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NATIVE

AMERICAN ART



THE
BEADWORK ISSUE



» **JOHN O'HERN**

John O'Hern retired to Santa Fe after 30 years in the museum business, specifically as the executive director and curator of the Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, New York. John was chair of the Artists Panel of the New York State Council on the Arts. He writes for gallery publications around the world, including regular monthly features on *Art Market Insights* in *American Art Collector* and *Western Art Collector* magazines.



» **PAULA A. BAXTER**

Paula A. Baxter is a design historian who has worked as an art librarian, curator and adjunct professor in New York before recently moving to Scottsdale, Arizona, a long-time dream realized. The author of *The Encyclopedia of Native American Jewelry*, she and photographer husband Barry Katzen have just published their fourth book together, *Pueblo Bead Jewelry: Living Design*. Their next project she claims is “the big one.”



» **BIRDIE REAL BIRD**

Birdie Real Bird, Bassanne Ahush meaning “Firsts Many Times,” is an Apsáalooke woman, leader, retired educator, historian and accomplished beader living on the Crow Reservation in South Central Montana. She learned how to bead from her grandmother decades ago. Her work has been displayed in various venues and is currently on display at the Chicago Field Museum show *Apsáalooke Women and Warriors*.



» **DON SIEGEL**

Don Siegel has been a collector and dealer of historic Native art for more than 30 years. He is most interested in Apsáalooke, Crow beadwork and the history behind the art. A number of pieces from his collection are on display at the Chicago Field Museum show titled *Apsáalooke Women and Warriors*. He currently resides with his wife in Santa Fe, New Mexico.



» **CHELSEA M. HERR**

Chelsea Herr is a recent PhD graduate from the University of Oklahoma's Native American Art History program. She has curated and co-curated multiple major Native American art exhibitions and began work with the Couse-Sharp Historic Site began in 2016, when she worked as a collections intern to catalog and store historic collections of beadwork and pottery. From there, she co-authored *The Couse Collection of Native Beadwork* with E. Jane Burns. Beginning this May, she is now the new curator of Indigenous Art & Culture at the Gilcrease Museum.



» **E. JANE BURNS**

E. Jane Burns is a retired academic living in Taos, New Mexico. After teaching for 35 years at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, she moved to Taos and began working with the Couse Foundation. In 2018, she wrote the *Couse Collection of Pueblo Pottery*, which showcases the unique array of Native pots collected by the painter Eanger Irving Couse while also explaining their relation to the land and the people who produced them. Her next project was *The Couse Collection of Native Beadwork*, co-authored with Chelsea M. Herr.



Columbia River Plateau, boy's
shirt, Umatilla, ca. 1870

From Grandmothers to Daughters to Granddaughters

The Couse Collection of Native Beadwork

By CHELSEA M. HERR and E. JANE BURNS

Powerful patterns of color and design characterize the beaded objects that the artist Eanger Irving Couse collected throughout his lifetime. Most of the 76 objects in the collection were produced from about 1830 to 1930 in different locations across the Great Plains. A number of items come from the Columbia River Plateau where Couse lived and worked during the early years of his career. All were fashioned with exceptional skill and artistry.

At the same time, the exquisitely beaded garments and accessories convey complex histories resonating far beyond their current lives in a museum setting. Although these items were produced during a specific historic era, we understand them to exist on a continuum that reaches back through many earlier generations and extends forward to include beadwork production today. Many Indigenous communities in North America create objects with vitality in and of themselves. From this perspective, objects continue to live long after they leave the hands of the artist. Generations of Native peoples have relied on and interacted with beaded objects while those objects

relied on their communities to animate them and their stories. And yet beaded items are not always intended to last indefinitely. Many artists recognize the importance of allowing a beaded object to deteriorate over time. Much like humans, who have finite lifespans, the objects they create will also eventually age.

