

# AMERICAN INDIAN BEADED BAGS OF THE COLUMBIA RIVER REGION

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. Beadwork is one of the most recognizable American Indian art forms. Glass beads, made in Europe, were among the most highly prized trade items throughout North America.

## Columbia Plateau Tribal Contribution:

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 western 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.



## Nineteenth Century:



All of these tribes first had access to commercially made glass beads in the early nineteenth century. Pony beads were among the earliest glass beads that were widely available in the Plateau. By the 1840s, glass beads were well stocked by American and Canadian fur trappers who traveled the trade routes. They were relatively large, about one centimeter in diameter, and 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 glass beads, known as seed beads, were introduced and were available in a much wider range of colors. This resulted in an explosion of complex designs appearing on objects made for the American Indians' own use as well as for sale outside the community. One of the most common beaded objects from the Columbia Plateau region is the flat beaded bags that appear to have developed just after 1850.



Rectangular in shape, likely based on the flat twined storage baskets called cornhusk bags that were also common throughout the region. Most 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. Instead of being strictly practical and used to store food like cornhusk bags, beaded bags were constructed with handles and were made and carried by women as purses or as a purely decorative clothing accessory.

By the 1870s and 1880s, the most common composition on the bags 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 designs beaded onto the bags may have been intended to represent plants from the natural environment that were used in daily activities.

After about 1880, a significant number of bags were made of tanned animal hides, some with a long leather fringe. Printed cotton material lined the inside of the bags, and there were a wider range of beaded designs, including bold geometric designs, based on motifs traditionally used to decorated baskets and cornhusk bags. Also, at the end of the nineteenth century, realistic depictions of people, most often American 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 a background or landscape.



### **Twentieth Century:**

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, enabling artists to add more details to their increasingly complex realistic designs. Many compositions were scenes showing everyday American Indian life featuring tipis and mounted warriors in traditional clothing. In contrast to earlier designs, many now began to incorporate landscapes as backgrounds, thus creating an even more realistic representation. Native American women began creating designs that were sure to be marketable. Many of these scenes were desired by the non-natives who were now beginning to collect these bags. Many 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.

### **Beading and Beaded Bags Today:**



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, many contemporary Plateau Indian artists 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.

