

OJIBWAY BEADWORK TRADITIONS in the Ayer Collections

Marcia G. Anderson and Kathy L. Hussey-Arntson

ON THE WESTERN SHORE of Mille Lacs Lake, north of Onamia, is one of the most significant groups of collections in the museum holdings of the Minnesota Historical Society. On exhibit at the Mille Lacs Indian Museum and Trading Post are many of the Ojibway and other Indian artifacts that make up a large part of the Jeannette O. and Harry D. Ayer collections. The Minnesota Ojibway material is particularly impressive. While it is broad in scope, it does show some inequalities in the number of items represented in any one subject area. There are few examples of games, fishing gear, women's clothing, and pre-1880s material, while woven yarn bags, birch-bark containers, dolls, and smoking equipment are extensively represented. The collection's

strengths seem to lie in the type of crafts made for commercial sale.¹

Beadwork is one of the common characteristics of the Ojibway artifacts. It is a craft executed by Ojibway women to decorate items for personal use or for sale. This collection contains examples of a broad variety of techniques and decorated surfaces and permits new insights into the design and production of beaded items during the first half of the 20th century.

The value of a collection of this kind cannot be established or put into perspective without proper provenience. To understand better the scope and composition of the Ojibway collection, it is necessary to review briefly the history of the Ayers during their residence at Mille Lacs. Minnesotans Jeannette O. Foster and Harry D. Ayer, who were married in St. Paul in 1908, moved to the Mille Lacs area sometime between 1914 and 1919. There they took over operation of a trading post formerly run by David H. Robbins on Vineland Bay.²

In 1918 the United States Indian Service, operating out of the White Earth Reservation, granted the Ayers a license allowing them to trade with the Mille Lacs Ojibway and to occupy and use certain buildings for a store and residence. In March, 1925, the Ayers were asked to vacate the Robbins buildings, which were to be used for an Indian school. By the end of the decade, they had built the trading post still in use.³

In its early years this structure located on the edge of

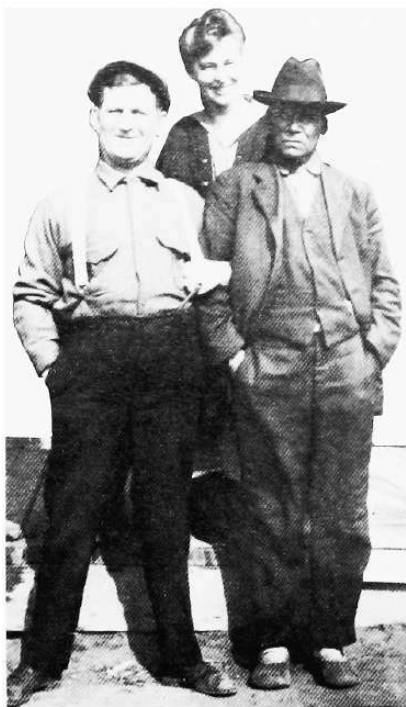
¹There are several spellings of the name Ojibway; common variations are Ojibwe, Ojibwa, and Chippewa; the Ojibway are known in their own language as Anishinabe.

The Ayer Indian collection of approximately 1,400 items focuses primarily on the artifacts of Minnesota Ojibway Indians from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s; it also includes a significant group of textiles, ceramics, and basketry from the Southwest and a small sampling from the Pacific Northwest of North America. Most of the latter appear to be from the early to mid-1900s and produced for commercial sale.

²Wedding announcement, October 20, 1908, and J. H. Hinton to H. D. Ayer, November 20, 1918, both in Harry Darius Ayer and Family Papers, 1787-1966, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS). The date of the Ayers' permanent move to Mille Lacs is uncertain. Their name appears from 1914 to 1918 in the *St. Paul City Directory*, p. 280, 264, 266, 265, 180, respectively, but is absent from 1919 on. It is possible they spent time in both places before making a final move.

³Hinton to Ayer, November 20, 1918, and P. R. Wadsworth to Ayer, March 6, 1925, both in Ayer Papers; Warranty deeds, November 12, 1918, Book of Deeds No. 31, p. 196, June 27, 1921, Book 39, p. 431, September 6, 1922, Book 38, p. 368 — all in Mille Lacs County Recorder's Office, Milaca.

