

## Chapter 4

# IROQUOIS BEADWORK: A Haudenosaunee Tradition and Art

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The Iroquois tradition of raised beadwork began in western New York in the late eighteenth century. It is slightly older than the other great North American Indian beadworking tradition that the Lakota, Cheyenne, and other people of the Plains developed. Raised beadwork is unique to the Haudenosaunee; it is made nowhere else in the world. The Senecas, who decorated clothes, sashes, and small pincushions with small glass beads in the eighteenth century, probably invented the style of Iroquois beadwork that still exists today. They were making beaded pincushions by 1799 and purses by 1807. In the mid-nineteenth century, ethnohistorian Lewis H. Morgan noted in his *League of the Ho-de'-no-sau-see, or Iroquois* the "delicacy, even brilliancy of their bead-work embroidery" on women's clothing (1851, Book 3:384), and he included illustrations of beadwork on a needle case, woman's skirt, cradleboard, heart-shaped pincushion, and work bag, the forerunner of a modern purse. He reported that in 1849 he had purchased five varieties of work bags as well as three varieties of pin cushions and five varieties of needle books (Morgan 1850, 57).

The Iroquois tradition of beadwork continued to evolve in the nineteenth century, and by 1860 Mohawks near Montreal and Tuscaroras near Niagara Falls were creating elaborate pincushions, purses, and wall hangings adorned with raised beadwork. Despite the similarity of items created, the two geographic areas developed different styles of beadwork (Table 4.1). Throughout the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, at the height of beadwork production, the Tuscaroras sold their beadwork mostly at Niagara Falls, on their reservation, and at the New York State Fair. They preferred to use small clear and white beads. During this same period, the Mohawks used larger clear beads and also employed red, blue, green, and yellow beads on most of their early pieces

(Figure 4.1). While they sold their goods at nearby Montreal, the Mohawks also traveled extensively throughout North America to sell at fairs, exhibitions, wild west shows, and Indian medicine shows. Some even sold their beadwork when they traveled to England to perform Indian dances at Earls Court, an exhibition ground in London. Photographs taken in 1905 show these performers attired in clothing decorated with Mohawk beadwork.

My personal family experience illustrates typical Iroquois beadwork transactions in the twentieth century. My story starts in 1903 when my grandmother went to the Afton Fair, a small agricultural fair in central New York. She took my nine-year-old father, but his sister, then eleven, was sick and could not go. My grandmother brought her home a present from the fair. It was a beautiful pink satin-covered bird-shaped pincushion that sparkled with light green beads (Figure 4.2). My aunt treasured this bird throughout her long life and displayed



**Figure 4.1.** Two needle cases that illustrate differences in nineteenth-century Mohawk (left) and Niagara (right) beadwork.

**Table 4.1.** Fifty Different Traits in Iroquois Beadwork.

	Niagara	Mohawk	Thomas-Hill
20th and 21st century use of plastic, metal, and leather additions	✳		
Asymmetrical heart designs with flower on one side and bird on other	✳		
Beaded panels for the Improved Order of the Redmen uniforms		✳	
Beadwork production highest between 1880 and 1920	✳	✳	
Birds often have perches and dates under the tail		✳	✳
Canoes have flat bottoms		✳	✳
Canoes have narrow bottoms	✳		✳
Card holders	✳	✳	
Checkbook covers and cell phone holders			✳
Clamshell needlecases	✳		✳
Corn husk dolls	✳	✳	✳
Covers for picture albums and address books			✳
Dates beaded in numbers larger than 1/2 inch tall		✳	✳
Dolls with faces made from leather	✳		
Eyeglass cases	✳		✳
Five-point pincushions		✳	✳
From 1860s to 1895 purple velvet preferred		✳	
From 1895 to 1925 hot pink cloth popular		✳	
Heavy beaded edging with no cloth binding		✳	
Large clusters of beads hanging from flower centers		✳	✳
Mat and pincushion sets	✳		
Multi-level mail holders		✳	
Picture frames shaped like animals or things	✳		
Picture frames with more than one window		✳	
Place names of locations outside of New York State		✳	
Place names of locations within New York State	✳		
Polished cotton on the back of nineteenth-century pieces	✳	✳	
Preference for blue, green, red, yellow, and white beads on each piece		✳	
Pressed paper flower decorations used in the 1920s		✳	
Raised beadwork often over one inch high		✳	✳
Red and blue cloth preferred	✳		
Relatively large pincushions and picture frames		✳	✳
Short shoe form pincushions	✳		
Simple beaded edging with cloth binding	✳		✳
Single and double match holders and whisk broom holders		✳	
Sprengperlen used lavishly until 1917		✳	
Sprengperlen used sparingly	✳		✳
Strawberry emeries and pincushions	✳		✳
Symmetrical designs on heart and trilobe heart pincushions		✳	
Tall boot or shoe form pincushions	✳	✳	✳
Three dimensional birds have wings down		✳	
Three dimensional birds have wings up	✳		✳
Trees and mat sets	✳		✳
Trifold needlecases	✳	✳	
U.S. and other national flags pictured		✳	✳
Urns		✳	✳
Use of checkerboard or salt and pepper technique of alternate bead colors		✳	
Wide variety of animals and birds pictured		✳	
Wide variety of mottoes and labels of pieces		✳	
Words beaded in letters larger than 1/2 inch tall		✳	



**Figure 4.2.** 1903 Mohawk bird purchased by my grandmother. 8.5 x 7.5 inches.  
In Afton Historical Society collection.

it proudly in her china cabinet, where I saw it when I was a child. At her death this cherished heirloom was passed on to her daughter who later donated it to the Afton Historical Society in Chenango County, where it is presently on view.

