

https://www.taosnews.com/tempo/indigenous-contemporary-beadwork/article_3d38fd55-9094-586c-a9da-5e32e122ee57.html

Stitched in sovereignty

Contemporary beadwork from Indigenous North America

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Shelby Rowe (Chickasaw): 'Hatulpushik Ishto' (Large Butterfly), 2020, glass beads and nylon thread. Beaded strands are often used to create jewelry, ornamentation and other decorative items.

Courtesy photo

The exhibit "Stitched in Sovereignty: Contemporary Beadwork from

Indigenous North America," at the Couse-Sharp Historic Site in Taos, takes place on the ancestral homelands of and adjacent to the contemporary, federally imposed boundaries of Taos Pueblo.

"As guests on this land, we honor the history and sovereignty of the Red Willow People, who are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the return of Taos Blue Lake this year. It is their fight for self-determination and sovereignty that 'Stitched in Sovereignty' honors," according to a statement from the Couse Foundation.

The exhibit highlights the diverse ways in which Indigenous peoples maintain sovereignty over not only their lands, but also their cultures, language, crafts and identities.

Indigenous beadwork is a highly collectible art form that has been traded by tribes since ancient times. Early beads were made from shell, coral, wood, silver, copper, horn, wood, turquoise and other Indigenous stones. About 500 years ago, glass beads were introduced and became a very popular beading material used by many tribes.

While many Indigenous communities have practiced forms of beadwork for millennia, it was with the importation of European glass beads and steel needles that beading became a transcontinental tradition. Tribes integrated these trade goods into preexisting aesthetic and material traditions. Hence, beadwork has long been a material expression of Indigenous sovereignty.

Fine seed beading has become highly sought after due to its intricate detail work and vibrant colors. Beading is a difficult and delicate art, taking years of practice to learn and perfect. It is also time-consuming, with many pieces taking months or even years to complete.

Beading is often done on a leather base with beads sewn on individually or attached in loops. Native American beaded art items include papooses, moccasins, clothing and various containers. Beaded strands are often used to create jewelry, ornamentation and other decorative items.

Plains Indian beadwork is one of the more popular styles due to its very intricate stitching, but there are many collectible tribal beadworks throughout North America. Some examples include the floral beadwork from the Northern Indians, turquoise beading from the Southwest Indians and wampum belts of the Eastern Indians.

The turquoise stone, known as the "fallen sky stone," has been valued by Native Americans for over 7000 years for its beauty and spiritual significance.

As Native American tribes came in contact with one another, Indigenous designs and materials were shared among craftsmen, further enhancing the beauty and diversity of this art form.

"The artists featured here continue the innovations of their ancestors in expressing personal and cultural identity, visualizing intergenerational knowledge, and maintaining relationships with the lands they call home," according to a press release regarding the exhibit. "Through their beadwork, they reassert the inherent right of Indigenous peoples to shape, reclaim and reenvision what it means to be Native in the United States and Canada today."

For more information visit ***couse-sharp.org***.