

American Indian Art Auctions: Beadwork

American Indian art encompasses many types of arts and crafts, from the more traditionally and / or stereotypically Native American art such as beadwork and pottery, to modern photography, fine paintings, sculptures and the like. There are many art auctions, both online and off, that feature this form of American Indian art.

In this article we'll discuss one of the most traditional and historically relevant branches of American Indian art: beadwork. Beadwork of the Native American peoples had and has practical as well as decorative; utilitarian as well as rich symbolic meaning.

Beadwork and making of the beads themselves is a very old craft. Stone, bone and shell beads (such as turquoise and semi-precious stones) are still made the same ancient way. Little affected by modern technology, the making of beads is still carried out in nearly the exact same way as peoples did thousands of years ago.

Sea shell bead pieces are among the most popular and well known pieces of regional trade importance for thousands of years. Nearly everyone has seen American Indian art pieces, from beaded necklaces to purses, belts and such.

For the last several decades modern beadwork has been replicated in oriental factories and very cheaply imported. This makes it a competing factor against the top quality beadwork done by American Indian craftspeople. The native American crafts people have lost several millions of dollars (just over an eight year period during the 1980s) to these fake native beads and beadwork pieces.

Historically, beads were carved from turtle shell, animal horn and deer hooves. These were often used for making rattling or tinkling pieces utilized in dance. Hunters often wore necklaces put together with animal portions, such as bear claws or wolf claws. These indicated a hunter's prowess. Bones and seeds were often steamed to soften them for stringing and /or bending into various shapes.

As an example of beadwork used for a most practical purpose, the Iroquois League (Haudenosee) used white and purple wampum chains made of fresh-water clam shells to record sacred ceremonies, treaties and songs. This practice was used both before and after the coming of European settlers.

Many types of agreements were recorded with such beadwork chains. They were highly valued and cared for by their owners. European settlers mistook this care and reverence for wampum beads as a sign that the beads held monetary significance. As such, they mistakenly assumed that the word 'wampum' referred

to money, when in actuality these important beads were much more like very important original documents.

To string beads, Native Americans used animal sinew that is split very fine with which to attach beads to clothing, though infrequently strong plant fibers such as hide thongs or nettle were used for these purposes.

Today, the Navajos as well as some pueblo people still make the ancient bead type called the heishii. This is by far the most popular and high quantity type of beadwork that is still made today as it was in ancient times. These necklaces are also referred to as story necklaces as they can be used to tell stories, with each bead representing a character.

Beads and beadwork are a very important part of archaeological explorations of pre-European history. Beads have survived thousands of years and tell many fascinating stories about times we weren't around to witness. This is particularly true with respect to beadwork mad of sea shells. Ancient shell beads have been found thousands of miles from seas, which indicates various trade routes and contacts among different groups of people.

Today American Indian artists even create digital beadwork designs to help them make actual beadwork pieces. In this way complex designs and pieces can be tested on the screen before the project is begun. This has certainly added to the creative process for many beadwork artists.

Beadworking weaves through native history both in ancient times as well as in today's modern computer technology. The most important aspect of beadwork, though, is not what can be sold or gained, but personal pieces that are only given among family and friends. The true meanings behind these pieces are personal associations tied to visions, important perspectives and other things that an individual wishes to be reminded of.

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