My research indicates that this bird was made by a skilled Mohawk beadworker from a Mohawk community located near Montreal and several hundred miles from the Afton Fair. This pincushion probably got to the fair with a group of Mohawks who traveled by train or wagon to perform at fairs, medicine shows, and exhibitions. While at these venues, they also sold their handmade baskets and beadwork.

In 1958 I bought a small red heart-shaped pincushion at a booth in the Indian Village at the New York State Fair, which is held near Syracuse (Figure 4.3). It was a present for my mother, who displayed it prominently on her bedroom dresser for the next twenty-five years until I inherited it. Mary Lou Printup, a leading Tuscarora sewer, later identified this pincushion as one she had made. She, like most Tuscarora beadworkers prefer to be called “sewers,” a term not popular with some other Iroquois beadworkers. In my research and writing, I use the word “beadworker” to refer to all except those individuals who specifically prefer to be called “sewers.”

When I purchased the red heart I had no idea that this pincushion had anything in common with the bird that my grandmother acquired fifty-five years earlier. I knew that I wanted to get something special for my mother, and this pincushion was special because it was beautiful and made by a native artist. In buying it I shared something with my grandmother, who died before I was born, that is, the purchase of a piece of Iroquois beadwork. Most likely the purchase of the bird was my German-born



**Figure 4.3.** 1958 heart pincushion purchased at the New York State Fair. Niagara Tradition. 4.5 x 4 inches.

grandmother’s only interaction with a Haudenosaunee woman, and my purchase at the State Fair was my first interaction with a Tuscarora sewer, the first of many.

In a similar manner Iroquois beadworkers and their non-Indian customers, often tourists or attendees at a public entertainment venue, have been brought together by beadwork for over two centuries. These transactions undoubtedly number in the tens of thousands.<sup>1</sup> During honeymoon trips to Niagara Falls and visits to agricultural fairs, exhibitions, and other attractions, people purchased Iroquois beadwork as mementos to remember these places and experiences. The beads often form designs featuring birds and flowers, natural themes that appealed to the Victorian women who drove the market of souvenir sales in the nineteenth century. Studies by Beverly Gordon (1984; 1986) and Ruth B. Phillips (1998) describe the souvenir trade and point out the importance of these items to the people on both sides of the transactions.

Souvenir beadwork was so treasured that the pieces were frequently kept in cedar chests or keepsake boxes. Therefore, when unwrapped one hundred or more years later, they are often in pristine condition. Ironically, few contemporary beadworkers have samples of their ancestors’ work because it was usually made for sale to strangers, although some beadwork was created as gifts for family and friends.

Because most pieces were made for sale to tourists, many people have dismissed Iroquois beadwork as “souvenir trinkets” not important enough to collect, study, or exhibit. In fact, they are often called whimsies, a term that I believe trivializes them and diminishes their artistic and cultural value. But within the last two decades Iroquois beadwork has become the subject of serious study and museum exhibitions. At least four traveling exhibits of

Iroquois beadwork have been installed in over a dozen museums and seen by thousands of museum visitors in the United States and Canada since 1999.<sup>2</sup> This scholarly recognition has resulted in an increased appreciation of these beadwork creations and the artists who made them. What were considered curious tourist souvenirs when they were made are now generating increased respect from both the general public and the Haudenosaunee.

Contemporary beadworkers see their work as a significant part of Haudenosaunee culture and an important link to the past. In Haudenosaunee communities beadworkers are admired as continuing a revered tradition. Although there are a few male beadworkers, the majority are women, and in a matrilineal-society with powerful clan matrons, the economic benefit of beadwork sales increases the influence of the women even more.

Iroquois beadwork is still sold at Niagara Falls, the New York State Fair, and several pow wows and festivals in the northeast; the methods of beadwork distribution have changed little over two hundred years. The beadwork itself, however, has changed tremendously. Over the last two centuries the styles of beadwork have evolved from simple small pincushions and purses to highly elaborate shapes, becoming works of art in the traditional sense. The beads selected have progressed from the very small seed beads used around 1800 to the larger seed beads of 1900 and finally, by 2000, to a wider variety of bead sizes and colors.

Iroquois beadwork remains a unique art form distinguished by several characteristics found only in work created by Haudenosaunee beadworkers. Iroquois beadwork features a design in glass beads that have been sewn on a fabric that is stretched over a backing of cardboard or cloth lining. The materials used in the beadwork are predominately small seed beads, cloth, cardboard, paper, and in pincushions, a stuffing. The beads are sewn onto the fabric in geometric or natural designs using waxed, doubled white thread.<sup>3</sup> The beads are usually sewn over a paper pattern that remains in place under the beaded elements. Although not practiced at all times in the history of Iroquois beadwork, the most distinctive trait is that the beads are raised above the surface of the cloth face. Some pieces have raised beaded elements that are over an inch high. The beads are raised by putting more beads on the thread than is needed to span the pattern so that the beads form an arch above the pattern. The amount of extra beads determines how high the arches are, that is, how much the beadwork is raised. Various velvets were and still are the favored fabrics, but other fabrics such as wool, twills, silk, and satin are also used. Pincushions often have beaded velvet fronts and polished cotton backs. Polished cotton is a shiny stiff material that is also referred to as chintz or oilcloth. On the majority of late twentieth-century and contemporary twenty-first-centu-

ry pieces, the back is a colorful calico. Some pieces, mainly in the Niagara Tradition, have a silk or cotton binding around their perimeters to cover the cut edges and attach the front and back fabrics. Tight beadwork on the edging often binds Mohawk pieces together so a cloth binding is not necessary. Flat purses as well as fist and box purses are constructed in the same manner, with cardboard as the base.

