



An Essay on Beadwork

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GBI Knowledge Center



Background

I'm an artist/craftsman. I learned beadwork by being self-taught and exposed to a variety of examples over the years. I am also close to a Native American woman who is among my best friends, and a fine traditional beadworker.

I became a bead researcher over 25 years ago. I have had personal curiosity about the origins, development and dispersion of beadwork skills, and have been encouraged to investigate and teach others about it.

I have posted on this topic on the Bead Chat Line and it is a subject of considerable interest. At The Bead Museum, it is among the most frequently asked questions. (I shall compose a series for the Bead Museum Quarterly, soon; what I cover here, I hope, helps that process.) In 1999, I lectured to the Baltimore Bead Society on this topic and preparation for that helped me clarify certain ideas and chains of events.




Part One

Our knowledge about the history of beadwork is considerably less than perfect. It is also quite complicated, given what we do know. The art of beadwork combines textile and fiber arts with the use of beads. For beadwork to happen, the beads must exist, and they must be available in quantities that make beadwork possible.

Thus we can't separate beadwork from the production of beads and we find that when the beads become available, the work is established and practiced. There were different sorts of beads at different times and places. Beadwork is also dependent upon certain fiber skills that can be related to other arts or crafts, such as weaving, netting, sewing, plaiting, and basketry (to name the important ones).

In any area where we find beadwork we can be certain that some participants also have requisite fiber skills that make beadwork possible. In many instances, especially in modern times, beadwork is not "created from whole cloth" (pun intended), but is introduced from elsewhere. Instead of thinking of it as an "indigenous art form," it's more likely that beadwork skills have been dispersed.



Like, “here are some beads, and here are some things you can do with them.”

What is “beadwork”? That’s a helpful question to define parameters. Many people do not realize there is a difference between “beadwork,” and “work done with beads.” The primary function of a bead is to be strung, as upon a fiber, thread, cord, or wire. (How obvious is that?)

Typically, when a group of beads are strung together, as with a necklace, the stringing is simple and straightforward, and the presentation causes us to focus on the beads themselves. The beads are the important parts, not their placement, though their placement should ideally enhance the beads and make the construction more than just the sum of its parts.


In beadwork, it’s just the opposite. The beads in beadwork (basically -- don’t hold me to this rule in all instances) are plain but consistent, and do not hold great interest in themselves. However, their placement causes considerable interest.

In other words, it is the work done with the beads that is exciting, being derived from any number of skills and techniques that demand precision, patience, consistency, and vision. (Vision, literally and figuratively.) It is not always clear whether a piece is “beadwork” or “work done with beads.” However it is frequently clear enough to provide these primary distinctions. (Part of the job of the artist is to stretch boundaries, make new combinations, synthesize, and make inspirations tangible. Thus, we hope there will be lots of exceptions to any rules.)

The history of beadwork spans at least 5,000 years. By about 2,500 BC, we find from the tombs at Ur in Iraq that remarkable beadwork constructions were created from thousands of very tiny, fairly consistent lapis lazuli beads. These were sewn onto a base to create a covering layer of beadwork, and made into a fillet or crown. This piece still exists today. (However, not having examined it personally, closely, I can’t say precisely what the technique was.)

In the ancient Indus Valley or Harappan Culture, craftsmen made millions of tiny beads and the pieces constructed from them would be regarded as beadwork by anyone’s definition.

In Egypt, billions of small beads were made, for the express purpose of creating beadwork. People wore this in their everyday lives, as well as for funerary purposes.



As early as 500 BC (and perhaps much earlier), the netted technique that we in America call “gourd stitch” was developed and used for beadwork, broad collars, funerary jewelry, and mummy nets. All this is well documented.

The beads used in these creations were usually (but not always), made individually, by slow and painstaking techniques: stone beads from lapidary processes and “faience” beads made from quartz-powder pastes. When glass was developed, it was exploited for making small beads that might have been used in beadwork constructions.

However, the BIG turn of events was the development of making “drawn” beads, which happened at about a few centuries BC. Once it was known how to make drawn glass beads, it was possible to produce billions and billions of small, uniform, consistent beads. Although it is quite likely that one of the main reasons for doing this was for making beadwork constructions, it is a sad fact that very few beadwork pieces exist from this early period.



