

*welcome to*

# THE SPIRIT OF BEADS:

## SHARING OUR STORIES



*A study guide*

*The Spirit of Beads: Sharing Our Stories* is presented in partnership by



Ukrainian Museum of Canada  
Ontario Branch  
UKRAINIAN WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

**NCCT**  
NATIVE CANADIAN CENTRE OF TORONTO

# *The Spirit of Beads: Sharing Our Stories*

This exhibition is co-presented by the Ukrainian Museum of Canada, Ontario Branch and the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto. *The Spirit of Beads: Sharing our Stories* focuses on beadwork and its significance, examining the similarities and differences in techniques, motifs, and symbolism in the many types of Indigenous and Ukrainian beadwork. It includes a selection of many forms of beadwork, including necklaces, pendants, earrings, and beading on clothing. There are both historical and modern artifacts in this exhibition.

This study guide is designed to help you understand the history of Ukrainian and Indigenous beadwork, and how it has changed over time. You will learn about the different techniques, styles, and symbols in beadwork. You will see how important beadwork is for both Ukrainians and Indigenous peoples in Canada as a way of sharing cultural traditions and beliefs. Beadwork is much more than just a pretty design—it tells stories about who the beaders and wearers were, and what was important to them.



Beaded children's moccasins

*In this study guide*

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Early Materials

The Bead Trade

Spirituality

Ukrainian Traditions

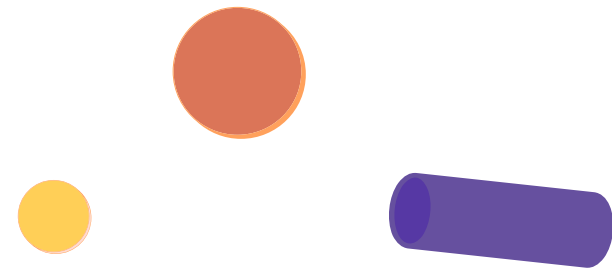
Indigenous Traditions

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# BEADING OVERVIEW



- There are many different types of beads. Some of the most common types include seed beads (the smallest), pony beads (a larger bead), and bugle beads (a longer, cylinder-shaped bead).
- Both Indigenous peoples of Canada and Ukrainians used materials from nature, such as bones, stones, minerals, and porcupine quills to make beads before commercial glass beads existed.
- Animal hair was often used before string because it could be found in nature and it was strong.
- Decorating an item with beadwork is a way for artists to show that the item is special. Sometimes these items will be given as gifts to important members of a community as a way of showing respect.
- There are many different beading techniques. Some examples shown in this exhibit include netting, bead embroidery, bead stringing, and beading that is woven on a loom.
- Beadwork is often used to make even everyday items beautiful and to uphold cultural traditions.



*Here are some examples of...*



## Raised beadwork

A technique where the beads are raised off the object, creating a 3-dimensional shape. This piece was created by a Haudenosaunee artist near Niagara Falls.



## Seed beads

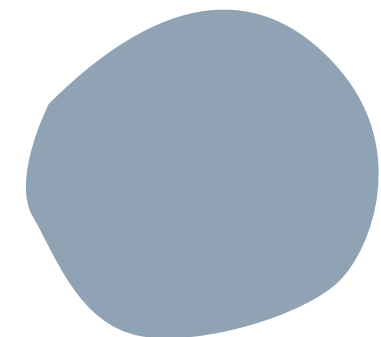
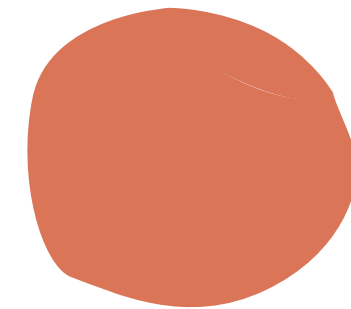
These are some vintage seed beads from a collector in Canada. These are particularly small in comparison to the beads we use today.



## A spirit bead

In the top petal of the red flower, you might be able to spot the white spirit bead. The maker of this vest did this on purpose as a sign of humility.

*In Indigenous cultures, beads are considered animate objects because of their ability to “make things happen.” Cree Naskapi people call beads “spirit berries.” They are “gifts from the spirit world” or “eyes of the manitou (spirit).”*



# EARLY MATERIALS



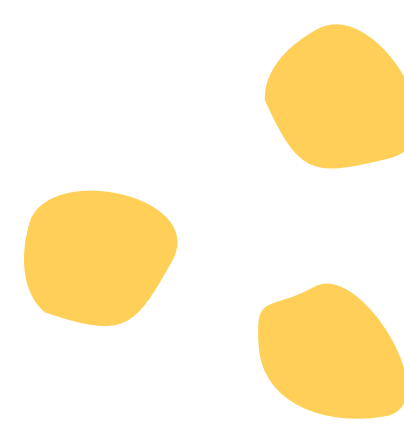
## Ukrainian materials

The first beads in Ukraine were made of naturally-occurring materials, including wood, clay, and semi-precious stones such as amber and carnelian. Horse hair was also commonly used to string beads because it is a strong, sturdy, and naturally occurring material. Later on, Ukrainians began stringing coins, coral that was imported, and stones made to look like coral. Another popular material was a fossilised shell called *balamuty*. These were all worn to demonstrate wealth.

