

An Introduction to Shoshone-Bannock Art and Beadwork: Continuity and Change in Art and Images in the Northern Rockies

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Wind River Historical Center
Dubois, Wyoming**

This project began in an attempt to learn more about the Eastern Shoshones of the Wind River Reservation and search beyond the documented and published written histories. Many people, including the author, have learned to appreciate the art that seemed so much a part of Shoshone life and work and which is so obviously on display at events like powwows. Given the proximity of the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming and the Fort Hall Reservation in Idaho, home to the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, and the close association and kinship ties between the two



reservations, the study expanded to include the Eastern Shoshones, the Shoshone-Bannocks, and the Lemhi Shoshones (formerly of Salmon, Idaho and now at Fort Hall). The study had three goals: First, to document as far as possible, the collections of Shoshone-Bannock material culture in museums and private collections. Second, I hoped to trace the changes over time in artistic styles. What designs, if any, remained in common use? Did some forms of artistic expression or material items “die out,” and if so, why? What influenced changes, if any, in artistic expression over time? Finally, I hoped to understand the place of art within Shoshone-Bannock culture in terms of economic development or survival, family life, it’s meaning to “being Indian,” and other questions.

In the American Indian art world, dealers and collectors often refer to an item as “traditional,” generally meaning that the item in question pre-dates EuroAmerican contact and thus has “pure” ethnographic origins, as opposed to commercial production. This view, of course, negates Indian agency and overlooks the fact that the entire North American continent had myriad intertribal trade networks—and thus some form of commercial production—long before Europeans ever reached Indian country. Following contact with Americans of the Lewis and Clark Voyage of Discovery, Shoshones and Bannocks became active participants in the early fur trade of the Rocky Mountains. Thus, from at least 1825, they had access to manufactured goods and materials and incorporated these products into their daily lives. They also were exposed to Indian people who were not their traditional trading partners or even their enemies. For example, during his sojourn as a fur trapper in Shoshone country in the 1830s, Osborne Russell reported that he spent one winter in a camp of Shoshones that numbered 20 lodges. About half the lodges were Shoshone families. The others were French and American traders and their wives, who included Seminoles, Iroquois, and Creeks. Russell doesn’t mention anything about

decorative designs on clothing, so one can't generalize if the "foreigners" had any immediate impact on Shoshone artistic interpretations, but it is possible.

The extant collections of Shoshone and Bannock art are widespread across the United States and some are in Europe, but few, if any, can be documented to pre-date the 1850s. This raises the question: Is there a baseline of what might constitute traditional Shoshone or Bannock art, given the caveat that any early examples might be "tainted" by white influence? The 19th-century painters Karl Bodmer, Alfred Jacob Miller, and George Catlin devoted most of their work to other Indian subjects, but they do allow us a glimpse at Shoshone life during the 1830s, in the form of decorations to blankets, clothing, and dress. For example, the image at right shows Bodmer's depiction of a Woman of the Snake Tribe. She wears a buckskin dress, decorated with a porcupine quill medallion and quilled hair drops. Her hide blanket also has what appears to be a trade cloth strip that also has quilled rectangles.



Another painting, Catlin's depiction of 3 Shoshone warriors, shows them wearing hide robes. The one on the left features parallel lines of quill work. The center hide robe also has lines of quillwork, but also has painted images of horses and riders.

A third early painting, that of Miller's "The Trapper's Bride"—based on his

experiences at the Green River fur trade rendezvous of 1837 and purportedly depicting the marriage of mountain man Jim Bridger to Sweetgrass Woman, the daughter of the Shoshone chief Mo-wo-ma—shows the bride in a plain, but fringed buckskin dress. The teepee behind her appears to have quilled horsehair or rawhide drops. The mounted warrior—Mo-wo-ma—wears an elk tooth necklace.



These paintings demonstrate design motifs—parallel lines, rectangles, quilled rawhide or hair drops—that are as close to being traditional Shoshone and Bannock art as can be found in the collections. But the paintings cannot tell us if these designs are authentic to Shoshone culture, borrowed from another Indian group, or an embellishment of the painter. More than likely, all three factors are in place.



Moreover, the collections do not hold early, pre-1850 material. In fact, as far as this study has determined, there is very, very little pre-reservation material—pre-1870—in any private or public collection. The only item that photographed in the study that may pre-date the 1870 is an elk bone hide scraper from the collection of the Wyoming State Museum. It is decorated with incised yellow lines and dots. Without the benefit of carbon dating, it probably is a 19th-century piece, and certainly the addition of a steel bit most likely places its present configuration to the post-1850 period.

