

Objects of Desire

Iroquois Beaded Drawstring Reticule Purses

Richard Green

A wide range of beaded purses and other articles of beadwork were made by Iroquois peoples over several decades of the 19th century for the souvenir market in the North American Northeast. They were sold to early European and Euro-American visitors to the region at tourist venues such as Niagara Falls, Saratoga Springs, and in the vicinity of Montreal.

Beaded purses were made to appeal to fashionable young ladies of the day and took a variety of forms, typically applied with polychrome floral designs with two-tone shading effect over paper patterns on dark brown velveteen. Many examples have faux flaps to front and back, with an opening at the top, as shown in Fig 1. Judging by the sheer number we see, the volume



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Photos: Richard Green



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Fig 1 Beaded purse of typical Iroquois type, with faux flaps to front and back, top opening, and floral beadwork decoration on dark-coloured velveteen. This example is virtually identical to a purse illustrated in *The Ladies' Newspaper* 2nd April 1859. Length (excluding bead loop fringe) 24cm. Author's collection

Fig 2 Drawstring reticule purse. Iroquois, possibly Mohawk, c. 1840. Glass beads over paper patterns on beige-coloured woollen cloth, with metal sequins, red silk top section and silk ribbon drawstring ties. Similar design to front and back. Overall length 33.5cm. Author's collection

Fig 3 Drawstring reticule purse. Iroquois, possibly Mohawk, c. 1840. Glass beads over paper patterns on dark brown velveteen, with black silk top section. Similar design to front and back. Overall length 30cm.

Author's collection

Fig 4 Drawstring reticule purse. Iroquois, possibly Mohawk, c. 1840. Glass beads over paper patterns on dark brown velveteen, with metal sequins, separately pieced dark brown velveteen top section, lined with polished cotton, and blue silken cord drawstring ties. Similar though not identical design to front and back. Overall length 25cm. Author's collection

Fig 5 Drawstring reticule purse of box type construction. Iroquois, possibly Mohawk, c. 1840. Glass beads over paper patterns on cream-coloured cotton, with metal sequins, cream-coloured cotton top section, originally faced with red silk. Slightly different design to front and back. Length (excluding bead loop fringe) 26 cm. Author's collection

Fig 6 Drawstring reticule purse. Iroquois, possibly Mohawk, late 1840's. Glass beads over paper patterns on dark brown velveteen, with metal sequins, integral dark brown velveteen top section, lined with polished cotton. Virtually identical design to front and back. Length (excluding bead loop fringe) 29cm. Author's collection

Fig 7 Drawstring reticule purse. Iroquois, c. 1850. Glass beads over paper patterns on dark brown velveteen, with integral dark brown velveteen top section, lined with polished cotton. Virtually identical design to front and back.

Fig 8 Detail showing bold central 8-petal flower, surrounded by frond-like sprays. Note the flatwork disc to centre of the main flower, encircled by brass sequins.

of souvenir beadwork produced by the Iroquois must have been phenomenal and this type of beaded purse probably ranks as the most commonly encountered article of Native American beadwork in existence.

One interesting variant of these purses, less frequently seen in museum and private collections and rarely if ever mentioned as a distinct type, is the Iroquois reticule purse with drawstring opening, several examples of which are featured here for readers' interest. (Figs 2-8)

Drawstring reticules of this type were no doubt modelled on European prototypes fashionable in Europe and North America during the second quarter of the 19th century and were used to hold ladies' miscellaneous personal effects. Their form also brings to mind certain indigenous types of woollen cloth bags with decorated panels which were made by various Native peoples both for indigenous use and trade in the Northeast and neighbouring regions.

Iroquois versions consist of a beaded lower portion, generally of U-shape and floral beaded on dark velveteen, with a plain upper section made either of a similar dark velveteen or silk. Both front and back panels are beaded, with front and back designs sometimes different, sometimes more or less identical.

Beadwork decoration usually takes the form of bold polychrome floral motifs



within borders of varying levels of intricacy. Beading techniques used consist of the classic Iroquois repertoire of solid satin type stitch (sometimes described as a modified lazy-stitch) which, combined with two-tone shading, creates a slightly raised, three-dimensional effect. Additionally, couched overlay is employed for areas of flat work, linear and decorative borders. A raised rope-work technique is also used for flower stems and borders. Metal sequins are frequently used as accents to fill areas

of void in between designs.

One recurring design arrangement features a large, bold central flower, sometimes with a large, flatwork, disc-like centre and surrounding frond-like sprays. The examples shown in Figs 1 and 2 are both probably Mohawk and, judging by the similarity of design, possibly by the same maker. In terms of execution of design, they are masterpieces of their type. They are strikingly similar to another specimen in the Canadian Museum of Civilization, documented as having been collected in the vicinity of Montreal between March 1841 and November 1842 by James du Pres, third Earl of Caledon of Tyrone, Ireland, who was stationed in Quebec as a captain of the Coldstream Guards.

More unusually, a number of drawstring reticule purses were made of box form, with separate front, back and side panels. (See Fig 5).

All of the examples shown here appear to date from the 1840's, giving an indication of the heyday for this type of purse as a fashion accessory. They vary somewhat in size, from 25cm (10") in Fig 4 to 33.5cm (13.2") in Fig 2. Several are fully lined with polished cotton fabric. The drawstrings are usually made of cotton hemtape, silken cord, or silk ribbon.

Bibliography

Gerry B. 2012 *A Cherished Curiosity: The Souvenir Bag in Historic Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Art* (Saxtons River, Vermont)



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