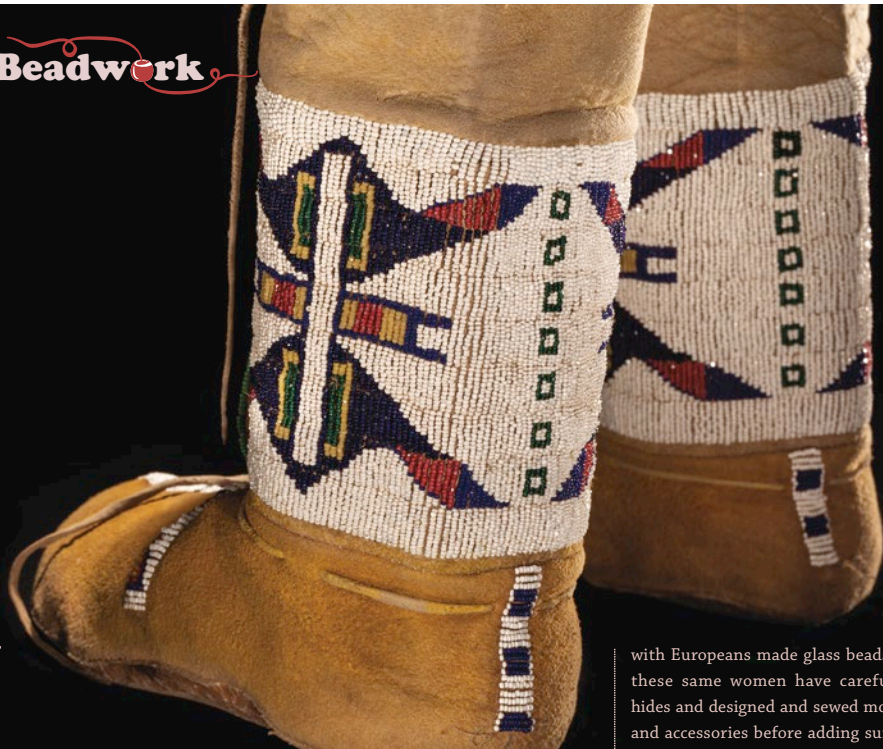
Some beaded items are designed for limited use because they are specific to an event in an individual's life. Two pieces in the Couse Collection were likely created to be used only once—the Jicarilla Apache yoke and the Apache buckskin dress. Originally, these garments would have been worn by a young woman for a coming-of-age ceremony, after which she would keep—but not wear—them for the rest of her life. While the wearer might only use the garment once, the item remains active while she continues to care for it after that singular event.

In many Native communities, especially before the 20th century, beadwork was primarily a woman's art form. Indigenous women from diverse regions across the country have covered both every day and specialized objects with beaded patterns since trade

Northern Plains, moccasins, ca. 1890



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with Europeans made glass beads available. Often, these same women have carefully prepared the hides and designed and sewed moccasins, garments and accessories before adding surface designs. Not all garments are embellished. Everyday moccasins, leggings, shirts and dresses are often fashioned from prepared hides without the addition of beaded designs. This does not mean, however, that beaded garments and objects are merely decorative.

In many instances, the process of beading is as important as the object itself. Some contemporary beadworkers describe their art as an act of contemplation, a kind of meditative stillness resulting from the skill, care, time, intention, creativity and labor required to produce a beaded garment or accessory. Other beadworkers explain that the intergenerational practice of beading fosters a unique relationship between beadworkers and the land from which they originate. Whereas most beadwork has relied on glass beads imported from Europe, one of the Native predecessors of this art, porcupine quillwork, uses quills and natural dyes to embellish animal hides. Today, quillwork continues alongside beadwork and for some, the use of beads to adorn objects is seen as an extension of that earlier Native practice.

Beaded objects embody ways of knowing and being that have been passed down from one generation of beadworkers to the next, often from grandmothers to



1. Southern Plains, high-top moccasins (detail), ca. 1900
2. Southern Plains, high-top moccasins, ca. 1900
3. Northern Plains, moccasins (detail), ca. 1890

daughters and granddaughters. In fact, the path of the beadworker as a crucial transmitter of a community's history is established at an early age. In many tribes of the Plains, young women coming of age receive a beadworking kit composed of a pouch, an awl and an awl case. A young woman's first beadwork project often involves learning from women in her family and tribe how to cover specific objects with beaded patterns. At an even younger age, Native girls often receive a doll, carefully adorned with beadwork. Some dolls actually carry beaded awl cases, knife cases and pouches. Other dolls are nestled in cradleboards that bear their own beaded patterning. Cradleboards themselves provide another key marker in the life of Native women, when family members and friends jointly offer the gift of a cradleboard they have carefully beaded to an expectant mother.

