

Crowning their glory – Native American 'pageant princess' crowns

Richard Green

This short article gives readers a glimpse of a popular style of beaded crown that has become fashionable with many lady dancers as part of contemporary Native American pow wow regalia. Beaded crowns were first used for annual pan-Indian 'princess pageants', particularly in Oklahoma, from the second quarter of the twentieth century. To this day, pageant princesses – outstanding young women from the Native community – continue to be appointed throughout Native North America, chosen for their appropriate qualities to represent their nation. In this context, ornately beaded crowns have been worn as a symbol of their status as a kind of Indian royalty!

Beaded crowns are more popular today than ever and have, in recent years, become incorporated into general ladies' pow wow dress. Looking at some of the more recent photographs illustrated here, they seem to get larger and more elaborate with the passing of each year.

The two Plateau women in Fig.1, probably photographed in the 1930s, wear beaded crowns as part of their finery. In each case, they are decorated with floral beadwork decoration in couched overlay technique. Fig.2 shows a Southern Cheyenne woman, circa 1950's, wearing traditional Cheyenne buckskin dress. Her outfit is beautifully complemented by a fully-beaded crown which is, again, relatively small in size compared with more recent examples. A single immature golden eagle tail feather is worn at the back of the head. Amongst many nations, this is representative of purity and unmarried status. In more recent times, however, a cluster of eagle breath feathers is de rigeur, set upright at the back of the crown (long, fluffy feathers taken from beneath the tail of the eagle, which are highly prized; Figs.4–8).

Firstly, a note about constructional details. The beaded crown is effectively a band of lightweight canvas or buckskin, with a straight lower edge; the upper edge rises in height towards the centre, at the point corresponding with the forehead. Rounded, lobed, or scalloped outlines are the norm. (See Diagram 1 for a selection of different shapes).

The entire front surface is applied with beaded designs as appropriate to the tribal traditions of the maker. Couched overlay seems to be by far the most popular technique, although lane-stitch is sometimes used. In some cases, the smallest sizes of seed beads are used – sparkling and cut beads, as well as 'micro' beads producing some of the finest results.

A wide range of designs may be employed from geometric motifs to realistic depictions

of birds, eagle feathers, and even dancer figures. Certain tribes specialising in the production of ribbonwork appliqué make use of beaded versions of abstract ribbonwork designs, while others with a tradition of floral beadwork may



incorporate floral sprays into their compositions.

Once beaded, the entire band may be stiffened with card, thick paper, or a thin layer of sheet plastic, and backed with buckskin or coloured cloth. A decorative beaded edging is sometimes used for a fine finish. This often takes the form of a tightly rolled edge, or a 'zipper' (picot) technique.

The ends of the crown are joined with elastic to ensure a snug fit on the wearer's head. It is current practice amongst many tribes to affix a beaded rosette or other ornament at the point where the two ends meet, in such a way as to conceal the join, often with decorative bead suspensions attached.

The crown illustrated in Fig.3 was made by Jarrica One Feather, an Oglala Sioux friend of the author's since the late 1970's. Born and brought up on Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, and now living in Santa Fé, New Mexico, Jarrica is a professional beadworker of great repute.

Her creations are of the finest quality produced in the whole of North America today. In addition to beaded crowns, she specialises in the making of moccasins, hairties, medallions and hair barrettes, chokers, handbags, and dresses, both in traditional and contemporary styles.

Fig.3 shows a stunning beaded crown Jarrica made a few years ago to be worn as part of her own pow wow regalia. Measuring a full 11 inches in height, it is a true masterpiece of beadwork design in couched overlay technique. It features a lady traditional dancer wearing a cloth dress, against a Sioux star quilt background, flanked by elk, on an overall orange ground, within white borders. The attention to detail in the female figure is impressive, and Jarrica has not overlooked a single element of her outfit – hair ornaments, hairties, belt, shawl, handbag, eagle wing fan, leggings and moccasins. Surmounting the main design area are three lobes containing a central eagle, flanked by splayed eagle tail feather motifs, all on a light blue ground. A striped rainbow serves to divide the upper lobed area from the deep lower field.

