

Métis Beadwork, Quillwork and Embroidery – Patrick Young

Module Objective: In this module, students will learn about the most important aspects of the traditional Métis arts: beadwork, quillwork and embroidery.

I) Beadwork

The Métis incorporated so much colour and decoration into their clothing that their craftsmanship became an art form. One of the predominant decorations found on clothing was beadwork. It flourished in the mid-nineteenth century when First Nations and Métis women supplemented the traditional painted quill and birchbark-incised geometric forms with floral embroidery. Observers of Métis material culture have made constant reference to the decorative beadwork on clothes. Beadwork, along with silk embroidery, produced in trailing flower designs is an indicator of Métis handicraft. The Dakota Sioux and Cree people, in fact, referred to the Métis as the *flower beadwork people* because of the preponderance of flower designs in their beadwork. Thus, floral beadwork has become one of the most distinctive symbols of the Métis.

The origin of Métis beadwork designs came from experimentation and merging of various art traditions that influenced Métis style. Several Plains First Nations used geometric patterns on their tipi covers, parfleches and clothing and, up until the 1840s Métis decoration was dominated by geometric designs. The use of floral designs, which the Métis were so well known for originated from contact with the Roman Catholic missions.

Elements of European folk art were introduced by the missions on the St. Lawrence River, and later further west where French-Métis coming out of the Great Lakes region were using small, stylized semi-floral designs. For instance, the Ursuline Order in Québec mission schools, during the first half of the seventeenth century, taught local Huron, Iroquois and mixed-blood girls European codes of dress and behaviour, which included stitching and embroidery.

Métis and First Nations trading parties journeying to Québec were being introduced to these styles. When returning out of the Great Lakes region they, in turn, introduced it to groups further west where it influenced the Métis in the Red River area.

Once in the West, the Grey Nuns taught Métis women beadwork techniques and designs, which produced floral patterns and designs. The Métis women also began copying designs, which they saw in churches and on the priests' vestments. By the 1830s, increasingly naturalistic and colourful floral designs became evident on Métis products from Red River after the establishment of Roman Catholic mission schools at Pembina, St. Boniface and Baie St. Paul.

Beadwork is found on almost every item of clothing and functional hide and cloth work produced by the Métis. The glass beads they used were procured from the trading companies. Beaded clothes included moccasins, coats, vests, belts, bags and mittens. Beadwork was done on tablecloths, wall pockets and cloth frames for religious pictures.

Men's jackets, whether made from worked hide or a Hudson's Bay point blanket, were commonly decorated with beadwork. In the winter, under their dresses, women wore dark leggings (*mitasses*) fashioned from wool or velvet and brightly decorated with beads. Men's hide leggings, too, were subject to beadwork. A pillbox style hat with a tassel called a tam, which was based on the Scottish pattern, is also decorated with beadwork. Shot and tobacco pouches and bandolier bags were, also, highly decorated with beadwork. Métis people, it seemed, always wore elaborately and brightly beaded moccasins and, in the winter, mittens.

The application of beadwork went beyond items used by people. The clothing, which parents made for children's dolls was fashioned with the same

craftsmanship and artistry as people's clothes. Métis people commonly fashioned blankets and jackets for dogs who worked pulling sleds or carrying goods on their backs, as well as blankets and saddles for their horses. These outfits were not just simple pieces of cloth or leather cut to fit the animal; they were, in fact, well-made and highly decorated garments.

Beaded creations were and are an important source of income for many Metis women and families. While much of the women's beadwork decorated their families' clothing, there was always a strong market orientation for these products. The late-nineteenth century saw the height of Metis art and it was traded extensively across the Canadian Plains and the northern United States to First Nations consumers and to retailers. The bison's demise combined with an increase in European settlement led to a focus on the early tourist trade. Women went beyond producing decorated clothing items to making decorated Victorian objects such as caribou-hide purses, picture frames, greeting cards, glasses cases and ladies' caribou-hide slippers. In more northerly regions, women continued to produce traditional, decorated functional clothing items into the twentieth century.

II) Embroidery

Much like beadwork, embroidery is prevalent on clothing, personal and household items throughout the regions which the Métis traveled and lived. A common motif or design, again, is the floral pattern, which exists in a relatively narrow spectrum of colours. The flower designs are a carryover from the time when women used quills in their embroidery, the period prior to the 1850s. Flowers are usually embroidered in shade of pink through red with the buds in shades of blues and purples. The flowers' centres are white or dark yellow, and

the leaves are green. A three-dimensional effect is produced with a combination of layering. The focal point convenes at the centre of the flowers. The overall pattern is constructed of curving stems, sparsely distributed, delicate leaves, flower buds and flowers.

