

Southern Yukon Beadwork Traditions: An Inland Tlingit Perspective

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It was a great honour for me to present this paper in Tlingit territory, in Juneau, Alaska. This was my first visit to Juneau and I began by explaining why it was such a meaningful occasion for me. I was born and raised in Teslin, Yukon. My Tlingit name is K'ayyah and I am a Crow member of the Kokhitan clan. My mother is Tlingit, also born and raised in Teslin, and my father was born and raised in Lillehammer, Norway. He came to Canada in 1925 and later made Teslin his home. My grandmother, my mother's mother, was born in Tulsequah, near Juneau, and lived part of her life in Juneau. She later moved inland to Teslin when she married my grandfather, Jim Fox. So Juneau is a special place in my family's history.

I grew up surrounded by beading and beadwork. There is a very special aura about beads. The centre of our home, when I was a child, was my mother and her beadwork. Often, it was the small amount of cash from the sales of her work that bought our school clothes or made Christmas more special.

I began to take an active interest in beadwork again when I had the opportunity to visit the George Johnston Museum in Teslin with my mother in 1992, and, in her company, to look at the beadwork there. She was able to point out some of the objects and to identify their makers. My interest was further fired when I saw photographs of costumes in George Emmons's book, *The Tlingit Indians*. This led me to prepare a proposal to conduct research on beadwork collections in the MacBride Museum in Whitehorse, a proposal it later accepted.

The Project

The MacBride Museum had several objectives in sponsoring the Southern Yukon Beadwork Traditions project. First, the museum wanted to record and share knowledge about its collections from southwestern Yukon Territory and northern British Columbia. Secondly, the staff hoped that such a project would increase access to their ethnographic

collections. Thirdly, they hoped to contribute information and resources for development of Yukon school curriculum.¹

As the principal investigator, I had my own personal objectives for the project. Of course, I hoped to learn about the individual artifacts, but I also wanted to learn about artistic traditions in this region and to construct a history of beadwork in the context of historical changes that have occurred in the southern Yukon. My ultimate goal was to connect artifacts with people.

We began by selecting pieces for a study collection from more than 100 beaded pieces in the MacBride collection. We chose 25 works ranging in age from 40 to 125 years and then prepared eleven of these to go on the road as part of a portable display. Our travelling display included a babiche bag, two wall pockets (see Figure 1), two firebags, a dance tunic, a hunting bag, a pair of mukluks, a pair of embroidered gloves, a cartridge belt and a small napkin ring. These pieces were photographed, stabilized and mounted to prevent wear and tear during travel and display. We arranged for them to travel to elders' homes, to community functions and to the Teslin Museum.

Our initial objective was to interview a number of elders, but we came to realize that working in depth with fewer elders might be more rewarding. Five elders agreed to work closely with me: Mrs. Mabel Johnson, a Tlingit elder and also my mother; Mrs. Dora Wedge, a Tagish woman; Mrs. Sophie Miller, a Ta'an/Southern Tutchone elder; Mrs. Thelma Norby, a Tahltan elder; and Mrs. Pauline Peters, a contemporary Tlingit beadworker.

Initially, I tried to learn as much as I could about the background of each object from museum documentation, historical photographs, archival records and information from other museums in the Yukon, northern British Columbia and Alaska. I had hoped that such a search would reveal information about individual pieces, about their makers and perhaps the names of donors or former owners. The results were disappointing. Women who did beadwork in the past remain largely anonymous in written records, as First Nations artists so often have. It became clear that the more important focus would involve showing the pieces to the elders and talking with them about the articles.

The elders's contributions did indeed become the most revealing part of the study. Each person was interviewed as often as three times. In each case I showed not just the beadwork but also the photographs, books and (where possible) other museum displays. The results, however, were *not* what I expected! I had anticipated learning a lot of information about each individual object. Instead, elders' responses centred around a number of general themes.

General Themes

First, there were many appreciative comments about the quality of work on individual pieces. The women examined each item carefully and their comments included a number of "oohs" and "aahs." They all commented on the beauty of the articles and on the skill of the beadworkers. Some expressed regret that such work is no longer being done and that this art is being lost.

Second, in cases where the maker could be identified, there was discussion about her identity. On one occasion, an elder was able to identify the original owner and maker of a headpiece because she was familiar with it as part of a traditional clan costume. Generally, though, the women were more interested in what I could tell them about who made each piece. Sometimes they had heard of the artist and wanted to know more about her. On several occasions the maker was related to the elder or to someone she knew and this might trigger a story about that person.

During the interview, an elder or artist might not always be able to give precise information about the actual piece we were examining; however, often seeing it caused her to remember other pieces of handwork, which, in turn, generated stories about other topics. For example, there were some discussions about travel and trade in the old days, and the kinds of things women traded with each other. One woman talked about her mother's extensive winter travels as a girl, both to the coast and to the far interior of the Yukon. Such recollections were not triggered by any particular object but usually seemed to be inspired by the oldest items, especially those displaying beads of different sizes and different ages.

There were also stories about more recent events and about family members who had once had similar objects. One woman, for example, reminisced about how women had once made babiche bags for their husbands, and how husbands contributed to making these bags. Another woman was reminded of her aunt when she saw a pair of very old gloves, and she talked about how her aunt had contributed to the instruction of young women in her community. Other times, stories were told about changes brought about by the Alaska Highway. An elder described how she and her peers were kept busy making fur hats, moccasins and fancy "souvenir" items like slippers, napkin rings and purses. Another woman described how her father was pressured into selling a beautifully beaded jacket she had made for him to a highway worker who admired it. She went on to recall her own mother sewing to meet the demands of packers and goldseekers at Dyea, the departure point for the Chilkoot Pass, en route to the Klondike gold rush.

