date of an article. About 1870, began to appear translucent beads and, toward 1885, glass beads colored silver or gilt and faceted throughout. There was a huge variety of colors and sizes coming not only from Venice and Bohemia but from France and England.

Very fine lustrous cut glass beads are to be found on some of the finest old pieces of embroidery. As these fine translucent beads are no longer obtainable at the traders' stores, the few that have been kept by the beadworkers are carefully treasured and are used only on choice pieces that are to serve a special purpose.

By 1900 the great period of beadwork was over. Skill in quill and beadwork had been handed down from generation to generation within the family, the older

Sioux women teaching the girls. At the time of puberty, maidens were expected to give up the freedom of early childhood and work quietly for hours each day on one of the handicrafts which the tribe had made its own. Sioux women now had new occupations and access to new materials.

Beadwork however continues to be carried on here and there through a wide territory. New pieces are shown at the annual fairs, at the dances where native customs are followed, and on Memorial Day, when choice bead work is sent to those who have been bereaved during the year. The desire to possess a handsomely embroidered costume exists among most of the older Sioux Indians. In some localities organized effort is being made to have the girls and the younger women continue the work, so that knowledge of their native designs and of the technique of an art peculiar to their race will not be entirely lost. It was introduced as an elective at the Oglala Community School at Pine Ridge a few years ago, taught by a skilled Sioux woman whose training came from her grandmother. The girls were interested, the work was continued and is now being encouraged among the students of many of the Sioux schools of South Dakota.

Modern beadworkers have an almost unlimited choice of beads. The pony bead type is no longer used but seed beads are or were imported by wholesalers from Venice, Czecho-Slovakia, France, England and Japan. The sizes and method of packing still remain similar to that previously described. Beadworkers judge beads to be purchased not only by their color but by the evenness and uniformity of beads on a string. At present, they use the larger size of seed beads, rather than the extremely small ones found in the old work. They also use many cut glass beads which are less expensive but whose shiny effect did not please the old workers. Workers who realize the variety of shapes and colors now at their disposal have an interesting opportunity to develop the traditional style in new directions and for new purposes.

Beadwork Technique

When Indian women first obtained beads for their embroidery, they sewed them to the buckskin in two ways. One of these prevailed among all the bead workers of the American continent and, though it was never much used by the western Sioux, we shall describe it first, since its wide use suggests that it may have been the earlier of the two.

Overlaid or Spot Stitch. The technique of this stitch is substantially the same as that of quillwork, i.e. a thread of sinew strung with a few beads, is attached to the

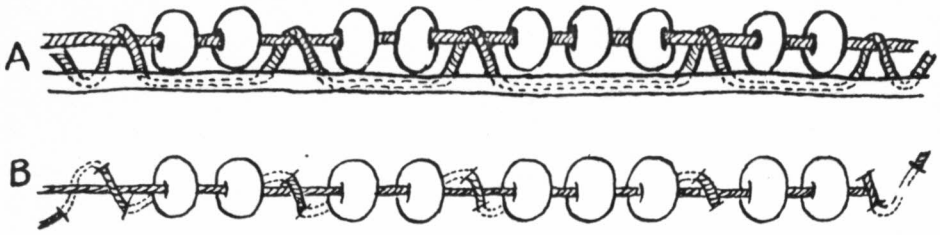


Figure 10. Detail of overlaid stitch: A, cross section; B, looking down. The dotted lines show where the sewing thread turns under the surface of the material.

buckskin by another sinew thread sewed across it, just as formerly a thread was sewed across a quill. Couching is the name given by White seamstresses to this method of attaching a narrow decoration without piercing it. Figure 10 shows the method in detail. Two threads are used, which we may 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. If the beads are all of the same color, there may be as many as six or eight. Then the sewing thread is stitched over it at right angles and into the buckskin, where it is carried along, as shown by the dotted lines, 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.

With fine work and curves, the sewing thread may cross after every two beads, with coarser work and straight lines, after three beads, four or even more. Elaborate flower patterns may be made in this way and also all-over work, where a curving design is executed and then the background filled with closely laid lines of beads, straight or curving. It is an excellent stitch for floral patterns and was the one used by the Woodland Indians whose designs are of this sort. It is also used entirely by the Blackfoot, Sarsi, Plains, Cree, Flathead and in part by the Crow, Shoshoni, Assiniboin and Gros Ventre. Among the Sioux, there is a division. The eastern Sioux, who use floral patterns, naturally use the overlay stitch. The western Sioux use a stitch common on the Plains.

