Wabanaki Beadwork 1850-2000 Part 1

by

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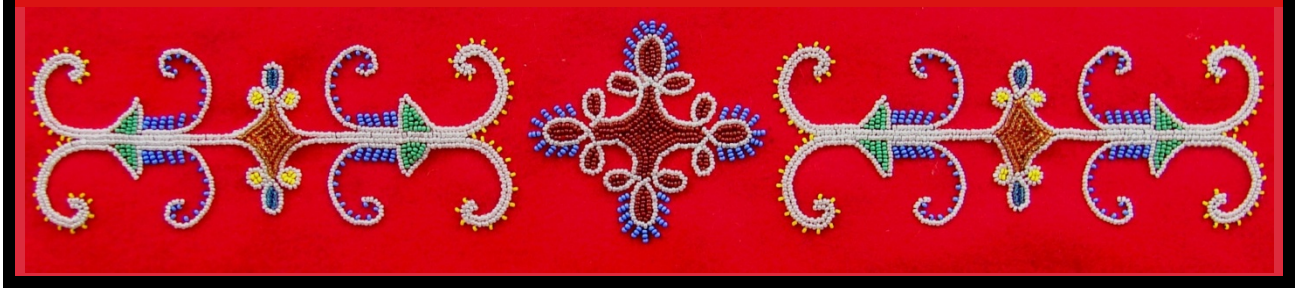

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Introduction:

Post 1850 Wabanaki Beadwork

This document, a preliminary classification of antique Wabanaki beadwork, has been prepared to assist Wabanaki groups and individuals in understanding the beadwork designs once practiced by their ancestors. The time may be coming when modern or future craftspeople will need these data to resurrect the ancestral styles, and then move beyond the traditional to developing new designs and interpretations. Unfortunately, except for early "double scroll" beadwork there is little Wabanaki Beadwork on display or in publication. Indeed, some of it, especially the mid 20th century "pan-Indian" styles are being scorned and even discarded by their owners as this is written. Wabanaki Beadwork 1850-2000 is meant to showcase heretofore unpublished examples from an admittedly small collection of beaded items and imagery of beadwork being worn. It also attempts to organize these collections in a meaningful way that offers a preliminary stylistic and, to a certain extent, temporal (dating), classification.

Classification

Artists are both individuals and participants in the larger culture, and deftly balance the role of individuality versus conformity to cultural (or economic) necessities. Some would argue that we must look for individuality and the essence of the bead artist in each work. In a series of thoughtful reviews of drafts of this paper, an Abenaki bead worker expressed concern regarding this attempt at classifying Northeastern beadwork types:

> *.... you are taking away some of their humanity with over-classification (of beadwork)*
> Melody Walker, Dec. 31, 2011

Brook is right, any classification scheme, in looking for rules that describe variation, necessarily downplays individual genius because it looks for elemental attributes that vary from sample to sample in understandable ways. I believe, however, that given the chaotic nature of our understanding of Northeastern North American beadwork, that we need to first make some sense of the chaos, then go back to look for individual genius once we begin to figure out who made what when. You see, there are three sources of information for cultural revitalization of Wabanaki Beadwork:

1.) tradition, the handing down of beadwork design information through the generations or among a bead worker's cohort. This information would be the most desirable. Taxonomists, people who study the science of classification would call this knowledge "emic" since it comes from within the culture. Except for a few design names collected by Frank Speck in the early 20th century, this understanding is lost to us. However, thoughts from descendents of practitioners of these artistic traditions often give valuable guidance in thinking and re-thinking organizational schemes in classification.

2.) repatriation, re-injecting cultural traditions into a culture missing them by researching and authenticating old information and artifacts long held in European hands. For this to work, the scholar must understand which cultures and areas created what, and so an "etic" classification is necessary, since the analysis must be done from outside of the contemporary culture of the original

artist. Later culture bearers such as Melody Brook can help with approaching an "emic" classification.

