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**Important notice:** *Bolded words represent the main idea conveyed in each slide. Underlined words indicate other central ideas that should also be stressed in your presentation.*

- 1. Introduction:** Among indigenous peoples of the Plateau region, women were the primary creators of many kinds of artwork, making and decorating a wide variety of items for everyday use and special occasions. This lesson will introduce you to some of the different types of traditional Plateau arts made by women; specific attention will be given to the way in which the introduction of new materials, such as glass beads from Europe, transformed that art. You will have a chance to view several pieces of art and see how new materials were incorporated as women applied their skills of adaptation and ingenuity in a way that made beading and beadwork an extension of Plateau cultural aesthetics.
- 2. Adaptation** can be defined as the modification of a person, process or object to adjust to new or changing resources, purposes, circumstances or surroundings.  
**Ingenuity** means the *application* of creativity and imagination. Ingenuity is the process of developing and executing new ideas—often by building on existing skills and resources (and ideas) while incorporating new ones.  
**As tribes responded to the many changes that resulted from the arrival of Europeans in their traditional homelands—including alterations to material resources and tribal economies—they applied the skills of adaptation and ingenuity in response to those changes. With regards to art, this meant refining existing skills to utilize new resources (beads) and finding new ways to continue to express their own culture through a new medium.**
- 3. The Plateau region** extends from the Rocky Mountains on the east to the Cascade Mountains on the west. It is bounded by the sub-arctic to the north and the Great Basin in the south. Within the Plateau region are the river basins of the Columbia, Snake and Fraser rivers. Using today's geographical names, the Plateau region includes the southern half of British Columbia and the southwestern edge of Alberta, as well as most of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, in addition to western Montana and a portion of northern California. This landscape varies from Palouse prairie to mountain valleys and river basins.  
Tribal nations of the Plateau include: Cayuse, Coeur d'Alene, Cowlitz, Klickitat, Kootenai, Nespelem, Nez Perce, Pend d'Oreille, Salish (inland), Sanpoil, Shuswap, Spokane, Umatilla, Walla Walla, Wenatchi, and Yakama. Shoshone and Bannock tribes also share Plateau, Great Basin and Plains cultural regions and characteristics.
- 4. Three Plateau tribes are located (presently and historically) in Montana on the Flathead Reservation: the Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreille.** "Pend d'Oreille" is the French name for the Kalispel tribe, whose native territory includes Northern Idaho. Often the term "Flathead" is used to refer to the Salish. Contrary to common assumption, this term was applied to them by other Plateau tribes who used to practice a form of skull shaping

which resulted in elongated heads that appeared conical. By contrast, the naturally rounded heads of the Salish appeared flat, thus the term “Flathead.” Bands of Kootenai live in British Columbia; their language is considered a language “isolate” because there is no other language related to it in the Western Hemisphere. The Salish referred to the Kootenai as “Lake People” or “Water People.” Several Plateau tribes, including the Kootenai and Salish, hunted bison east of the Rocky Mountains, established camps there, and regularly traded with Plains tribes.

5. **In general, the tribes of the Plateau region were fishing cultures** (although the Kootenai, Salish and Nez Perce also hunted buffalo, shared many characteristics with Plains tribes and at times lived east of the Rockies). Because of the abundance of foods available to them, most Plateau tribes had semi-permanent communities at seasonal fishing sites and returned to specific places according to the season for harvesting plant foods and fibers. Salmon, sturgeon, and other fish were central to their diet, as were camas, bitterroot, and berries. Most Plateau tribes had an egalitarian social and political structure, unlike the generally more stratified and gendered social systems of Plains tribes. Additionally, some of the Plateau tribes were pacifists, and warfare and raiding were not central to their cultures or identities. Some Plateau tribes, such as the Nez Perce and Cayuse, acquired horses in the early 1700s and this enabled them to extend their hunting areas and develop trade relations with other tribes in the Great Basin and Plains. (The Appaloosa is a Nez Perce breed of horse.)

