

Characteristics of Metis Beadwork

By Lawrence J. Barkwell

Introduction

Metis beadwork and Metis fiddle music are the major art forms of the Metis people. Both of these artistic forms were very complimentary to their historic lifestyle on the plains of the Old Northwest, a mobile people with a horse culture. They traveled great distances as voyageurs, hunters, itinerant traders and freighters.

During the 19th century the Metis were noted for their fine floral design beadwork. They were so closely identified with this work that they became known as the “Flower Beadwork People.” Due to high quality design and craftsmanship this work was much sought after by Indians and Non-Aboriginal frontiersmen, traders and European tourists to the Old Northwest.

Beadwork provides visual group identity markers, it is also a sign of material wealth and much used for reciprocal gift-giving. Beading was used to decorate the clothing that women made for their children and husbands and was also a commercial activity for Metis women. Decorated apparel given to relatives or friends is believed to bring health and prosperity.



Lawrence Barkwell and Brian Cyr in front of the “Batoche Families” display. They beaded their own vests and Brian made his own finger woven sash.

A major characteristic of Metis beading is that all the motifs are normally connected to each other by either stems or tendrils. Designs and connecting stems use a double curve and s-curve motifs. This as “s”-curve is also a characteristic of Chippewa and Woodlands Ojibway. A second characteristic is the depiction of “feathered stems”. These are two or three bead accents running down the sides of the stems. These are also called “mouse tracks” or “Pickerel guts”. A third characteristic is to bead a mistake into the work. This action guards against hubris and excessive pride by affirming that only the Creator can make something that is perfect. These misplaced or miscoloured beads are often called “Spirit beads”.

Metis beaders often use the Ojibwa constructs by always representing four parts of the plants. Floral patterns usually include ‘four states of vegetation,’ seed, leaf, bud, and fruit or; stem, leaf, bud and flower. This cycle of four corresponds to myriad other ‘four quarters’, ‘four directions’ and ‘four stages of life’ analogies in Ojibwa/Chippewa thought.

Technical Aspects:

Nearly all Metis beadwork is produced by using an overlay or appliqué beadwork using a “two needle” technique. This is variously called appliqué-stitch, spot-stitch, couching-stitch or overlay-stitch. The other two common techniques not discussed here are the lane-stitch and the Crow-stitch.

In this appliqué style the beads are strung on a double thread on one needle, laid down on the pattern then couched or tacked down with a single thread on a second needle. Couching can be done between each bead or between every second or third bead.

Technique – The Metis begin beading the centre of a flower with a centre bead, then bead circular rows out from the centre to the desired size. Petals are begun at the outside outline then filled with concentric rows of beads along this outline. They usually change color every two rows. Cree and Ojibway work differs in that they will fill by beading straight lines across petals and flower centres. The Metis leave the dark cloth as a background to the beaded design whereas the Ojibway fill the background with beaded lines of (usually) white beads following the contour of the motif. Similarly they outline a leaf and fill with lines following the contour. The Metis and Dene of the far north used to place accents on the tips of leaves and the outside centre of flower petals by using one to three copper beads for contrast to the base color.

Edging – The edges of Metis cloth bags, vests, wall pockets etc are edged with bias tape or ribbon folded over the edge. This is then decorated with edge beading of a variety of styles: single-bead edging, Zipper edging, stacked bead edging, scalloped edging or rolled edging. For single bead edging, take up one bead, pass the needle and thread from the front side through the material one eighth inch below the edge, then return the needle through the bead from below. Take up the next bead and repeat. This produced a flat row of beads along the edge. For zipper edging begin with a single bead as before, then take up two beads, pass the needle below the edge and then return the needle through the

second bead and pull the thread tight. This will make the bead between the two that are flat to the edge stand up vertically creating a Zipper effect.

Metis motifs:

The most familiar Metis motif is the Metis five petal Prairie Rose which is in fact a trademark of Metis women for over two hundred years. The flower motifs include, buds, stems, and tendrils, seeds, leaves (small plant as well as tree leaves such as Oak, Ash and Maple), berries and grapes. The Metis use a variety of rose designs and are also fond of beaded hearts. Northern Michif-Cree also use a butterfly motif.

