

# Tradition, Design, Color: Plateau Indian Beaded Bags from the Fred Mitchell Collection



A Temporary Exhibit of the Montana Historical Society



Top left: 9- $\frac{1}{4}$ " long, 9" wide; ca. 1880  
 Above: 15- $\frac{1}{2}$ " long, 14" wide; ca. 1900  
 Bottom left: 13- $\frac{3}{4}$ " long, 11- $\frac{3}{4}$ " wide; ca. 1900

Cover: 23- $\frac{1}{2}$ " long, 16- $\frac{1}{4}$ " wide; ca. 1890

All dimensions include fringe but do not include handles except where noted.



# American Indian Beaded Bags of the Columbia River Region

BY BILL MERCER

Beadwork is one of the most recognizable and visually striking of American Indian art forms. Glass beads, made in Europe, were among the most highly prized trade items throughout North America. A variety of beadwork techniques and elaborate designs were developed and handed down from one generation to the next, by the middle of the nineteenth century regional and tribal styles began to emerge.

The various tribes that lived along the Columbia River Plateau region in what is now eastern Oregon, eastern Washington, northern Idaho and western Montana were among the most proficient beadwork artists of all North American Indians. In Montana these tribal groups are the Salish, Kootenai and Pend d'Oreille who now live on the Flathead Reservation. To the west, other tribes of the Columbia Plateau include the Wasco, Wishram, Yakama, Umatilla, Walla Walla, Cayuse, Nez Perce, Colville, and Spokane.

All of these tribes first had access to commercially made glass beads in the early nineteenth century, shortly after Meriwether

Lewis and William Clark completed their epic journey to the Pacific Ocean in November 1805. What are known as pony beads were among the earliest beads that were widely available in the Plateau. Relatively large, they were about one centimeter (approximately 1/16 inch) in

diameter and were most frequently available in black, white, red, and blue with green and yellow being less common. Because of their size and limited range of colors, pony beads were often sewn onto clothing as alternating bands or blocks of contrasting colors.

By the mid-nineteenth century smaller beads, known as seed beads, were introduced and they were available in a much wider range of colors. This resulted in an explosion of complex designs appearing on objects made for the Indians'

own use as well as for sale outside

the community. One of the most ubiquitous beaded objects from the Columbia Plateau region is the flat beaded bags that appear to have developed just after 1850. Rectangular in shape they are probably based on the flat twined storage baskets called cornhusk bags that were also common throughout the region. Instead of being strictly utilitarian and used to store food like cornhusk bags, beaded bags were constructed with handles and were made and carried by women essentially as purses or as a purely decorative clothing accessory. Most



13-1/4" long, 11" wide; ca. 1870-1880



bags were beaded only on one side and the bags made between 1850 and 1875 were usually constructed of red or dark blue woolen cloth. The interior was unlined, the top edges were often reinforced with leather; and two leather thongs sewn on just below the upper edges served as handles. Sometimes large glass or brass beads and even Chinese coins were used as fringe for additional decoration. The beads were sewn on with an appliqué stitch using two needles. The beads were strung on one thread, which was secured at both ends; the second thread was used to tack the string of beads to the bag at regular intervals. This technique required hundreds of tiny stitches, but it permitted the creation of abstract curvilinear designs that have a lively, organic feel to them. The designs on many of the bags from this period consisted of two rows of different colored beads applied next to each other to create the outline of a form. The interior of

the form was left unbeaded thereby utilizing the cloth, usually red wool, as an integral part of the design. The background area around the designs were also usually left unbeaded. This practice may be explained by the fact that glass beads were still rather expensive to acquire so they were used sparingly while showing an abundance of red wool cloth, also an expensive trade item, was a marker of status and wealth.

By the 1870s and 1880s beaded designs came to be more representational than abstract. The most common compositions consisted of stylized floral designs. Plants, such as camas, wapato and bitterroot, were an important food source for the Plateau tribes while others, such as beargrass, were used in the construction of baskets. In some instances the foliate designs beaded onto the bags



Top: 23- $\frac{3}{4}$ " long, 13- $\frac{1}{4}$ " wide, ca.1930  
Bottom: 16" long, 10- $\frac{1}{2}$ " wide; ca. 1900-1910





filled in around them in a series of concentric rows of beads. The result is a lively and dynamic composition that gives an illusion of space and dimension. Contour beading, however, fell out of favor by about 1900 and from then on it has been used only rarely.

After about 1880 a significant number of bags were made of tanned leather, some with a long leather fringe. Printed cotton material was used to line the inside of the bags, and a wider range of beaded designs was used including bold geometric designs, based on motifs traditionally used to decorated baskets and cornhusk bags. When translated into beadwork the geometric designs are usually large single motifs located at the center of the bag. Frequently the geometric designs are beaded with multiple shades of a single color or similar colors arranged so that it goes from the darkest to the lightest shade and sometimes back again. Placed on a contrasting color background the geometric designs create a striking visual statement. Also at the end of the

may have been intended to represent plants from the natural environment that were used in normal daily activities. For example, there are numerous bags beaded with a plant design that has a single multicolored pompom-like flower that is probably meant to represent a flowering beargrass plant. In other instances domesticated plants are shown growing in flowerpots or cups. The leaves and flowers of these designs were usually outlined and then filled in with beads of a contrasting color.