3.) revelation, guidance from the spirit and ancestral worlds. All Wabanaki bead workers who I have met acknowledge the "power" inherent in these creations, and many believe that they can feel the ancestors speaking to them through the choice of materials, colors and designs. This kind of "emic" insight is very valuable and can guide the researcher and occasionally reveal heretofore hidden (but once seen, quite obvious) connections hidden from a purely objective analysis.

In this booklet, we will be focusing on data repatriation, based on a series of objects in the collections of the Wôbanakik Heritage Center in Swanton, VT, augmented by literature citations of comparative materials that have been studied by other researchers. I hope that the "science" in this endeavor has been influenced, at least a bit, by tradition, and even, occasionally, by a spark of revelation. Perhaps once this (or another, better) classification becomes a standard, we can then have the leisure of looking for the individual genius that lay behind each item. And so the overall goal is creating an environment within which modern Wabanaki bead workers or other artists can communicate with the individual creations of their individual forbears.

History of research into Wabanaki Beadwork

Of all of the North American beadwork traditions, that produced by the Wabanakis in the 19th century and early 20th century is the least studied and least known, even though Wabanaki beadwork is some of the most sought after and expensive in the antique American Indian art market. Probably the most important early research into Wabanaki Beadwork was Frank Speck's Symbolism in Penobscot art, originally published in 1927. He was the only writer to get any then-traditional Wabanaki insight into the origins and development of the designs, since memory of the symbols' meaning was fading fast when he was doing his ethnographic research. Speck notes that this is because the Penobscots had shifted from beadwork to making splint baskets for sale around 1900 (Speck: 2001:56). Amid all of Speck's speculations are two meaty quotes from his informants; first that floral designs represent "plants which are good as medicines (Speck: 2001:62), and second that " the idea of a design comes into the mind by itself and if you do not make it you lose it and it never comes back again (Speck: 2001:59). In another context, his informants told him that some Penobscot beadwork, especially on chiefs coats and collars had "political symbolism" (Speck: 2001:65). That political meaning was widespread in Wabanaki art was indicated in his mention of Odanak Abenaki white curved designs on dark cloth from chief's regalia. He notes that this beadwork commemorated the last treaty negotiation with the Iroquois (Speck: 2001: 71). Speck considered the design motifs discussed below as entirely modern (in the early 20th century, Speck 2001:40) and that they had no definite interpretation, called simply by their botanical plant-part name for "flower," "stem," "leaves," etc. (Speck: 2001:73). After this work, the study of beadwork languished through the mid 20th century.

In the late 1970's there was a burst of activity to research and publish Wabanaki material culture, including beadwork, focusing on that of the easterly Wabanakis -- such as Ruth Holmes Whitehead's classic Elitekey: Micmac material culture from 1600 AD to the present (Whitehead, 1980: 15-29), and Gaby Pelletier's Micmac and Maliseet Decorative Traditions (Pelletier, 1977:19-32). The focus of the beadwork sections of these books was the so-called "double curve' design (see below), which sparked huge interest in the style by collectors and other museums. Then the scholarly community seemed to lose interest for fifteen years or so, until, Stephen Augustine's Mi'kmaq and Maliseet cultural ancestral material, (Augustine, 2005); artist/collector Gerry Biron's Made of thunder, made of glass: American Indian beadwork of the Northeast which included occasional examples of

Wabanaki nineteenth century beadwork tourist items (Biron; 2009: 14,15, 27); and Uncommon Threads,: Wabanaki Textiles, clothing and Costume (Bourque and Labarr, 2009), the catalog of the first museum exhibit to focus on Wabanaki costume. In these publications the focus was mainly early and mid 19th century beadwork. These previous researchers had little interest in late 19th or 20th century styles, usually dismissing them as "theatrical-looking" with "no known prototypes" Bourque and LaBarr, 2009:107). These researchers also believe that beadwork of the late 19th century was "indistinguishable from those made by the Iroquois" (Bourque and LaBarr, 2009:107, 121), which leads to the next issue--.