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*HARRY AYER, his
wife Jeannette, and
their friend
O-gee-tup, about
1920*

the Ojibway community, near what was to become Mille Lacs Reservation, served as a general store for the local residents, primarily Mille Lacs Ojibway. In the years that followed, the Ayers added a number of other businesses, including rental cottages, the construction, sale, and repair of boats, a maple syrup and sugar business, and fisherman guide services. The Ayers' interest in the local community led to personal collecting of Ojibway artifacts, as well as purchasing local craftwork for sale at the post. They also bought Indian goods to sell at the post from numerous North American firms in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Alaska, and elsewhere.⁴

The Ayers were neighbors, friends, employers of, and vendors for the Ojibway at Mille Lacs. Because the various Indian agents employed by the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs for the Mille Lacs band were nearly 170 miles away at the White Earth Reservation, Harry Ayer assumed the role of mediator, executor, or administrator of Ojibway estates and acted occasionally as their spokesman to the White Earth agents.⁵

Over the years souvenirs became the mainstay of the Ayers' business, and the trading post became less of a general store. In 1959 Mr. and Mrs. Ayer, seven years before their deaths, donated their entire estate to the MHS. The gift included 104 acres of land, the post, a new building for exhibiting their collections, and a trust fund to support and expand the museum. The trading post is now the bookstore and gift shop for the Mille Lacs Indian Museum.

SINCE the Ayers and the early 20th-century Ojibway artists and craftsmen are no longer living, photographs in the society's audio-visual library and documentary evi-

dence such as business records in the division of archives and manuscripts help to piece together the story behind the collections. While much information can be gained from this material, the data are spotty and incomplete. As a result of some recent efforts to supplement the Ayer records, copies of Southwest trader Lorenzo Hubbell's letters to the Minnesotans are now in the couple's papers.⁶

The development of a commercial relationship between the Ayers and the Mille Lacs band is particularly apparent in the trading post account ledgers. The Ayers ordered merchandise from bead supply companies that imported their beads from European manufacturers, and the Mille Lacs Ojibway purchased beads, velvet, thread, needles, braid, cloth, and ribbon at the post. Entries relating to the production of beaded items, recorded under the name of the purchaser, appear frequently in the ledgers. In the late 1920s and early 1930s the trading post accounts of Dick Skinaway, Mrs. John Dorr, Sr., John Mink, Taylor and Jim Hanks, Maggie Skinaway, Frank Nickaboine, Jess Wadena, Dick Garbow, Jim and Mrs. Sam Keg, Equay, Mrs. Joe Shakopee, and Sam Mitchell indicate that someone in each family was doing beadwork. One Ojibway customer, Jim Hanks, bought supplies over a six-month period in 1929 that included beads at \$1.50, thread at \$.21, and needles at \$.05. Some of these family names can be tied directly to beaded items in the collection today.⁷

The ledger records do not describe how the materials

⁴The Ayers formed the Mille Lacs Products Co. with John Martin and T. H. Croswell to manufacture and sell maple syrup and sugar, sorghum, boats, and toys; Certificate of Incorporation, June, 1930, in Ayer Papers. See also Ayer to Lorenzo Hubbell Co. and to Zuni (New Mexico) Trading Post, both May 31, 1945; R. Ortega and Co. (El Paso) to Ayer, June 7, 1945; Don C. Foster of Juneau, Alaska, to Ayer, May 14, 1946; receipt for shipment from Southwest Arts and Crafts (Santa Fe) March 2, 1945; Henry S. Beach to Ayer, June 2, 1945 — all in Ayer Papers.

⁵Here and below, see Russell W. Fridley, May 11, 1959, and Leonard Lampert, Jr., July 28, 1959, both to Mr. and Mrs. Ayer, Ayer Papers. The Ayer Papers are replete with evidence of their relationship with the Indians; see, for example, C. V. Peel to Ayer, November 7, 1919, P. R. Wadsworth to Ayer, July 21, 1921, and Ayer to Blanche La Du, February 10, 1933.

⁶Ayer to Lorenzo Hubbell, May 19, 1943, Ayer Papers; Hubbell Estate to Mille Lacs Indian Trading Post, June 7, 1943, University Library Special Collections, University of Arizona, Tucson, copy in Ayer Papers.