Pincushions were usually stuffed with sawdust, but sweet grass, cotton, cattail fluff, newspapers, and polyester have also been used. Contemporary craftsmen remember that their mothers preferred pine sawdust because of the nice aroma.<sup>4</sup> Small strawberry-shaped pincushions are traditionally filled with emery, used to sharpen and polish needles. Velvet and twill-covered picture frames and other wall hangings on cardboard bases have polished cotton backs on earlier pieces and calico on more recent ones. European glass beads were often augmented with metal sequins on nineteenth-century pieces and with plastic sequins and other plastic novelty beads since the late twentieth century. Bone and shell beads and leather, which are often used in other American Indian beadwork, rarely occur in Iroquois beadwork.

The most common form of Iroquois beadwork, and the form most easily recognizable by people who are not familiar with Iroquois beadwork, is the flat black purse or bag featuring identical colorful, beaded floral designs on both sides. Most flat bags have flaps on both sides, but the opening is across the top where the two sides meet. The face fabric is usually black or very dark brown velvet, and the interior is often a light-colored linen or polished cotton. A binding, usually red, is attached around the closed sides of the purses. A beaded fringe is sometimes added. The fringe is merely sewn to the binding and does not hold the two sides of the bag together; it is purely decorative. The flaps usually are edged with white beads that are larger than the beads that outline the flaps and body (Figure 4.4). The flaps and body are sometimes outlined with short parallel lines like a stockade. The faces of the flap and body are covered by stylized flowers in shades of blue, red, yellow, and white connected with green stems, which are sometimes striped in two shades of green. Some bags feature a small slit pocket under one of the flaps. It may have been meant to hold a comb or mirror.

Although there are great similarities between existing bags, they could not have been made by the same person. Based on the numbers of flat black bags in personal and museum collections and the frequency that they appear on eBay, I estimate that at least twelve thousand flat bags were made between the 1840s and 1910. And there is evidence that some may have been made earlier. A chronology of these purses has not been developed, but traits such as striped buds, the use of very small seed beads, and beaded "flairs" seem to indicate an early date. The



**Figure 4.4.** Four flat, black nineteenth-century purses. Note the four colors in the flowers. Average 7 x 6 inches.

use of the four-color motif indicates that they were made by Mohawk beadworkers, and at least one bag is lined with a Montreal newspaper from the 1840s (Karlins Karklins, personal communication, 2000). An interesting observation is that although some bags are similar, no two identical bags have been encountered.

Similar floral beadwork is found on glengarry-shaped caps that indicate a Scottish influence easily found in the St. Lawrence Valley, and some of the bags may be inspired by the shape of Scottish sporrans. Similar floral beadwork was also applied to moccasins, mats, watch pockets, and other small items. Even with so many examples of this type of beadwork, the place of manufacture has not been determined. Although they are identified as Tuscarora in some collections, they do not share traits with known Tuscarora beadwork and are probably not Tuscarora. If they were made by Mohawk beadworkers, as is suspected, the exact location of their manufacture is not known. It is ironic that we know so little about the origin and evolution of the most common form of Iroquois beadwork.

In *Flights of Fancy: An Introduction to Iroquois Beadwork*, I defined sixty forms or types of Iroquois beadwork. Variations in size and material, however, increase the number of types or, at least, subtypes. There are twenty-five basic pincushion shapes, twenty shapes of wall hangings, eight purse and container shapes, and many miscellaneous forms such as dolls, mats, and trees, plus moccasins, shirts, skirts, leggings, hats, and other items of

clothing. Approximately half of all Iroquois beadwork falls in the pincushion category; purses comprise about a quarter, with wall hangings and miscellaneous forms making up the remainder. Necklaces, earrings, barrettes, small souvenir pins, and wirework are not included in this study. I have personally examined over six thousand pieces of Iroquois beadwork and have studied photographs of over twenty thousand more, and I have never seen two identical pieces of any kind, except for a few intentionally matched pairs of wall hangings. It would have been so easy for the beadworkers to replicate the same pattern over and over and mass produce identical pieces, but they did not. This fact illustrates the creativity of the beadworkers who wanted to make each piece a little bit different. Some bead artists, moreover, created works of great imagination featuring incredible animals and fantastic flowers.

In addition to the distinctive floral and faunal designs on the beadwork, upper case letters and numbers are sometimes included in the designs on Iroquois beadwork. These designations fall into five categories: an expression of sentiment; the year the piece was made; the location of the sale; an identification of the function or form of the piece; and the name of the image on the beadwork. Although beaded words appear on items made by Native Americans in Iowa and Alaska, they are usually only of place names found in those two areas and not sentiments, dates, or labels such as those often found on Iroquois beadwork.

For those desiring Iroquois beadwork expressing sentimental thoughts there are pieces with beaded sayings such as REMEMBER ME, THINK OF ME, LOVE ME, I LOVE YOU, GOOD LUCK, CALL AGAIN, TAKE ME DEAR, TRUE LOVE, O MY DEAR, SMILE DEAR, JUST ONE GIRL, HONEY, DEAR FATHER, DEAR SISTER, and DEAR MOTHER. These sentiments are perfect on gifts for loved ones. Of course many pieces have been purchased during honeymoon visits to Niagara Falls, but the most common expression on beadwork from there is merely FROM NIAGARA FALLS (Figure 4.5). Perhaps the mental image of the Falls carries so much power that no other words are necessary.