Iroquoianism

Figure 1. Real photo postcard, Halifax, NS, ca. 1907.
Please note the "Niagara-style" beaded "cushions" for sale on the table.

In this branch of material culture study there is a continuation of the old "Iroquois centric" ideas left over from Frank Speck's assumption that all "complex" cultural attributes of the Wabanakis such as political organization or material culture (such as wampum symbology) were derived from the "superior" Iroquois.

The Iroquois were the agents of conveyance of both material and ceremony to the tribes eastward...
Frank Speck (1975:5)

Under this paradigm, if a motif is found to be present in both Wabanaki and Iroquois art (and culture), it is implicitly assumed that the trait, design or object migrated from west to east.

One of the more interesting images of Wabanaki bead workers emerged in an internet auction in 2006 and now resides in the Wôbanakik Heritage Center Collections (Figure 1). A post card entitled "At the Indian Village near Halifax, NS" (Halifax, Nova Scotia; sent in 1908) clearly shows a woman in front of a typical Wabanaki bark wigwam selling stuffed beaded cushions as she carefully works on her art. An identical (but in much better condition) example of this postcard was published in 1992; and the women in the image were authoritatively identified as Micmac by Ruth Holmes Whitehead (1992: 74), the foremost scholar of Micmac material culture. An art-historical/geographical problem with this postcard is revealed under magnification --that the woman in the image is selling items that any scholar of North American beadwork would have to

classify as the "Niagara style" -- a type of beadwork heretofore assumed to be made by the Iroquois. Under low-power magnification, we can clearly see that these cushions are complete with loops of beads and "springperlen" (colored glass tubes) suspended from the rim. The furthest left example is star-shaped and has the typical "Niagara" style raised beadwork on the obverse. Some items, although in the Niagara beadwork style, are of non-typical Iroquois form -- such as the round tasseled cushion at the front left of the craft seller's table.

Figure 2. Typical "Niagara-style" beaded "cushion" in the form of a boot.
Note that the pendant loops of beads are similar to those which can be seen on the cushions in Figure 1.

Now Halifax is a huge distance from Tuscarora Reservation in Niagara County, NY the "hub" of Niagara style beadwork; and difficult and time consuming to reach by ship or train from upstate New York. It strains credulity to postulate that Tuscarora bead workers migrated to Halifax, the center of a traditional vibrant beadwork tradition, set up a Wabanaki style wigwam (rather than their typical portable canvas shelter, http://iroquoisbeadwork.blogspot.com/ Figure 1.) from which to sell the bulky, low-value (at the time) touristic beadwork. The image of crates of Iroquois sawdust filled cushions being sent on consignment to Micmac bead workers is almost as outlandish. The simplest explanation is that this is a Micmac bead worker selling her wares.

But this complex long-distance trade scenario is exactly what has been postulated -- that Seneca Iroquois bead workers in Westernmost New York state made and sent large quantities of the common small pouches or watch cases long thought to be Wabanaki (e.g. Hothem , 2003: 188) to Maine and the Maritimes, there to be re-sold as Wabanaki wares (Bourque and Labarr, 2009:121, Figure 3 below). This may have happened occasionally, since items believed to be of mid 19th century Iroquois manufacture occasionally turn up in old Maine collections (Eckstrom, 1980" Plate XI), with an apparently local provenance. It is also possible that Wabanaki bead workers made and

traded Iroquois looking items to their western brethren for sale at Niagara Falls or other New York Tourist destinations. It will probably be impossible to know, at this late date, the nature and direction of much of the internal Native trade in tourist bead art. However, the postcard cited at the beginning of this section is stunning photographic evidence of a lively but unstudied Wabanaki beadwork tradition long thought to be Iroquois -- a "smoking gun."

Native people were not only traditional bead workers, they were astute entrepreneurs, who manipulated and adapted the tourist wares trade to the economic and geographic realities of their customer base. If an Iroquois beadwork merchant needed a certain size and style of reticule or whimsy, who can say whether an ethnic Wabanaki was not asked to produce?