As one might expect, the beadwork design is replete with symbolic meaning. Jarrica explains that the whole crown is in fact a tribute to her grandmother, Elva One Feather, who was a huge influence in her early years while growing up on Pine Ridge Reservation.

'The orange crown is a tribute to grandma; the lady on the front represents her and her spirit. The deer on the side of the crown are elk – grandma's medicine. The eagle on top represents Tunkasila [the Creator] watching over all of us. So far,

the medicine has worked. Whenever I wear the crown, people take notice!' (One Feather 2006)

Figs 4–8 show Native women from a variety of nations, all wearing beautifully beaded dance crowns in conjunction with their pow wow regalia. One cannot help but be impressed at the flair and inventiveness that has gone into their making! And so the tradition continues!

(A later article will examine a possible theory for the origins of these beaded crowns).

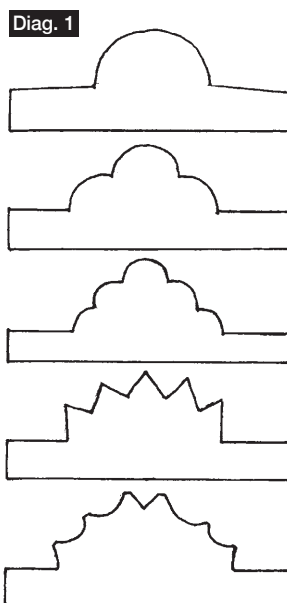




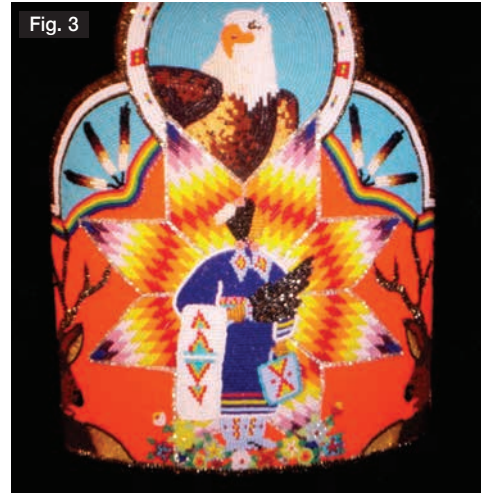
Diagram 1 Diagram showing different shapes for contemporary beaded crowns.

Fig.1 Two Plateau women, probably photographed in the 1930's. Both wear beaded 'princess crowns' in addition to their extremely fine beaded buckskin regalia. Executed in couched overlay technique, the floral design employed on the crown worn by the lady on the right is more stylised in layout. Photographer unknown. Written Heritage Collection.

Fig.2 Southern Cheyenne woman in full regalia, wearing a beaded 'princess pageant' crown. Note the relatively small size compared with more recent examples. Author's collection.

Fig.3 Beaded crown, made by Jarrica One Feather as part of her pow wow regalia. Photo courtesy of Jarrica One Feather.

Figs.4-8 Lady dancers at the 2005 Gathering of Nations pow wow in Albuquerque, New Mexico, proudly wearing ornately beaded crowns as part of their traditional regalia. Photos by Paul Gowder.



Photos: Richard Green (1, 2); Jarrica One Feather (3); Paul Gowder (4-8)

Author's note

The author would sincerely like to thank Jarrica One Feather for so generously providing photographs of one of her beaded crowns for use to illustrate this article. Jarrica also took the trouble to explain the symbolic meaning of her work, and even found time to proof-read the final article. Also, thanks to Jack Heriard of Written Heritage, Folsom, Louisiana, for permission to reproduce other photographs used in this article, including those taken by U.S. photographer Paul Gowder.

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