Some expressions display Indian humor such as the small cardboard canoes that are labeled FAST on one side and BOAT on the other. There is a horseshoe wall hanging that asks ARE YOU SINGLE, a purse that pictures a labeled MICKEY MOUSE, and one that states IN GOD WE TRUST OTHERS PAY CASH. And there is a 1926 FOX on a BOX (Figure 4.6). Others carry a serious religious message with JESUS PROTECT OUR FAMILY, GOD BLESS OUR HOME, JESUS NEVER FAILS, and GOD IS LOVE. The earliest expressions appear on beadwork made in the 1860s and become most popular during the 1890s and the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Much Iroquois beadwork is easy to date because dates



**Figure 4.5.** Front and back of a mid-nineteenth-century Niagara needle case. 2.5 x 4 inches.



**Figure 4.6.** FOX on a BOX purse with 1926 beaded on the end. Note the four basic colors used in the Mohawk Tradition.



**Figure 4.7.** Front and back of an 1850 Niagara pincushion. 3 x 3 inches.

are frequently beaded on them. As early as the 1830s beaded dates were incorporated into Seneca flat purse designs. The earliest known bead-dated pincushion is a small, square Seneca pincushion with 1850 beaded on the back. This is the only piece that I have seen with a beaded date on the back instead of the front (Figure 4.7). Birds often display a date under the tail, such as the 1903 date beaded under the tail of my aunt's bird. Years became common on pieces made after 1895, with the years between 1900 and 1920 the most frequent.

Sometimes beadwork has a date written on the back in pen. The earliest written date that I have seen was made in the late 1790s. It may be one of the earliest Iroquois pincushions ever made. Often a piece was so important to the owner that a date and even a name and a place was written on the back. While these notations are invaluable in dating individual pieces they are also useful in dating similar items that carry no date. The notes frequently convey information otherwise difficult to find. For example, one pincushion has written on the back, "New York State Fair, Sept 17, 1889." Furthermore, "25 cts" is penned on the side. This Mohawk trilobe pincushion demonstrates that there were Mohawks at the State Fair that year, which was several decades before the Indian Village was constructed in the 1920s. And the price for a nice, but not special, pincushion was twenty-five cents. A new, generic pincushion today sells for about twenty-five dollars.

The name of the place where the beadwork was sold is often beaded on the front. About fifty different place names have been observed, and the most common place names are NIAGARA FALLS, MONTREAL, CAUGHNAWAGA, OTTAWA, STATE FAIR, SARATOGA, and TORONTO (Figure 4.8). The existence of more distant places shows that the beadwork traveled many miles with its makers and sellers. There are pieces that carry names such as ST LOUIS, BANFF, KLONDIKE, TORONTO NATIONAL EXHIBITION, CHICAGO WORLDS FAIR, STE ANN DEBEAUPRE, RIVIERE DULOUP, MT CLEMENS, ALLENTOWN EXHIBITION, DEVILS LAKE, BROCKTON FAIR, YORK FAIR, and FORT WILLIAM CANADA.

In a humorous vein many pieces carry beaded titles that identify the function or shape of the particular piece of beadwork. Identifications include BOX, SOUVENIR, WHISK, INDIAN CANOE, SCISSORS, PICTURE FRAME, PIPECASE, BANJO (a whisk broom holder in the same shape as a banjo), and MATCHBOX. The word BOX on the lid of a box purse, SOUVENIR on a pincushion, and PICTURE FRAME are the most common words (Figure 4.9).

In a similar manner animals that are pictured on pieces are sometimes identified with the beaded name next to the animal. Examples include PIG, LION, BIRD, FOX, and DOG. (Note the word PIG beneath the pig's stomach on Figure 4.10) Over forty different animals have been



**Figure 4.8.** 1920 Mohawk heart pincushion with a place name. 4.75 x 5 inches.



**Figure 4.10.** 1912 Mohawk purse in hot pink, with FIG. 5.25 x 5.25 inches.



**Figure 4.9.** 1938 Mohawk SOUENIR star pincushion. 4.25 x 4.75 inches.



**Figure 4.11.** Mohawk boot pincushion with MONTREAL spelled backwards. 5.5 x 4.25 inches.

observed beaded on beadwork. In addition to the ones listed above are chickens, ducks, owls, squirrels, cats, geese, deer, moose, goats, rabbits, elephants, horses, zebras, camels, rhinoceroses, cows, and an amazing variety of unidentifiable animals that may not be intended to represent real birds or animals but may have been created to showcase a beader's creativity.

Frequently words were misspelled, including BUX for box, SOUENIR for souvenir, OTAWA for Ottawa, PICTUPE and PITCHUR for picture, BAST BOAT and FAST BOST for fast boat, MARRY CHRISTMAS for Merry Christmas, MONTREAL MATCHAL for Montreal matches, and EXHIBITIN for exhibition. Many of these can be explained by the fact that many Mohawk beadworkers were illiterate, although they often spoke Mohawk, English, and French. To create the beaded words, they had someone print out the desired words so they could

copy the letters; words were misspelled when they were copied incorrectly. There are humorous family stories of Mohawk school kids intentionally printing out "naughty" words that should not have been beaded on pincushions, but I have never seen one. One piece has Montreal spelled LAERTNOM when the beadworker did not notice that the pattern had been reversed. Notice on Figure 4.11 that the L on the left is crowded sidewise on the heel. Also note the unidentifiable animal on the top of the boot.

