

# Off the cuff!

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How 19th century *European* beaded cuffs may have influenced early Iroquois raised floral beadwork

The subject of this article is a particular style of fancy beadwork wrist cuffs, and a purse of similar period and related style. The type of cuffs in question are variously described in published sources as 'Georgian' or 'Regency' in period, and either English or French in origin, popular with fashionable European ladies during the early half of the 19th century.

This precise style of beadwork has long intrigued me. Indeed, many years ago, I presented in this journal a short description of two such examples – a single specimen in the collections of Carrow House Costume and Study Centre in Norwich; the other, a matched pair belonging to Carole Morris (Green 2002, 9). Several examples, including Carole's pair

(Fig 6), are illustrated here, in Figs. 3–11.

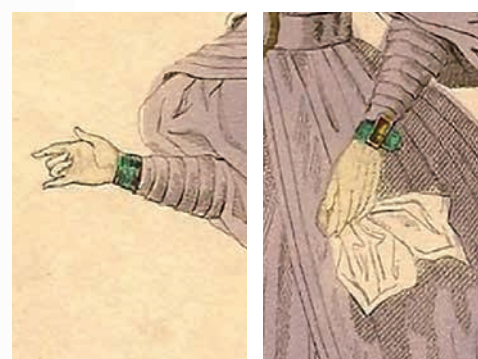
The tantalising similarity of these cuffs, or certain constituent elements of them, in style and technique to mid 19th century Northeastern Native American work led me to speculate on a possible link to Iroquois beadwork produced in the Montreal region for the 19th century souvenir trade.

In the short 2002 article, I was unable fully to explain the dynamic in play, being left with more questions than answers, and the subject of this enigmatic style of beadwork needs to be revisited; hence the present article. Amongst the various possibilities I considered is the idea that these early beadwork cuffs might have been made in imitation of Northeastern Native work, or that they may even



Figs 1 & 2 Two fashion prints from 'The World of Fashion and Continental Feuilletons' from 1831. This was a British women's magazine published monthly and dedicated to high life, fashions, polite literature, fine arts, the operas and the theatre, and contained London & Parisian fashions and costumes. It was published by John Bell from 1824 to 1851.

(Note the pairs of darker coloured cuffs, the one on the right possibly indicating a metallic clasp. Pairs of cuffs were meant to be detachable)

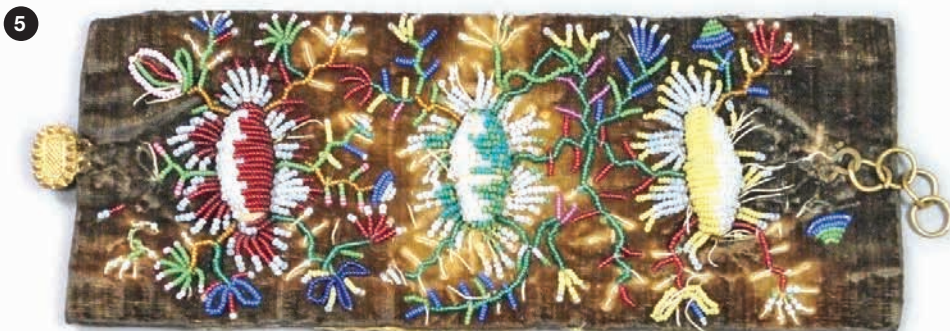


have been made by one of the various tribal groups in the Northeastern region. However, with the benefit of hindsight and increased knowledge accrued over the ensuing years, neither of these theories now seems likely.

The recent listing of a colourfully beaded 'Georgian or Regency' purse (Figs 16–17) on a well-known internet auction site led me to reconsider the possible origins, significance and influence of this category of European beadwork. The style of beadwork on the purse is closely related and virtually identical to that of many of the ladies' beaded cuffs.

Moreover, specific stylistic details of certain floral elements used in the decoration of this purse are so strikingly similar to mid 19th century Canadian





Mohawk-Iroquois work that a link between the two seems very tempting to make. Indeed, the purse in question seems to provide the strongest kind of circumstantial evidence of some level of stylistic influence – perhaps the closest we can ever get to a 'smoking gun', if any such thing exists.

### The Wrist Cuffs

When found on the internet or illustrated in beadwork publications, these ornately decorated ladies' wrist cuffs are variously described as 'English Regency', 'Georgian', 'French', or 'European'. They appear to be related to a solidly beaded canvaswork variant based on Berlin woolwork designs, popular during the same early 19th century period (see Figs 12–14), certain early examples of which feature French Empire style motifs such as urns and baskets of flowers, Roman key motifs, and butterflies.

