

Lenape Ribbonwork

This is a two panel list about Lenape ribbonwork. The main purpose of this list is to present images of various ribbonwork patterns, and since many styles of ribbonwork had no special Lenape names they will not be given.

The eighteenth century Delawares developed new decorative techniques using ribbons. These replaced the quillwork and possible use of paint as ornamentation, although quillwork continued to be used on moccasins until the late nineteenth century. The ribbonwork found on skirts and leggings of the Delaware is considered typical of the Woodlands as a whole although each tribe developed their own patterns. Research on the personal appearance of other Woodlands tribes is sketchy, but ribbons were mentioned by seventeenth century observers as hair ornaments. Their application in geometric designs was an eighteenth century development. The technique appears to be well developed by at least the 1770's for the Delaware.

The silk ribbons used in native ribbonwork were used as trade items by traders in the 1700s if not earlier. When clothing decorated by ribbons went out of style in Europe the unwanted ribbons were exported to the Americas. Exactly when ribbonwork began is unknown, but by 1800 this unique style of decoration was seen among several woodland tribes

Ribbonwork involves sewing strips of colored ribbon onto another base fabric and is used as a trim decoration on various clothing items. Patterns are created in the ribbonwork strip by cutting or folding the material and different levels of ribbons reveal many colors of cloth. The ribbonwork strip is created using two parts: an uncut base ribbon and a secondary cut or folded pattern ribbon. The secondary ribbon is attached to the base ribbon to reveal a pattern made from the color of the base ribbon. Highly intricate ribbonwork patterns contain more than two ribbons and create a pattern of several different colors. Skilled ribbonworkers have used many different colors of ribbons.

The original ribbons were made of brightly colored silk and then hand-stitched on darkly colored wool, broadcloth and sometimes leather. Due to the nature of the material, early productions of items with ribbonwork are extremely perishable and fragile. Also, some of the ribbon was weighed with lead salts to produce a heavier product but this hastened the deterioration. In more modern times ribbonworkers use a sewing machine to create more designs at a faster pace and often use less expensive taffeta, grosgrain, or satin ribbons. One of the favored types of ribbon the Delawares used was Moiré ribbon.



Early Ribbonwork



This cap has fur from a bear and is decorated with ribbonwork edged with beads.

Unfortunately there does not seem to be a date with this cap.

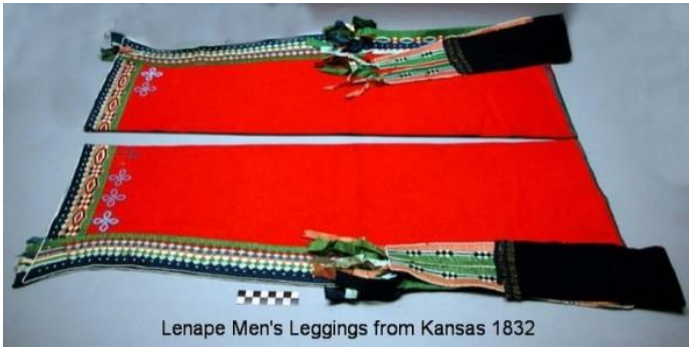


This early Delaware moccasin has simple ribbonwork and the seam on the toe is decorated with porcupine quillwork.

Unfortunately there does not seem to be a date with this.



This is an early pair of Delaware moccasins decorated with ribbonwork on the cuffs. There is a narrow band of beadwork down the toe seam.



Lenape Men's Leggings from Kansas 1832

This is a pair of Delaware men's leggings made of a red woolen material. They are elaborately decorated with ribbonwork. They were collected from the Delawares when they lived in Kansas in 1832.

Later Examples of Delaware Ribbonwork



This is a woman's ceremonial blanket decorated with ribbonwork and some beadwork. It is dated to about 1890.



This is another woman's ceremonial blanket decorated with ribbonwork around the bottom and silver brooches placed elsewhere on the blanket.



This photo shows a Delaware woman wearing an elaborately decorated blanket. It is decorated with several rows of ribbonwork and note her leggings which also have ribbonwork decoration. On her blouse collar there are many small silver brooches. Photo from about 1910.



This is a fairly early example of Delaware ribbonwork where the maker was experimenting with something other than using the small diamond pattern.



This example of Delaware ribbonwork was done using Moiré ribbon.



This is a Delaware woman's wrap-around skirt. It is decorated with a panel down one side and designs along the bottom are done with beadwork.



This is another Delaware woman's wrap-around skirt with a ribbonwork panel down one side and a matching one around the bottom of the skirt. The preferred material used to make these skirts was some type of woolen broadcloth.



This is a Delaware man's breechcloth. It is mainly decorated with beaded designs but it also has ribbonwork down both sides.



This is a set of what is called a man's dance aprons. These were used in place of the long breechcloth to make it look like the wearer is actually wearing a full breechcloth and worn over some type of pants.



This is a pair of Delaware women's leggings. Down one side and around the bottom is very intricate ribbonwork done in a small diamond motif.



This is a pair of Delaware men's leggings decorated with ribbonwork using the small diamond pattern.



This pair of moccasins was collected from the Delawares who were living in Kansas in 1838. It shows a slightly different style of ribbonwork and the toe seam is decorated with a narrow band of porcupine quillwork.



This pair of moccasins was made after the Delawares had to move to Oklahoma. They were made in the 1930s and have ribbonwork cuffs and beaded toes.



This pair of moccasins has ribbonworked cuffs with the small diamond designs and beadwork on the toe. These were made about 1960.



This pair of moccasins has a different style of little diamond work on the cuffs and they were made in the 1970s.



Another type of decoration that was used on clothing was to cut strips from some type of washable material like cotton. These were then sewed up using the same patterns that are used in ribbonwork. These were usually applied to some type of garment like a dress that was washable.

Anna Laura Wilson Wahnee shows an example of a dress that was given to her as a gift and decorated with this type of work.



This is another example of a dress worn by Nora Dean that was decorated with ribbonwork using a cotton material.



This is a photo from 2019 showing three young Delaware women in traditional dresses decorated with ribbonwork. They are:

Minnie Thaxton Dombrovski

Quay Hosey

Anna Pechonick Pate

Note: The silver crowns are not part of traditional Delaware clothing but go with their awards. Delaware women did wear a silver comb at the back of the head.

Compiled by

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