Lazy Stitch. The western Sioux, it has been mentioned, used geometric patterns, for which the painstaking overlay stitch was unnecessary. They and the Plains Indians immediately around them, such as the Crow, Cheyenne and Arapaho,

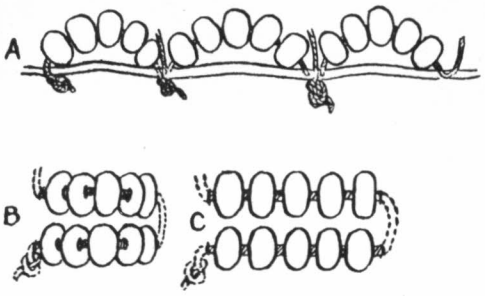


Figure 11. Detail of lazy stitch: A, cross section; B, looking down—dotted lines indicate turn of thread under surface of the material; C, same as B, but with beads separated to show more clearly.

worked out another method, suited to straight lines, which has acquired the name of the lazy stitch.

Detail of the lazy stitch is shown in figure 11. Here a given number of beads from six to twelve, are strung upon a thread of sinew which has been fastened to the skin by inserting it in a perforation made by an awl. Another perforation is made to admit the sinew at the end of the row of beads. As in the overlay stitch, the perforation does not pass through to the under side of the skin, but runs horizontally just below the surface, so that no stitches show. The same number of beads is again strung on the sinew, which is carried back to the starting point and passed through another perforation, close to the first one. Thus the pattern is made up of beads sewed down only at the ends of each row. The strings of beads tend to arch a little between the stitches and a ridged effect results. In an all-over pattern, these rows of parallel ridges make it easy to recognize any beadwork from the central Plains. They are somewhat wider than the bands which composed an all-over pattern in porcupine quillwork and yet they are very reminiscent of that former style. Though the sewing method is different from that of quillwork, it may be that Sioux women had come to like the banded effect.

Their stitch may have acquired its nickname of lazy because it is less firm than the overlaid stitch, and beadwork in which it is used is said to pull out sooner. However, it is an easy method of covering large spaces and, perhaps as a consequence, we find that the western Sioux often covered the whole of a moccasin or a dress yoke with solid color. Some Indians using the overlay stitch also made solid backgrounds, though with them the surface was smooth and showed no ridges. Both in texture and pattern, such work is entirely different from the products of the western Sioux, with their clear cut geometrical figures and the even ridges which form a rhythm through the whole. Plate 33 shows examples of both stitches.

Cloth and Thread

About 1850, traders began to bring cloth and velvet into Sioux country. Beadworkers welcomed the bright colors of the new fabrics and used them lavishly.