We do have the evidence of the beads, which have been recovered in great quantities. As Peter Francis has aptly demonstrated, these beads, which he calls “Indo-Pacific beads,” are the most numerous beads on the planet. Directly or indirectly, the presence of Indo-Pacific beads made the art form we are now familiar with possible.

Part Two

Traditions related to these skills and techniques needed for beadwork also demand a sizable quantity and availability of beads. Many works might be made, techniques developed and evolved, patterns devised, and preferences made.

In other words, at almost any time a few people who could amass a sufficient quantity of beads to do such work could make a few beadwork items from available resources. However, the establishment of a “tradition” strongly implies the possibility of receiving mass quantities of beads, over a period of time, and a stable desire to exploit the beads for this purpose.

When Europeans began to explore Africa and Asia, they wanted to be involved in goods exchanges. They discovered that beads could be used as a medium of exchange (like currency), were durable and transportable. However, they also soon found that the receivers of beads had particular tastes and desires, and that not just any bead style, type, or color would be universally popular.

The Europeans had to make smart choices and learn the marketplaces to have appropriate goods. The “Aggrey” bead is a great example of this-since it’s recorded that Europeans tried to make copies, these were unacceptable, and improved attempts were made to have a better product.




At some point, Venetians turned from making wound and blown beads to making drawn beads. Exactly how and when-and even “why” this happened is controversial. Sometime in the 15th century (I think as early as 1469), the drawn technique was developed and used at Venice for beadmaking. Large and small rosetta (“chevron”) beads were made and presumably small plain drawn seed beads.

It’s possible, and even likely, that one of the reasons for making these beads was to compete, in West Africa, in the market for Indo-Pacific beads. Indo-Pacific beads were desired by West Africans, and were part of the trans-Saharan trade with Arab lands to the north.

The products that Venetians made were sent all over the world -- Africa, Asia, and the Americas all being important importers. In North and South America, we have among the most interesting fields for studying this historical bead trade, because we know that practically no (but not precisely no) European beads existed in the Western Hemisphere until Columbus traded or gave away the first beads in 1492.





American archaeology gives a pretty clear idea of what beads were made over time, and where they went and this coincided with important developments that Venetians were making in bead techniques and styles. By as early as 1580 (or even earlier), small drawn beads and seed beads were in the hands of Native Americans. (In other areas, such as Africa and Asia, we have the possibility that Asian drawn beads may be confused with European beads, and vice versa.)


However, were seed beads common enough to allow typical beadwork (and beadwork traditions) to be established? Probably not. The likely use of small drawn beads was for necklace strands, and embroidered borders on clothes and objects, uses that survive today.

Beadwork can be easily divided into major groups according to the types of fiber techniques used to create them. The three major and most frequent types are: 1) woven, 2) netted, and 3) embroidered. Minor types include knitted, crocheted, knotless netting, application onto webbing (similar to cross stitch embroidery).

There are even non-fiber techniques such as the Huichol (of Mexico) do when they inlay seed beads into wax, or when beads are held by tension, as between two panes of glass. Some people do not consider these last two as equaling “real beadwork,” but I am not among them. These less-common techniques can be considered as being like the typical fiber categories they represent, except the work is embellished with beads.

Woven work usually (but not always) demands a loom be used; and the work itself features the typical weaving construction: warps and wefts, which run perpendicular to one another, and carry beads in a fabric or structure. Weaving is closely related to normal fabric making, and also other types of weaving such as mat making, and basketry.

Netted work is different from weaving in that the structure features one or many cords or fibers, interacting with themselves or each other in a different manner. Netted fibers cross one another, usually diagonally, may or may not be knotted at any juncture (beads may form junctures), and most easily cause the development of patterns that are diagonal in orientation.



In embroidery, the beads are basically sewn down onto a supporting surface that might be fabric, webbing, leather, or even plastic sheeting. This surface might be embellished in its entirety, or in part, or on edges or margins. Stitches generally resemble normal embroidery stitches, but in these instances also carry beads.


In considering the origins or developments of beadwork skills, techniques, or traditions, it is logical and expected that techniques will exist where the non-beaded techniques exist. Cultures that weave, such as fabric-making, tapestry work, rug-making, mat-making, or basketry, have a “head-start” on exploiting weaving techniques for beadwork.

