

Oklahoma Indian Crafts

by Clydia Nahwooksy

On entering any Indian home in Oklahoma, from Tulsa to Oklahoma City, in small towns such as Carnegie and Tahlequah, or rural communities, like Jay and Concho, one will nearly always find Indian crafts. A majority of these items are traditional in nature and were created for use within the Oklahoma Indian community. Exceptions are those items crafted for family, friends, or, in some cases, for sale.

Probably the greatest use of traditional craft items is in local Indian powwows, traditional ceremonies, and other community related activities. The majority of crafts are made of beads and buckskin in response to the powwow tradition which has increasingly over the past decade spread beyond the southern Plains tribes in the state. A demand for such items comes from the numerous powwow clubs and related organizations which have sprung up among non-Plains groups within the state, for their members are required to wear traditional southern Plains apparel in order to carry out these new relationships. While southern Plains tribal craftsmen – whether Cheyenne, Kiowa, or Comanche – perpetuate their traditional crafts, increasingly non-Plains people are also learning the skills necessary to make beaded moccasins, leggings, buckskin dresses, and other paraphernalia. At the same time, such tribes as the Choctaws, Creeks, and Cherokees, along with the approximately twenty other non-Plains tribes within Oklahoma, continue the older style crafts traditionally their own.

While traditional crafts are in abundance, pan-Indianism has resulted in a variety of crafts which reflect the mingling of several tribal traditions. Some examples are southwestern rug and pottery designs utilized by Plains Indian beadworkers, and geometric Plains beadwork designs used by Woodlands basket weavers. Thus individual craftspeople, as they have for generations, continue to borrow ideas from other groups. Over the past decade many craftspeople have been influenced additionally by the artistically innovative work at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The Institute produces items based on traditional design, but utilizing construction techniques which are individual and innovative.

A small percentage of Indian craftspeople make a living from their work. Of those who do, the majority are creating traditional crafts to be traded or sold to other Indian people. At the same time, many craftspeople produce items for family use or solely for giving to others at the give-away, or honoring ceremony. Another group of craftspeople produce contemporary products for purchase by private collectors and organizations.

The present article focuses on the traditional craft items where skills have been learned within a family or community and passed from one generation to the next for hundreds of years. The numerous tribal people at this year's Festival have all learned traditional ways within their family or tribe. Their traditions, showing the continuity of old ways, have been carefully preserved within their cultural environment.

Demonstrating her experience and skills at this year's Festival is Mavis Doering, a Cherokee basket weaver from Oklahoma City, who learned traditional basket weaving from her mother and grandmother. Mavis also learned contemporary techniques through courses offered by the tribe and even developed techniques of her own. While she excels as a contemporary and innovative basket maker, she is still admired by other Cherokee basket makers because of her skill in gathering basket materials and natural dyes to produce traditional baskets. Mavis has mastered the use of honeysuckle, buckbrush, white oak, reed, cane, and ash for weaving and the use of black walnut, hickory, and pecan along with sassafras, wild plum, and many other materials for dyeing. She will be producing all types of traditional baskets and introducing the Festival visitor to each step in their construction, from the preparation of materials, including dyeing, to the finished basket.



Osage finger weaving

From its rich tradition of relationship to the earth and all natural surroundings, Indian crafts proliferate in Oklahoma. They are produced by the approximately fifty tribes, clans, and bands represented in the state, more than three-fourths of whom were located here through government treaties when the area was called "Indian Territory." In the past decade, increasing numbers of persons from many tribes have moved to Oklahoma, often as a result of marrying a person from an Oklahoman tribe, but just as often to relocate to a good crafts market.

The crafts of Oklahoman tribes include baskets, pottery, flute making, wood-carving, beadwork, hidework, patchwork, appliquework, featherwork, quilting and German silverwork. They continue to flourish as old ways are increasingly appreciated and practiced.