

Pattern Project: Histah'e or Cheyenne Navel Amulets

by Nico Strange Owl and Richard Green

This pattern project is based on the Bead Society workshop held at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery on Sunday 3 April this year, supported by the Bursary Fund, where 20 members were able to learn from visiting Cheyenne beadworker Nico Strange Owl how traditional navel amulets or 'histah'e' were made. The instructions, diagrams and images below should help other members, who were not able to attend, to make one of these amulets. See also Green 2005.

To begin with, select a suitable piece of soft leather to make your amulet. Brain-tanned buckskin is of course best, if you can get it. This type of hide was traditionally made by all Plains Indian peoples, tanned using a mixture of brain and liver. It is beautifully soft and fluffy in texture, easy to bead on, and won't stretch when used as a substrate for beadwork. Smoked buckskin has the added advantage of repelling moisture, and lasts for many, many years. If you can't get hold of brain-tanned hide, use commercial tanned deerhide, or even good quality chamois.

Next step – draw out the shape of the amulet on the buckskin, taking care to make the most economical use of the hide. Choose one of the patterns illustrated in Fig. 1 – either the rounded turtle shape or the simple diamond-shaped lizard. To the Cheyenne, a lizard shape was used for girls' amulets, a turtle shape for boys'. This distinction varies significantly, however, from one tribal group to another. Sioux amulets, for example, were probably not gender specific at all. The Blackfeet made snake-shaped amulets for boys and lizard-shaped ones for girls.

You will need to cut two identical shapes, one for the front, the other for the back of the amulet. Most are beaded on the front surface only, although some examples are beaded on both sides.

When you have drawn the outlines, start beading the front surface. Lane-stitch is the traditional choice for old-time Cheyenne, Sioux and Arapaho amulets, although couched overlay technique (appliqué or spot stitch) is commonly used on contemporary examples.

Bead with either Nymo thread or a strong cotton sewing thread. Thread should always be used doubled, for maximum strength. Waxing the cotton sewing thread helps ensure firm, tight beadwork, and gives a much more durable end-product. Remember to keep all your knots on the outer surface, and bead over them. Traditionally, animal sinew, (usually deer, buffalo or elk), was used for lane-stitch beadwork, and some beadworkers still favour using this instead of commercial types of thread. It is, however, difficult to get hold of and takes time to prepare in the requisite lengths.

Take care when laying out your chosen beadwork

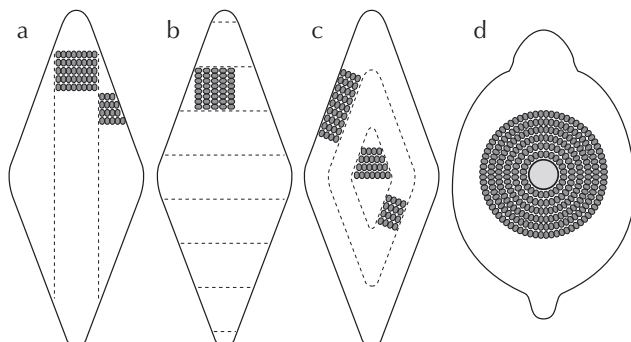


Fig. 2 Layouts comprising a) vertical lane-stitch lanes, b) horizontal lanes, c) concentric arrangement of lanes, d) domed metal tack at centre, with beadwork executed in concentric rows in couched overlay technique.

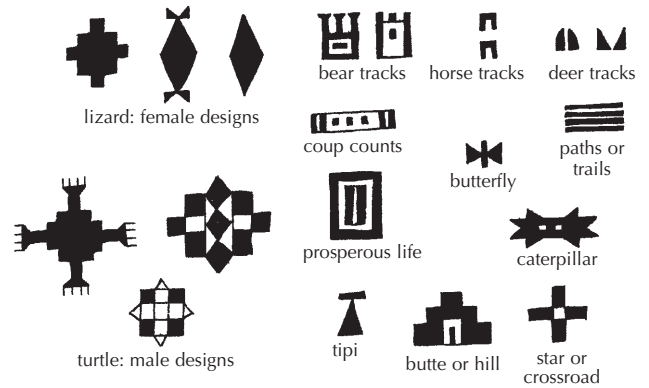


Fig. 3 A selection of Cheyenne beadwork designs.

design on the hide. If working in lane-stitch technique, you can make things easier for yourself by drawing out your lanes in soft pencil or ballpoint pen. Lanes can be arranged either vertically, horizontally, or concentrically, according to personal taste. Figs. 2a-c shows three possible ways of laying out lanes on a lizard-shaped amulet.

If you have opted to use couched overlay technique, you again have the choice of working your rows vertically, horizontally or concentrically. You could even try fixing a domed metal tack or a large bead at the centre of your amulet and beading concentrically around it, forming a central medallion, and then filling in the remaining beaded area with either horizontal or vertical rows. (Fig. 2d).

A range of typical Cheyenne designs is illustrated in Fig. 3. Many of these have set symbolic meanings to the Cheyenne. They are similar or identical to Sioux and Arapaho designs, the three tribal groups being traditional allies. These geometric designs lend themselves best to lane-stitch technique.

When choosing your colour scheme, bear in mind the following colour symbolism prevalent amongst the Cheyennes:

- RED: Creator
- BLUE: Water, Sky
- YELLOW: East (protection, visions)
- BLACK: West (growth, movement)
- WHITE: North (wholeness, completeness)
- GREEN: South (nourishment)

White is the most common choice of background colour in most Cheyenne beadwork. Black tends to be used very sparingly, if at all, except on sacred beadwork. The colour yellow should also be used sparingly, especially for males.