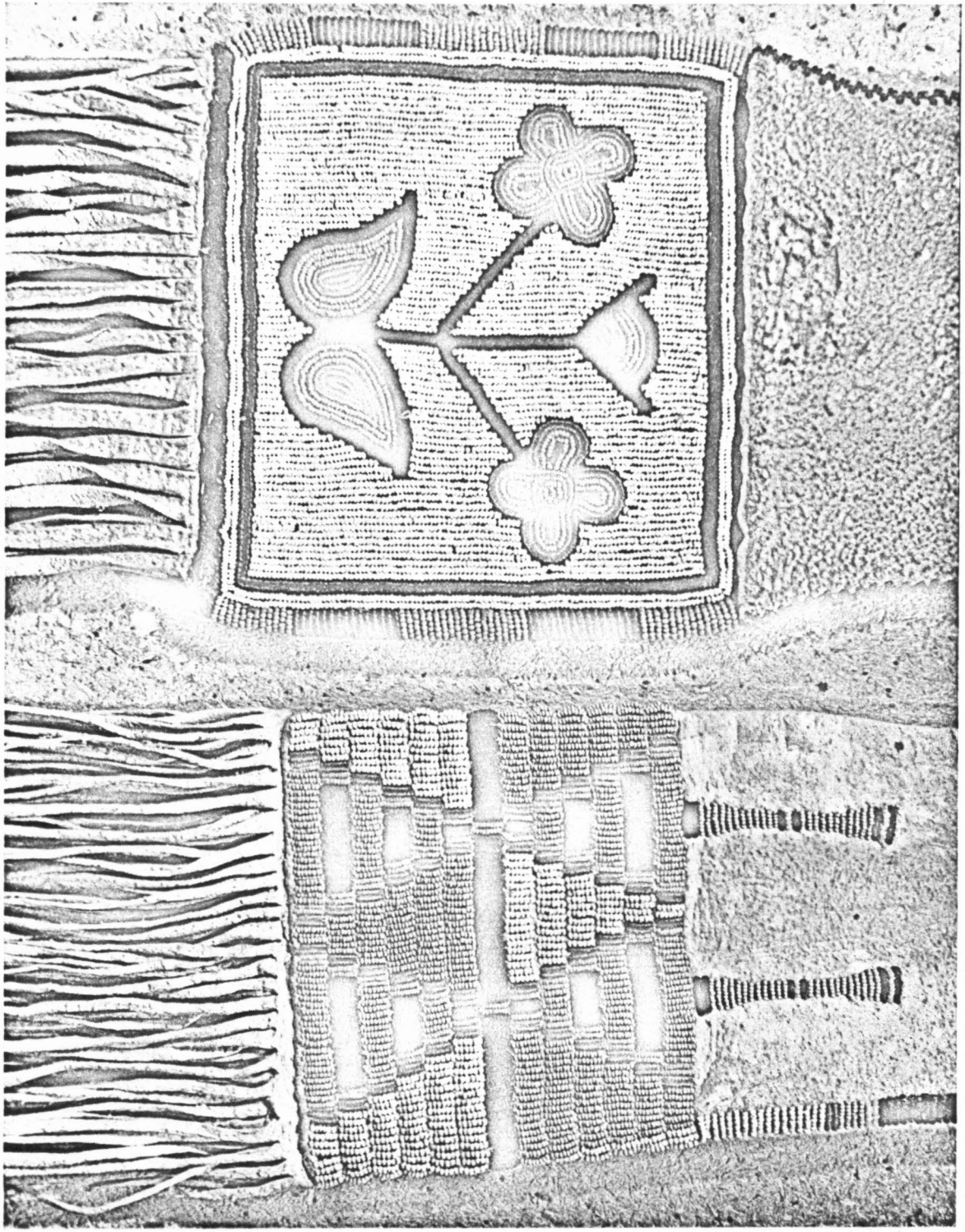


Plate 33. Examples of overlaid stitch and lazy stitch.

But they and their near neighbors in the west central Plains were conservative in their use of materials. Commonly they continued to sew their beads to buckskin and then attached the buckskin to cloth. Many examples of this appliqué can be seen in blankets, leggings, bags, pipe bags.

As long as beads were applied to buckskin, the thread used was generally sinew but when, in recent years, they were sewed directly on cloth, the thread was cotton or, more rarely, linen. Cloth, being of less firm texture than buckskin, brought about one change in technique. That is, the sewing perforations now passed all the way through the material, so that the stitches showed on the wrong side. Many of the most elaborate and brilliantly colored examples of Sioux beadwork date from this later period, when the beads were laid lavishly on backgrounds of red or blue cloth, or black velvet.

While cotton thread does not wear well, a waxed linen thread is an excellent substitute for sinew.

Weaving

In early days, western Sioux women did not weave either quills or beads. Weaving was an eastern art, practised by the Woodland Indians and, occasionally, by the eastern Sioux. The weaving frame used by these early weavers was a bow, with a number of warp strings strung on it in the position of the bow string and with perforated pieces of birchbark used as spreaders. In time, an oblong wooden frame took the place of the bow and this frame has finally found its way to the western Sioux. It was introduced, as far as known, by white teachers in the Indian schools but has become popular lately for articles made for sale. Bead weaving, by this method, is an easier and quicker process than any method of sewing and it is also well adapted to the Sioux geometrical style.

