

NATIVE AMERICAN PIPE BAGS

Designed to keep a sacred pipe safe, and wonderful examples of craftwork in their own right, these traditional bags make beautiful craft projects for your own sacred items.

Pipe or Fire bags, used to contain sacred pipes are one of the most beautiful expressions of Native American craftwork you can find. Highly sort after as collectors items, original 19th century bags sell for thousands of pounds in auction houses across the world.

Made from buckskin, and generally with long fringing at the bottom, these tall narrow bags are almost always decorated by beautiful bead and porcupine quill work as well as sometimes paint, horse hair, ermine skin and ribbons.

Although each bag is unique, the nationality of the maker can be determined by the beadwork found on the bag, as each tribal group across North America has its own traditional beadwork designs, and these design elements can be seen in all the beadwork done by that group.

Beadwork falls into two main groups, geometric and figurative. The geometric beadwork designs are mostly to be found in the pipe bags of the peoples of the Great Plains such as the Arapaho, Crow, Cheyenne and Lakota. Even within these groups there are distinct tribal differences, the Arapaho and Lakota tend to have spidery geometric designs while their neighbours the Cheyenne often produce beadwork with bold stripes of colour.

Figurative beadwork can also be found occasionally in the beadwork of the

Plains, where designs such as horses, people and flags can be seen, but is mostly to be found in the beadwork from the Northern plains that stretch from the US across the Canadian border and on into the Canadian woodlands. Here the main theme of the beadwork is floral, and this gives the pipe bags of people such as the Cree a very distinctive appearance.

To make a pipe bag, you need to have a piece of soft leather such as buckskin, longer than your pipe stem, and over twice as wide as the pipe bowl is long. This is because the bag is made from one piece of leather stitched up at the side. The tassels that hang from the bottom of the bag are generally made from a folded-over strip of additional buckskin.

To sew up the bag you need to sew it inside out, so put the side of the leather you wish to show on the inside, then when the bag is sewn up and turned inside out it will be on the outside of the bag.

The tassels are sewn into the bag's bottom while you sew up the bag itself. To do this, you need to cut a strip of leather not quite as wide as the bag will be and twice as long as you want the tassels to be.

Once you have cut this tassel piece, fold it in half and place it inside the bag, with the fold at the bottom.

The bag can now be sewn up with the tassel leather inside, and once turned inside out,



the two flaps of extra tassel leather will hang from the bottom. It is important that when you sew up the bag you must be careful not to sew the tassel leather into the side seam of the bag, as if you do it will not allow you to properly turn the bag inside out.

To cut tassels, use very sharp scissors and start in the centre of the first flap and divide it in half to make two wide tassels, each half the width of the bag. Now these can be divided in half again, and again and again until they are too thin to divide safely anymore. The other flap of leather can now be cut in the same way and eventually you will

end up with abundant tassels hanging from the bag's bottom.

If you wish to decorate the bag with beadwork, you can use lazy stitch ¹ to create geometric patterns. The floral patterns are created in a different stitch which is not so easy to do.

Beadwork can be applied to the front and back of the bag. Normally the seam up the side is also covered with a long strip of additional beadwork. The top of the bag is often rolled over to make a thin tube all around the opening, this is also beaded.

The bag is generally closed by means of a long leather cord which passes through the bag on the opposite side to the seam. The two ends of the cord are then wrapped around the bag and act as a simple tie.

Pipe bags are fairly simple to make, and lazy stitch beadwork is not difficult to do (although neatness comes with practice). It is fairly slow however, so if you plan to do a lot of beadwork on the bag it will be a major project - but well worth it. For an experienced beadworker a bag such as those illustrated would take around forty to eighty hours of solid work. The bag itself maybe taking 2 or 3 hours to make, and the rest of the time going into the beadwork.

NOTES:

1: For a detailed guide to Lazy Stitch see Sacred Hoop Issue No 2. This issue also has instructions for a Plains style paint bag which is very similar in many ways to a small pipe bag and extra craft tips may be taken from this article should you wish to make a pipe bag for yourself.

PHOTOS:

Page 22 - left : Cheyenne pipe bag. The bag is beaded and below the beadwork panel is an area of porcupine quill work covered leather slats from which the tassels hang. From the top of the bag hangs a small quill wrapped leather streamer with plumes of red dyed horse hair.

Right : Cree pipe bag with a typical Cree floral beadwork.

Page 23 - from left to right :

Lakota pipebag with beadwork and quill work slats. The geometric pattern is typically Lakota.

Lakota pipe bag with representational beadwork in a horse design. Beadwork like this is far less common than geometric designs.



Cree bag with floral beadwork. Tin cones with red dyed horsehair plumes are fixed to the bag above the tassels.

Very ornate Cheyenne pipe bag with beaded pennants at the bottom rather than the normal tassels.

All the bags shown are either late 19th or early 20th century.