Other early items are scarce. John Wesley Powell gathered several examples of Shoshone buckskin pants and shirts from his 1876 expedition down the Colorado, but these were the relatively plain and undecorated everyday wear clothing. The earliest documented and also



decorated beaded item is this dress, now in the collection of the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming. The dress was either purchased or given as a gift in 1884 and belonged to a daughter or daughter-in-law of the Eastern Shoshones' famous leader, Chief Washakie. Its main decorative element is a geometric rectangle, sometimes called a "boxed eye" motif. This design appears quite frequently in Shoshone-Bannock beadwork during the early reservation period until around 1900. Note the use of the blue field for the background, and the rectangular motif with the strong use of cobalt, red, and especially, "greasy" yellow seed beads. This design also has short fringe, which is what the Shoshone and Bannock elders say is traditional in their clothing, although most modern powwow buckskin dresses will have long fringe dangling from the sleeves.

The boxed eye motif and the color combinations show up in other forms of early beadwork. The dress below is in the Denver Art Museum, and the beaded sheath is in the Wyoming State Museum. Note that the sheath may show some influence of Northern Arapaho design with the use of the inverted teepees—this element is seen quite often in Arapaho work, but not as frequently among the Shoshones. Other design forms that use the same color combinations can be seen in these Lemhi Shoshone moccasins (Lemhi County Historical Museum) and in the



Bannock beaded pouch (Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History). The overall design in the Bannock pouch is often referred to as the "four directions." The Lemhi moccasins and the Bannock pouch also have additional colors of "Cheyenne" or "Crow" pink and light blue.

The era of geometric designs, as well as some forms of material culture, ended about 1900. In many ways this paralleled the great changes that had taken place in Shoshone and Bannock life in the years between 1890 and 1910. In Idaho, the federal government began attempts to close the Lemhi Reservation in 1889 and most of its people started relocating to Fort Hall. Lemhi officially closed by 1906. In 1900, Fort Hall was reduced in size from 1.3 million acres to about 1/2 million in 1900. At Wind River, waves of epidemics decimated the Shoshone population, reducing the number to less than 900 people from perhaps 2000 as recorded in 1870. In 1904, the reservation was cut in half, with over 1 million acres ceded to the federal government. In both Wyoming and Idaho, towns near the reservations—Pocatello, Lander, and Riverton—had greater populations of white residents by 1900, where 20 years earlier, the Indians outnumbered their white neighbors. Like most people, Shoshones and Bannocks learned to adapt and survive in their "new world." This became evident in their material culture, as some items dropped out of production in favor of manufactured goods, other forms were introduced or modified to meet market demand, and still others incorporated new designs and colors in their motifs.

There was one notable loss in material culture in the move to reservation life. Basket-making essentially disappeared by 1900, probably for two primary reasons. First, Shoshone and

Bannock basket weavers tended to make utilitarian forms that were not as finely woven or as beautifully decorated (at least to potential buyers of Indian art) as people such as the Apaches, Pimas, or the many California examples. Thus, basket making had little commercial potential. Secondly, baskets were made primarily for harvesting pine nuts and grass seeds. Reservation flour rations replaced these more traditional food groups and thus eliminated the need to make storage or harvesting containers, as did the adoption of manufactured pots, pans, and buckets. By 1904, for example, Agent Herman Nickerson of the Wind River Reservation could find only one example of Shoshone basketry that could be sent to the 1904 Lewis and Clark Exposition.



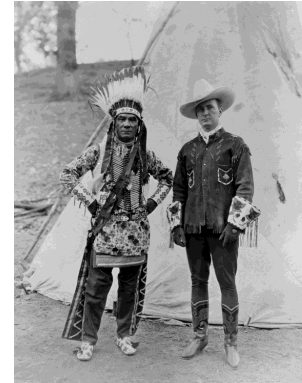
Likewise, making and painting parfleche containers also declined, although not to the same extent as basket weaving. Parfleche envelopes and boxes were essential to the horse and buffalo culture as means of storing dried meats, packing clothes and cooking items, and other items needed during seasonal rounds. The rawhide based containers packed more easily and lasted longer than baskets, but like baskets, were no longer needed once the reservation economy replaced buffalo hunting as a mainstay. However, making and painting parfleche has remained as part of a small-scale and individual art form, and unlike beadwork, still retains allegiance to traditional geometric designs. Contemporary Shoshone-Bannock parfleche painters offer them for sale in reservation craft shops, and one can also see them used as containers for powwow dance regalia.



Beadwork design also changed dramatically. Floral elements, especially among the Shoshones, eventually gained widespread acceptance and use. Floral designs in American Indian and Alaska Native beadwork evolved with contact with Europeans, flowing westward from the Atlantic seacoast and south and east from Alaska. While many Indians had design motifs that reflected more geometric or abstract floral elements in their environments, the Roman Catholic missionary influence sparked the creation of patterns that emulated, to some extent, the lacework and needlepoint found in altar linens and clerical vestments. Such floral elements appeared first among the work of Lemhis. To some extent, this reflected their proximity to Nez Perce and other Plateau tribes to the west and the Flathead/Kootenai/Salish to the north in Montana. These peoples had begun to incorporate floral designs as early as the 1870s, influenced themselves by Roman Catholic nuns and priests who established missions on the Plateau and Montana reservations. Shoshones themselves, however, say that the turn to floral motifs reflected patterns in their own environments, such as wild mountain roses or morning glories. Still others claim that they took design ideas from advertising as found in Burpee seed catalogs (a company founded in 1876), or from other early advertisements that featured floral pictures or arrangements. More than likely, the early florals developed in response to both sets of influences, and were confirmed by the commercial aspects of producing beaded floral designs.