The heyday of the floral-beaded cuff type discussed here appears to be the late 1820's and early 1830's. Usually made in

Figs 3–7 Early 19th century European or French-Canadian beaded wrist cuffs. Glass Sablé beads on velvet. Original gilt metal clasps are shown in Figs 3–4, while the cuffs in Figs 5 and 6 appear to have had their original clasps removed and at a later date these have been replaced with poorer substitutes. The clasp from the cuff in Fig 7 is missing.







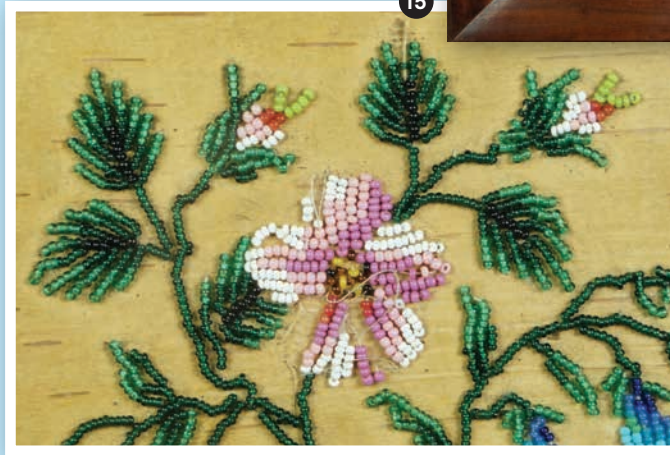
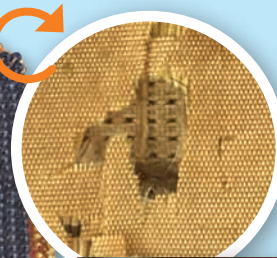
Figs 8–11 Early 19th century European or French-Canadian beaded wrist cuffs. Glass Sablé beads on velvet. Original gilt metal clasps are shown in Figs 8–11, while the cuff in Fig 9 has no surviving clasp. (Fig 9 Carole Morris' Collection; Fig 10 P. J. Ash Collection)

matched or virtually matching pairs, they are of simple rectangular form, made of dark-coloured velvet, often with gilt metal clasp fittings. The choice of velvet is usually dark brown, black or red. They are generally applied with arrangements of floral motifs in a raised beadwork technique, with two-tone shading and cotton padding underneath to create an embossed effect. This technique no doubt derives from a long European stumpwork embroidery tradition, popular in both France and England, and frequently applied to ecclesiastical vestments.

Compositions vary in extent of density, from simple repeated flower motifs with no additional elaboration to very densely arranged compositions, with relatively little void background area showing.

Figs 12–14 Early 19th century European wrist cuffs with canvaswork designs derived from Berlin woolwork embroidery. Note the use of naturalistic shading to many of the flower and leaf designs. The detail shows the reverse of cuff 13 where the canvas is showing in places. (Fig 12 P. J. Ash Collection; Fig 13 Claire Madder Collection)

Fig 15 An early 19th century floral beadwork panel on birchbark, probably French-Canadian.





The beads used are an extremely tiny Italian type, which (slong with even smaller beads than these in 18th century pieces) are described by the French as *sablé* (sand). The designs take the form of bold flowers and leaves, the remaining background space often filled with smaller-scale flowers, leaves, buds, stems, radiate crosses, and other motifs.

A wide range of bead colours is generally used, all sewing being done in commercial

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cotton thread. Some specimens employ tiny steel, brass or gilt metallic beads as accents within the design. The majority of examples studied seem to be backed with silk or satin. Over time, many examples appear to have lost their original gilt metal clasps (e.g. the one in Fig 6 was replaced with 'hooks and eyes').

### The Purse

The attractively beaded purse shown in Fig 16 is constructed of dark-coloured velvet – one side red, the other green – with an ornate gilt metal hinged clasp fitting and metal chain handle. Each side is applied with a different arrangement

of floral beadwork in a raised technique similar in style and clearly related to that decorating the wrist cuffs.

Perhaps the most notable feature of this floral style, as with the wrist cuffs, is the distinctive two-colour shading to the flower and leaf elements, which creates a naturalistic effect. As in the case of the wrist cuffs, designs are executed in a raised beadwork technique with cotton padding beneath the beads, lending an embossed appearance to the individual

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Fig 16 (below) Early 19th century European beaded purse, probably French-Canadian or French. Glass *sablé* beads on velvet.

Fig 17 (above) Early 19th century French purse with canvaswork floral beadwork designs derived from Berlin woolwork embroidery patterns.

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design elements.

### A North American Link?

While the precise origins of the delicately beaded European wrist cuffs and stunningly decorated purse shown here are not easily established, the style of beadwork in question appears to have an undeniable stylistic link to Native beadwork produced in the Northeastern region of North America in the mid 19th century. The style seems particularly closely related to Mohawk work produced for the souvenir market at Kahnawake (Caughnawaga) reserve near Montreal, Quebec, and may conceivably have provided some level of influence on its development.