6. **Traditional arts** of the Plateau include many forms of artistic expression and decorative techniques. Necessity demanded that a variety of containers be available for harvest, storage, transportation and holding personal belongings, but Plateau people also used their creativity and the resources available to them to create cultural items that were aesthetically pleasing as well as functional. Beauty was very important as a cultural element. Some of the types of art from the Plateau region are:

**Carving**—elaborate carving of stone and bighorn sheep horns for dishes, utensils, tools, etc.; the Plateau carving style is generally representational/realistic, with people and animals frequently serving as motifs.

**Basketry**—Plateau tribes made coiled baskets of cedar root and beargrass for food harvest, storage and cooking; and twined baskets for hats, smaller baskets, and cornhusk bags (also called “flat bags”). They used plant fibers—cedar root and bark, beargrass, cattail, and Indian hemp—to produce these bags; and they decorated them in geometric patterns, created by dyeing the same plant fibers with mineral and botanical dyes.

**Leather**—This includes tanned hides, rawhide parfleche containers (often painted), saddles, and sewn clothing.

**Decorative media** include dyed plant fibers, several kinds of shells, bone and shell beads, porcupine quills (less common than on Plains), mineral and botanical paints and dyes.

**To decorate or embellish these items, Plateau people used media (materials) from their environment as well as ones they acquired from intertribal trade.** Some of these artistic media were dyed plant fibers, several kinds of shells, bone and shell beads, porcupine quills (less common than on Plains-Indian-made items), and mineral paints and botanical (plant) dyes.

7. **Parfleche containers** are made of rawhide—frequently elk or buffalo—and are often used to store dried meat. They are common to Plateau and Plains tribes as well as tribes of other regions. The rawhide is soaked and scraped, then folded and painted. One style of parfleche common to many tribes of the Northwest is tri-folded envelopes. The geometric designs painted on this parfleche envelope are similar to designs used by tribes such as the Blackfeet and Gros Ventre (White Clay) of the Northern Plains. A standard household item of great utility, parfleche containers were regularly given as wedding presents. Because of its durability, rawhide was also used to make quivers for arrows and (later) for storing documents and papers.
8. **Coiled baskets** were a specialty of the Plateau and served multiple daily uses. These baskets varied in size, and were often cylindrical in shape, but some were conical; they could be tall or quite shallow. Geometric patterns are a common design, for example, the stair-step or zigzag pattern seen in this photograph of a wide, bowl-shaped coiled basket from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The dark fibers are cedar, while the pale golden bands are beargrass. Baskets like this were often used for berry harvesting.
9. **Twined bags**, also called “flat bags,” demonstrate the variety of geometric patterns and shapes in Plateau arts. Some were created using patterns in shades of brown and gold (depending on the plant fiber). Women also applied their knowledge of plants to create a variety of botanical dyes from barks, roots, and berries. Cornhusk, beargrass and apocynum were often used in creating these bags, as it was readily available and relatively easy to dye. Both coiled and twined bags required harvesting a substantial amount of the required plant and careful soaking of the plant fibers prior to use to soften them, in addition to the making of dyes and coloring the materials. The wide bands of un-dyed fiber at the top and bottom of the bag are typical of the Plateau style and are probably reinforced with root fibers for strength and durability.
10. **Cornhusk bags** were used for gathering and storing edible roots and bulbs, like bitterroot and camas, but they are also a means for demonstrating one’s cultural creativity and displaying beauty. Design patterns and motifs could be community-specific, generalized throughout all or most of the region, or specific to a single maker. Diamonds, chains of triangles, stars, flowers and even animal shapes are frequent motifs. Botanically-derived colors include reds, pinks, yellows, browns, and violet. This image is of the reverse side of the bag in the previous slide. Nearly all Plateau bags have different designs on each side, allowing for greater application and expression of one’s creative abilities. Because the bags are made all in one piece, rather than two sides seemed together, the women who make them have to work in two design patterns at once, adding to the complexity of their creation.
11. **Imbrication** is the process of “**false**” embroidery. It gives the appearance of embroidery, yet these designs have been twined into the bag as it was being made, much like a woven design is, rather than being applied over the top of a finished bag’s surface. The triangle design on one side of this cornhusk bag is created by alternating groups of colored triangles. Notice how the red and blue pattern wraps around the edges slightly onto the opposite surface of the bag—this is because of the construction of the bag as a single piece. The creation of such patterns using the false embroidery technique requires mathematical precision and patterning that women had to understand by heart and through much practice; knowledge