The almost entire absence of the Odanak and Wôlinak Abenakis or the sizable Abenaki population at Akwesasne from discussions of the 19th century beadwork trade is curious in this regard, given the extensive research into their coeval tourist basket wares. Once art historians begin to accept the possibility that the Wabanakis were as "complex" and as interesting as the Iroquois, then perhaps new avenues for research will open. For example, the small pouch (Figure 1) with embroidered double scroll design supposedly made by the Seneca (Bourque and Labarr, 2009:121), but my colleague and beadwork scholar Frank Bergevin places them significantly to the East. He notes " I find these (pouches) at least pan-Quebec, and had been leaning towards a Mohawk (Caughnawaga) origin (Bergevin e-mail, June 10, 2012). Since the reverse of the pouch has the distinctive Wabanaki Leaf design, it may actually be Eastern Townships Wabanaki (Odanak, Becancour, Sherbrook, Yamacheche or Durham Abenaki/Wabanaki).

Figure 1. Small pouch (obverse) with embroidered double scroll design
supposedly made by the Seneca (Bourque and Labarr, 2009:121), but the reverse has the distinctive Wabanaki Leaf design.
Wabanaki
Mid or late 19th century

Current Research

In this booklet, I have attempted to divide the "non double scroll" Wabanaki beadwork tradition into sub-genres based on published examples as well as investigation of examples in the Wôbanakik Heritage Center collections in Swanton, VT. I have also attempted to discover those stylistic attributes and motifs which may serve as reliable indicators of Wabanaki, rather than Iroquois origin. However, there are numerous examples that defy exact ethnic attribution, especially items made during the turn of the 20th century.

Archaeological research

According to an analysis of extant 18th century beads from middens of Abenaki historic habitation sites in the collections of the Wôbanakik Heritage Center, beaded goods of that period seem to be almost exclusively made from largish blue and white glass beads called pound (early) or pony (late) beads.

Figure 3. White pound beads, Missisquoi Village site, Highgate, VT
ex. Ben Gravel collection,
Mid or late 18th century

Occasionally we find reddish or rust colored beads, but no other colors. Only in the 19th century did the Wabanakis use the smaller "seed beads" (see also Whitehead, 2001: 269) to craft the heavily studied "double scroll" designs of the Indians of Maine and the Canadian Maritimes. A few white 10/0 glass seed beads were found in 2000 in Abenaki graves dating to the 1820's-1840's in Highgate and Swanton, VT but their underlayment has completely disintegrated, and the beads were reinterred before scholarly analysis could be done on them. The designs appearing in this volume date to the mid 19th century and later.

The Wabanaki leaf

One of the more interesting discoveries of stylistic analyses is the "Wabanaki leaf," a design motif common on mid and late 19th century Wabanaki beadwork, but absent on contemporary beadwork that has been published with a definitive Iroquois attribution (or is assigned to that tradition by scholars such as Biron, 2009). It consists of a distinctive broad or even heart-shaped beaded leaf, usually filled with simple patterns of beads. There is no defined "midrib" or central vein (as in Iroquois examples), but the lines of beads filling the leaf are divided bilaterally, then angled slightly forward -- subtly implying a midrib and parallel veins such as are seen in beech leaves. The base of the leaf, where it meets the petiole can be indented or heart shaped. Three leaf fill variants have

been identified, 1.) a solid fill (Figure 4.), type 2.) a bicolor type with the lower leaf one color (Figure 5.) and the upper leaf another color and 3.) a leaf with a border composed of several rows of contrasting color beads (Figure 5.). These are most commonly seen on tourist trade bags and pouches, although occasionally they appear on Penobscot moccasins (mainethingstodo.com/mttd/2009/06/77-find-out-about-maines-native-americans). However, Biron (2009:16) has classified two Wabanaki leaf examples as Kahnawake Mohawk but was very tentative in this assignation. Frank Bergevin writes ".. Figure 4 is again something that I could not comfortably say is any one group exclusively." But when viewing the whole beaded bag which the he states (this) is in what I was seeing as a Western Abenaki style more than anything and closer to Mohawk in many ways." (Bergevin e-mail, June 10, 2012). There is little doubt that the leaves in figure 5 are Wabanaki, "I do not believe I have seen (them) on anything other than Wabanaki (generally Micmac or Maliseet)" (Bergevin e-mail, June 10, 2012).