Assuming the origins of the designs (rather than any particular set of cuffs, many of which would have been made in England to copy European fashions) are more likely to be French or French-Canadian rather than English, this class of European fancy beadwork may well have been fashionable in Montreal society in French Canada in the early decades of the 19th century, its heyday being the 1830's, just a few years before the emergence of the first Mohawk souvenir beadwork material in the 1840's. It is not difficult, therefore, to imagine that examples of these items somehow came to the attention of Kahnawake Mohawk sewers, at precisely the period when Mohawk floral designs were beginning to be developed.

From early times, young native girls were instructed in embroidery and other domestic arts by Ursuline nuns of Quebec City. It is widely accepted that French floral embroidery designs were used as inspiration here.

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### Comparison of floral motifs used to decorate articles of early 19th century French/French-Canadian and mid 19th century Mohawk beadwork.



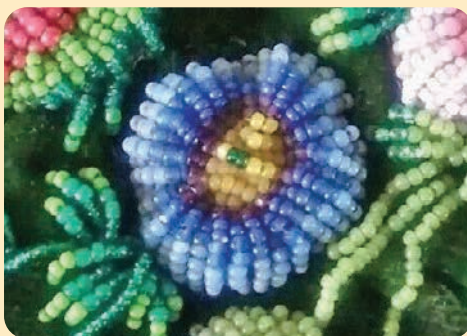
**Rose and leaf design with two-tone shading:** (left) from the European or French-Canadian purse illustrated in Fig 16, early 19th century, (right) used on a Mohawk calling card or needle case (Fig.19), c. 1840's..



**Bold flower design with two-tone shading;** (left) detail of an early 19th century European or French-Canadian wrist cuff, (right) detail of a Mohawk purse dating c. 1840's.



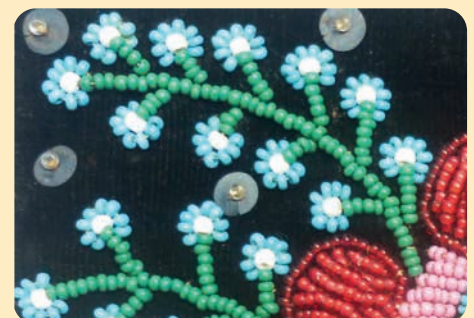
**Flower motif with two-tone shading;** (left) on an early 19th century European or French-Canadian wrist cuff, (right) on a Mohawk purse dating c. 1840's.



**Small flower with two-tone shading:** (right) on the European or French-Canadian purse illustrated in Fig. 16, early 19th century, (right) similar small flower with two-tone shading, on a Mohawk calling card or needle case (Fig 19), c. 1840's.



**Small-scale star motifs:** (top) on a French or French-Canadian wrist cuff, early 19th century, (bottom) on a Mohawk purse dating circa 1840's.



**Forget-me-not:** (left) European or French-Canadian wrist cuff with forget-me-not and butterfly designs, early 19th century, (right) on a Mohawk purse, dated 1850.



In the late 1600's, under the auspices of the Jesuits, the St Francis Xavier Mission was first established at Kentake near Montreal, (known today as La Prairie), eventually in 1716 relocating to Kahnawake, where a permanent church was built in 1720, with a school to indoctrinate the local Mohawk populations. This Roman Catholic influence was further reinforced over many ensuing generations, with the missionary school system, where instruction in domestic arts continued to be given. From this background of Catholic religious instruction sprang a combination of influences which led to the development of Mohawk beadwork souvenirs, produced so prolifically by Mohawk sewers from the 1840's onwards.

The St Francis Xavier Mission at Kahnawake today exhibits a sizeable collection of historic treasures of European, Canadian and First Nations origin, dating from the 17th century and later. Many of these articles were gifts from France, and one supposes some may have been used as teaching aids for beadwork instruction to the Mohawks in the mid 19th century.

Mohawk sewers were endlessly inventive in their creative output, and were ever on the lookout for new sources of inspiration in form, design and marketing opportunities. European embroidery styles such as Berlin woolwork are considered to be amongst the techniques that came to influence the development of floral beadwork at Kahnawake.

### The European Language of Flowers

Polychrome floral designs were adopted and adapted with great alacrity by Iroquois sewers. In the case of Kahnawake Mohawk work, designs were executed in a raised beadwork technique over paper patterns on a substrate of dark-coloured velveteen or, occasionally, on gold-coloured silk. Two-tone colour shading in an attractive range of bead colours was very much the norm.

This two-tone shading features of course in Berlin woolwork floral designs as well as in the category of European raised floral beadwork illustrated in this article. Examples of this work regularly appeared in mid-19th century publications such as Godey's Lady's Book, which included illustrations and patterns for fashion accessories to be made in the home.