In generalizing historic beadwork as a woman's responsibility, we recognize that there have always been exceptions to this categorization. Concepts of gendered identities and gendered divisions of labor vary widely across Native communities. Even the meaning of the term "woman" is not consistent. Although European—and later American—settlers enforced a rigid binary understanding of gender, many tribes hold more varied concepts of gender identity and the responsibilities accompanying those identities. At the same time, the majority of objects represented

in this book come from regions—the Columbia River Plateau and the Northern Plains—where the majority of beadworkers have historically been women.

Although European glass beads arrived in North America by the end of the 16th century, they were not in widespread use across the continent until the early 1800s. At first large glass beads were used by Natives in some areas to make necklaces. Smaller pony or trade beads appeared later, before the importation of even smaller seed beads, initially from Venice. The demand was high. The value that Europeans saw in pelts and furs equaled the value Indigenous people in North America saw in glass beads.

But Native Americans have made, worn and traded beads of various materials since before contact with Europeans. As precious commodities, Indigenous beads made of shells, pearls, bones, teeth and stones like turquoise and agate have been highly valued and traded across long distances. Often, these goods are revered for more than just their aesthetic value. For instance, wampum, made from whelk and quahog shells, has long served as a form of currency and gift-giving, while also providing a visual record of treaties negotiated by a number of tribes along the continent's eastern seaboard.

In other contexts, Native beadwork builds on and extends modes of figural, abstract and geometric representation that existed long before the introduction of European glass beads to the Indigenous Americas. Many cultures in Native North America have painted with natural—and later commercial—pigments, on materials such as rawhide, buckskin, pottery, shells and geological formations like rocks. At times, painted or dyed hides are further adorned with quillwork or beadwork, both of which can appear together on a single garment. Weaving techniques used for basketry and textiles, especially those found in the Plateau and Woodlands, have also been adapted to accommodate beadwork.

At the same time, it is important to remember that beaded objects created in local Native American communities often bear the marks of tribal interactions far beyond their immediate geographic location. Whereas certain regions developed specific styles of beadwork, individuals in those regions have also participated in longstanding networks of cultural exchange fostered by trade, travel, warfare and intermarriage with tribes in distant areas. The history

Beadwork

of Native beadwork in North America involves complex movements of people and goods across considerable distances and extended periods of time.

It is not surprising, then, that the majority of beaded items collected by Couse in Taos came from distant Plains tribes. Taos Pueblo was a major trading center for tribal goods arriving from neighboring Native communities, especially those to the east. A letter from Virginia Walker Couse to her sister in Washington state dated July 2, 1902, explains that the Couses purchased a pair of blue moccasins she describes as “Cheyenne” from Bert Phillips, a painter and member of the Taos Society of Artists who ran a small curio shop in town. The moccasins, which have more recently been identified as Arapaho, attest to the movement of beaded items from the Plains into Taos, passing through a circuit of southwestern traders and entrepreneurs who sold Native-made goods to Euro-American tourists and travelers in the early 20th century. For Couse and others living in the Taos area, there was also the possibility of trading directly with Natives at Taos Pueblo, whether for locally made goods or items obtained from other tribes.

Many non-Native traders and buyers were motivated by a desire to save remnants of what they erroneously believed to be a “vanishing race.” The impulse was shared by social scientists, individual collectors and museum professionals of the period, who acquired significant caches of Native objects in the belief they were protecting Indigenous cultures from disappearing. Couse himself went onto the Yakama and Umatilla reservations when he lived in Washington state looking for Native-made objects to use in his artwork.

It is unclear how well Couse may have understood the cultural forces informing the beaded items he collected and portrayed in his paintings. Certain beaded objects appear frequently and others rarely. To a large degree, it seems that Couse selected and arranged the beaded garments and accessories in his compositions based on their aesthetic value. He also seems to use Native-made items as visual markers of Indigeneity, a practice shared with other painters of the Taos Society of Artists and some of the Southwest artists and photographers who preceded them. Whether beaded objects originated from the Plains or Plateau regions, Couse readily combined them in Taos, New Mexico, to convey to national and international

audiences something about what he considered to be North American “Nativeness.”

