

Northern Athapaskan Beadwork: Part 2

by Richard Green

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The Northern Athapaskan peoples occupy a vast area of the Canadian and Alaskan Subarctic, stretching over 2300 miles from the Alaskan interior to the west coast of Hudson's Bay, Manitoba, covering large areas of Yukon Territory, Northwest Territories, British Columbia, northern Alberta and Saskatchewan in between. They are a complex and fluid network of linguistically related peoples, inhabiting a harsh environment with lengthy winters, restricted daylight and sub-zero temperatures.

Broadly speaking, the beadwork art of the Northern Athapaskan Indian groups divides into five regional styles, as outlined by an important work on Northern Athapaskan material culture by Kate C Duncan (1989). Each of these regional styles shares a number of common features. The beadwork of the Great Slave Lake/Mackenzie River region was covered in Newsletter 78 (Green 2005). The other four regions are discussed here.

2. Yukon-Tanana Region

The peoples of this region include the Tanana, Han, Tutchone, Ahtena and Koyukon. (See map). They inhabit an area covering the Yukon River valley in Canada, the Tanana and Middle Yukon River valleys in Alaska.

Beaded objects most commonly associated with these groups include sled bags, mittens, gun cases, gold poke pouches, and English style hide hunting shirts with bib, collar, shoulder epaulettes and cuffs. Another item of men's clothing popular in this region is the jacket with back yoke and plackets – vertical decorated bands,

applied to each side of the front opening. (See Fig.14).

Although there is a strong influence from the Great Slave Lake/Mackenzie River style, beadwork from this region is characteristically quite restrained in composition, employing fewer separate motifs on an individual piece. Large open areas of background, usually a bright red woollen cloth or smoked hide, are a feature of this style of beadwork.

continued



Simplified map of the western Subarctic region, indicating the major Northern Athapaskan groups mentioned in this article, as well as neighbouring peoples. (Note: the Inland Tlingit, neighbors to the south of the Tagish, are indicated by the number '1' on the map.)

Figure captions for pages 12 & 13

Fig. 14: Panels from a man's jacket, c. 1890-1900. Yukon-Tanana region. Smoked hide jackets with front openings were popular amongst many of the Northern Athapaskan groups. The fringed yoke was positioned across the back of the shoulders, the plackets positioned vertically, one to either edge of the front opening of the jacket. The effect of relatively large undecorated areas of bright red woollen cloth against smoked hide exemplifies beaded material from the Yukon-Tanana region. Note the relative simplicity of the symmetrical composition, the restricted palette of bead colours, as well as the ogee-sided semi-floral designs. The transverse colour division used in the central flower motif on the yoke panel is a typical treatment. The panels are edged with a green wool flannel braid within white linear beaded borders. (Author's Collection)

Figs. 15 & 16: Pair of mittens, Yukon-Tanana region, attributed to the Tanana, c.1900. The use of bands of brown fur

trim at the wrists and cuffs is standard for mittens from this region. Note the way in which the strong white 'stems' are used to unify the composition. The open contoured designs, including ogee-sided forms, although floral in nature on the cuff section, are more abstract on the hand. (Author's Collection)

Fig. 17: Cushion, Yukon-Tanana region, attributed to the Han, c. 1900-20. Beaded on smoked moosehide, sinew-threaded and couched, this cushion exhibits certain Great Slave Lake / Mackenzie River influences, though differs from this regional style in a number of ways. The stems are made up of short diagonal lines of beads, creating a twisted rope-like effect. Few of the leaves are contour formed. Instead, they are formed as if stitched in satin stitch embroidery. (Author's Collection)

Fig. 18: Fire bag, Liard-Fraser or Tahltan region, possibly Sekani, c. 1900. This bag was used to carry fire-making equipment, or as a shot pouch, and was worn around the neck. The rectangular pouch, with its wildly abstract composition and densely beaded

surface area, exhibits strong Sekani traits. The strap, with its hourglass motifs and blocky rectangular units, suggests the possible influence of a neighbouring group, possibly the Tahltan, amongst whom the fire bag was also a popular accessory. (Author's Collection)

Figs. 19-21: Detail of the front panel and the hourglass designs on the strap of the fire bag in Fig.18. These openwork designs are beaded in couched overlay technique on fine red woollen cloth, within decorative frame-like borders.