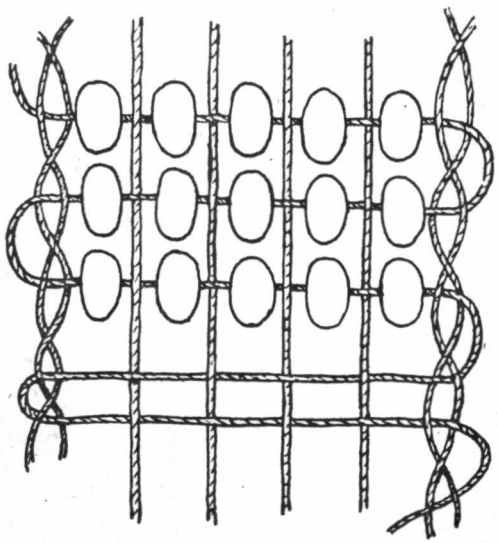


Figure 12. Bead weaving—single weft.

Woven bead work was used for headbands, armbands, scarfs, garters and belts. Strong cotton threads, forming the warp, are wrapped around the frame to the desired width. Beads are then strung with a fine needle on a thread that cor-

responds to the weft, and woven into the warp threads until the desired length is obtained. Then the warp threads are cut and trimmed into end fringes.

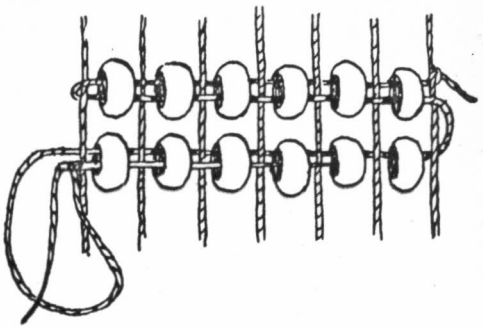
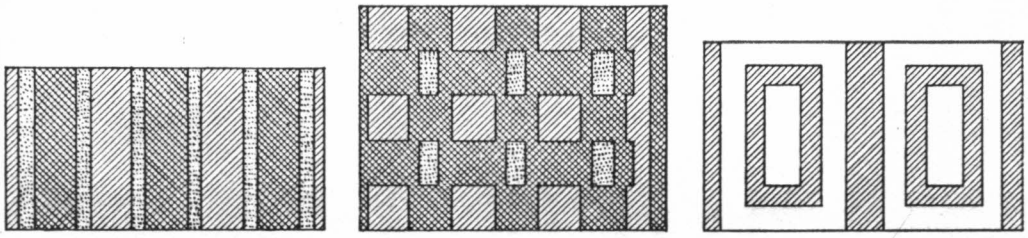
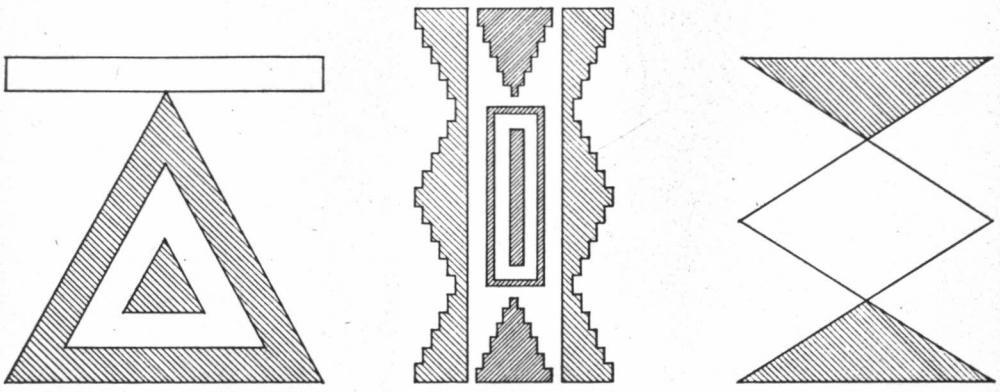


Figure 13. Bead weaving—double weft.

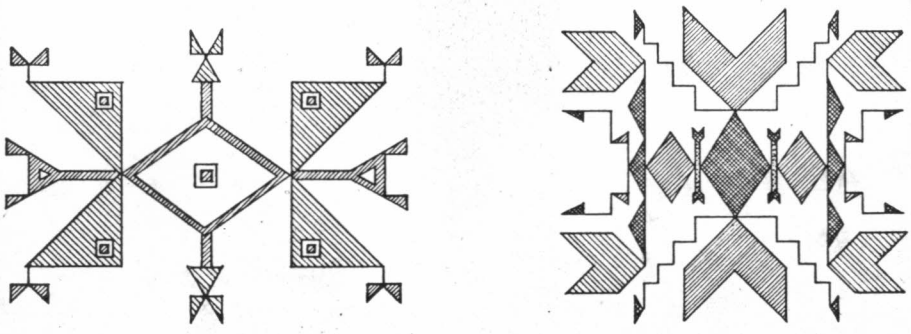
The weft may be single or double. In single weft (*Figure 12*) a single thread, strung with beads, is passed in and out of the stretched warp, a bead being placed upon it between each two warp threads. In double weft, (*Figure 13*) the weft is strung with beads and laid across the whole width of the warp, so that one bead appears between each two warp threads. Then the needle and thread are passed back through each bead, on the other side of the warp.