of different patterns was a valuable skill in and of itself.

You can see on the inside of the bag how the dyed fibers are twined in with the un-dyed ones to create the star pattern on one side of this bag (which dates to about 1880). During the reservation period (1870s-1940 on the Plateau), women still used naturally dyed plant fibers, but commercial dyes were also available to them after about 1890. Wool yarn, another store-bought item, was also used for false embroidery, but did not hold up over time as well as the stronger plant fibers.

12. **Recycling** is *essential* in societies where everything is made by hand and requires many hours of labor and much concentrated effort. Developing ways to re-use materials made the production of goods more efficient and less wasteful of materials and labor. When a corn husk bag got worn down or torn, women refashioned the good parts into smaller items, such as belt bags (which attached to the belt with leather strings). Both men and women used belt bags for wallets or purses. Notice that these bags still exhibit their design in a balanced way. They were used as money purses in response to a cash economy. Plateau women continue to decorate and embellish these smaller bags as well as harvest bags, as the art itself is a marker of cultural identity.

13. **Plateau tribes traded these large harvest bags to other tribes** who may not have had the same resources to make them or who preferred the Plateau craftsmanship and style. Intertribal trade was often on a small scale, between family groups or individuals, but there were also large trade centers on established routes (as you can see in the map) where tribes from many regions would meet—sometimes annually—to trade, intermarry, and share news. (Notice the Salish trade center in the Bitterroot Valley.) The Plateau region was an especially busy place in terms of trade with tribes from the Great Basin region to the south and the Plains to the east. The Nez Perce and Shoshone tribes, for instance, had well-established trade relations with Plains tribes, and they also traded Plains goods to other Plateau tribes.

In addition to trading material goods, **tribes and individuals traded ideas, including ideas about artistic design, composition and technique.** Over time some tribes within a given region “specialized” in certain items, design compositions, or techniques, and other tribes could recognize their work. This Plateau bag, shown front and back, was acquired by a non-Indian rancher on the Crow Reservation between 1890 and 1930, and was probably a trade item from earlier years. It contains commercial jute fibers in addition to cornhusk and naturally dyed wool yarn for the imbrication. (Because of its strength and durability, apocynum (Indian hemp) was also used in some bags instead of or in addition to cornhusk.)

14. **Traveling along intertribal trade routes**, such as the Kootenai-Cree/Métis alliance, glass beads of European origin came to the Plateau region long before Europeans or Euro-Americans did. Until about 1820, glass beads were scarce. The first beads were “pony beads” in a limited quantity and small range of colors. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, smaller “seed beads” became readily available in a great variety of colors and were widely traded and purchased both between tribes and traders and among tribes.

There are several types of seed beads, which are often defined by their luster (brightness). The pink, blue, and red beads in the upper picture are faceted or “cut” beads. They have flat sides that reflect light and give the beadwork a sparkling appearance. In the lower example, the white beads are also cut beads and they are semi-transparent. These translucent faceted beads were common in the mid-1800s, but are rarely seen on beadwork after 1900 until recent years. The blue-gray ones were called “Russian” beads, perhaps because

they first appeared in the West with a Russian fur trader. Most of the seed beads available through trading posts were opaque (solidly colored). Some of these beads had a slightly murky hue, such as the yellow ones in the flower, and they are referred to as “greasy” beads.