The introduction to silk embroidery was provided in the early Catholic mission schools in the seventeenth century along the St. Lawrence River and around the Great Lakes. The Ursuline nuns instructed local Huron, Iroquois and mixed-blood girls in embroidery and beadwork. The girls worked with European materials such as silk thread, glass and metal beads, velvet and wool and were introduced to the European floral patterns for the first time. Silk thread from France was initially used but it soon became more economical to use local materials.

Using moose hair, women adapted embroidery into the appliqué technique. The moose hair was too short to use for traditional embroidery so it was laid in bundles and then attached on cloth or worked hide at intervals with sinew or cotton thread. Moose hair tufting is now a flourishing art form, suitable for framing, as well as a means to decorate clothing. In other instances, hair was wrapped in thread to form pipes, which were attached onto the item in conjunction with the embroidered pattern. The hair would be wrapped for about half a centimetre then attached to the garment before continuing with the wrapping.

Ojibway and Métis trading parties who journeyed to Québec were introduced to this embroidery style either firsthand through the Ursuline nuns or second hand through other First Nations groups or French Canadians. These journeying groups transmitted the styles and techniques, in turn, to those working further

west, influencing the Métis in the Red River area. Once the Grey Nuns came to Red River and began teaching in the Catholic mission schools, they began instructing local First Nations and Métis girls in domestic activities including embroidery. Unlike the Ursuline Nuns in Québec, the Grey Nuns used European materials exclusively. Thus, the tradition of true European embroidery was maintained among the Red River Métis. In addition, the production of quality silk embroidered items by Métis girls was a source of income for the nuns as well as for the girls' families.

While nuns introduced European ideas about embroidery, Métis girls and women experimented with various styles and decorations once outside the nun's influence. As a result, they developed their own unique artistic tradition. Embroidery appears on both functional and decorative items such as mittens, jackets, leggings, moccasins, vests, knife sheaths, bags, dog blankets, wall pockets, pillowcases, piano covers, picture frames and purses.

On jackets, the embroidery is limited to the shoulders, cuffs, pockets and front plackets while it appears on the front, neckline and bottom edges of vests. Women would even take prefabricated items and embroider them as a means of adding their own embellishment. On any clothing item, embroidery is placed on highly visible areas not on those, which will receive a great deal of wear and, thus, deterioration.

Silk embroidery was a favourite decoration among the Métis of the Mackenzie River Valley in the Northwest Territories. After its introduction in the late-nineteenth century by Métis dispersing from Manitoba and Saskatchewan and nuns in boarding schools, embroidery soon began to appear on moccasins, gloves,

mittens and other clothes. The decorative elements began to show a distinctive northern flavour, reflecting the adaptation of this artistic flare to northern living. For instance, embroidery was used to decorate dog blankets and sled covers.

The tradition of embroidery is still alive today, though silk is commonly replaced with cotton and rayon floss or thicker wool and synthetic yarns. The floral patterns are still as popular today as in the past 100 years. Embroidered items have long been popular items in the tourist trade, but many are still produced as gifts for friends as well as for personal use and adornment. In fact, embroidered mitts and moccasins have long been given by women to husbands and male kin as special New Year's presents among the Métis in the Subarctic.

III) Metis Quillwork

The First Nations of the Americas have been doing quillwork for centuries prior to the arrival of Europeans in North America. The beautiful and elegant geometric and floral designs were noted by early explorers and depicted by artists as they traveled across the landscape. The quillwork skills did not immediately disappear with the intrusion of Europeans and the rise of the Métis. First Nations mothers taught their mixed-blood children the techniques and methods required to produce intricately designed decorations fashioned out of porcupine quills.

The Métis, soon after, began to adapt quillwork to suite their own artistic expressions. Their use of vibrant colours and bold expressions mirrored their vibrant attitude towards life. Red, blue and yellow were among the favourite colours of dyed quills as noted by writers sojourning in the Canadian West and Northwest. Through contact with nuns in boarding and residential schools,

Métis women and girls adapted their quill embroidery skills to new European techniques, such as silk embroidery, and patterns.

