

THE COURTING FLUTE IN NATIVE AMERICAN TRADITION

Ed Wapp, Jr.

*"I was one part of a red cedar standing high on a high mountain.
I was taken by a young man, whittled, and given a sweet voice.
I became the night voice of the young man speaking to his sweetheart,
Singing his tender thoughts."*

The Courting Flute is one of the three melody instruments used by Native American people and is an integral part of traditional Indian music. Among Native Americans, the voice is also regarded as a melody instrument. The Apache violin completes the trio of Indian melody instruments. Rarely are the three instruments used ensemble.

Used principally by Woodlands tribes, Southwestern tribes and tribes from the Southern and Northern Plains, the Indian flute was once a means of transmitting signals in the night. The flute, however, was most frequently used as a means by which a young man could communicate his love.

Flutes are made from red cedar, redwood or pine, but gun barrels and other materials are finding their way to the skillful hands of the flute craftsman-musician. Flutes are frequently decorated with small carved animals, quillwork, beadwork, leather streamers and feathers.

Melodies for the flute are both traditional and contemporary. Traditional melodies are transcribed and transposed from the love songs, riding songs and dance-related songs that are historically part of the songs and song systems of many Native American communities. Individuals also compose pieces especially for the flute and the composed songs are frequently based in the contemporary experiences of a tribe or the composer.

The flute tradition among Native American people is not a static form. New materials for crafting flutes are being used by flute musicians and expanded needs are represented in broadened flute repertoires. Like any dynamic, expressive cultural tradition, changing times and lifeways are reflected in the ways groups of people maintain or alter the parts of their lives that represent an historic sense of community, and for the moment, few young Indian people are learning the art of crafting and playing the Indian Courting Flute.

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*Pour Elk, a Sioux dandy, shows the examples of Lazy Stitch, overlay, and quillwork designs of the 1880's.
BAE photo.*

ARTWORK OF THE NORTHERN PLAINS INDIANS

Tom Kavanagh

The artwork of Northern Plains Indian Tribes reflects both the ecological and cultural environments in which the Northern Plains Indians live.

Materials used, such as buffalo, deer, and elk hides, deertail hair and porcupine quills and earth color paints, were what was available. Artwork was applied to every utilitarian and ceremonial article that could be decorated.

Traditional artistic expression was not formalized into 'art for art's sake,' but developed from esthetic origins of a more functional nature. It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate a piece of Indian artwork from its cultural environment. Such work can be admired for its technical complexity and its mastery of the media. However, it cannot be fully appreciated without a knowledge of the culture that produced it.

The horse-pastoralist-buffalo hunting economy of the Plains required that the Indian camps move every week or ten days in order to find sufficient grazing land for the horse herd, which might number close to 2000 horses for a single camp. Camp equipment and home furnishings were limited to those things which were essential to this nomadic way of life and were easily portable. But within these limitations,

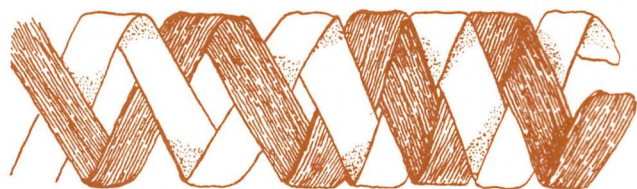
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there developed ample opportunity for artistic expression.

The article itself and the available materials determined the kind of decoration to be applied. Clothing, bags, and cases received an applied decoration of beads or quillworks while rawhide containers and large articles like tipi covers were painted.

The shape of the article also helped in determining the designs. Parfleches, the rawhide suitcases of the Plains, were painted with designs which followed the shape of their closing flaps: usually, rhomboids and rectangles, divided into diamonds and triangles of opposing colors. Round designs were used on shields, and 'knife blade' outlines were beaded onto knife cases. Another category of decorations was reserved for use on moccasins.

Quillwork and beadwork often served the purpose of covering seams or other portions of a garment. For instance, the narrow quillwork strip which covered the shoulder and sleeve seams of a man's shirt was expanded into wide strips of design, in contrasting colors, as beadwork was applied to the garment.

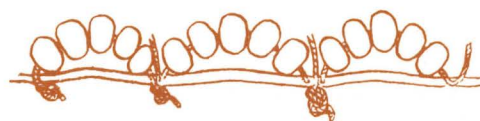


Narrow bands of porcupine quillwork, varied in color, are sewed together to form the designs as in Poor Elk's pipe bag.

Porcupine quills are too short to cover a large area satisfactorily. Consequently, large areas were covered with narrow bands of plaited quillwork. Designs were created by varying the color in each quill band and by placing a number of bands side by side.

The technique of applying quillwork, made up of narrow bands of color, to large design surfaces was carried over to beadwork techniques. "Lazy Stitch" beadwork was made by sewing a number of beads to the material with a single thread. A stitch was taken in the material, six or eight beads were threaded, and another stitch taken. The process was repeated with each successive set of six beads sewn next to the previous one. The finished piece had a ridged effect very similar to the banding of the quillwork. The Teton Sioux favored the "Lazy Stitch" beadwork.

The Crow and Blackfeet nations however, preferred the "overlay" technique. In the overlay tech-



Lazy Stitch designs, with the ridged effect, are similar to quill designs in the arrangement of bands of color to create a total design.

nique two threads were used: one threaded the beads while the other sewed them down. No ridged effect is produced with the overlay technique.

Contrary to the attempts of some scholars to attach symbolic meaning to Northern Plains Indian beadwork designs, most Northern Plains Indian craftsmen insist that beadwork designs are not representational and rarely disguise any symbolic meanings. It is common, however, for beadworkers from one tribe to have names for particular designs—"tipi," "horse-tracks," and "bear's paw"—and those names may, though not necessarily, extend to other Indian tribes. Some designs may be associated with specific symbols. For example, a turtle design may be beaded on a woman's dress to invoke the protective power of the turtle to guard the owner of the dress from diseases that most commonly afflict women. But, it should be noted again, the "turtle" is not regarded in the same way by all Northern Plains tribes, and the design may in fact have a completely different meaning from one tribe to another.

Contemporary Northern Plains arts develop from the forms and styles of the "Buffalo Days." What was "formal" wear in the 1800's is now dance and "ceremonial" wear, worn only at dances or important occasions. Though the Oklahoma tribes have been influential in the design of dance outfits, the Indians of the Northern Plains continue to maintain a unique tradition. Very few beadworkers are now involved in the creation of large articles, fully beaded dress, or matched dance outfits, because of the time, effort, and money involved. However, those who do continue in the traditional ways have kept the strength and simplicity of the designs while producing an art true to the culture that created it.



The overlay technique is more suitable to the floral designs of Crow, Blackfeet, and Cree.