15. **When beads were added to the available artistic resources, inter-tribal influences on technique and composition became even more apparent on the Plateau.** The companies who controlled the fur trade, such as the Hudson Bay Company, sent their Métis (mixed heritage) employees west to establish trading posts and attract business. The Métis were of French, Scottish and Chippewa and/or Cree heritage, usually spoke two or three languages, and were extraordinary bead-workers. When they arrived at the Plateau, the Métis had already had access to European beads for 200 years, and they brought their designs, skills and beaded clothing with them.

Métis beadwork is distinctly botanical, often with a tri-foliate (three leaved) design of leaves and flowers in bright colors. You will notice that sometimes the colors are not “realistic”—perhaps because these were the only colors of beads available to the artist at the time, but maybe realism in terms of color was not important to the aesthetics. Some Plateau beadwork shows similarities to these artistic qualities, particularly among Plateau tribes along the Rocky Mountains.

Like the belt bags made from worn corn husk bags, small pouches such as this one on the top (shown front and back) were often made from recycled clothing. The bag on the left is from the Flathead reservation. It was made from a uniform sleeve, maybe from a soldier at one of the forts in Montana. The scalloping technique in white beads around the star is a technique much used by the Métis of Chippewa (Ojibway) descent. During the fur trade years, many Métis intermarried with tribes from the northeastern parts of the Plateau region. Later, landless Métis, as well as Chippewas and Crees, settled on the Flathead Reservation in its early years and intermarried with the Salish, Pend d’Oreille and Kootenai living there.

16. **Although not all scholars agree on the amount of influence the Métis had on Plateau beadwork, they have identified certain common styles** and techniques both groups have in common. For instance, some of the early Plateau foliate and floral designs often featured nearly symmetrical floral motifs in unrealistic colors, with stems branching out laterally and a double row of beads outlining the floral shapes. Like the fur trade tribes, the Plateau tribes were not picky about colors in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and many of their beaded items from this period show an abundance of colors and hues, but the Kootenai had a preference for dark green backgrounds.

17. **To create these designs, Plateau artists used beading techniques** called overlay technique and two-needle appliqué. These techniques enabled the artist to make tightly beaded lines. Because beading allowed the artist to create curvilinear shapes, the designs did not have to be geometrical. In contrast, twining and false embroidery limited the artist to straight lines, sharp angles, and rectilinear shapes. The geometric designs, such as the flower motif above, remained abstract. With beads, however, the artist could make naturalistic shapes and the popular flower motif became vividly realistic. Plateau artists were able to bead flowers that were so realistic in appearance that they were identifiable as a specific species, such as this iris (lower image) which was created in the late 1800s.

18. The **star and flower motifs** that preceded beadwork persist into the 20<sup>th</sup> century as widely popular motifs on twined and beaded bags. They sometimes varied in form from tribe to

tribe. Although cornhusk bags were still made for harvest and storage, after 1900 they were increasingly made as handbags, used as an accessory to ceremonial dress, and prized as heirlooms, just as many beaded bags were. These two women are the daughter (left) and wife (right) of Sheta-mo-on-e, a leader who was both Yakama and Umatilla. (With the reservation system mixing tribes together, tribal intermarriage became very common at this time.) You can see that in 1900, the traditional twined hat and bag are still part of cultural dress, as are the beaded hand bag and the belt bag with a beaded rose motif. By this time, beadwork had been totally incorporated into the aesthetic of Plateau tribes. (A cultural aesthetic is a culturally specific sense of beauty and design.) Beadwork continued the tradition of beauty and artistic talent important to Plateau women and became representative of who they were as artists and as citizens of their tribal nations. In that sense, Plateau women adapted beading into their pre-existing cultural framework.

19. **Plateau bead artists rather quickly developed their own style of beadwork**, building on two artistic preferences: the sense of balance and near symmetry as seen in their geometric designs and lively floral motifs. To these influences they added a third element—the realistic representation of actual bird and plant species from their own environment.