Where netting is practiced, beadwork will be netted. Where embroidery is made, embroidered beadwork will be made. Cultures that do not indulge in these arts or crafts have much less a chance of developing such skills for beadwork.

Fiber skills might be introduced from elsewhere, and/or the beadworking skills likewise. The arguments that concern “independent invention” of skills, versus “introduction from outside” are many. Each side probably has many, many proponents and defenders. I am here telling my opinions, based on personal experience, what I understand about cultural histories, prevailing opinions, and much serious contemplation. I want to add that I am a skilled weaver as well as being a beadmaker, beadworker, and bead stringer. (One day, I hope to try basketry.)

In Asia, there are many traditions of fabric-making, netting, and embroidery, that go back in time much farther than there is any evidence for beadwork along parallel lines. So, it is not difficult to believe that beadwork pieces made in the past 300 years had antecedents in works that no longer exist. Similar comparisons can be made about Africa and Europe.

European fiber skills are quite refined, and there is reasonable evidence for women (primarily) practicing these crafts since early Greek times and earlier. These were indispensable skills that every girl or woman was expected to pursue. Thus, there is a long tradition. I know less about Africa, Asia and India, but their situations were probably not much different.



In many places such skills or crafts would have been performed by industries, but in tribal and small communal societies individuals were expected to do a broad variety of different sorts of work and art (though not always with the same degrees of interest and skill-levels). In the “New World,” some fiber skills were much less common than elsewhere on the planet. North and South Americans practiced some amazing mat making, basketry, and netting skills. North Americans did rather little conventional weaving of fabrics, because they relied a lot on dressed hides of animals for clothing. However in South America some of the most amazing and precise weaving was practiced in pre-Columbian times.

There is an unfortunate tendency to think of Indian culture as monolithic, when in fact it varied considerably from region to region, and tribe to tribe. In modern times, Indian culture has tended to meld, due to the breakdown of tribal groups, their actual extinction, intertribal friendships, the pow-wow experience, current trends in religion, and much cultural sharing.



Indians tend to band together in ways that they did not when they were the sole inhabitants of this land. So, oddly, the non-Indian perceptions of Native Americans have slowly come to actually be the case though tribal differences do remain to some degree, and people are still proud of their individual and communal heritage. (All of which is reflected in traditional dress, ceremonies, and life styles -- if we can use that phrase here.)

In any event, 100 years ago, and earlier, some Indians did certain crafts, while others did not. Plains Indians did not weave (and still do not, basically). However, they did do porcupine quillwork, which was the probable instigation for the later use of beads for beadwork. California Indians were very skilled at basketry, because they often did not make ceramics. Indians that subsisted on fishing were good net-makers.

In the Southwest, weaving was introduced by Anglos, and taken up with a ferocious enthusiasm (as was silversmithing). The earliest woven beadwork remaining consists of wampum belts and pieces made by the Iroquois (though these likewise post-date Anglo influence). The point is, Indians did different sorts of crafts in different areas, according to their needs and skills, and eventually according to exposure to outside influences that interested them.



Part Three


Beadwork as we know it and (should) think of it, is a modern art form. It demands large quantities of small uniform beads (which became available in Asia with the Indo-Pacific production, though there's almost no evidence these were used for beadwork; and from Venetian sources much more recently).

Beadwork also demands textile skills, such helpful supplies as threads and needles, and appliances such as looms, for woven work. Furthermore, while it's possible (and expected) that the occasional beadwork construction may have been made (anywhere), it takes the availability of beads, supplies, skills, and the production of many types of beadwork items to instigate an actual beadwork tradition. Practically speaking, very few works older than about 300 years still exist. Nevertheless, as we saw in earlier parts of this essay, some beadwork seems to have been made earlier in time.

In England, it is recorded that Anne Boleyn (1507 to 1536) had in her possession a cap beaded with jet (or just black) beads. In many portraits of the period, women are depicted as wearing beaded garments as well as necklaces. The beads, however, appear to have been small coral and pearl beads (for instance). Seldom is a bead depicted that might just be a glass seed bead, such as we would associate with typical beadwork.