Also at this time there was a tendency to bead the entire face of the bag thus providing a beaded background for the primary design. The backgrounds are a single color, usually white although blue or yellow were also sometimes used. Most often the backgrounds were beaded with long horizontal rows of beads carefully sewn next to each other to create a flat, regular surface. An alternative to this method is called contour beading. In this technique the design elements were sewn first and then the background was



Top: ca. 1920-1930, taken at Good Noe Hills, Washington, photographer unknown  
Bottom: 21" long, 15-¼" wide; ca. 1920

nineteenth century realistic depictions of people, most often Indians or cowboys, as well as birds and animals began to be common. The figures usually appear in profile, floating on a background of perfectly straight horizontal rows of beads without any reference to landscape or illusion of depth.

Plateau beaded bags created from about 1900 to 1940 are among the most visually interesting examples of American Indian beadwork. They became extremely elaborate both technically and in subject matter. Rather than being a consistent



size and shape like earlier examples, these bags were made in all sizes and sometimes eccentric shapes like hearts and shields. A greater variety of beads was available, including metal, faceted, and translucent ones, enabling artists to add ever more details to their increasingly complex realistic designs. Many compositions were genre scenes showing everyday Indian life featuring teepees and mounted warriors in traditional clothing. In contrast to earlier designs many now began to incorporate landscapes



Left: 8-½" long, 7-¼" wide; ca. 1900-1910  
Upper right: 18-½" long, 13-½" wide; ca. 1930  
Lower right: 23" long; 12-¾" wide; ca. 1930-1940





as backgrounds thus creating an even more realistic representation. However, many of these scenes were the fantasies of the non-Indians who were now beginning to collect these bags as Indian women began creating designs that were sure to be marketable. Many frequently used designs incorporated realistic views of the landscape including forests, mountains and the Columbia River. The American flag also became a commonly used motif, especially around the time of World War I. Names, phrases, and dates were sometimes incorporated into the designs while popular culture, advertisements and product packaging provided a ready source of images that could be adapted into beadwork. The logo for the Elks fraternal organization is but one example of a design that has been frequently adapted by beadworkers throughout the Plateau region.

Today beaded bags are perceived within Plateau Indian communities as a traditional art form that is an outward expression of

cultural identity. They are carried by women at powwows as well as other special occasions. Older bags are considered to be treasured heirlooms and the legacy of a rich cultural tradition. At the same time, there are many contemporary Plateau Indian artists who continue to create bags with beaded designs that not only acknowledge that legacy but extend it into the future as a vital and dynamic cultural expression.

The vibrant bags illustrated in this publication and highlighted in the accompanying exhibition have all been selected from the Fred Mitchell collection. Acquired over several generations by a number of family members the Fred Mitchell collection includes



Left: 15- $\frac{3}{4}$ " long, 14- $\frac{3}{4}$ " wide; ca. 1900-1910  
Right: 24- $\frac{1}{2}$ " long, 12- $\frac{1}{2}$ " wide, ca. 1930-1940

more than 650 examples of Plateau beaded bags with an emphasis on bags from the late nineteenth century through the 1940s that are beaded with figural designs. It is considered the finest and most extensive collection of these bags in the world. The majority of these bags have never been on public view before and the Montana Historical Society gratefully thanks Mr. Mitchell for the privilege of creating this most extraordinary exhibition.



Above: 14- $\frac{1}{4}$ " long, 12- $\frac{1}{4}$ " wide; ca. 1930  
Upper right: 12- $\frac{1}{2}$ " long, 12" wide; ca. 1930-1940  
Lower right: 15- $\frac{3}{4}$ " long, 13- $\frac{1}{4}$ " wide, ca. 1880







Above: 14- $\frac{3}{4}$ " long, 13- $\frac{1}{4}$ " wide; ca. 1900-1910  
Left: 12" long, 11- $\frac{3}{4}$ " wide; ca. 1890



Above: 24-½" long, 15-¼" wide; ca. 1910





Above: 12- $\frac{3}{4}$ " long, 12" wide; ca. 1910  
 Upper right: 13- $\frac{3}{4}$ " long, 11- $\frac{3}{4}$ " wide, ca. 1920  
 Lower right: 9- $\frac{1}{2}$ " long, 7- $\frac{1}{2}$ " wide; ca.1900



Top: 19-½" long (including handle) 14-¾" wide; ca. 1940-1950; beaded on both sides  
 Bottom: 6-¾" long, 6-½" wide; ca. 1900-1910; beaded on both sides





Top: 10" long, 9" wide; ca. 1900; cornhusk on one side, beading on the opposite side  
Bottom: 14" long, 12- $\frac{3}{4}$ " wide; 1948; beaded on both sides



Above: 22" long, 15" wide; ca. 1890  
 Upper right 23-½" long, 17" wide; ca. 1920  
 Lower right: 8-½" long, 7-¼" wide, ca. 1900





Above: 22-½" long, 16-¾" wide; ca. 1930

Upper right: 16" long, 13-½" wide; 1922

Lower right: 16-¼" long, 15" wide; 1920-1930

Back cover: 14-¼" long, 12" wide; ca. 1930

Photography: J. Cooper, Montana Historical Society  
Graphics: R. Jones-Wallace, Montana Historical Society





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Funded with a grant from



Montana Office of Public Instruction  
Denise Juneau, Superintendent  
In-state toll free 1-888-231-9393  
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225 N. Roberts, P.O. Box 201201  
Helena, MT 59620-1201