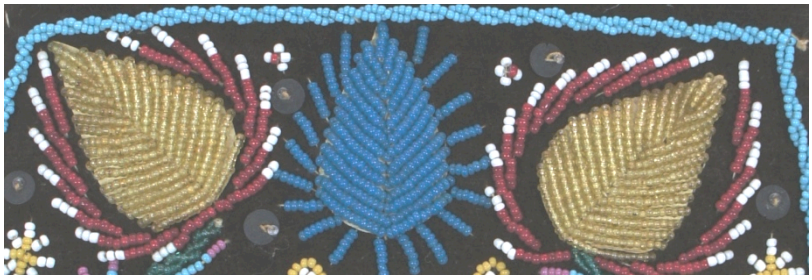

Figure 4. Detail pouch with "solid-fill" Wabanaki leaf design
Wabanaki
Mid or late 19th century

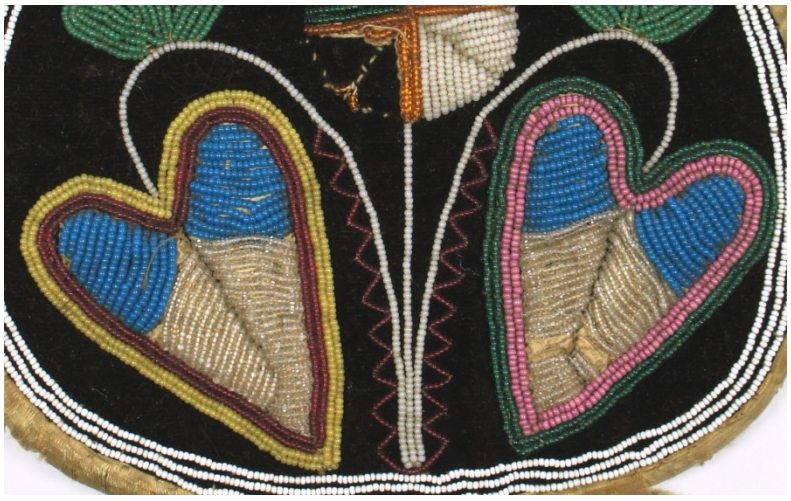

Figure 5. Detail pouch with "bicolor-fill" and "bordered" Wabanaki leaf with heart shaped base
Wabanaki
Mid or late 19th century

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In contrast, Iroquois leaves typically taper to the petiole as well as the tip and usually have distinctive colored bands executed at an angle to the axis of the leaf blade (Hothem, 203:183-187). Occasionally leaves on Iroquois items will be in a shape similar to the Wabanaki leaves discussed here; to fill the apices of four-panel beaded hats (Hothem, 2003:183), or the hard-to-fill corners of

flat bags (Hothem, 2003: 187). However, these are decidedly different in style, with much larger beads, and usually displaying a prominent beaded mid-rib vein to the leaf.

Real photo postcard image analyses

Another portion of this research has focused on the huge, untapped resource for late 19th and 20th century Wabanaki beadwork -- the "real photo" postcards of Wabanaki people that were sold as souvenirs at tourist destinations in New England (Figure) and the Canadian Maritimes. Although they were, except for a few ceremonial images, posed for the camera, they nevertheless express the subjects' identity that they wished to be remembered by. Also, by and large, the beadwork used in the post cards consisted of materials owned by the subjects, or existed in the local community

Figure 6. Detail, Real Photo Post card of "Penobscot Indians 1920."
The man wears a Sunflower style shirt panel and collar with Niagara Headdress band.