The Mohawk Tradition of Iroquois beadwork is very distinctive, and the Mohawk beadworkers of Kahnawake, Kanasatake, and Akwesasne were the most productive. Their work outnumbers ten to one that made by all other Haudenosaune beadworkers. Moreover, besides those living in the St. Lawrence River Valley there were Mohawks in the late nineteenth century who lived in Manhattan and Brooklyn, where they made a great



**Figure 4.12.** Improved Order of the Redmen jacket in the Mohawk Tradition. 35 x 19 inches, 12 x 5 inch chest panels.

deal of beadwork to sell on the streets of New York City and on the docks to sailors. Because these sales did not provide enough income, some families made beadwork for regalia worn by a fraternal organization known as the Improved Order of the Redmen (Figure 4.12).

Although the earliest Mohawk beadwork dates to the 1860s, the period of greatest productivity was between 1880 and 1920. Nineteenth-century beadwork features large, clear beads with floral and bird motifs. Words and dates are beaded in large letters often more than an inch tall. The earliest types are pincushions, picture frames, and wall pockets. Often added to clear beads are those in four basic colors: red, yellow, green, and blue. When there is one color, the other three are usually also included. It is rare to find a piece that has clear beads highlighted by beads of only one color.

The most common type of Mohawk beadwork is the purple, pillow pincushion, a large rectangular pincushion averaging 8.5 by 10 inches (Figure 4.13). Thousands of these pincushions were created. They feature one or more birds and flowers made of mostly clear beads sewn onto purple velvet. Often a vase or basket form is also portrayed. Beaded horses, angels, and words are noted, but are rare. Although other colors of velvet were used, purple in various shades was the favorite. The velvet pincushion



**Figure 4.13.** Mohawk purple pincushion, one of most common forms of Mohawk beadwork. 8 x 10 inches.

center is framed by clear leaves often alternating with colored leaves. The colored leaves are positioned so that leaves of the same color are always opposite each other on the outer edges. Sometimes a few colored beads are incorporated into the center design. Out of the hundreds of this type of pincushion studied, no two identical ones have ever been observed. The backs of the pincushions are usually polished cotton in pink, blue, purple, or red. Clear edging beads surround most pincushions, and many have loops on each corner. Many are stuffed with sawdust, which make them heavy; some weigh over two pounds. The largest pincushions are four inches thick. Smaller ones and lighter ones are stuffed with cotton or sweet grass. It is thought that these large pincushions were used to store large Victorian hatpins. They were made from the 1870s to the first decade of the twentieth century. Pieces made in the 1870s sometimes feature crossed U.S. flags, a design which may have been inspired by the U.S. Centennial. Although most likely made on reserves near Montreal, Canada, they obviously were made for the U.S. tourist market.

Purple heart-shaped and trilobe heart-shaped pincushions are also common and are obviously related to the large rectangular purple pincushions. Leaves in the four basic colors alternating with leaves in clear beads are often found along the top of the hearts. Most have hangers to place them on a wall. Picture frames with one, two, or four picture openings were also made in the same color combinations (Figure 4.14). There are also box purses with purple velvet sides. Sometimes the short sides of the boxes are covered with red or blue fabric instead of purple. Boxes also feature beaded elements in the four colors alternating with clear ones. The use of the same bead colors with purple velvet makes it obvious that pincushion makers also made boxes and picture frames. The picture frames and box purses were constructed of fabric glued over thin cardboard like that used in cereal boxes or shirt



**Figure 4.14.** Mohawk picture frame with two openings. 8.5 x 9.5 inches.



**Figure 4.16.** Hot pink Mohawk trilobated heart-shaped pincushions.



**Figure 4.15.** 1890s Mohawk boot pincushion, with a close-up of the toe. 8.5 x 6.5 inches.

boxes. The beadworkers had to sew through the cardboard, fabric, and paper pattern to sew the beads in place. They needed sharp needles and strong fingers.

In the 1890s new forms and different fabrics were adopted by the Mohawk beadworkers. Gold and green cloth encrusted with clear, green, amber, and sometimes pink or blue beads were featured. The new forms included stuffed birds, wall pockets, horseshoe wall hangings, whisk broom holders, and match holders. Pincushions in the shape of high-heeled Victorian boots, which began in the 1880s, were elaborated into large fancy boots in the 1890s (Figure 4.15).

Mohawk beadworkers started around 1895 to use hot pink cloth, which soon replaced purple velvet as the favored material. For the next twenty years hot pink was used on heart pincushions (Figure 4.16), picture frames, purses, and horseshoe wall hangings. Leaves in the four colors still appeared along the tops of hearts, but they now were in new shades of blue, red, yellow, and green beads. Animals and flowers, often raised over an inch above the hot pink surface, were often executed in a checkerboard technique that alternated clear or white beads with colored beads. During this time chalk-white beads replaced the clear beads that were so popular in the nineteenth century.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the wall hangings, especially the match holders, evolved into striking pieces of art. Some were almost completely covered with tubular beads called *sprengperlen*, which would have sparkled in the flickering light of kerosene lamps (Figure 4.17). The *sprengperlen* were made in factories in Bohemia, and when the factories there closed in 1917, these large beads were no longer available. So after 1917 the wall hangings and pincushions that had featured showy *sprengperlen* designs and loops changed to all seed beads.

Mohawk beadwork became much simpler after 1930, and although still made by a few families today, there are far fewer Mohawk beadworkers than a century ago. Classes are being organized so new Mohawk beadwork will be created in the twenty-first century. On the other hand, there are at least a dozen people who are active beadworkers on the Tuscarora Reservation near Niagara



**Figure 4.17.** 1909 Mohawk match holder, with *sprengperlen*. 7.75 x 6 inches.



**Figure 4.18.** 1990 Niagara GOOD LUCK horseshoe. 6.5 x 6.5 inches.

Falls in western New York. Many are descended from the sewers who made exquisitely detailed beadwork in the 1860s and 70s.

