

WC 8708888

Bandoleer Bag, Delaware Indians, c. 1860s

A flat square pouch made of cotton cloth, attached to a wide shoulder strap of the same material. Pouch and strap completely covered with multi-colored abstract designs and two bird images in spot-stitch beadwork, and lined with printed cotton. Silk ribbon pendants at the ends of pouch flap and strap-tabs.

Ex-collection of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, Cat. Nr. 13/5856; no information on its earlier origin.

By the 1830, Delaware Indians were living in Missouri, Arkansas and Texas, but the main body of the tribe had settled into Kansas. Two centuries of border warfare and forced removals had obliterated many of their traditional customs, undermined their social unity, and caused widespread demoralization. Hunting was their preferred occupation, and many Delawares became famous as trappers in the far West and as scouts of the U.S. Army.

The quillwork-decorated black skin shot pouches of these people revealed their former residence near Ottawa and other great Lakes Indians (see WC 8812008). A gradual change of these Delaware shot pouches into colorful bandoleer bags started about 1830, when the Delawares witnessed the arrival of thousands of Indians forcibly removed from the Southeast. The exposure to the bandoleer bags of these Creek, Seminole, and Cherokee Indians is clearly visible in the subsequent Delaware developments, but it did not lead to a complete replication of the Southeastern style. A Delaware identity was retained by preserving some traditional elements, the very gradual change of other components, and the development of a distinct style of flamboyant beadwork. However, the Delawares understood and followed the Southwestern example of this colorful apparel as an almost defiant expression of their Indian identity.

The two examples in the Warnock Collection are representative of the Delaware style in the 1860s. The uniform and regular layout of the beadwork patterns suggests that cut-out patterns were used by that time. Typical are the solid beading of the background, the truncated triangular flap, and the use of ribbons at the ends of flap and strap-tabs.

This Delaware art style influenced the beadwork of the Caddo and other tribes of the Southern Plains. Unmistakably derived from Delaware examples is the beadwork on baby cradles of the Kiowa (see WC8401019 and WC8708718). Delaware creativity contributed to the emergence of a regional intertribal art style, referred to as "Prairie Style".

Bandoleer Bags

By 1800, the Indians in the eastern part of the country had been engaged in trade with Europeans for over two hundred years. Wool and cotton fabrics had to a large extent

replaced deerskin for garments. Beads, silk ribbons, and the acquaintance with colonial folk art were stimulating new ideas and new techniques of ornamentation, and were to have a profound effect on the arts of the native people.

In their adjustment to the fur trade, and as long as the French, British and Americans were occupied with their territorial wars, the Indian tribes had maintained a measure of social and political independence. This came to an end in the War of 1812. In the subsequent subjection of the native peoples, and despite the white man's refusal to recognize the basic rights of the Indians, much of the artistic creativity of the native women was motivated by their efforts to maintain and revitalize their Indian identity.

Starting in the 1820s, elaborately bead-worked shoulder bags became popular Indian apparel in the Southeastern parts of the country, followed in the 1830s by the Delaware in Kansas, and by the Ojibwa and other tribes of the Upper Great Lakes region in c. 1850. In each of these regions these so-called 'bandoleer bags' were the more elaborate versions of earlier hunter bags, presumably influenced in their shape by the shoulder bags of the colonial military.

Widespread was the halfway change in the beadwork patterns on the shoulder straps; remarkable is the frequently dissimilar decoration of pouch and strap, treating them as totally separate objects of decoration. Much of the beadwork on the bandoleer bags was apparently inspired by designs observed in American folk art, on printed cotton, and on commercial ceramics. But the inspiration was channeled through dreams, as stated by several of the women artists. Dreams did not necessarily give the designs a symbolic meaning, but the creation of these new designs challenged the artist's imagination, thereby giving them an emotional value that went beyond a merely decorative quality.

In contrast to their native proto-types, these spectacular bandoleer bags served no practical purpose. Primarily worn by the men on festive occasions, this apparel earned prestige for the women artists. Large numbers of these bags have survived, indicating their once great popularity. Unfortunately, only very few of these bags have any recorded history, making it difficult to identify tribal styles.

Drs. T.J.Brasser  
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