The bag on the left was created around 1880 using the translucent beads preferred at that time. You can see that the birds feature natural colors in addition to realistic shapes, as do the flowers. The background of this bag is done in a beading style called contour beading—the artist first created the items in the foreground and then beaded the background in lines that bend around the shapes of the birds and plants, so that the background enhances the shapes in the foreground. Contour beading can be difficult, as the artist has to determine how to make the shapes fit together in a balanced way, and when it is done well (as it is in this design), it creates a sense of movement that enlivens the overall composition.

The bag on the right, which dates to about 1890, is another example of the ability that Plateau women achieved in realistic representation of actual, identifiable plant and bird species. The yellow flowers at the bottom are the glacier lilies that grow in abundance in mountain meadows of the northern Plateau. At the top of this bag, songbirds are perched on a flowering branch, perhaps service berry or wild plum. These pieces of beaded art are examples of how the art of the Plateau became even more representative of the Plateau as women created realistic compositions that depicted elements of their region's natural environment.

20. **From the 1880s through the 1920s many Indian children (even young adults) were sent to boarding schools** in an attempt by the federal government to “Americanize” them. The education of Indian girls and young women centered primarily on domestic chores, such as sewing, laundry, cleaning and food preparation. Embroidery was very popular at this time and reflected the Victorian style of the era; flowery compositions such as bouquets and May Day baskets were frequent themes, as were lovebirds and roses. Victorian designs have a “Valentine” quality to them, and this quality was adopted into the design repertoire of Plateau beadwork. At this time, beaded bags were created for two functions: first as artistic heirlooms displayed at cultural gatherings and, second, as items to sell to white collectors. Thus, Plateau women applied their ingenuity to making beaded bags that appealed to a white American sense of beauty or aesthetics.

Compare the two bags on the left: you can see that the bag with the pansy on it still looks new—probably because it was created for sale to a non-Indian. (It is from the collection of Fred Mitchell, who collected over 650 beaded Plateau bags.) On the reverse side of this bag is a beaded illustration of Santa on a sled—a very “American” theme! The

rose bag above it is worn at the edges, indicating that it was well used and likely not made for sale. It also has a shoelace for a handle, probably because the original leather or cloth handle wore out. This image is the other side of the bag with the irises you saw earlier in the presentation, as the practice of creating different designs on each side of the bag continued.

The bag in the center shows the May Day basket design typical of Victorian embroidery and postcards of that era. The reverse side is twined cornhusk with a geometric pattern. Perhaps the woman who created this bag wanted to demonstrate that she was both a modern American woman *and* a traditional Plateau woman, or maybe she wanted the bag to appeal to collectors who wanted a bag with a familiar Victorian composition as well as an “authentic” “Indian” look.

21. **Until 1924, when the Indian Citizenship Act passed**, Indians were not American citizens in a legal sense, unless they applied for citizenship. Nonetheless, many of them joined the U.S. military at the start of World War I and fought overseas. This era was a very difficult time for Indian people in this country—they had been stripped of their land, their cultures were being systematically dismantled, and they were inhibited from practicing their indigenous customs or teaching these ways to their children. In addition, most of them were impoverished. Joining the military of the government that treated them so wrongly may seem like a counterintuitive act, but in reality it was a way in which Indian men (and, in World War II, women) asserted their identities as both Indians AND Americans.

**Plateau beadwork from this time reflects the patriotism of American Indians**, as these two pieces illustrate. The American flag and bald eagle were widely utilized motifs from 1915 through the 1940s.