While pincushions, needle cases, match holders, whisk broom holders, small canoes (probably comb or match holders), purses, and picture frames are functional, wall hangings shaped like horseshoes seem to have no practical use. These cardboard-based pieces, which range from 3 to 12 inches tall, often feature beaded words (Figure 4.18). Although GOOD LUCK is the most common motto on horseshoes, there are a wide variety of sayings such as I LOVE YOU DEAR, CALL AGAIN, REMEMBER ME, THINK OF ME, O MY DEAR, and SOUVENIR. They



**Figure 4.19.** Picture frame by Dolly Printup Winden, with a 1931 photo of her grandmother Matilda Hill sitting near her own beadwork. 11 x 9 inches.

became a popular souvenir form in both the Mohawk and Niagara areas starting in the 1890s and continue so today. They are made to hang from the toe end of the horseshoe and not with the toe pointing down as a real horseshoe would be nailed over a doorway.

Perhaps the most prominent twentieth-century Tuscarora sewer was Matilda Hill. In 1905, she returned to the Tuscarora Reservation from the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania at the age of thirteen and soon started sewing. She made thousands of pieces and employed many people to help with the beadwork production. She had sewing bees in her home during which beadwork was made in an assembly-line fashion in which different individuals cut the cloth, did the beading, stuffed pincushions, sewed them closed, and put on the fringe. She continued to create colorful pieces of beadwork until her death in 1985. Her daughter and granddaughter continue to sew fancy beadwork (Figure 4.19).

There were several other families at Tuscarora who made beadwork. The women were so well known for their beadwork that many are identified as “beadworker” in the U.S. Census records of the early twentieth century. Although many photographs of nineteenth-century Tuscarora beadworkers exist, most are unidentified. It is hoped that someday the photographs and the names of the beadworkers listed in the census records can be matched.

If Iroquois beadwork can be assigned to one of the two major traditions, the eastern Mohawk Tradition and the western Niagara Tradition, it is the western one that is more difficult to identify with a particular nation. Whereas the Mohawk Tradition was practiced mostly by members of Mohawk communities, the beadworkers in the Niagara Tradition came from places inhabited by members of more than one Iroquois nation. Although the Tuscaroras may be the most recognized of the sewers in the Niagara Tradition, it is also likely that there were beadworkers on the Grand River Reserve in Canada, which is occupied by Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, Senecas, and Tuscaroras. But as of now, no beadworkers from the Grand River Reserve have been identified. Of those living on the Tuscarora Reservation today, there is at least one prominent “Tuscarora” beadworker whose mother was Mohawk and father was Onondaga.

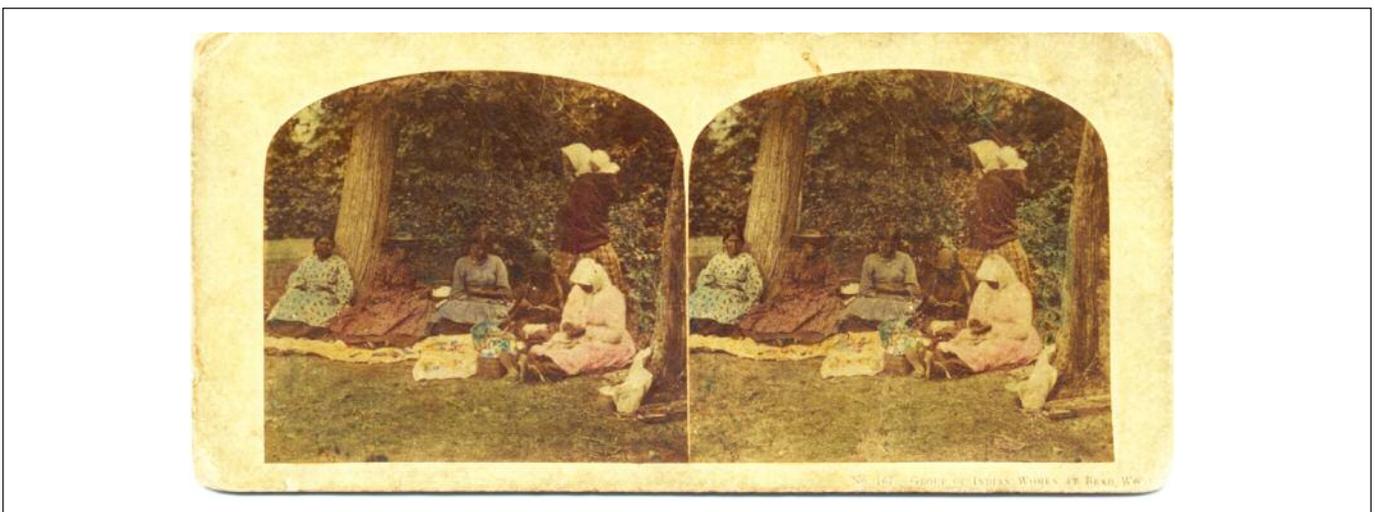
Beadwork in the Niagara Tradition that was made no later than the 1840s was collected by Lewis H. Morgan and pictured in three publications (1850; 1851; 1852). The most common pincushion forms are six- and eight-lobed pincushions about four inches in diameter (Figure 4.20). Hundreds of these were made. A central flower made of clear beads is repeated from pincushion to pincushion while the “sprays” between the clear flower petals are made of various colored beads. The central flower and the parallel pincushion outlines were made by laying down long strings of very small beads and tacking them down with a needle and thread from the back. The beads never left the string that they were put on at the glass factory. So, technically, the beadwork is not raised. Velvet and wool, often red or black, are the favored fabrics for the beaded side of the pincushions, while tan polished cotton



**Figure 4.20.** 1840s Niagara pincushion, similar to those collected by Lewis H. Morgan. 4.5 x 4.5 inches.

most often covers the back. The edges are bound with silk. Outlining the circumference are parallel lines of beads that commonly alternate lines of white beads with those of blue beads. At least a portion of the beadwork Morgan collected was made by Senecas on the Tonawanda Reservation in western New York. Some of the beadwork was made by Caroline Parker Mt. Pleasant, who is one of the earliest named Seneca beadworkers. Although raised at Tonawanda, she lived her adult life on the Tuscarora Reservation. She may have taught residents there how to make beaded pincushions.