If the postcards were used, they serve as an excellent relative dating technique, in that the beadwork style show cannot have been developed AFTER, the date on the card. A careful analysis of the beadwork in these images provides a wealth of information on what was being worn by the Wabanakis, presumably much of it locally made.

Figure 7. Real photo postcard of Penobscot women and children from Indian Island, Maine. Ca. 1910

Figure 8. Detail, ancestral Missisquoi Abenaki woman with beaded headdress.
Real photo postcard ca. 1920

If the postcard shows sufficient detail, it reveals much needed data; Frank Bergevin writes, "Figure 8 is fantastic; it shows that Abenaki element that I think results from being so close to the Iroquois in so many cases." (Bergevin e-mail, June 10, 2012).

Stylistic typology

In reviewing the Wôbanakik Heritage Center collections and the rather extensive published collections cited in the Bibliography, I have devised a VERY preliminary typology of non-double scroll Wabanaki beadwork. They will be explored in more detail below, with specimen and archival imagery illustrations.

Wabanaki Beadwork types: A preliminary classification

Early-Mid 19th century
- Double Scroll Beadwork
- Geometric Beadwork
- The Nested Circle style
- The Miniature floral style.
- The Radiant Leaf style.

Mid-late 19th century
- The Sunflower Style.
- Passamaquoddy Beadwork (not stylistically definitive at this time)
- The Figural Style.
- Netted Beadwork

Turn of the 20th century
- The Niagara Style.

20th century
- The Pan-Indian Style.
- Wabanaki Revival Styles

Unknown date and cultural affinity
- Miscellaneous Abenaki Beadwork Types

Double Scroll Beadwork

Early/mid 19th century.

Emerging from all of this previous research (except perhaps for Biron, 2006), is the best known Wabanaki beadwork style, the "Double Scroll," a style that has come to define the Wabanaki embroidered beadwork tradition. Because to the obsession of museums and elite collectors with the style, it is almost all in the hands of Euroamericans and little remains in native hands or on the market. The Wôbanakik Heritage Center has in its collections only a single tiny pouch, tentatively assigned a Micmac affiliation due to its striking stylistic and technological similarity to an example published as of Micmac ethnic origin (Augustine, 2005: 91). This style has been the darling of ethnic art historians, collectors, and researchers, so we can add nothing to the already large corpus of information on the double scroll motif such as Elitekey: Micmac material culture from 1600 AD to the present (Whitehead, 1980: 15-29), Micmac and Maliseet Decorative Traditions (Pelletier, 1977:19-32), Mi'kmaq and Maliseet cultural ancestral material, (Augustine, 2005) and Uncommon Threads,: Wabanaki Textiles, clothing and Costume (Bourque and Labarr, 2009).

Figure 2. Small pouch (reverse) with embroidered paired double scroll design
Wabanaki
Mid or late 19th century

Geometric Beadwork

Early/mid 19th century.

There are many geometric-pattern beaded cloth items floating about in the antique ethnographic trade that are not assignable to any particular native people, but are usually given a default Iroquois provenance. However, occasional artifacts are uncovered with a history that hints that they may have been made, or at least used by Wabanakis.

Figure 9. Moccasin cuff,
15/0 12/0 and 10/0 beads
Ex Ben Gravel collection Swanton, VT
ca. 1810-1850

The red wool beaded cuff is embroidered with tiny 15/0 half-circles and zigzags with larger 111/0 white beads added in the circles and triangles to give the design more "pop." It was recovered by Swanton, VT historian Benjamin Gravel as part of a totally disintegrated moccasin from within the wall of an early 19th century house that was being renovated that village in the 1920's. It is the only remaining piece of beadwork with a pre-1850 Swanton, VT provenance, which leads to a possibility that this item was made or at least used by the Missisquoi Abenakis. The fact that the beaded pattern was sewn to a definite trade wool rather than a later commercial wool or velvet made for the Euroamerican trade indicates an earlier date, perhaps earlier than the mid-19th century.