

Metis Beadwork

Some Hints for Overlay Beadwork

By Gary Johnson

During the 19th century the Metis were noted for their fine floral design beadwork and Porcupine quillwork. They were so closely identified with floral artwork that the Sioux even referred to them as the “Flower Beadwork People”, and throughout the century Metis beadwork and quillwork were much sought after by both Indians and white Frontiersmen alike because of its high quality workmanship and elegant design.

Because of the proximity of the Red River Country to seaboard shipping via the river and lake network from York Factory on Hudson’s Bay to Fort Garry on the Red River, Metis artists had access to fine multi-coloured seed beads, silk ribbon, wool trade cloth, cotton calicos, velvet, and other European manufactured goods in larger quantities and at an earlier date than did the Plains Indians. This fact alone was one of the major reasons that the Metis were producing very fine floral design beadwork during the early decades of the 19th century. While Plains Indians were producing what many people regarded as “crude” two and three colour pony beadwork during the same period.

Nearly all Metis beadwork was produced using an overlay or appliqué beadwork technique. This technique requires the use of one needle and thread to string the beads and a second needle and thread to sew down or ‘couch’ the bead-bearing string. This technique is described in nearly every craft book ever written that contains a chapter on bead work.

But many people have difficulty manipulating the two threads and become discouraged with the technique. There are a few simple ‘tricks’ though that can make overlay beadwork much easier to accomplish and which will contribute greatly to improving the quality of beadwork produced by this technique.

The first of these ‘tricks’ is to prepare a surface for the beadwork that is firm enough to prevent the bead thread from “humping up” or “going sideways” while you are attempting to sew it in place. Much Metis beadwork was applied to trade cloth or Velvet base. Old trade cloth was quite stiff when new, but modern wools are too limp by themselves to serve as an adequate base for good overlay beadwork. One way to overcome this shortcoming is to prepare a laminated base composed of one or two layers of ordinary tent weight canvas covered with wool broadcloth or velvet.



Extreme close-up of the lower back of a seed beaded Metis buckskin coat, design ca. 1840, made by Gary Johnson c. 1999.
(Louis Riel Institute photo collection, photo by Gary Johnson)

The laminating process can be accomplished quite quickly and easily using one of several brands of spray adhesive that are on the market. The spray adhesive is flexible and does not obstruct passage of the needle through the material. It also eliminates the need for basting the material together and prevents the various layers of the laminated base forming 'bobbies' while the beadwork is being applied. Spray adhesive is also ideal for attaching a cloth backing to your beadwork. Such backings or linings of Calico or even

silk were a common characteristic of historic Metis beadwork and serve to protect the threads and knots on the back of the beadwork from abrasion.

For most of my beadwork I use a single layer of canvas covered with a single layer of wool or velveteen. Modern velvet has a higher knap than old velvet, and velveteen has a texture that is closer to the historic material. But for items that will be subject to harder use, such as shooting bag straps, etc, I double up on the canvas. By the way, black seems to have been the favourite colour for wool or velvet used by the Metis, but dark red, navy blue, brown, and maroon were also used.



A Metis seed beaded smoking cap on black velvet, design ca. 1870. Made by Gary Johnson. (Louis Riel Institute photo collection, photo by Gary Johnson).

For items that need to be very flexible I sometimes substitute pillow ticking or even iron-on peplum for the canvas, but working with these materials requires advanced skills and great care to produce even work.

There are also some ‘tricks’ that can be used to stiffen buckskin to make beading easier if the item being beaded is going to be lined, one of the simplest methods is to apply masking tape to the back of the area to be beaded then tear off the excess when the beadwork is finished. Another common method is to baste a paper pattern on the front side of the item, and then tear the paper away from the edges of the beadwork. It is a good idea to ‘score’ the paper with a needle or awl around the beadwork before attempting to tear the paper away. This method works pretty well if the item is being

beaded with isolated designs, but, if the designs are connected by stems (as most Metis designs were), it becomes necessary to bead the stems without paper.



Metis seed beaded “sharp” or “pointed toe center seam” moccasins, red stroud or melton cloth cuffs, design ca. 1840. Made by Gary Johnson ca. 1999.
(Louis Riel Institute photo collection, photo by Gary Johnson.)



Metis seed beaded mittens on buckskin and black and red velvet with ribbon appliqué, design ca. 1870. Made by Gary Johnson ca. 1999.
(Louis Riel Institute photo collection, photo by Gary Johnson.)

References

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