PONY BEAD PERIOD 1800-1840



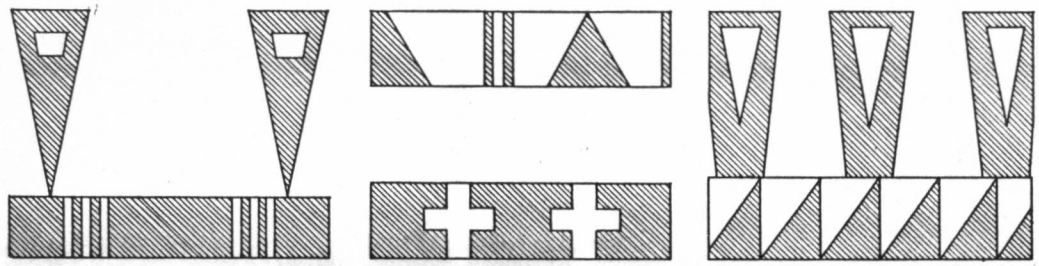
FIRST SEED BEAD PERIOD 1840-1870



SECOND SEED BEAD PERIOD 1870-PRESENT

Figure 14.

CHRONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF BEADWORK DESIGNS OF CENTRAL PLAINS



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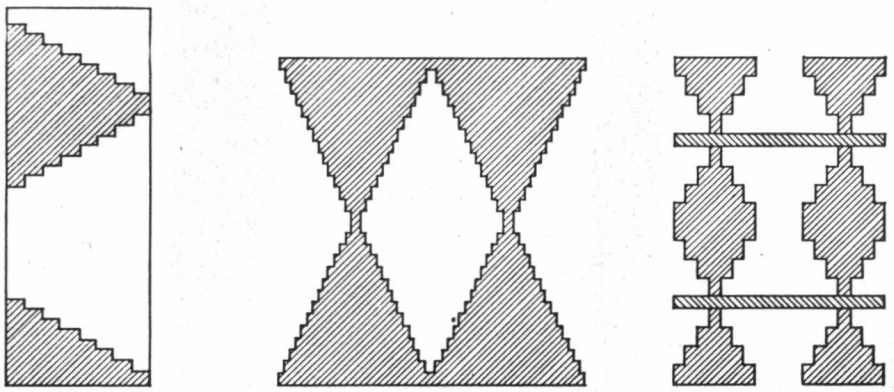
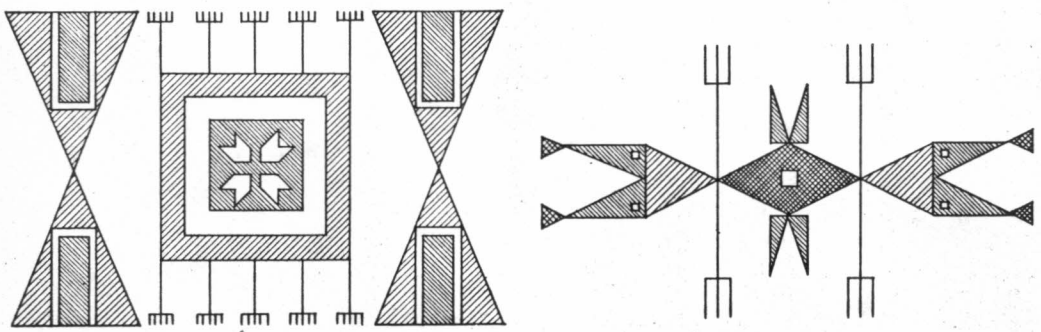


FIRST SEED BEAD PERIOD 1840-1870



SECOND SEED BEAD PERIOD 1870-PRESENT

Figure 15.