Most objects in the Couse Collection date from the reservation era (circa 1830-1930), when the federal government forcibly relocated tribes to confined areas either completely removed from their homelands or limited to an isolated portion of those lands. During this period, beadworkers from disparate tribes were housed in close proximity, which resulted in substantial transference of beading styles and designs. This is also the period when beadworkers began to make objects for sale or trade to outsiders, both European and American, while still retaining beaded materials for personal and community use. It is unclear which beaded objects in the Couse Collection were created with the intention of being sold, and which were made for use in Native communities. All result from a highly labor-intensive and demanding process that begins with the preparation of hides.

Historically, beadwork has been affixed to animal hides that range from bison and elk to deer, moose,





4. Columbia River Plateau, moccasins, Yakama, ca. 1890
 5. Columbia River Plateau, arm cuffs, ca. 1900
 All photos by Jeff Smith. Courtesy The Couse Foundation.

and others. Once the animal has been skinned, the fur is scraped off the hide to prepare for tanning. Although skins can be smoked or bleached by sunlight, the most common method of tanning involves using the animal's own brains, typically boiled in water, to soften the hide and achieve a preferred texture and color. Further labor is required to produce the sinew thread used by many tribes. After animal tendons are boiled, pounded, and shaped into usable strands, the sinew is threaded through a needle made of wood, bone, or steel. To sew or bead a garment, the needle is then passed through small guide holes in the buckskin made with an awl.

For some beadworkers, the importance of the animal goes beyond its ability to provide materials for human use. Many Indigenous North American communities consider nonhuman entities, such as animals, plants, and bodies of water, as part of their kinship networks. As such, they are to be treated with respect. Many Plateau artists thank the animal for providing its skin, and they consider the beadwork itself to augment the beauty and dignity of both the animal and the wearer. This commitment to honoring the animal can prompt the artist to retain the full shape of the animal skin, keeping its legs intact or preserving its tail in place. In some cases, respect for the animal's life can encourage an artist to bead on the skin side of the hide, so that the fur side is worn on the interior, against the wearer's

own skin. In this way, the human does not wear the skin as the animal did.

The significance of beadwork for Native individuals and communities continues today, and the art form has expanded in a number of ways. Like other modes of creativity and expression, beadwork thrives in both the art market and in personal, everyday life. While some pieces might be made for regular use, others are made for display as unique art objects. Many of the long-held functions of beadwork continue to flourish, such as the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge practiced by the beadworking families of Rhonda and Charlene Holy Bear (Cheyenne River and Standing Rock Lakota, respectively) and Joyce and Juanita Growing Thunder–Fogarty (both Assiniboine). Like a number of other beadworkers, both the Holy Bear and Growing Thunder–Fogarty families produce works as gifts, for personal use, for sale, and for display in museums and private collections. There are also a growing number of male artists working as full-time beadworkers, including Elias Not Afraid (Apsáalooke), Marcus Amerman (Choctaw), and Ken Williams Jr. (Seneca/Arapaho). Artists like Katherine Boyer (Métis) and Dyani White–Hawk Polk (Sicangu Lakota) integrate beadwork with thought-provoking and unexpected materials, such as antique furniture and acrylic paintings.

A number of these artists address restrictive narratives and expectations of “authenticity” that have been assigned to Indigenous peoples in the course of colonization. Rather than choosing between a narrow, artificial vision of what is considered “traditional” as opposed to what is deemed “contemporary,” beadworkers embody longstanding traditions of Native peoples adapting to new environments, incorporating new materials and communicating new ideas. Regardless of the ways beadworkers have transformed their art over the years, the medium remains an integral mode of self-identification, expression and cultural affiliation. As artists with rich histories and responsibilities rooted in their communities, these beadworkers demonstrate the ways in which Native peoples look toward the future, while still valuing the past. In that, their work comes full circle to join the beaded objects now held in the Couse Collection that were themselves shaped, generations ago, by both historical and contemporary circumstances. «