⁷Accession no. 10,000.815-836; Walco Bead Co. to Mille Lacs Indian Trading Post, February 28, 1930, January 12, 1932, and to H. D. Ayer, September 1, 1936, in accession files, MHS museum collections department; Trading Post Account Ledger, vol. 76, p. 12, 26, 32, 58, 64, 70, 74, 87, 117, 119, 120, 125, 133, 140, [1929], Ayer Papers. These names, shown as they appear in the ledger, have various spellings; many women bore only Ojibway names and the Ayers listed them under their married English names.

YOUNG Frankie
Hanks posed for
the Ayers at Mille
Lacs in 1937.



HIS BREECHCLOTH
is made of blanket wool
and decorated with
floral spot-stitch em-
broidery. Accession no.
10,000.145.



BANDOLIER or
shoulder bag,
probably made in
the 20th century
for Ed Skinaway,
a Mille Lacs
Ojibway; it is
decorated with spot-stitch, floral bead embroidery
and non-Indian motifs. Accession no. 10,000.615.
Color photography here and on the following
pages is by Eric Mortenson.



purchased at the post were used, but this information can be obtained by examining the items themselves. The Ojibway beadwork in the Ayer collection exemplifies most of the design and style characteristics seen in this craft during the 19th and 20th centuries. It decorates objects made from velvet, trade wool, leather, and birch bark, as well as items composed entirely of beads.

One distinctive feature of this beadwork is the use of color. The Ojibway do not express color preferences so much as they reveal a desire to use a wide variety of colors. One exception to this might be the color chosen for the background: dark backgrounds are often made of cloth (black, dark blue, or red); light backgrounds generally are created by filling in the area with beads (white, gray, or transparent). Before the use of dark cloth, tanned animal skins were dyed black as a background for the porcupine quillwork that was common until decoration with beadwork began. Until the late 1800s, colors were few, and all-white designs were more prevalent.⁸

The Ojibway use a number of different designs and techniques in their beadwork. The two major designs are floral-curvilinear and geometric, and these are often

found in combination. Less common designs include zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, dream, and clan symbols. From non-Indian cultures the Ojibway frequently incorporate motifs like flags, cornucopias, pineapples, and script or printing. Border motifs are most commonly composed of a variety of geometric patterns such as zig-zag lines, strings of diamonds, and a traditional Ojibway motif called otter tail.

Of the many different designs to be seen in the Ayer collection, the floral-curvilinear is the most frequent. It is found alone and in combination with most of the other designs. Common floral motifs include oak leaves, wild roses, grapevines, lilies, pine cones, and a pomegranate shape that might also be a stylized acorn.

Geometric designs are well represented but are less common in the Ayer collection. The technical sophistication of Ojibway geometric design is apparent in the combinations of a variety of motifs. Frequently, popular motifs such as stylized flowers, diamonds, stars, V-shapes, crosses, and arrows were used in conjunction with each other.

The beadwork on Ojibway bandolier bags often combines floral-curvilinear and geometric designs with other motifs. Maple leaves, vines, and flowers combined with cornucopias, an American shield, and the name "Ed Skinaway" applied in script decorate one such bag in the Ayer collection. Another one incorporates several

