

Métis Quillwork

The First Nations have been doing quillwork for centuries prior to the arrival of Europeans in North America. The beautiful and elegant geometric and (later) floral designs were noted by early explorers and were depicted by artists as they traveled across the landscape. Quillwork skills did not immediately disappear with the intrusion of Europeans and the rise of the Métis. First Nations mothers taught their mixed-heritage children the techniques and methods required to produce intricately designed decorations fashioned out of porcupine quills.

The Métis, soon after, began to adapt quillwork to suit their own artistic expressions. Their use of vibrant colours and bold expressions mirrored their vibrant attitude towards life. Red, blue and yellow were among the favourite colours of dyed quills as noted by writers sojourning in the present-day Canadian West and Northwest. Through contact with nuns in boarding and residential schools, Métis women and girls adapted their quill embroidery skills to new European techniques, such as silk embroidery, and floral patterns.

Unlike using trade beads or silk floss, which are ready to use upon purchase, quills had to be collected and worked before they were ready to be manipulated as a craft item. The porcupines themselves were relatively easy to catch because they are slow moving. Being nocturnal, the animals could be found resting in tree branches or in an underground burrow during the day. Once dispatched, the quills were removed before the porcupine's skin dried to prevent them from breaking. The quills would be sorted into various

sizes, from 2.5 to 12.5 centimetres, and would be dyed by placing them in a boiling coloured liquid for three or four hours. Dyes were made by using vegetable matter such as mosses, roots and barks mixed with water and an acid from certain berries, urine or wood ash. The combination of vegetable matter with a slightly acidic solution made the dye insoluble. Once dyed, the quills retained their colour for a very long time before fading. The large quills would be set aside for use as backgrounds while the smaller ones were used for the more precise line work.

To attach quills to a piece of leather or cloth, a woman required an awl, which punched small holes into the material. The awl could be fashioned from a worked bone or a bone splinter. The desired pattern would be traced onto the item before the holes were made, and the quills would be soaked to make them flexible and to allow the craftswoman to flatten them between her teeth or fingernails. Sinew, a fibrous and tough material from the backbone of a bison, or cotton thread was used to secure the quills onto the leather or cloth through holes made by the awl. Once the quills were sewn into the design on the surface of the garment, a tool was used to flatten them uniformly.

Even though quills were stiff and long, Métis artisans were able to manipulate them into very delicate floral designs and motifs. In fact, because of their ability to create such richly and intricately decorated items, the Métis were able to trade great quantities of their work to the First Nations on the northern and central Plains. Quillwork could be found on shirts, leggings, jackets, moccasins, vests and hats as well as on many non-clothing

items. The Métis influence in quillwork was quite strong, especially among the neighbouring Cree. Prior to 1800, the Cree produced quillwork in geometric patterns, however, by the late 1820s they adopted many of the floral patterns used by the Métis.

The techniques used to make quillwork designs include wrapping, sewing, plaiting and weaving, each with their own variations. Wrapping consisted of binding a flattened quill around a long object, which could bend without breaking, such as hair or leather. "Network" was a form of wrapping common to the Métis. Using several horizontal, thin leather strips the craftswoman wrapped two strips at a time with a quill, alternating between the strips from episode to episode. This technique produced a design, which resembled a net. Wrapping was also used to produce rosettes or quilled discs, which were originally worn by First Nations men and to decorate rifle bags, saddles and tipis.

Sewing was also popular. Craftswomen bent a flattened quill under and over stitches while the quill was being sewn onto the hide. The variety of sewing techniques and the flexibility of sinew or cotton thread allowed craftswomen to create a wide assortment of designs not possible in other attachment techniques. The spot stitch, where a quill was spiraled around the thread and then sewn onto the spot, was popular among the Métis because of its utility in producing delicate line work such as floral patterns. Plaiting involved passing quills back and forth between two strands of sinew that was then wrapped around an object. Among the Métis, this form of

quillwork was used to decorate functional items such as whips and handles rather than clothing.

Weaving was also used to produce quill decoration. Quills were interwoven with horizontal threads on a bow loom. The quills were arranged in between warps or vertical threads, which ran from one end of the bow to the other and were held tight by the tension in the bow. They were made of sinew or vegetable fibre. The wefts, or horizontal threads, alternated over and under the quills to hold them in place along the warps. A desired length of weaving was completed and lined or applied onto some other surface. By using dyed quills in a variety of colours, the weaver could produce assorted geometric patterns on the loom, a carry over of Cree design preference. As time passed, however, and with trade beads becoming more common, women found they could produce equally, if not more, intricate designs by sewing beads onto garments or by using silk embroidery. Quillwork required that the people dispatched or frightened porcupines, collect the needles, prepare them and dye them before they could be used in decoration. If porcupines were not readily available, they would have to trade with other groups for the quills. Beads, cotton thread and silk floss were became very common in the early and middle nineteenth century across Central Canada and women soon realized the advantages of working in these media.

While quillwork declined in popularity among Métis craftswomen in the mid-and late-nineteenth century, many of the designs produced using beadwork and silk embroidery matched those made with quill embroidery.

The silk embroidered and beaded floral designs were, to some degree, copies of quilled designs. The European media were much more workable than the indigenous quills and allowed women to further elaborate on their already complex and intricate designs.

Adapted From:

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