Fig. 22: Pouch, Interior Coastal region, British Columbia, probably Inland Tlingit, c. 1900. The stylised ogee-sided semi-floral designs, with contrasting contour beading, are typical of the beadwork produced by the Inland Tlingit and Tagish groups. (Ex author's Collection)

Fig. 23: Moccasin, Interior Coastal region, probably Inland Tlingit, c. 1880. The use of floral designs on the vamp and ankle cuff of red woollen cloth, as well as the squared toe seam, are indicative of Interior Coastal origins for this moccasin. (Author's Collection)

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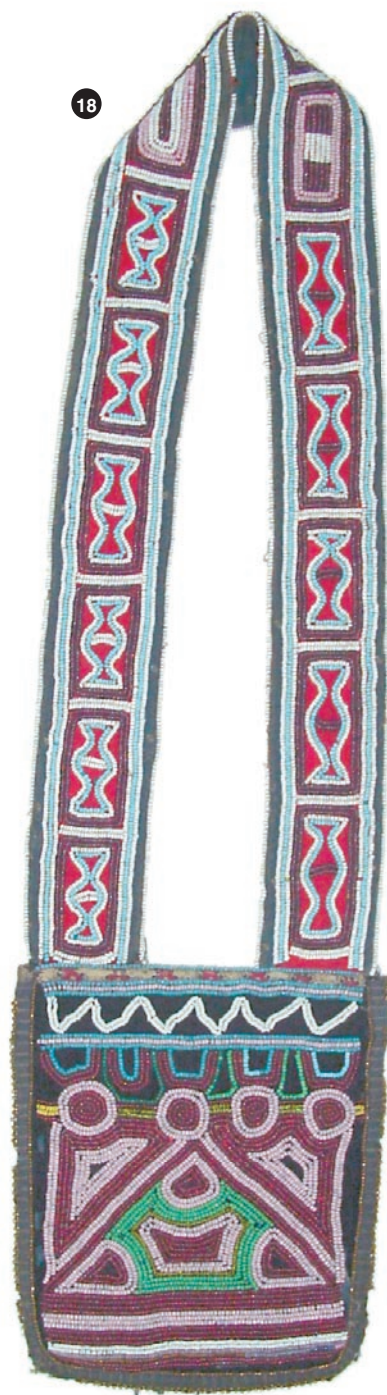




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Floral compositions are often dominated by a strong network of stems which serve to link the floral elements of the composition. (See Figs.15 & 16). Both plain and hair stems are used, though rarely together on the same object.

A further feature of this Yukon-Tanana style is the use of contour outlines to floral or semi-floral motifs, often ogee-sided, without solidly in-filled interior. This is exemplified in the design on the Tanana mittens illustrated in Figs.15 & 16.

Floral forms are typically divided transversely by bead colour, irrespective of the actual contour of the motif in question. This treatment can be seen both in the central flower motif on the jacket yoke in Fig.14, as well as in several of the openwork motifs in Fig.15 and 16.

A variant of this regional style was produced by the Han and Koyukon peoples in the early years of the twentieth century, and comprises a range of articles made for sale – cushion covers, picture frames and wall bags. (See Fig.17). The inspiration for many of these objects was probably drawn from ladies' magazines like the *Ladies Home Journal*. Designs such as daisies, pansies, forget-me-nots, as well as representations of eagles, hearts, flags and other realistic designs, were popular.

3. Liard-Fraser Region

This southwestern region of Athapaskan territory is populated by the Kaska, Sekani, Beaver, Carrier, and Chilcotin peoples. (See map). Beadwork from this region is perhaps the most removed, in a stylistic sense, from the

floral tradition of other Northern Athapaskan peoples. The commonest items found in museum and private collections are fire bags, used to carry fire-making equipment; gun cases, and sled bags with front flap.

Although certain pieces feature floral motifs reminiscent of work from the Great Slave Lake area, Duncan (1989, 118) suggests that through these designs are discernible a much earlier artistic tradition. Some examples combine floral designs against a geometric background; others exhibit a strongly abstract quality, almost verging on the chaotic.

A common practice was the random in-filling of background areas between designs, these areas being given the same level of emphasis as the main designs. This practice has been taken to the ultimate extreme in the case of the fire bag illustrated in Fig.18.

4. Interior Coastal Region

This region, located inland from the coast of British Columbia, is the homeland of the Inland Tlingit and the Tagish. (See map). Their close proximity to the Tlingit proper, led to a Northwest Coast influence in their beadwork designs. They produced, amongst other items, octopus bags, wall bags, dance shirts and knife sheaths on straps, which were worn around the neck.

Designs are of an overtly stylised semi-floral form, typically ogee scrolls, often contour outlined, without solidly beaded in-fill. Concentric contours are often of contrasting colours.

Red wool was often favoured as a background, smoked hide being an alternative. (See Fig.22).

5. Tahltan region

The Tahltan are the neighbours to the south of the Interior Tlingit, located in the north-west corner of British Columbia. (See map). They are well known for their production of extremely stylised abstract and curvilinear motifs, often on a red woollen cloth background. Objects of Tahltan origin most often encountered in collection

include knife sheaths with neck straps, fire bags, and cartridge belts. Fire bags often combined stylised abstract forms with woven rectangular panels in larger beads.

Bibliography

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