22. **Plateau beadwork of the mid-20th century** reveals an explosion of new motifs in ever-more realistic depictions of culture and identity. The work from this period is absolutely ingenious in its detail and style. For the first time, Plateau Indians themselves became a central motif in their beadwork—often as Indian cowboys or women at their homes. One reason for the “Indian person” motif is the Pendleton Rodeo, a huge cultural event attended by whites and Indians alike each summer in eastern Oregon. Another reason may be that pop culture in the U.S. tended at the time to glamorize a generalized “Indian” aesthetic while also heartily embracing a romantic notion of cowboy culture. You will also see in beadwork of this era a lot of realistic wildlife—especially deer and elk—but the desire to fill any otherwise empty space with flowers carries over from the Victorian era of earlier decades. Horses, which had been popular motifs since the turn of the century, appear very real. Look at the saddle in the central image—the level of detail here is really amazing. Another interesting aspect of this particular bag is the more traditional geometric designs in each corner—similar to some twined/cornhusk handbags—and the long fringes decorated with shells.

The little “elephant” bag is intriguing. We do not know who made it or where it came from, but it was made in about 1930-1940. It looks like a design made for a child, maybe a kid who learned about elephants at school or saw one in a circus or zoo. In any case, it eventually ended up in the collection of one of Montana’s governors.

23. **The Salish women in this picture are Josephine Camille and her daughter, Lucy Pierre, from the Flathead Reservation**. This photo was taken in July 1906, probably at the Arlee pow wow, and they are dressed in their regalia and carrying their beautifully made handbags in an expression of “This is who we are.” You can see that the pattern on the cornhusk bag at the left—one small star/flower in each corner and a much larger star/flower in the center—is the same pattern on the bag Josephine Camille is holding (which was made four

decades earlier), evidence that many of the traditional design patterns persisted well into the twentieth century. Some are still being created today, as traditional arts are being revived. Lucy Pierre holds a beaded bag with a leaf motif, similar in style to the one on the belt pouch at the right. Notice that she also has a belt pouch with a rose beaded on it. During the reservation era, beaded artwork had become firmly anchored in tribal aesthetics and was undeniably an artistic form of cultural expression, thanks to the skill, resourcefulness, and creativity of Indian women.

24. Here we have a wonderfully detailed bag that shows at its center a Plateau woman—perhaps the artist herself—in full reservation era regalia: twined beargrass-and-cedar hat with typical zigzag pattern, abalone-shell earrings, green wool trade-cloth dress with fully beaded yoke and abalone shells, calico cotton blouse, and a beaded belt and sash. On either side of her are two long-stemmed flowers similar to the old Métis or Chippewa style. The pale blue background, a favorite among western Plateau tribes as well as with the Crow, is tightly beaded in two-needle appliqué and the bright red and green triangles of the border point in towards the woman, who emerges in front of them as a symbol of the beauty that is so much a part of her cultural heritage.

Created circa 1940, this bag was beaded with a lot of care and skill and talent. Such work is only achieved by a woman who is dedicated to her art and who put an incredible number of hours into creating designs and developing artistic skills. For an artist such as the one who made this, beading is part of who she is as an Indian artist from her tribal nation.

In an interview for the book *A Song to the Creator*, Joanne Bigcrane, a Pend d'Oreille artist who does both beadwork and quillwork, talks about how art is an extension of a woman's self and an expression of her culture, saying:

*“To be a good woman, you paid attention to what you were doing, and you did it right, meticulously. I learned what those aesthetics were and still had been when I was a child. Nowadays people feel... ‘Well, that doesn’t matter.’ But if you want to follow the traditional values, yes, it does matter. Following traditional aesthetics means you have to strive... You have to strive in a sense not for personal worthiness, but for an honoring statement to the Creator for what He has given you, to give respect to everything He has provided.*

*“Everything that I try to make, I try to make with the utmost quality in mind. I don’t approve of making something with a frivolous attitude. Because no matter where that piece goes, I go with it, because I put something of myself into it...”*

25. (Credits—This presentation was created by Laura Ferguson for the Montana Historical Society, in conjunction with the temporary exhibit of the Fred Mitchell Collection of beaded Plateau bags, May 14, 2009 — October 3, 2009. Copyright 2009, Montana Historical Society.)

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