Beading Materials and Supplies

Base – The Metis bead on articles made from deer hide (buckskin), moose hide, and elk hide. All beadworkers much prefer brain-tanned hides because they are soft and easy to work with. For cloth articles it is most common to bead on Melton cloth, Stroud cloth (a coarse square or plain weave cloth), Velvet, and woollen cloth. The favourite cloth colours are; black, dark navy blue and deep scarlet. Most Metis put a layer of canvas on the underside so that when sewing the thread is stable where it enters the cloth and doesn't move around because the foundation is kept from stretching or contracting. Paperbacking with the pattern drawn on it is stapled to the top surface.

Thread – Old style beading used sinew for the thread. Today beadworkers used mercerized cotton thread (usually size 50) that has been waxed with beeswax or polyester, nymo thread (although this stretches). It is said that by waxing the thread it gets longevity of 125 years. Waxing also aids in avoiding knots and tangles in the thread as you work.

Beads – The most common size bead in use today is a #10 seed bead. Beadwork done in the 1800s often used very small #13 to #16 beads. For larger beads the standard is the Pony bead.

Needles – Usually the needle size matches the size of the beads being used. For example a #10 needle for #10 beads a # 14 needle for #14 beads, because the larger needles will not go through a small bead. The preferred beading needle is a #10 sharps needle. These are short fine needles with a thin eye. Many people use a #6 Glovers needle for couching on moose hide and other leathers. The end of the Glovers needle is like a small knife blade and it is easier to sew through two or more layers of hide with these needles.

Commonly beaded articles:

There are three categories of articles that are beaded; clothing, utilitarian objects, and household objects.

Clothing: Jackets, coats, vests, buckskin shirts, frock coats, hats (e.g. pillbox-style “smoking caps”), moccasins, trousers, full and half-leggings, mittens and gauntlet gloves. Beaded buckskin jackets and shirts became a status symbol on the plains. These were favoured by Army and Police officers, traders, Army Scouts and of course tourists to the

Old West. Notable examples are General George A. Custer, Buffalo Bill Cody, Annie Oakley, and Theodore Roosevelt.

Utilitarian objects: Pad saddles, saddle blankets, tuppies (dog blankets), cruppers, head stalls, shot pouches, bandolier bags, tobacco bags, Octopus bags, pipe bags, knife scabbards, and panel or “fire” bags.

Household objects: Tea cosies, wall pockets, shelf valences, pocket watch holders, needle cases, lamp pads, baby-carrying moss bags and footstool upholstery.

Elements of Design

Metis designs sometimes contain the "X" and cross motifs which suggest the cardinal directions as well as Ojibwe spiritual concepts. These designs are pictorial or diagrammatic metaphors of a larger, sacred universe; the four quarters and asymmetrical design reconcile opposites, just as the cosmos creates balance and harmony. Asymmetrical yet balanced designs and compositions are also suggestive of male-female balance and harmony. The asymmetry and alternating elements express Anishinaabe/Metis spiritual concepts; they visually reconcile opposites, just as the cosmos creates balance and harmony.



This detail on a beaded Fire Bag demonstrates asymmetric balance and an X pattern. The four elements are leaves, seeds, flowers and stems. (A variation of an 1870s Metis pattern, made by Lawrence Barkwell.)



Lawrence and David Barkwell
Lawrence wears a Beaded Vest and Shot Pouch

Resources:

One of my teachers, the late Gary Johnson of Lodge Grass Montana, told me that when he was growing up in Ohio his grandmother and a local schoolteacher were his teachers. At that time the only written resources he could find were directed primarily to the Boy Scout Order of the Arrow groups. He asserted that the best modern day written resource was ironically written by a German, Geog J. Barth:—*Native American Beadwork: Traditional Beading Techniques for the Modern Day Beadworker* (Stevens Point, WI: R. Schneider Publishers, 1993).

My primary instructor in beading, Jennine Krauchi of Winnipeg, suggests that any serious student of beading subscribe to the *American Indian Art Magazine*. I have found that its back issues are a tremendous resource. She also suggests the excellent resource book *North American Indian Jewellery and Adornment*, by Louis Sherr Dubin (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams Inc. Publishers, 1999). Lois Dubin is also the author of *The History of Beads from 30,000 B.C. to the Present*. Dubin says that the modern beadworkers have taken over from the traditional Native American shaman who communicated spirituality through music, dance and sacred imagery.

My friends, Louis Garcia¹ and his wife Hilda Red Fox (both beaders) from Mni Wakan Oyate (Fort Totten, N.D.) recommend *Whispering Wind Magazine* a bi-monthly magazine that features Indian crafts, culture and history. Both Gary Johnson and Louis Garcia have contributed numerous beadwork articles to this publication.

¹ Spirit Lake ethnographer and historian.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute