

Artist: Janet Grandjambe  
Photo Credit: GNWT



Careful lining and edge finishing are important to the beadworker. The lining covers any stitches that might show on the back while piping adds flair to the edges.

In the most common type of beaded edging, the thread is passed through a bead, then through the edge of the material and up through the bead again. Two more beads are threaded before being attached to the material. The beads are then in alternating positions, vertical and horizontal, with only the latter sewn directly to the edge.

Less common is single-bead edging. It is found in ornamental knife-sheathes and pouches. Using a single row of beads, a thread is crossed over itself between the beads. The threads are hardly visible in the finished work.

For more than 150 years, beaded clothing has made an impressive fashion statement across the Northwest Territories. The expression of individual and family prestige is reflected in the skill and creativity of these Dene and Métis seamstresses.



### FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Arts and Fine Crafts Section  
Department of Industry, Tourism and Investment  
Government of the Northwest Territories  
P.O. Box 1320  
Yellowknife, NT, Canada  
X1A 2L9

Phone: 1-877-445-2787  
Email: [nwtarts@gov.nt.ca](mailto:nwtarts@gov.nt.ca)

Website: [www.nwtarts.com](http://www.nwtarts.com)

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# Beadwork

From Canada's Northwest Territories

Photo Credit: Fran Hurcomb



Trade-mark owned by the Government of the Northwest Territories



Beautifully beaded moccasins, mukluks and gloves, trimmed with fur, express the creativity of Aboriginal women.

Caribou and moosehide jackets with brilliantly beaded floral designs are proudly worn by many people in the Northwest Territories.

## Beading

Since before the time of European contact, embroidery has been the art form women used to add beauty to their clothing and to express individual creativity. Although porcupine quills have given way to beads and geometric designs have been replaced by floral ones, the cultural role of embroidery continues in the Northwest Territories today.

## History of Beading

Brightly coloured seed beads first became available to the Great Slave Lake Region about the middle of the 19th century, from the Hudson's Bay Company. About the same time, Métis introduced new designs to local women who were using porcupine quills to make European designs of zigzags, lines, repeated triangles and diamonds.

The women welcomed and enjoyed the brightly coloured beads and new designs. Beads could be



used far more freely and easily than the scarcer quills. Owning beads reflected increased social standing and wealth and wearing them advertised it.

By the end of the 19th century, distinctive regional styles had developed reflecting the adaptability, creativity and innovation of the Dene and Métis beadworkers.

## Beading Techniques

Various materials, such as moose and caribou hides, stroud, and coloured velvet, can be used as canvas for beading. Black velvet was a popular backing in the early 20th century. A flour and water paste is applied using a pointed instrument, to draw pattern outlines on velvet. Charcoal, lead pencil or ink are used on the hide. Today, most beading is done with artificial sinew or dental floss. However, natural sinew is still commonly used for sewing beads along an edge where they are vulnerable to wear.

Decorative beading can be either sewn or woven. Almost all sewn beadwork is "crouched", a technique that uses the overlaid or spot stitch. This is ideal when the leather or cloth is to be entirely concealed with beads or where very delicate line-work is required. Beads are threaded and laid in the desired position. A stitch is made between every two or three beads. If a broad surface is to be covered, line after line of beads are stitched close together.

On an exceptionally fine piece of work, or where there are very short turns incorporated in the design, a stitch is made between every bead. The pattern is beaded first and the background filled in afterwards.

The most common technique for woven beadwork is the square weave on a loom. This style is used in jewelry, headbands, and belts when straight beaded lines are desired. To set up the loom, sinew warp strands are threaded through a strip of leather, about a bead's width apart.

To achieve tension, a leather cord at one end is fastened to something rigid, such as a stake and the opposite end is wrapped around the weaver's waist. By leaning backwards, the weaver creates the proper tension. Another way to achieve tension is to tie the warp strands to both ends of a flexed bow, resulting in a bow loom. To start a row of weaving, a bead is threaded on two sinew strands. These strands are then divided and one is passed over and the other is passed under the warp strand. The two sinew strands are then passed through the next bead, divided and so on. At the end of the weave, the weft strands are crossed to secure the last bead.



Credits: [1] Kate Corbin Duncan, Northern Athapaskan Art: a beadwork tradition. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1989 [2] Kate Corbin Duncan and Eunice Carney. A Special Gift: the Kutchin beadwork tradition. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988.