To European needleworkers, many of these flower forms, or the way they were arranged, held specific symbolic meanings derived from the so-called 'language of flowers', or floriography, popular in France in the period between 1810 and 1850, and in Britain in the Victorian era. Universally understood in polite society, this codified level of meaning may well have been carried over into Mohawk floral beadwork produced for the 19th century souvenir market.

According to the multivalent language of flowers, white roses signify innocence, purity, humility, reverence, charm, worthiness, and young love. However, they can also signify virginity, death, or a heart unacquainted with love. Red

roses convey sentiments of romantic love; yellow: friendship and devotion; deep pink: gratitude and appreciation; light pink: admiration, gentleness, sympathy and grace. In a more religious context, deep red roses and their thorns were sometimes considered to represent the blood of Christ, and the rose's five petals the five crucifixion wounds or stigmata.

### Stylistic Parallels

Some of the beadwork designs shown in Fig 18 illustrate the stylistic similarity of Mohawk floral elements to those used to decorate the European wrist cuffs (Figs 3-11 and, perhaps most notably, the beaded velveteen purse (Fig 16).

The most telling of parallels between this particular European/French-Canadian and Kahnawake Mohawk work can be found in the rose-like flower in full bloom, with two-tone shading to the petals. This floral element occurs with remarkable frequency and endless variations in mid-19th

century Mohawk beadwork, and is one of the hallmarks of the Mohawk style of the period, featuring on velveteen purses, moccasins, fancy caps, and a variety of other novelty items. (See Figs 19-23).

Other floral and foliate motifs shared by the two respective styles include forget-me-not sprays, hair stems, rudimentary leaves and buds, and fern-like leaves. A number of comparative photographs highlighting these stylistic parallels are shown in Fig 18. There are many stylistic differences, of course, as one might expect, but equally strong similarities that cannot be explained away as coincidental. I hope readers will agree that the case for an influence of the European/French-Canadian style over Mohawk work is compelling.

There are also differences as well as similarities in the use of materials. Whereas cotton padding is generally used beneath the floral designs on the wrist cuffs and purse, Mohawk sewers substituted this with paper patterns,



Fig 19 (above) Mohawk needle or calling card case with typical floral designs, c. 1840's. Glass beads on gold-coloured silk.



Fig 20 (below) Pair of mid 19th century Mohawk beaded cuffs with typical floral decoration. Glass beads on dark velveteen over paper patterns, backed with glazed cotton.





Figs 21–22 Mohawk purses dating from the third quarter of the 19th century, with typical floral beadwork decoration, featuring shading to the flowers and leaves. The purse in Fig 21 is dated '1860'. Glass beads on dark velveteen over paper patterns, lined with glazed cotton.

Fig 23 Mohawk purse c. 1840. Glass beads over paper patterns on brown velveteen. The similarity to the European/French-Canadian floral style is unmistakable.

enhancing the vibrancy of colour of the translucent beads. While European cuffs are generally backed with silk or satin, Mohawk work is almost invariably backed with glazed (polished) cotton in a variety of colours.

## Conclusion

The origins of both categories of beadwork discussed in this article – European/French-Canadian and Mohawk – have been all too



routinely misidentified and misunderstood whenever they come to light in beadwork-related publications, antique fairs, on the internet and elsewhere.

Many of the floral-beaded wrist cuffs, so regularly described as 'English', are probably French or French-Canadian fashion accessories that achieved a level of popularity in Britain and North America, including French Canada in the 1830's, although many were almost certainly made in England working from European patterns.

Nineteenth century Mohawk beadwork, meanwhile, is often generically assigned as 'Iroquois' or, even worse, is occasionally misattributed as being the work of other Native American groups. The range of external influences that led to its development are complex, very much driven by factors such as the Native economy and the role of the Catholic Church in religious and domestic arts instruction at mission schools such as the one at St Francis Xavier Mission. Here, Roman Catholic imagery blended with French and other European embroidery styles and indigenous traditional elements to create a new and distinctive decorative art form which the Kahnawake Mohawks harnessed to meet the demands of a burgeoning tourist market in the North American Northeast.

To date, I have been unable to unearth definitive proof of French/French-Canadian raised beadwork wrist cuffs or other such articles being used as teaching aids in mid 19th century



sewing classes at Kahnawake or other Mohawk communities in the Montreal region. This of course does not mean that such information is not out there, somewhere, so I shall continue my quest to seek it out. I have no doubt such details may not have even qualified as a footnote in the annals of social history. Nevertheless, it is hoped this article will provide fairly compelling evidence of one of the crucial contributing influences on the development of the Mohawk raised floral beadwork style, and a basis for future research.

## Bibliography

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## Acknowledgements

My thanks to costume historian Susan Greene at Cornell University Costume & Textile Collection (CCTC), Ithaca, New York, for her comments on the origins of the beadwork wrist cuffs under discussion in this article.