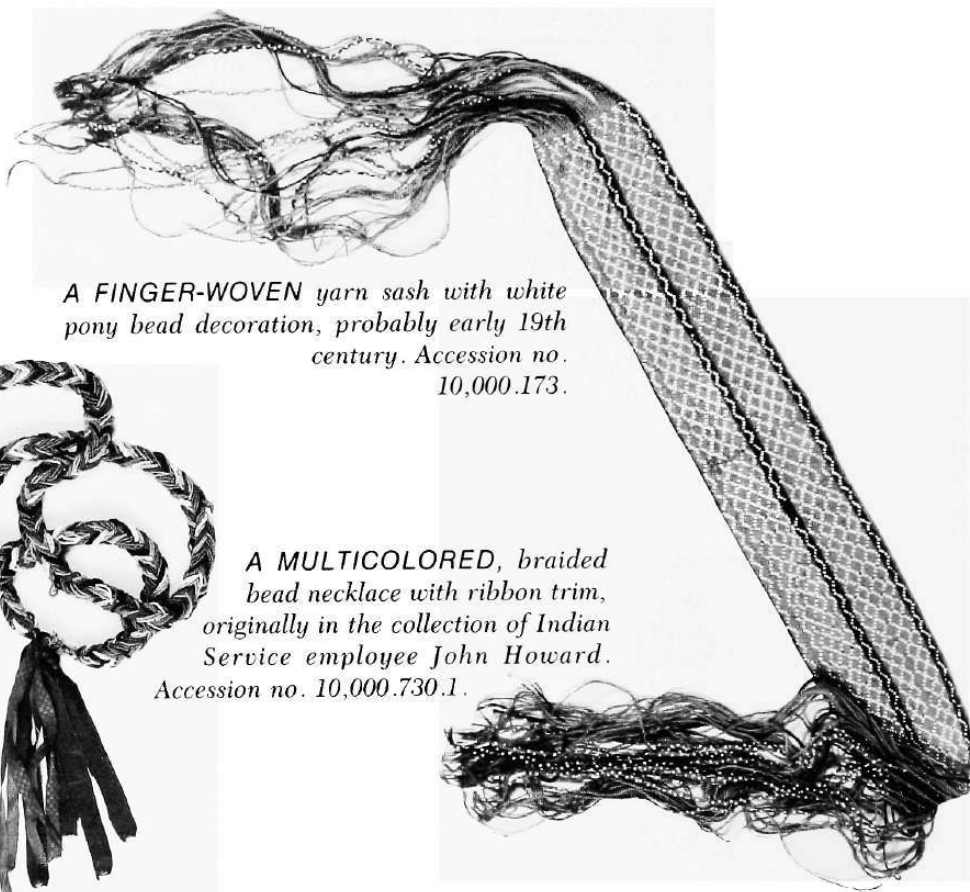
⁸Carrie A. Lyford, *The Crafts of the Ojibwa*, 151 (Education Division, Office of Indian Affairs, *Indian Handcraft Series*, vol. 5 — Washington, D.C., 1942); Frances Densmore, *Chippewa Customs*, 191 (Reprint ed., St. Paul, 1979).



THIS BANDOLIER bag, with geometric, loom-woven beadwork on trade wool and cotton cloth and a ribbon border, is characteristic of earlier work done between 1860 and 1880. Accession no. 10,000.152.



A MULTICOLORED, braided bead necklace with ribbon trim, originally in the collection of Indian Service employee John Howard. Accession no. 10,000.730.1.



A FINGER-WOVEN yarn sash with white pony bead decoration, probably early 19th century. Accession no. 10,000.173.

geometric motifs, a zigzag and diamond-banded border, and two representations of thunderbird spirits.⁹

BEADWORK techniques influence design motifs and affect the choice of medium to which they are applied. A floral vine theme, for example, cannot be replicated on a birch-bark container with the same effectiveness as on a velvet breechcloth. Most floral-curved designs are produced by a technique referred to as spot-stitch embroidery, in which strands of beads are stitched to the surface every two or three beads. When the Ojibway beadworker places the beads, she follows the motif's outline working freehand from the outer edge to the center, rather than applying beads in straight lines, up and down, or left and right.

In contrast, loom-woven beadwork lends itself almost exclusively to geometric designs. The beadworker employs linen or cotton thread to warp a rectangular frame. The warping can be single or double, and beads are worked in with a needle and the weft thread. One bead is placed between each warp or pair of warps, using a plain weave, under-and-over technique, resulting in a design commonly referred to as square weave.¹⁰

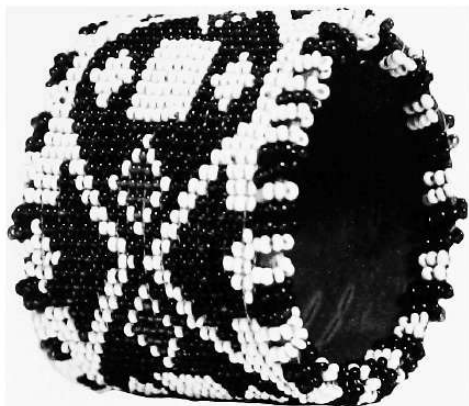
The Ayer collection also contains several examples of more unusual techniques. One necklace was produced

by braiding together clusters of beaded strands. Another, an early 19th-century example, is a finger-woven sash of wool yarn. White pony beads decorate the sash in interwoven geometric designs that are inserted during the weaving process. A thread prestrung with beads crosses over and under the woollen warp and weft threads. Additional techniques displayed in the collection are horizontal net weave, beaded edge finish, daisy chain, and strung beads used in necklaces and fringe. These techniques require numerous supplies, including needles, thread, sinew (used in older examples), glass or faceted metal beads (including seed, pony, necklace, and tubular size), sequins, and a surface onto which the beads are applied (velvets, trade wools, tanned animal skins, birch bark, cottons, or ribbons).¹¹

