

OJIBWE CRAFTING

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*Sweetgrass cup and saucer, ca. 1885
St. Louis County Historical Society Collection
Photo courtesy of Michele Hakala-Beekma*



*Beadwork and Red Willow Basket from Hakala-Beekma
Collection*

Photo courtesy of Michele Hakala-Beekma



IN TRADITIONAL OJIBWE CRAFTS FUNCTION AND BEAUTY MEET

Crafting has long been a strong symbol of the rich history and culture of the Ojibwe people past and present. Historically, Ojibwe crafting was largely done for practical purposes to create necessary commodities such as tools, containers, homes, and canoes. Today, rather than craft out of necessity, Ojibwe crafting now serves as a creative way for Ojibwe people to connect with their culture and serves as a symbol of the resiliency of the Ojibwe in the face of change and challenges to their cultural traditions and ways of living.

The Ojibwe utilize a variety of resources and techniques in their crafting. Among the most common materials used are those that come from nature, including birch bark, porcupine quills, plants, and animal parts such as hide, fur, and bones. The unique landscape of the Great Lakes region that the Ojibwe call home has also long served as inspiration for the design and embellishment of their unique crafts, with floral motifs being among the most widely recognizable symbol in Ojibwe craft.

Beyond serving as a symbol of Ojibwe culture and heritage, crafting also has been an economic resource for the Ojibwe past and present. Historically, the Ojibwe traded with Europeans for goods and resources that were not readily available in the Great Lakes region. In exchange for foreign commodities such as beads, the Ojibwe traded their own goods, including furs, maple sugar, and wild rice. Today, Ojibwe crafts often are sold by artists at events such as powwows and craft fairs.

CRAFTING FOR PRACTICAL PURPOSES

In the past, crafting was a necessity of everyday life for the Ojibwe. Crafting tools and containers meant that the Ojibwe could efficiently harvest, prepare, and conserve the natural resources and food around them. Natural resources such as birch bark, lumber, and plants were among the most practical and widely available for use. Animal parts such as hide, fur, and bones also were utilized frequently to create clothing and tools. No matter the material, the Ojibwe always thanked the Creator for the sacrifice, offering tobacco (*asemaa*) and only taking what they needed. Today, the same respect for the land and its resources remains, though crafting has become less a practical necessity of everyday life and more so a way to connect with one's culture and heritage.



*Drying wild rice, Nett Lake, ca. 1947
Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society*



*Wooden Ladle from the St. Louis Historical
Society Collection
Photo courtesy of Michele Hakala-Beekma*

tools and utensils

Tools and containers were important everyday utensils for the Ojibwe. Tools needed for preparing and consuming food, crafting, and other handiwork projects could be made from a variety of natural resources, including animal bones, wood, and rocks. Baskets and containers made of birch bark also were common and were often utilized to collect and store food, with different types of baskets and containers being used for different purposes. For example, winnowing baskets, which are wide and shallow baskets made of birch bark, were utilized in the processing of wild rice to gently blow away the chaff. On the other hand, larger containers commonly used to hold or store food and haul water. Today, many of the same baskets and containers that were once staples in the everyday lives of the Ojibwe, are now used for a variety of purposes, whether it be to practice a cultural tradition such as winnowing wild rice or simply for decorative purposes.

traditional homes

Many of the same techniques and materials used by the Ojibwe to craft tools, baskets, and containers also were applied to the construction of traditional Ojibwe homes. In the past, two types of homes were utilized by the Ojibwe: wigwams and tipis. In the winter months, the Ojibwe lived in villages of round, birch bark houses called *wiigiwaam*, or wigwams. In the summer and fall months, when relocating for hunting and gathering, the Ojibwe often lived in temporary birch bark homes known as tipis (referred to as *bajiishka'ogaaan* in the Ojibwe language) due to their smaller size and portability in comparison to the traditional wigwam.



Left: Woman seated in front of wigwam, ca. 1870

Below: Ojibwe woman and children in dwelling near Brainerd, ca. 1866

Photos courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society



OJIBWE VOCABULARY



CLICK EACH WORD TO HEAR IT
SPOKEN BY A NATIVE SPEAKER!