## Indigenous materials

Before the introduction of European beads, Indigenous peoples of North America used organic materials including shells, bones, porcupine quills, plant fibres, birch bark, animal hair (including horse hair because of its strength), stones, and minerals to adorn themselves. There is evidence that Indigenous groups had created their own beads for at least eight thousand years before European contact.





# THE BEAD TRADE

- Glass was discovered around 1700 BC in the Middle East.
- Glass is made by heating sand. It is melted at high temperatures, and cooled to be shaped.
- Glass making techniques spread to the rest of the world through international trading. Italian craftsmen brought the technique to Venice, which became the largest producer of glass in the world. Eventually, the technique spread to other parts of the world.
- As glass beads became more widely available and affordable, the range of colours and sizes allowed artists to explore new design possibilities.
- Glass beads came to Ukraine and North America through trading and they became very popular.
- For both Indigenous peoples of North America and Ukrainians, beads were important because they could be used to visually communicate ideas such as spiritual and religious beliefs, practices, respect for nature, and ways of life. A person's beadwork sometimes included symbols, designs, and colours which can tell us about the person and where they came from. Beaded items were expensive and were usually worn on special occasions.
- European traders used beads to trade with Indigenous populations in North America. This was supposed to be a fair system, but unfortunately early treaties and agreements were not always followed. This meant that a lot of Indigenous peoples were taken advantage of for access to land and resources.



# BEADS AND SPIRITUALITY

In Ukrainian culture, beads were used to both express a person's spirituality, and to protect them from evil spirits and poor health. One neckpiece that was traditional in Ukraine was the *zgarda*. The *zgarda* included protective symbols, and with the spread of Christianity, incorporated crosses.

Another symbol that is seen as a spiritual item in Ukrainian culture is the *pysanka*. This is an egg that is normally decorated using beeswax and different coloured dyes. Each egg is typically decorated with patterns and motifs that have deep meaning. Today, many Ukrainians treat the *pysanka* as a Christian symbol of new birth, especially around Easter. In this exhibit we have eggs that were covered in beadwork in a similar pattern that would be drawn onto the eggs. These eggs are decorated with beadwork that was loomwoven and pressed onto the egg.

Beading can be a way for the artist to connect with their own spirituality. There are also many items that help with this. One example is the spirit bead. When an Indigenous artist purposely places a bead in their work that does not match the other ones around it, it is called a spirit bead. These artists believe that only the Great Spirit can create something that is perfect. By making their art imperfect, they show that no-one can be perfect like the Great Spirit.

Another item that can connect Indigenous peoples to their spirituality is the pipe bag. Pipe bags carry sacred pipes that are used in ceremonies. The smoke from the pipe connects the individual to everything around them, and carries their prayers to where they need to go. The tobacco smoke grounds the individual to the Earth, and the fire in the pipe connects them to the sun.

# UKRAINIAN TRADITIONS

Many of the Ukrainian artifacts featured in this exhibit are beaded items that can be worn, including traditional items like necklaces, collars, beaded bands, and watch fobs. Each of these items are unique in the meaning behind their uses, but many of them were first worn as a form of protection from evil spirits and poor health. It was believed that evil spirits would be too distracted by the shine and colour of the beads to harm the wearer. Necklaces in particular eventually became part of traditional Ukrainian festive wear, and could include materials like coral (*korali*) or coins (*monety*).



A trident or *tryzub* on a watch fob

Watch fobs (*kotyliony*) were also particularly popular for men. They were originally made by young women who gifted them to young men they wanted to dance with. During the war, they were worn on the soldier's uniform as a protective charm. They were always beaded and sometimes included the man's initials and symbols that were important to him.



*Here are some traditional*

# UKRAINIAN ARTIFACTS

*found in The Spirit of Beads exhibit*



*Monety*

*Monety* are neckpieces that have coins strung on them. This was a way Ukrainians could show their wealth and high status.



*Zgarda*

The *zgarda* is a neckpiece that often has metal crosses on them. Crosses are important symbols for many, including Ukrainians.



*Vest*

There are many different kinds of vests with different names to describe the kind of vest it is, and where it comes from.



*Sorochka*

*Sorochkas*, or chemises, are very common to all areas of Ukraine. This is an example of a women's beaded *sorochka*



# INDIGENOUS TRADITIONS

There are many diverse Indigenous groups in Canada, each with their own complex beliefs, traditions, and histories. However, many groups share a common worldview that all things are sentient, interrelated, and possess a spirit or life force. All of creation requires some of this spirit, which is provided through complex networks of interrelation. Humans are responsible for upholding harmony within the natural cycles and beings, and often do so through ceremonies and rituals.