Beadwork seems to have been embroidery-based, which would not be surprising in a culture that placed such an important emphasis on embroidery and tapestry work. I suspect that it was the European tradition of making needlepoint and tapestry works that formed the basis of modern beadwork. For the past 100 years (or so), and even now, these two crafts occasionally (or often) feature beaded embellishments.

How the loom came to be used in beadwork is unknown, and not speculated about, that I'm aware. Whether this was a European development, that was practiced in Europe and came to be exported with the beads, is as much a guess as any other proposition-though I am inclined to suspect this may have been the case.



We know that Native Americans did woven work for Wampum beads, rather earlier in time, but not necessarily prior to exposure to Anglo art and craft traditions. (Existing wampum constructions -- even the earliest ones -- are from the period after contact with Europeans.) In any event, it's easier (for me) to believe that loom-woven beadwork derives from the weaving of fabrics or tapestries. Or that this is a likely origin, especially when compared to cultures that did not indulge in weaving traditions. (How would these folks come upon the idea of creating a loom to weave beads, if they didn't already have looms for other functions?)


For me the easy-to-believe proposition is this: When large quantities of beads were available, the people who traded in them basically said "here are some beads, and here are some things you can do with them." The techniques came with the beads. Of course, the receivers had to be or become interested in the art form, and had to develop the skills necessary to produce the work (if such skills were not already performed).

This process, no doubt, also engendered local and unique variations in skills and techniques-and certainly resulted in unique and individual artistic expressions. Also, once beadwork beads were available anywhere (coming basically from Venice), they were available everywhere, and practically all cultures have indulged in some beadwork in modern times.

In North America, beadwork came to be produced by many Native Americans. But, how and when did this happen? As I have said, it's not a good idea to think and write about heterogeneous societies as though they were all one big culture. Different people (within regions and tribes) had different skills, traditions to call upon, variable access to trade goods, and variable interest.

The Plains Indians took up beadwork with considerable enthusiasm, and with few background skills that might facilitate this. Also, their exploitation of beadwork as an artistic expression has been fairly well documented. So, let's talk about this region, assuming that while it is special and unique, it also shares some aspects in common with other regions.

Prior to contact with Europeans, a typical craft among Plains women was decorative work done with porcupine quills. This was not (as has often been assumed and stated) an "ancient" art form. It probably had not been practiced for many centuries before Contact.




However, by the 18th century, it was a well-established art, performed by women and applied to the clothing and objects of women, men, and children. A number of different techniques were used with quills, but they basically involve either sewing (embroidery), weaving, or plaiting/wrapping. In terms of patterns, the types of designs that the art allows generally tended to be bold and blocky patterns (with notable exceptions, of course).

European seed beads became available to Plains Indians in quantities in the mid-1800s. At first, these beads were larger than we normally think of seed beads as being—more like the modern “pony” bead that is between 1/8 and 1/4 inch in diameter. These were also available in fairly limited colors.

When Indian women applied them to clothing, they did so by sewing the beads down in geometric patterns that clearly related to quill patterns. (My friend Jo Allyn refers to this period as “Seedbead I.”) We can say that the use of these beads became something of a fad, was dispersed as a practice, began to replace quillwork, and created a demand for glass seed beads as a trade commodity. This instigated the receipt of greater quantities and many more colors of beads.

Smaller beads were also available. This caused a dramatic change in the scale of the work and patterns, so that much more refined and intricate work was possible. (It probably also affected quillwork similarly, as it continued to be practiced alongside beadwork, often in the same pieces or constructions.) Plains women had and maintained certain color and pattern preferences, based on esthetic traditions. For instance, white remains the most popular color for the backgrounds of beadwork constructions (among Sioux women).

There has also been a greater reliance on embroidery techniques (the “lazy stitch”), that harken back to pre-beadwork skills. Patterns are still based on geometrical paintings (as on parfleche bags, buffalo robes, and teepees, for instance), though representational images (people, people on horseback, villages, and typical animals and objects) were also rendered. (The beginning of this period is called “Seedbead II.”)




We can probably assume that the development of beadwork in other regions may have occurred similarly. That is, it happened around the same time, often incorporated traditional European approaches in technique (with unique local variations or developments), grew from simple to complex in form and pattern (using first larger beads of few colors, followed by smaller beads of many colors, and with increasing availability and demand).