When you have finished beading the front panel of your

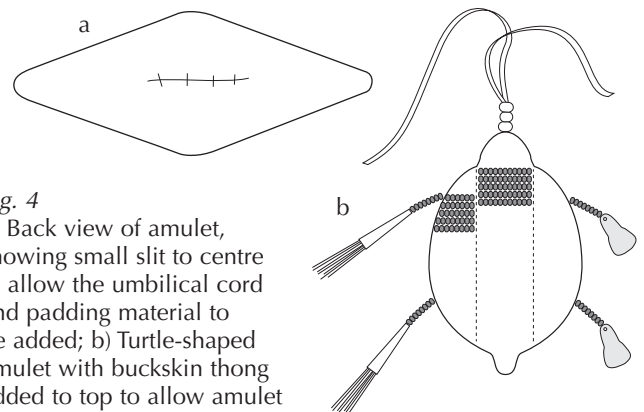


Fig. 4 a) Back view of amulet, showing small slit to centre to allow the umbilical cord and padding material to be added; b) Turtle-shaped amulet with buckskin thong added to top to allow amulet to be attached to the cradle or carry cot. Note the positioning of the amulet's 'legs', made of horsehair-filled tin cones or cowrie shells and beads.

amulet, cut it out; take the corresponding cut-out piece of buckskin, destined to be the back of the amulet, lay the two identical pieces together with the beaded surface on the top, beaded side uppermost. Start sewing the two pieces together around the outer edge, using small, firm whip-stitches.

Bearing in mind that the amulet obviously still needs to be padded out, leave a small opening in one side. Alternatively, sew up the edges completely and make a central slit in the underside, as shown in Fig. 5.

At this stage, the dried umbilical cord can be inserted. The amulet can be further stuffed with buffalo wool, if available, together with sage, cedar or sweetgrass, all traditional materials identified with ritual purification amongst the Cheyenne and other Plains peoples. If no umbilical cord is to be inserted, the amulet can just be padded with cotton wool. At least one person at the workshop intended to put her daughter's hospital identity bracelet in the amulet when it was finished.

The outer edges of the amulet may then be decorated with a beaded edging of your choice. A simple 'zipper' (picot), or 'modified zipper' edging works well. Alternatively, small connected rows of beads, in the manner of lane-stitch technique, following the outer edge, perhaps in alternating colours. Or over-sew with a few beads threaded on each stitch.

To complete the amulet, add 'legs' at four points to the outer edges of the case. These can be made from larger beads, tube beads etc, strung on thick thread or finely cut buckskin thongs (see Fig. 4b). Drilled metal coins, tin cones filled with dyed horsehair, dentalium or cowrie shells are popular choices of embellishment. Alternatively, you can add 'legs' made of short length of buckskin, spirally wrapped with seed beads.

A buckskin lace attached to the 'head' end of the amulet, at the back, serves to tie the amulet to the infant's cradle or carry cot! This thong can be further embellished with large glass or metal trade beads.

Bibliography

Green, R. 2005 'A Link with Life – Plains Indian Navel Amulets' Newsletter of the Bead Society of Gt Britain 77, 16–17.



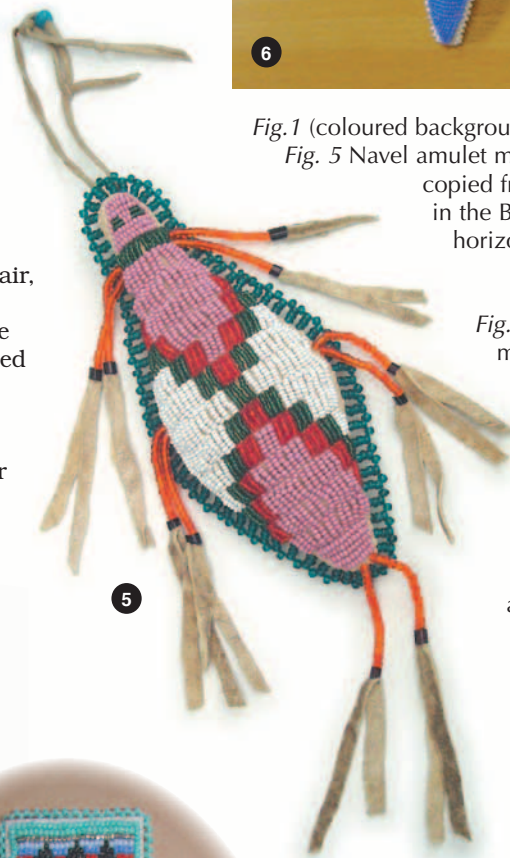
Fig. 1 (coloured background) lizard and turtle templates.

Fig. 5 Navel amulet made by Richard Green in 1988, copied from a Blood-Blackfoot example in the British Museum [1903.108] with horizontal layout of lane-stitch lanes. (Collection of Mr and Mrs Wilf Green)

Fig. 6 Contemporary navel amulets made by Sioux beadworker, Dan Schumacher. Note the shape of the one on the left, with integral legs and tail, and the upper surface executed entirely in couched overlay technique. (left: Carole Morris Collection.)

Fig. 7 Late 19th Blackfoot navel amulet, each side finely beaded in couched overlay technique. The case has been unpicked at one side and the umbilical cord removed, presumably by its owner before selling it to a curio collector. (Richard Green Collection.)

Figs. 8 & 9 Contemporary Cheyenne amulets.



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