Other times our discussion shifted to the production of artistic work and the kinds of techniques used by artists. They talked about how women had once used porcupine quills and how these had eventually been replaced when different varieties and sizes of beads reached the Yukon through trade. They talked about the many purposes for which bags were made. They spoke about the tools women used for sewing, about how different ideas for designs came to them, and about how both tools and designs were frequently loaned or exchanged.

In one instance, a particular piece reminded one of the elders of the responsibilities young women learned at puberty. In speaking with her and with other elders, I have become increasingly convinced that the connection between beadwork, sewing and the transmission of knowledge to young women was critical, and hope to learn more about this.

Sometimes, as an elder examined a bag or a jacket, she would recall and sing a song associated with what she was seeing. One woman was inspired to share songs she remembered partly because of the presence of another elder who could understand its significance. And with the song came stories: a very old story associated with a firebag was told to provide background for a particular song. This seemed to be a way of capturing the memories or spirit of ancient times.

Because potlatches were occasions for wearing ceremonial regalia, other pieces would remind elders of specific potlatches where these objects might have been worn. One woman described in detail a potlatch in which she had recently participated.

Mrs. Tagish Jim's Wall Pocket

I would like to illustrate this process with reference to one particular piece, Mrs. Tagish Jim's wall pocket (see Figure 1). To me, it seems to be symbolic of a way of life lived in the Far North where people had to be so prepared to move when necessary. It is a beautiful work of art that, at the same time, the owner could roll up into a small package and take it with her when she moved—almost like a piece of furniture that can be taken out again and used as soon as she is settled in. (As I move to a new apartment myself, I think of how wonderful it would be to have such exquisite and compact furniture!)

Working with pieces like this was a wonderful experience. I came to know the character and personality of each of them. But preparing them to be photographed and then looking at the slides produced gave me a very different point of view. Individual pieces suddenly became works of art! The harmony of colour and design became obvious to me in a new way. It became clear to me that the colours, the designs and the materials were chosen to produce a specific effect. The artists had

a vision not formerly clear to me.

A black-and-white photo of this wall pocket does not produce the same visual effect but, when we first looked at the coloured slide, someone likened it to a cathedral stained glass window. For me, the image gave me the impression of music, a song filled with love and pathos. I began to think of Mrs. Jim's wall pocket as a songsheet. One of the elders, Mrs. Dora Wedge, looked at this wall pocket and spoke of her stepfather who had owned one like it. He was from the Teslin area and had carried it with him when he went to Teslin one spring. She recalled that he had intended to return in the fall, but became ill and passed away before he could return. One of the memories he left with her was of his wall pocket.

Once near the end of the summer, I brought my mother, Mrs. Mabel Johnson, to visit Mrs. Dora Wedge. During the visit, they reminisced about my grandfather, my mother's father, and his brother, Mrs. Wedge's step-father. Then my mother sang my grandfather's song for Mrs. Wedge, the song he had made at the time when he had lost two of his brothers. Many years before, I had heard Johnny Johns, Mrs. Wedge's older brother, sing my grandfather's song and had wondered how he had come to know it. Being with those two women on that afternoon made a powerful connection from beaded work, to song, to family and memory for me, as well as for them.

All of this relates to my experience as a First Nations researcher working in my own community. I do not speak my Tlingit language. This is a big drawback and I do not know whether I will ever learn to speak it. But I do understand how some Tlingit ideas are expressed in

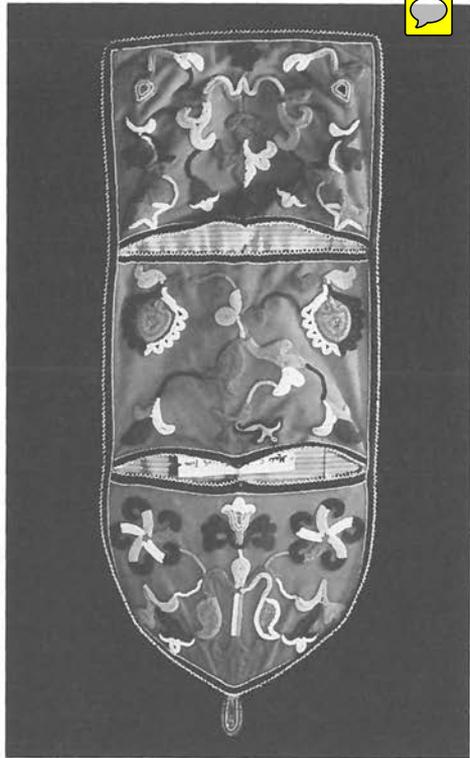


Figure 1 Southern Tutchone Wall Pocket. Photo courtesy MacBride Museum, Whitehorse. Reproduced with kind permission.

English as a second language. I also find that I have my own bank of cultural knowledge and that sometimes I don't give it proper or adequate recognition in the work I do. I can read about potlatches in the anthropological literature and learn certain things, but I can remember and feel *intensely* what it was like to be a small child attending a potlatch, knowing that I was responsible for behaving in very specific ways and that to do otherwise would be unthinkable. I have to remember to give weight to my own knowledge, too. Most important for me is finding my own place in the genealogical connections of my community. This makes every discovery personally exciting and affirming. Artistic beaded work by women has been one of the ways to make these connections.

As this study continues, I hope to have much more to say about the importance of beadwork as a way of learning about traditional Yukon First Nations culture. While early Yukon cultures were not producers of many enduring physical objects, beadwork remains as a beautiful legacy evoking a disappearing past. Together with history remembered by elders, we may be able to create a window through which to view these times. This project is just the beginning of work I hope to be doing during the course of my life.

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