I don't know that we can make many more valid generalizations than these. Some groups may have begun slightly earlier (being farther East, and closer to major sites where trade goods came into the continent). Other groups, due to possible insulation from outside influences, and/or conservative attitudes about ornament and traditions, did not practice much beadwork until later. In any event, the stereotypical image that many Anglos (or modern Americans) have of ALL Indians as making beadwork, is not a true perspective, though it has tended to become more true as Native Americans become more similar to one another.

I suspect that a number of readers will be somewhat disappointed to read some of the above. I expect some Native Americans to take great exception. There is a general tendency to believe that crafts performed by indigenous people are indigenous in origin, and that they derive from "ancient" times. Beadwork is an excellent example of this.

Many Americans do not realize the across-the-world traditions of beadwork (they just think of it as being "Indian"), and many Native Americans also have similar ideas, as they are most familiar with their own works, followed by hobbyist attempts at imitating their work. Since it can be established that beadwork beads did not exist in the Plains in quantities enough for beadwork traditions prior to the mid-1800s, it stands to reason that not much beadwork was made by Indians (nor anyone else, except possibly some Asians), prior to this time.

When it is clear that typical beadwork skills also greatly predate Contact and depend upon traditions that were not typical of Native Americans, it is easier to assume that the skills came with the beads. We can use "gourd stitch" as an example. This netted technique is not unique to America and to Indian people. As we saw in Part I, it goes back to at least BCE 500 in Egypt, and is still used as a crafts-technique by Europeans.



This is not to say that Indians have beadwork because Europeans gave it to them. I do not mean to suggest anything so simple and simplistic. The point is that Indians did not “invent” beadwork-if only because it developed as a worldwide art, and was certainly practiced by the very people (Europeans) who made the beads.


The idea was expressed here at The Bead Site that before Europeans brought glass seed beads, Indians used to do beadwork with shell beads (and/or other native products). This is not out of the question nor even unlikely. It is a primary human occupation that if objects exist that can be made into beads, they will be so-made; and if beads exist, they will be strung and worn.

This is not unique to Native Americans, nor are these people excluded from such uses of time and skills. However, the idea that “gourd stitch work” as practiced by Southwestern Indians (for instance) is a tradition founded on the use of shells as beads, is untenable and certainly unprovable. Shells do not lend themselves easily to doing close repetitious netted constructions of the formal techniques typical of small rounded beads.

There is also no evidence that shells (or other materials) were made into great quantities of small uniform beads, to make such a tradition possible. Wampum is the closest Indians came to this and New York is pretty far away from New Mexico (!). Indians (or anyone else) who believe this proposition are indulging in revisionist history, and are making pop analyses, assuming a one-culture history that defies the variability of traditional Indian societies. The “roots” of Indian beadwork are old and deep. But, the art form we know now is fairly new.



Perhaps the most important consideration is not whether Indians “independently invented” beadwork, or not. The important consideration is that Native American beadwork is a unique artistic expression. It is different from any other practice of beadwork by non-Indian people in this country or elsewhere.



There are some remarkably similar expressions, among certain styles and techniques that make a case for a kind of “universality” or dispersion of these styles and patterns. I have documented this as taking place simultaneously in North Africa, South Africa, Greenland, and the American Southwest. In this instance, these necklaces look a great deal like ancient Egyptian broad collars. Not that there’s any relationship, but I mention this so readers will have an idea what I’m referring to and to get a mental picture, and to show that some styles are long-lasting or are universally similar.

In addition, even when techniques and skills may have been introduced from outside, internally, unique regional variations eventually develop that are probably local in expression (unless popularized and disseminated). On the whole, however, Indian beadwork is a unique expression of art, created by Indians and that’s what should be admired and celebrated, for its own merits.

We could also make a place for the admiration of any and all other beadwork expressions-and I believe this is what is and will happen. For the past 30 years, and especially in the past 10 years, beadwork has developed into an art form that is being exploited by a great new wave of practitioners. I am one such artist. We here in America should acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Native Americans (as the closest people to us, with unique and outstanding beadwork traditions), while respecting the facts that the new beadwork is not of itself “Indian,” nor necessarily “Indian-based,” and that beadwork everywhere is admirable.

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This is a preliminary article that has since been expanded. It was composed for The BeadSite in 2000.