Unlike using trade beads or silk floss, which are ready to use upon purchase, quills had to be collected and worked before they were ready to be manipulated as a craft item. The porcupines themselves were relatively easy to catch because they are slow moving. Being nocturnal, the animals could be found resting in tree branches or in an underground burrow during the day. Once dispatched, the quills were removed before the porcupine's skin dried to prevent them from breaking. The quills would be sorted into various sizes, from 2.5 to 12.5 centimetres, and dyed by placing them in a boiling coloured liquid for three or four hours. Dyes were made by using vegetable matter such as mosses, roots and barks mixed with water and an acidic by the introduction of certain berries, urine or wood ash. The combination of vegetable matter with a slightly acidic solution made the dye insoluble. Once dyed, the quills retained their colour for a very long time before fading. The large quills would be set aside for use as backgrounds while the smaller ones were used for the more precise line work.

To attach quills to a piece of leather or cloth, a woman required an awl, which punched small holes into the material. The awl could be fashioned from a worked bone or bone splinter. The desired pattern would be traced onto the item before the holes were made, and the quills would be soaked to make them flexible and to allow the craftswoman to flatten them between her teeth or fingernails. Sinew, a fibrous and tough material from the backbone of a bison, or cotton thread was used to secure the quills onto the leather or cloth through holes made by the awl. Once the quills were sewn into the design on the surface of the garment, a tool was used to flatten them uniformly.

Even though quills were stiff and long, Métis artisans were able to manipulate them into very delicate floral designs and motifs. In fact, because of their ability to create such richly and intricately decorated items, the Métis were able to trade great quantities of their work to the First Nations tribes on the Northern and Central Plains. Quillwork could be found on shirts, leggings, jackets, moccasins, vests and hats as well as on many non-clothing items. The Métis influence in quillwork was quite strong, especially among the neighbouring Cree. Prior to 1800, the Cree produced quillwork in geometric patterns but, by the late 1820s they adopted many of the floral patterns used by the Métis.

The techniques used to make quillwork designs include wrapping, sewing, plaiting and weaving, each with their own variations. Wrapping consisted of binding a flattened quill around a long object, which could bend without breaking, such as hair or leather. "Network" was a form of wrapping common to the Métis. Using several horizontal, thin leather strips the craftswoman wrapped two strips at a time with a quill, alternating between the strips from episode to episode. This technique produced a design, which resembled a net. Wrapping was also used to produce rosettes or quilled discs, which were originally worn by First Nations men and to decorate rifle bags, saddles and tipis.

Sewing was also popular. Craftswoman bent a flattened quill under and over stitches while the quill was being sewn onto the hide. The variety of sewing techniques and the flexibility of sinew or cotton thread allowed the craftswoman to create a wide assortment of designs not possible in other attachment techniques. The spot stitch, where a quill was spiraled around the thread and then sewn onto the spot, was popular among the Métis because of its utility in producing delicate line work such as floral patterns. Plaiting involved passing

quills back and forth between two taught strands of sinew which was then wrapped around an object. Among the Métis, this form of quillwork was used to decorate functional items such as whips and handles rather than clothing.

Weaving was also used to produce quill decoration. Quills were interwoven with horizontal threads on a bow loom. The quills were arranged in between warps, or vertical threads, which ran from one end of the bow to the other and were held tight by the tension in the bow. They were made of sinew or vegetable fibre. The wefts, or horizontal threads, alternated over and under the quills to hold them in place along the warps. A desired length of weaving was completed and lined or appliquéd onto some other surface. By using dyed quills in a variety of colours, the weaver could produce assorted geometric patterns on the loom, a carry over of Cree design preference.

As time passed, however, and with trade beads becoming more common, women found they could produce equally, if not more, intricate designs by sewing beads onto garments or by using silk embroidery. Quillwork required that the people dispatched or frightened porcupines, collect the needles, prepare them and dye them before they could be used in decoration. If porcupines were not readily available, they would have to trade with other groups for the quills. Beads, cotton thread and silk floss were becoming very common in the early and middle nineteenth century across Central Canada and women soon realized the advantages of working in these media.

While quillwork declined in popularity among Métis craftswomen in the mid-and late-nineteenth century, many of the designs produced using beadwork and silk embroidery matched those made with quill embroidery. The silk embroidered

and beaded floral designs were, to some degree, copies of quilled designs. The European media were much more workable than the indigenous quills and permitted the women to further elaborate on their already complex and intricate designs.

Fast Facts, Questions and Activities:

Please refer to the *Traditional Métis Clothing* storyboard.