One set of early consumers of such products were the performers, both Indian and white, of the Wild West shows. These traveling spectacles began production in the early 1880s. Famous promoters like Buffalo Bill, Pawnee Bill, and Tim McCoy, to name just a few, helped to spread

images of cowboy and Indian frontier life throughout the United States and Europe, and remained extremely popular until well into the 1920s. A highlight of the stars of these shows, both Indian and white, was their colorful beaded and fringed clothing. When attendance at the Wild West shows declined in the 1920s and 1930s, other forces took their place and expanded commercial opportunities and consumption of Indian-made products. During this period, movie westerns and western area dude ranches brought new demands for authentic Indian wear. This demand was widespread, too—and included an upswing in Navajo weaving, Pueblo pottery production, basket making in the Southwest and up and down both coasts of North America, and beadwork. As one example, there are many images of the actor and Wild West show promoter, Tim McCoy, wearing beaded items made for him by the Indians of the Wind River Reservation.



Agency records don't record how much of an influence or how much money these commercial sales made for Shoshone and Bannock beadworkers and artists. But there are a few references that help tease out some of this information. For example, the Lemhi agent reported that 2600 pairs of deerskin gloves were sold by Indians at the agency in 1896. He doesn't mention if these were simple work gloves or fancier beaded models. Old-time ranchers and farmers in Pocatello, Lander, Riverton, Dubois, and Jackson Hole have reported that they remember Indians would come to town every Saturday to sell their beaded wares. More than one person has stated that the durability of brain-tanned buckskin gloves elevated them to the status of necessity among farmers and ranchers. Anecdotal evidence from interviews suggests that many an Indian woman beaded items that brought in food for her family.

Concomitant with dude ranches, westerns, and local area sales to stores, farmers, and ranchers, Indian culture itself promoted making and displaying beadwork. The rise of modern powwow dancing, in full swing by the 1930s, as well as the renewal of ceremonies such as the Sun Dance, which had been outlawed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs for decades, celebrated "Indianness" and maintained an internal tribal motivation for beadwork and traditional leather products like dresses, moccasins, armbands, etc. Note that the young boys in the photo above right are surrounding a powwow drum and most are wearing beaded ties and collars, items that were very fashionable among Shoshone and Bannock men and boys during the 1930s.



In the post-WW II era and up to the present, beadwork designs fully flowered in every sense of the word. The "Shoshone Rose" is a recognized symbol at almost any western powwow, and Shoshone beadworkers report that their work is well-known in the larger Indian community as representing the highest quality. The origin of the rose design generally is credited to Eva McAdams of Fort Washakie on the Wind River Reservation. Eva said her mother got the



idea for a large-scale rose from an advertising box during the Depression, but variations of the design pre-date that period, as evidenced by the designs seen in this black & white photo from

the 1920s or very early 1930s. Nevertheless, the rose is now widely used today by beadworkers from Fort Hall and from Wind River.



yokes on traditional buckskin dresses, for example, can cost upwards of \$10,000. Eva



McAdams charges \$2000 for her moccasins. A more important function of beadworking is that the process ties the beader to their Shoshone or Bannock heritage. Their parents, grand-parents, and more distant relatives have a long history of killing deer, elk, moose, buffalo; fleshing and tanning the hides; and then sewing on dyed porcupine quills or glass beads. So the cycle continues. At a deeper level, beading helps define one's identity. Beading is often done in small groups or family circles. Drusilla Gould, a Shoshone-Bannock member of Fort Hall and instructor of Shoshoni language at Idaho State University, says beading is how she learned family stories and tribal history and important songs. Her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother taught her which colors belonged to or were associated with particular families, how to make patterns, and most importantly, imbued in her the understanding that beading was part of whom she was as an Indian person. This last image is a pair of traditional moccasin boots. They are now on display at the Lemhi County Historical Museum in Salmon, Idaho. They were completed around 1900. The first remarkable thing about them is that Drusilla's great-grandmother was completely blind when she did the work. The second remarkable thing is that Drusilla found the pattern for them and is now duplicating the beadwork pattern, but with her own colors. They will be worn proudly by one of her granddaughters in future powwows and important ceremonial dances.

Beadworking today seems to play several vital roles. First, it continues to have economic dimensions. Many beaders prepare pieces to showcase and sell at annual powwows; others go on the powwow circuit. Still others bead more occasionally, selling at wholesale prices to local or tribal stores. Some make dance regalia as their main occupation. Fully-beaded