There is a large quantity of nineteenth-century beadwork that was made on the three Seneca reservations in New York State. In fact, the earliest known photograph of Haudenosaunee women is of female beadworkers who are identified as Seneca. It was taken at Niagara Falls in 1859 by William England, a visiting English photographer (Figure 4.21). The caption on the back of the postcard made from this photograph reads:



**Figure 4.21.** 1859 stereoscopic card of Seneca beadworkers at Niagara Falls. William England (1830–1896), photographer.

Goat Island during the summer season is much frequented by vendors of souvenirs of the Falls, for few can pay a visit here without carrying away some little article of curiosity as a remembrance thereof: hence those who keep shop "under the shade of the greenwood tree," drive a considerable and profitable trade. Amongst them the Indian women are conspicuous, as seated on the sward they curiously contrive purses, pincushions, needle-books, slippers, caps, and other numerous articles in elegant bead work, which for beauty of design and neatness of execution is unsurpassed. In the neighbourhood of Niagara in times past, ere the white face set foot upon their territory, were the hunting grounds of the Seneca Indians, and it is the remnant of this scattered tribe that gains a subsistence by the manufacture and sale of fancy articles upon the ground where at one time the tribe held undisputed sway. About four miles from Niagara, is a small Indian village, where the old laws and customs of this people are still observed.

By the time England visited Niagara Falls, the Senecas had been creating flat purses with beaded dates for fifty years. The major beaded motif of these bags is composed of zigzags or triangles between parallel lines. Both sides of the purses are beaded with different designs. These bags were probably made on the Seneca Nation of Indians in southwestern New York State. After 1850, the use of clear beads on red cloth dominated Seneca-made pincushions, box purses, mats, and trees, but by the beginning of the twentieth century, there apparently were few or no Seneca beadworkers making these tourist items. No doubt some beadwork was done for personal gifts and on clothing, but that is all that is known.

Recently there has been an effort to revive beadwork at the Seneca Nation of Indians. Several adults and children have taken workshops taught by master beadworker Samuel Thomas, Cayuga. Thomas, who is self-taught, learned to bead as a teenager, and over the last twenty-five years he has become a very prolific beadworker. He and his mother, Lorna Hill, estimate that they have made over twenty thousand pieces. They make pincushions, picture frames, boxes, cases for glasses and cell phones, checkbook covers, photo album covers, and dozens of other forms. Their style is a combination of the Mohawk and Niagara styles, often using motifs and techniques from both areas on the same piece. Thomas developed a unique style by studying old pieces in museums and private collections and then adding his own artistic flair. Because of their productivity and the new style that they have developed, I have defined a third tradition of Iroquois beadwork: the Thomas-Hill Tradition.

Although there are resident beading classes at Tuscarora and Kahnawake, Thomas is the most active

Haudenosaunee who is promoting Iroquois beadwork. He teaches beadwork at both the Seneca Nation in New York and the Oneida Nation in Wisconsin. His popular workbook (2004), which illustrates his beadwork techniques, is used by beadworkers in Wisconsin as well as on the Akwesasne, Onondaga, and Seneca Nation reservations, where raised beadwork had almost disappeared at the end of the twentieth century. Moreover, Alaskan beadworkers have ordered copies of the Thomas workbook. It is also used by countless non-Indian beaders.

Thomas has taught dozens of workshops to both Indian and non-Indian students in Ontario Province, Canada, and in several states as far away from Iroquoia as Oklahoma and New Mexico. His workshops at the National Museum of the American Indian fill up quickly. Through his workshops and workbooks he has played a major part in the growing understanding and appreciation of Iroquois beadwork. Additionally, Thomas's exhibitions use beadwork to illustrate basic principles of the traditional Longhouse religion. In this way he teaches people that the spirit of the Great Law persists in the twenty-first century.

Recently Thomas has extended his teaching beyond North America by holding a workshop in Great Britain. Thus, he brought the tradition of Haudenosaunee beadworking full circle by returning to one of the original sources of the beads first used by the Iroquois. Thomas has also made several trips to Kenya where he spent considerable time conducting workshops and encouraging the production of beadwork for sale as souvenirs to tourists on safari. It is serendipitous that a member of the Haudenosaunee has recently introduced beadworking to another part of the world where the tourist industry is an important source of native income, just as it was for his ancestors. Thomas's most recent project, GA-NRA-DAIS-GO-WA'H, the Great Tree of Long Leaves, involved creating a fifty-branched, six-foot tall, beaded tree using both Iroquois and Kenyan beading techniques. Figure 4.22 is Thomas's model of this tree and is the size of beadwork created by nineteenth-century Senecas.

