



A descriptive analysis of Blackfeet Indian beadwork  
by Elizabeth Mae McCoy

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF SCIENCE in Home Economics  
Montana State University  
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**Abstract:**

Assuming that the Indian beadwork is distinguishable on a tribal basis, it may express social and cultural patterns and reveal tribal history. The subjects for this study are the Blackfeet Indians. They were selected because of their outstanding ability in the art of dress and use of ornamentation. Beginning as the Algonkin and Sioux nations, the Blackfeet nation today consists of the Bloods, the Piegans, and the Blackfeet. They reside on a reservation in northwestern Montana and adjacent Canada.

Interviews with native Blackfeet revealed that among their tribe the most popular use of beads was for decoration and that geometric forms dominated. Blackfeet beadwork can be identified by observing the way line, color, and bead application methods work in geometric designs. Evaluation of the beads, the base materials, the designs, and the method of application can establish a general classification for beaded specimen. Although accuracy is limited, it appears that Blackfeet beadwork reached its peak in the mid 1800's.

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial  
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ABSTRACT

Assuming that the Indian beadwork is distinguishable on a tribal basis, it may express social and cultural patterns and reveal tribal history. The subjects for this study are the Blackfeet Indians. They were selected because of their outstanding ability in the art of dress and use of ornamentation. Beginning as the Algonkin and Sioux nations, the Blackfeet nation today consists of the Bloods, the Piegans, and the Blackfeet. They reside on a reservation in northwestern Montana and adjacent Canada.

Interviews with native Blackfeet revealed that among their tribe the most popular use of beads was for decoration and that geometric forms dominated. Blackfeet beadwork can be identified by observing the way line, color, and bead application methods work in geometric designs. Evaluation of the beads, the base materials, the designs, and the method of application can establish a general classification for beaded specimen. Although accuracy is limited, it appears that Blackfeet beadwork reached its peak in the mid 1800's.

## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

Among the Plains Indians there is little recorded history. Writing as a way of communication was nonexistent in their culture. As the old traditions of story-telling and picture writing fade away, so does the culture of the tribes. Much valuable information is therefore lost to coming generations.

Many scholars have suggested that arts and crafts may be a means of helping to establish historical accounts. As Coster says, "Their art was a means of communicating their emotions, and in it they expressed the characteristics of their race." (Coster, 1916: 301) This suggested that some tribes gave these conventionalized designs a symbolic value. (Wissler, 1941: 134) It also suggests that the arts and crafts of the Plains Indians may be used as an historical account of the tribes.

Art expression may be one of two types. It may be of a religious, or purely decorative connotation. In the former, which was a more serious art, there was a tendency toward the realistic. In the latter, highly geometric forms were constructed. These characteristics are discernable in the craft work of the Plains Indians. The religious art, for example, appeared in paintings on the Blackfeet tipi and the figures on the ghost dance shirts of the Dakota. On the other hand,

horse trappings, clothing items other than ceremonial costumes, and moccasins often supported the geometric decorative art expression.

(Wissler, 1941: 137)

Beadwork, being a popular craft of the Plains Indians, was no exception as a communicative art expression. It was used to communicate their beliefs and to decorate their clothing. For the most part, beadwork may be found on clothing, horse trappings, ceremonial props, and moccasins to mention just a few.

Many tribes were classified as Plains Indians. In general, they were Cheyenne, Sioux, Gros Ventre, Crow, Blackfeet, and Assiniboin. Of those inhabiting the upper reaches of the Missouri, two were outstanding. As described by George Catlin:

The several tribes of Indians inhabiting the regions of the Upper Missouri . . . are undoubtedly the finest looking, best equipped, and most beautifully costumed of any on the Continent. . . . As far as my travels have yet led me into the Indian country, I have more than realized my former predictions that those Indians who could be found most entirely in a state of nature, with the least knowledge of civilized society, would be found to be the most cleanly in their persons, elegant in their dress and manners, and enjoying life to the greatest perfection. Of such tribes; perhaps the Crows and the Blackfeet stand first; and no one would be able to appreciate the richness and elegance (and even taste too), without seeing them in their own country. (Roehm, 1966: 62)

The reservations of both the Crow and the Blackfeet are within the boundaries of Montana. Both tribes used ornamentation widely in their clothing and clothing accessories. The study of this ornamentation in either tribe could be a valuable resource in recording their

culture. Because of their outstanding ability in the art of dress and use of ornamentation, the Blackfeet tribe was chosen for this study.

If beadwork is to be used as a clue to history, changes need to be recorded, and an attempt made to interpret it in terms of social and cultural patterns. Several museum curators have indicated this study will be valuable as a means of authenticating Blackfeet Indian beaded specimen.

This study was therefore undertaken to find information needed for further recognition and understanding of Blackfeet Indian beadwork designs. Its objectives were to:

1. Identify characteristics of beadwork designs that are attributable to the Blackfeet tribe
2. Interpret the symbolism
3. Reveal the changes of the bead craft

Four basic assumptions have been made:

1. Blackfeet Indian beadwork is distinguishable from other Indian beadwork.
2. Blackfeet Indian beadwork reveals social and cultural patterns.
3. The designs of Blackfeet Indian beadwork have changed over the years.
4. A primary reason for these changes was due to outside influences.

## Chapter II

### BLACKFEET INDIANS

#### Location

The North American Indians may be classified by language, culture, and physical characteristics. It is, however, more usual to consider them as political or social groups, or tribes. It is under such group names that the objects in museum collections are arranged. The cultures of many tribes are quite similar. Resemblances are nearly always found among neighbors and not among widely scattered tribes. It is convenient, therefore, to group them in geographical or cultural areas. (Wissler, 1941: 17)

The Plains Indians acquired their name from the geographical area they inhabited, the Great Plains.

The area stretches from central Alberta all the way south to the Mexican border. It is bounded on the west by the Rocky Mountains, and on the east by the Missouri River. It includes parts of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. . . . This was the home of the Blackfoot, Crow, Sioux, (Dakota), Cheyenne, and Comanche Indians, among other. (Driver, 1961: 16)

(Fig. 1)

In the northwest corner of this outlined land area, next to the Rocky Mountains in Montana and in adjacent parts of Alberta, Canada, were the Blackfeet tribes: the South Piegan, North Piegan, Blood, and North Blackfeet. (Wissler, 1966: 102)



Fig. 1. Plains Indian Area

With the immigrations of civilization to the western United States, the territory of the Blackfeet Indian tribe continued to be diminished. The ultimate move was the establishment of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. This tract of land was located in northwestern Montana surrounding Browning. (Fig. 2)

### Tribal Division

The origin of the Blackfeet tribe has been traced to two tribal families, the Sioux and the Algonkin. Noted in the family trees of each of these major tribes is the Blackfeet name. (Fig. 3 & Fig. 4)

#### A. Algonkin-Wahashan Stock: Plains Country

1. Cree
2. Blackfoot
3. Gros Ventre or Atsina
4. Blood
5. Piegan
6. Araphaho
7. Cheyenne

Fig. 3 (Wissler, 1966: 68)























































































































