

## **Métis Beadwork**

The Métis incorporated so much colour and decoration into their clothing that their craftsmanship became an art form. One of the predominant decorations found on Aboriginal clothing was beadwork. It flourished in the mid-nineteenth century when First Nations and Métis women supplemented the traditional painted quill and birchbark-incised geometric forms with floral embroidery. Observers of Métis material culture have made constant reference to the decorative beadwork on clothes. Beadwork, along with silk embroidery, produced in trailing flower designs indicate Métis handicraft. The Dakota Sioux and the Cree, in fact, referred to the Métis as “the Flower Beadwork People” because of the preponderance of flower designs in their beadwork. Thus, floral beadwork has become one of the most distinctive Métis symbols.

The origin of Métis beadwork designs comes from experimentation and the merging of various art traditions. Several Plains First Nations used geometric patterns on their tipi covers, parfleches and clothing and, up until the 1840s Métis decoration was dominated by geometric designs. The use of floral designs, which the Métis were so well known for originated from contact with the Roman Catholic missions.

The Catholic missions on the St. Lawrence River (in present-day Québec) introduced elements of European folk art to Aboriginal peoples. Later French-Métis coming out of the Great Lakes region used small, stylized semi-floral designs. For instance, the Ursuline Order in mission schools in New France, during the first half of the seventeenth century, taught local

Huron, Iroquois and mixed-blood girls European codes of dress and behaviour, which included stitching and embroidery. Métis and First Nations trading parties journeying to New France (and later when it became Lower Canada) were introduced to these styles. When returning out of the Great Lakes region, they, in turn, introduced it to groups further west where it influenced the Red River Métis

Once in the West, the Grey Nuns taught Métis women beadwork techniques and designs, which produced floral patterns and designs. The Métis women also began copying designs, which they saw in churches and on the priests' vestments. By the 1830s, increasingly naturalistic and colourful floral designs became evident on Métis products from Red River after the establishment of Roman Catholic mission schools at Pembina, St. Boniface and Baie St. Paul.

Beadwork is found on almost every item of traditional Métis clothing and functional hide and cloth work. The glass beads they used were procured from the trading companies. Beaded clothes included moccasins, coats, vests, belts, bags and mittens. Beadwork was done on tablecloths, wall pockets and cloth frames for religious pictures.

Men's jackets, whether made from worked hide or a Hudson's Bay Company point blanket, were commonly decorated with beadwork. In the winter, under their dresses, women wore dark leggings (mitasses) fashioned from wool or velvet and brightly decorated with beads. Men's hide leggings, too, were subject to beadwork. A pillbox style hat with a tassel called a tam, which was based on the Scottish pattern, was also decorated with beadwork.

Shot and tobacco pouches and bandolier bags were, also, highly decorated with beadwork. The Métis, it seemed, always wore elaborately and brightly beaded moccasins and, in the winter, mittens.

The application of beadwork went beyond items used by people. The clothing, which parents made for children's dolls was fashioned with the same craftsmanship and artistry as people's clothes. The Métis commonly fashioned blankets and jackets for dogs who worked pulling sleds or carrying goods on their backs, as well as blankets and saddles for their horses. These outfits were not just simple pieces of cloth or leather cut to fit the animal; they were, in fact, well made and highly decorated garments.

Beaded creations were and are an important source of income for many Métis women and families. While much of the women's beadwork decorated their families' clothing, there was always a strong market for these products. The late-nineteenth century saw the height of Métis art and it was traded extensively across the Canadian Plains and the northern United States to First Nations consumers and to retailers. The bison's demise combined with an increase in Euro-Canadian and European settlement led to a focus on the early tourist trade. Women went beyond producing decorated clothing and made decorated Victorian objects such as caribou-hide purses, picture frames, greeting cards, glasses cases and ladies' caribou-hide slippers. In more northerly regions, women continued to produce traditional, decorated functional clothing items well into the twentieth century.

**Adapted From:**

Young, Patrick. "Métis Beadwork, Quillwork and Embroidery".  
<http://www.metismuseum.com/media/document.php/00715.pdf>