Another common practice in many Indigenous cultures is beadwork because it is a way in which older generations can ensure important symbols, motifs, patterns, and encoded messages are carried on to future generations by being beaded onto everyday items. One common symbol is the strawberry, which is important because it is the first fruit to ripen in the new year, and it has many medicinal uses. There are often important ceremonies to honour the strawberry, and it can be found in many of the pieces of beadwork in this exhibit



Beaded strawberry pin cushions

*Here are some traditional*

# INDIGENOUS ARTIFACTS

*found in The Spirit of Beads exhibit*



*Moss bag*

A moss bag keeps a baby safe and secure. The inside of the bag is stuffed with moss, which is a natural antiseptic and absorbent material.



*Moccasins*

Moccasins are a common kind of footwear made of animal hide. They were usually intricately beaded, quilled or embroidered.



*Baby belt*

Baby belts are long straps that a mother would wear to keep her baby secure on her back. Often, these would be beaded beautifully and given to mothers as a gift.



*Fire bag*

Fire bags are bags used to hold items to start and keep fires burning. These items can include kindling, wood, stones, and more.





# IDENTITIES IN BEADWORK

In Soviet times, Ukraine was controlled by communism. Under communism, any kind of symbol which showed Ukrainian identity was forbidden. This included the trident (*tryzub*), the kalyna berry, the lion, and the colours blue and yellow, which are the colours of the flag. Still, Ukrainians maintained their identity by placing blue and yellow beads side-by-side, or embroidering small symbols on their clothing.

The trident is a symbol that was used by Volodymyr the Great, the Grand Prince of Ukraine. In 1992, the *tryzub* was established as the national coat of arms of Ukraine. When Ukraine became an independent country, it was very important for Ukrainians to show their country's identity through symbols and colours. They often used beadwork to do this.

# IDENTITIES IN BEADWORK



Residential schools were boarding schools for young Indigenous students funded by the Canadian government's Department of Indian Affairs and run by Christian churches. Indigenous families were required to send their children to these schools, and the students were not allowed to speak the languages they spoke with their families or practice the traditions they did at home. They were not allowed to wear their traditional clothing, or do any of the beading and embroidery that they did with their family. If they broke any of these strict rules, they were punished. These children were often treated very poorly, and the pain and sadness of their experiences followed many of them for the rest of their lives, which affected their families as well.

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# IDENTITIES IN BEADWORK



Despite the sadness of these families, Indigenous peoples continued to create beautiful beadwork and embroidery. For some artists today, creating their beadwork helps them make sure that their culture's art and traditions are not lost or forgotten. It can also help them heal from the sadness of their families' experiences in residential schools. It is very important that artists keep creating this beautiful art. In this exhibit, we have items made by Indigenous artists that were sold as souvenirs for tourists at Niagara Falls. These artists used items that the European tourists would want to buy as inspiration, continuing their beadwork practices to uphold their cultural traditions and support their families and community.

# SUMMARY



Bandolier bag

● Beadwork is often used to make even everyday items beautiful and to uphold cultural traditions.

● Both Indigenous peoples of Canada and Ukrainians used materials from nature to make beads before commercial glass beads existed.

● The first beads in Ukraine were made of wood, clay, and semi-precious stones such as amber and carnelian.

● Indigenous peoples of Canada used shells, bones, porcupine quills, plant fibres, birch bark, animal hair, stones, and minerals to adorn themselves.

● Glass beads came to Ukraine and North America through trading and they became very popular.



*Kryvul'ka* collar



Octopus bag

A person's beadwork sometimes included symbols, designs, and colours which can tell us about the person and where they came from.

In Ukrainian culture, beads were used to both express a person's spirituality, and to protect them from evil spirits and poor health.

Along with the practice of beading itself as being a way for the beader to connect themselves to the "unseen world," there are items that do the same, like pipes and tobacco.

Many traditional items like necklaces, collars, beaded bands, and watch fobs were first worn as a form of protection from evil spirits and poor health.

Watch fobs (*kotyliony*) are beaded items that were worn by men as a protective charm during the war.



Beaded *pysanka*





A Ukrainian vest

● A common practice in many Indigenous cultures is beadwork because it is a way symbols, motifs, patterns, and encoded messages can be carried on to future generations.

● There are often important ceremonies to honour the strawberry in Indigenous cultures because it is important for medicinal uses.

● After Ukraine became an independent country and the Soviet Union collapsed, it became very important for Ukrainians to show their country's identity through symbols and colours, and they often used beadwork to do this.

● For some Indigenous artists today, creating their beadwork helps them make sure that following residential schools their culture's art and traditions are not lost or forgotten.



An Indigenous vest



*Study guide provided by the staff at UMC OB*



*For more information  
please check out our website at  
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*Face mask beaded by Maria Rypan*