Asemaa

Tobacco

Wiigiwaam

Wigwam

Bajiishka'ogaaan

Tipi

Wiigwaasi-jiimaan

Birch bark canoe

birch bark canoes

The construction of birch bark canoes (*wiigwaasi-jiimaan*) also required many of the same materials and resources the Ojibwe utilized for many of their other practical crafts. Historically, canoes were a vital means of transportation for the Ojibwe as they explored the Great Lakes region and gathered water-borne foods such as wild rice and fish. Today, the traditional methods of hand-crafting canoes from birch bark are only practiced by a few, but canoeing remains a popular activity among the Ojibwe in contemporary times and is still utilized by many in the gathering of wild rice and fishing.



Stocker, Stella Prince, 1858-1925. 1916 - 1917. "Birch bark canoes on shore, Minnesota." University of Minnesota Duluth, Kathryn A. Martin Library, Northeast Minnesota Historical Collections, accessed November 10, 2020. <https://reflections.mndigital.org/catalog/nemhc:4991>

BIRCH BARK CRAFTS

One of the most common resources utilized by the Ojibwe in crafting is birch bark (*wiigwaas*), a natural construction material utilized by past and present for artistic and functional purposes. Birch bark, which is easily accessible in much of the Great Lakes region, is prized for its durability, flexibility, and water resistance, making it an ideal material for crafting baskets, containers, and even canoes.



Eastman, Seth, 1808-1875. 1850. "Indian Sugar Camp."
Nicollet County Historical Society, accessed November 19,
2020. <https://reflections.mndigital.org/catalog/nico:1607>



Makakoon-Etched birch bark basket c.1939 (left) and maple
syrup basket (right)

St. Louis County Historical Society Collection
Photo courtesy of St. Louis County Historical Society

The Ojibwe begin to gather birch bark for the construction of baskets, containers, and other projects in late June or early July "when the raspberries begin to ripen" or "when the flies start biting." Prior to the extraction process, it is customary that an offering of tobacco (*asemaa*) be made to the tree to thank it for its sacrifice. It is important that not a single piece of birch bark goes to waste or is discarded. To ensure all pieces of extracted bark are utilized, scraps are often incorporated into smaller projects such as decorations or jewelry, or the scraps may be used to make a fire.

When working with birch bark, the Ojibwe often turn to other natural construction materials such as spruce root and pitch to create durable and lasting crafts. Spruce root (*wadab*) is an ideal material for holding the seams of a basket or container in place because it is durable, does not stretch, and holds knots well. Pitch, on the other hand, is a natural glue-like mixture made of sap, ash, and animal fat that often is used to repair birch bark baskets or containers. Both materials are ideal for creating both practical and decorative crafts, whether it be to create an air-tight birch bark canoe or a small basket with decorative seams.



Wadab-spruce root
St. Louis County Historical Society Collection
Photo courtesy of Michele Hakala-Beekma

EMBELLISHMENT

When the Europeans began to make their way into the Great Lakes region in the 17th century, trade between settlers and the Ojibwe introduced the indigenous communities to a variety of new goods and materials. A common trade item from the Europeans to the Ojibwe were small glass beads known as seed beads. These beads introduced the Ojibwe to a new method of crafting that allowed for more intricate and colorful designs.



Double Layer Birch Bark Quilled Basket, 1939
St. Louis County Historical Society Collection
Photo courtesy of Michele Hakala-Beeksma

quillwork

Prior to the introduction of seed beads, the Ojibwe often used porcupine quills (*gaawayag*) to embellish their crafts, especially those made of birch bark. Porcupine quills, while able to be manipulated to create elaborate and beautiful designs, were often cumbersome and difficult to work with because of their natural stiffness and sharp points. Even so, the Ojibwe developed techniques to manipulate the quills to their liking to create elaborate and beautiful designs. Natural dyes extracted from regional vegetation also allowed the Ojibwe to add bursts of colors to their quillwork. It was not until European settlers began making their way into the region that the Ojibwe began to use aniline dyes to color their quills, leading natural dying techniques to become a mostly forgotten art.