⁹Accession nos. 10,000.615 and 10,000.152, in MHS museum department. A bandolier bag is a decorated shoulder pouch usually worn by men on ceremonial occasions. Such bags have been particularly popular with Woodlands Indians since the 19th century.

¹⁰David A. Armour, "Beads in the Upper Great Lakes: A Study in Acculturation," in *Beads: Their Use by Upper Great Lakes Indians*, 14-17 (Exhibit catalog, Public Museum Publication No. 3, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1977).

¹¹Accession nos. 10,000.730, 10,000.730.1, MHS museum. On the sash technique, see Armour, in *Beads*, 17.



A **BIRCH-BARK** napkin ring, embellished with geometric loom-woven beadwork. Accession no. 10,000.671.



SPOT-STITCH floral beadwork decorates this small leather purse. The strap is loom-woven beads that have stylized flower motifs. Accession no. 10,000.725.



A **MAUKAK**, or birch-bark container, evidently made to be sold at the trading post. Accession no. 10,000.25.



MILLE LACS residents George Nickaboine, George Pendageyosh, and Jim Hanks, Jr. in 1930, wearing beaded outfits reserved for special occasions

Whether bead supplies decorated personal family apparel or items to be sold at the trading post is unclear. The Ayer collection has several good examples of both groups. Many Ojibway beadworkers decorated leggings, breechcloths, wrist cuffs, armbands, moccasins, belts, sashes, dresses, bandolier bags, pipe bags, vests, shirt-front panels, drum bands, cradleboard bands, dolls, quivers, knife and awl cases, knee garters, and courting flutes for themselves or family and community members. The Ayer collection contains examples of these items, with specific ones made by family members of Ed Skinaway, Jim Hanks, Mary Hudson Barney (known as "Chi Bi Bi"), and Charlie Boyd.¹²

But crafts decorated for sale in the trading post were usually of a different nature. Many objects such as napkin rings, pincushions, watch fobs, bracelets, purses,

and bookmarks are forms from non-Ojibway cultures. More traditional decorated pieces are moccasins, beaded bags, neck chains, and birch-bark containers. In 1927 the Ayers purchased beaded and other souvenir goods from the Ojibway totaling \$2,209.25, and the society continues to purchase beadwork and other crafts for the Mille Lacs Indian Museum and Trading Post.¹³

Women are the traditional beadworkers among the Ojibway. While they continue to use many of the earlier techniques and designs, they also create new motifs and discover new surfaces and objects to decorate. Sold at the post today are belt buckles, earrings, key chains, and eyeglass cases as well as moccasins, bags, necklaces, and pendants. Young Ojibway women are doing beadwork, although they are also busy with full-time jobs and other activities. Some of the most active beadworkers in the Mille Lacs band — Maude Kegg, Batiste Sam, Lorena Gahbow, Margaret Hill, and Cecelia Dorr, for example — are descendants of those beadworkers who sold their work to Harry and Jeannette Ayer in the first half of this century.¹⁴ The whole story of the Ojibway beadworkers at Mille Lacs remains to be told, but thanks to the scope of the Ayer collections, the society is beginning to document the important and ongoing tradition of a native craft technique.

¹² Accession nos. 10,000.615, 10,000.145, 10,000.619, and 10,000.620, in MHS museum department.

¹³ Indian Room Inventory, vol. 88, Fall, [1940]; Souvenir Inventory, vol. 90, 1946; Souvenir Room Inventory, vol. 89, 1947–50; "Summary of Goods Bought from Indians in 1927" — all in Ayer Papers.

¹⁴ Telephone interview with Floyd Ballinger, site manager at the Mille Lacs Indian Museum and Trading Post, April 30, 1982.



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