For thousands of years the ancestors of the Haudenosaunee made beads for decorative use. Prehistoric beads were made from natural materials such as stones, bones, clay, shells, and quills. Wampum, tubular shell beads, were important in religious, diplomatic, and trade situations, and they were also used for decorative purposes. Although wampum may be the most well-known of the beads used by the Haudenosaunee, glass beads became equally important after their arrival from Europe. These sparkling bits of glass, which came in a rainbow of many colors, proved very attractive to the Iroquois people. Like the beads made of natural materials, the glass beads were at first used to decorate bodily ornaments, clothes, and other possessions. The newly



**Figure 4.22.** Twenty-first-century model of a beaded tree and mat by Samuel Thomas, Cayuga.

acquired glass beads gradually replaced quills and other decorations made from natural materials. As a result, these glass beads became important trade items between the Haudenosaunee and the Europeans. In 1669, Jesuit missionary Jacques Bruyas enticed his Oneida pupils to attend school on a daily basis by offering “a string of glass beads, or two little glass cylinders” to those who could “repeat on Sunday all that is said during the week” (Beauchamp 1905, 389). A century later, Indian trader and British Superintendent of Indian Affairs, William Johnson included “Small white Beeds, & other Coloured D[itt]o Small” in a 1761 “List of Such Merchandise as is Usually sold to the Indians” (Sullivan 1921, 334-35). Therefore, it seems only natural that such a longstanding relationship between the Haudenosaunee and beads would continue into the nineteenth century. By that time, however, the direction of the trade had reversed, and non-Indians paid money for beaded items made by the Haudenosaunee. As the demand for Iroquois beadwork increased throughout the nineteenth century, money from beadwork sales became a major source of income for many families. Beadwork sales peaked between the 1890s and the 1920s. During that time the wild west shows, medicine shows, 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, the 1901 Pan-American Exposition, the 1904 Saint Louis World’s Fair, and the

increase of tourism to Niagara Falls and Montreal fueled sales of Iroquois beadwork. Many pieces of remarkable artistic quality were made during that quarter century. Although interest in Iroquois beadwork diminished after that and fewer individuals created beadwork, interest in Iroquois beadwork revived during the last two decades of the twentieth century. For the first time, Iroquois artists won major awards for their raised beadwork creations at the Mashantucket Pequot Tribe’s Schemitzun Indian Marketplace in Connecticut, the Indian Market and Festival sponsored by the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art in Indianapolis, Indiana, and the Santa Fe, New Mexico, Indian Market. This recognition has encouraged others to learn and practice traditional raised beadwork techniques. With an increasing number of Haudenosaunee interested in creating traditional beadwork and a growing number of beadwork collectors, the future of Iroquois beadwork appears promising in the twenty-first century.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report on Iroquois beadwork is the result of thirty years of research in museum and private collections and talking with beadworkers. Thanks to them for allowing me to study their beadwork. I also have to acknowledge the rich resource of eBay where over twenty-five thousand pieces have appeared in the last ten years. Through eBay I have met beadwork collectors throughout North America and Europe who have generously shared information on their collections. Historical researchers George Hamell and Paul Huey were also willing to share many interesting beadwork references they have unearthed. Fellow beadwork collectors and researchers Karlis Karklins (from Ottawa, Canada) and Richard Green (from Birmingham, England) have also been generous in sharing their findings. Special thanks go to Samuel Thomas (from Niagara Falls, Canada) who is probably the only Haudenosaunee who is as devoted to learning about Iroquois beadwork as I am. Without the patience and computer skills of my husband, Tom Elliott, none of this would have been possible. Thanks to them all.

## ENDNOTES

1. Estimating twenty beadworkers each making fifty pieces a year for two-hundred years results in an estimated total of beadwork pieces created at two-hundred thousand.
2. For more on my Iroquois beadwork research, see “Two Centuries of Iroquois Beadwork,” in *BEADS*, Vol. 15, Society of Bead Researchers, Ottawa, Canada, 2006, and *Iroquois Beadwork, Volume 1: A Short History*, Iroquois Studies Association, 2008. For further information on beadwork, see also [www.otsiningo.com](http://www.otsiningo.com), the website of the Iroquois Studies Association, Inc.

The exhibition *Across Borders: Beadwork in Iroquois Life* was shown at the McCord Museum in Montreal (1999–2000), the Castellani Museum of Niagara University (2000), the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec (2001), the National Museum of the American Indian in New York City (2001–2002), the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto (2002), and the Mashantucket Pequot Museum in Connecticut (2002–2003). *Flights of Fancy: 200 Years of Iroquois Beadwork* was shown in the Yager Museum at Hartwick College in Oneonta, N.Y. (2001), the Chemung County Historical Society Museum in Elmira, N.Y. (2002), and the DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County, in Ithaca, N.Y. (2003–2004). *Ska-ni'-Kwat, The Power of the Good Mind* has been exhibited at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City (2003), the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ont. (2003), the Mashantucket Pequot Museum in Connecticut (2003), The Iroquois Indian Museum in Howes Cave, N.Y. (2003), Woolaroc Museum in Bartlesville, Ok. (2004), the Seneca Iroquois National Museum in Salamanca, N.Y. (2005–2006), and the New York State Museum in Albany, N.Y. (2006–2007). *Made of Thunder, Made of Glass: American Indian Beadwork of the Northeast* has been installed in four New England museums (2006–2009). *Native American Beaded Whimsies* was displayed in The Schwenkfelder Library and Heritage Center in Pennsburg, PA (2007–2008). And the most recent exhibit is *Sewing the Seeds: 200 Years of Iroquois Glass Beadwork* at the Rockwell Museum in Corning, N.Y. (2009).

3. In traditional Haudenosaunee homes black thread is reserved for sewing burial clothes.
4. The analysis report on samples of pincushion stuffing that were sent to the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse confirmed that the sawdust was pine and came from five different species of pine.

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