Quillwork designs often were applied to crafts made of sturdy materials, such as birch bark bowls, boxes, baskets, and containers, though they were also sometimes used as a decorative element on clothing such as moccasins. The first step in creating a decorative quillwork design was to outline the design. Because quills are stiff and rigid, they are first soaked in water until they become flexible and soft. The sharp ends of the quills are inserted first through small holes made with an awl, then bent over into another hole to secure the quill in place. The ends of the quills are trimmed off, bent, and pressed close to the back of the bark to fasten them in place. Once the quills are secured, they are then left to dry and stiffen – once they do so, there is no need to fasten them down with sinew or other types of thread. When the artist is happy with the design, a thin lining of birch bark is used to cover the ends of the quills on the back of the design so that the ends of the quills cannot be seen.

OJIBWE VOCABULARY



CLICK EACH WORD TO HEAR IT
SPOKEN BY A NATIVE SPEAKER!

Wiigwaas

Birch bark

Asemaa

Tobacco

Wadab

Spruce root

Gaawayag

Porcupine quills



Young woman in beaded outfit - Emily Porter, Nett Lake, ca. 1916-17

Photo courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Kathryn A. Martin Library, University of Minnesota Duluth, on permanent loan from the St. Louis County Historical Society.

beadwork

The Ojibwe are well-known for their intricate beadwork and nature-based designs. Beaded floral patterns crafted by the beading and stitching of glass seed beads (*manidoominensag*) on a neutral background (hide, black, or white) are a classic representation of Ojibwe style, with both identifiable and stylized plants serving as the basis of most Ojibwe beadwork designs.

Most notable examples of Ojibwe beadwork can be found on clothing, moccasins, and dolls. The creation of these beaded designs is accomplished through a variety of techniques, the most commonly practiced being loom beading and spot stitching.



Loomed headband-Hakala-Beeksma Collection

Photo courtesy of Michele Hakala-Beeksma



Spot Stitched Bandolier Bag-St. Louis County Historical Society Collection

Photo courtesy of Michele Hakala-Beeksma

techniques

loom beading vs. spot stitching

Loom beading requires the use of a wooden loom, with the beaded designs created using techniques similar to those used to weave textiles on a loom. This method of stitching allows for the creation of clean, linear beaded designs like those often found on bandolier bags like the one pictured above.

Spot stitching, which was first developed when glass seed beads were introduced to the Ojibwe by European traders, entails the stringing of beads onto a singular thread and laying them in place. An additional thread is then used to secure the beads in place at "spots" three or four beads apart. This method of stitching allows for large areas to be filled quickly, while making it easier to create the curvilinear designs. This method of stitching is most commonly utilized to create the curved floral motifs that the Ojibwe have come to be known for, as seen above.

OJIBWE VOCABULARY



CLICK EACH WORD TO HEAR IT
SPOKEN BY A NATIVE SPEAKER!

[Manidoominensag](#)

Beads

[Makizinan](#)

Moccasins

MOTIFS



*Thunderbird loomed necklace, Cradleboard,
and Rose Headband
From Hakala-Beeksma Collection
Photos courtesy of Michele Hakala-Beeksma*

geometric patterns

Geometric patterns are patterns formed using geometric shapes and repeated. They are typically used when doing loom work.

natural inspiration

Flowers, plants and leaves are typical motifs for floral based beadwork.



colors & dyes

In Ojibwe craft past and present, red, yellow, green, and blue are the most commonly used colors. Traditionally, the Ojibwe turned to regional vegetation to create natural dyes for their crafts, especially on quillwork. Aniline dyes were eventually introduced to the Ojibwe by Europeans, leading natural dyeing techniques to become a mostly forgotten art.



*Dyed and Natural Porcupine Quills
Photo courtesy of Michele Hakala-Beeksma*

MOTIF COLORING PAGE



MOTIF COLORING PAGE

