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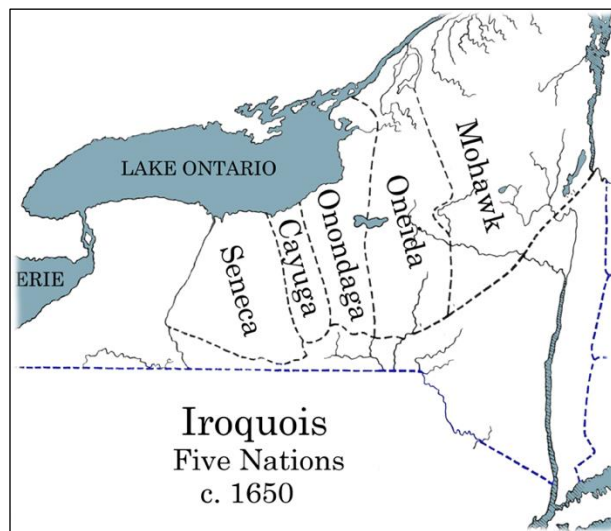
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Contemporary Oneida Beadwork: Revitalized Identity Through an “Adopted” Art Form

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At the very first TSA conference in 1988, I gave a talk on the meanings of textile “trifles” such as beadwork pincushions. I had written my dissertation on Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) beadwork sold as souvenirs at tourist areas like Niagara Falls, and demonstrated how even small, seemingly trivial items like these were meaningful to both makers and customers. The beaded objects were not only a crucial source of income for tribal members, but also held strong cultural associations and provided personal satisfaction. Now, I am delighted to share a relatively recent chapter of this story, where a “new” type of beadwork has become central to the cultural identity of one branch of the Haudenosaunee, the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin.



*A map showing the approximate distribution of Haudenosaunee tribes in New York State in the pre-contact period. The Tuscarora, who lived to the west of the Seneca, joined the Confederacy in 1722. Note that Haudenosaunee territory extended beyond these borders into what is now Canada and Pennsylvania.
Source: R.A. Nonemacher, Wikimedia Image Commons.*

The Five—and later Six—Nations of the Iroquois, or Haudenosaunee, were a federation of tribes who in the pre-colonial era lived in what is now primarily New York State and neighboring Canada and Pennsylvania.¹ In the early contact period they were known for their wampum, or shell beadwork, especially their woven belts which even served as treaty documents. By the nineteenth century when trade cloth and imported glass beads were readily available, they

¹ The original members of the Confederacy were the Mohawk, Oneida, Seneca, Cayuga and Onondaga. The Sixth Nation, the Tuscarora, joined in 1722. The principles of the Confederacy have long been recognized as a model for the U.S. constitution. This was formally acknowledged in October, 1988 in Senate Resolution 331.

adorned their regalia and other items with exuberant bead embroidery, typically worked in floral and woodland motifs. By the last decades of the century, when railroads enabled easier travel and thus brought new markets to their areas, they used these same skills to create small novelty items that visitors found appealing. This was especially important since traditional lifeways had been severely disrupted, and as part of a cash economy, beadwork sales were a matter of survival.²



This image, captioned “Scene at Niagara Falls—Buying Mementos” appeared in Harper’s Weekly, June 9, 1877. The well-dressed couple on the left is purchasing a beaded purse. The woman on the right displays her wares on a blanket. Public domain..

One of the styles Iroquois beaders elaborated toward the end of the century was a form of raised work—a kind of three-dimensional spot stitch embroidery. In the more common flat beadwork, stitched beads lie on the cloth surface, but in raised work, the beads arch over it, creating a kind of bas relief. Most Iroquois sale items incorporated this technique. It was primarily worked on small, useful and relatively inexpensive objects such as purses, mats, pincushions and picture frames. These were popular souvenirs of travels to places like Niagara Falls and Toronto. Based on their cheerful, almost whimsical appearance, such objects have come to be collectively known as “whimsies.”³ The height of raised beadwork production and sale was in the years before World War I, although a smattering of generally simplified pieces were still made throughout the twentieth century.

² See Beverly Gordon, *The Niagara Falls Whimsy: The Object as a Symbol of Intercultural Interface*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1984.

³ The term is somewhat controversial among native people today, as some find it dismissive or pejorative. From my study of the historical record, this was not always so.



Lobed pincushion "whimsey" ca. 1890-1910. Photo courtesy Dolores Elliott.



Heavily beaded double picture frame, ca. 1900. Photo courtesy Dolores Elliott.



Two inscribed whimsies made with the tourist market in mind. The needle case, with “crystal” beads worked on a red wool ground, is in the author’s collection. The 1896 piece that says “Think of Me” incorporated a good luck horseshoe. It was ostensibly made as a match holder that would hang on the wall, but there is little evidence of matches ever being used on pieces like this. Photo courtesy Dolores Elliott.

The Oneida were one of the tribes of the Six Nations confederacy, but tragically, a variety of factors (federal and New York state policies, white land speculators, pressure from the church) forced them to sell large portions of their land in the early 1800s. The majority of the tribe was “relocated” (removed) to Wisconsin.⁴ The contemporary Oneida Nation of Wisconsin reservation is located near Green Bay, about 900 miles from the original homeland;⁵ these people have been separated from their broader cultural context for two centuries. They left New York well before the development of the raised beadwork style, and did not participate in the eastern tourist trade or make Iroquois-style whimsies. While many individuals mastered flat beadwork, they never developed the kind of fanciful raised techniques that flourished among other Haudenosaunee people.⁶

This all changed a little over twenty years ago. Two Cayuga emissaries from the Niagara Falls area, Samuel Thomas and his mother, Lorna Hill, came to Wisconsin to teach the raised beadwork style. They found a very receptive audience; in Karen Ann Hoffman’s words, the technique “took fire in Wisconsin.”⁷ The Oneida had felt cut off from what they perceived as their broader Haudenosaunee culture, and for many, this kind of beadwork seemed a way back in. As Beth Bashara, director of the Oneida Nation Arts Program, explained,

⁴ Carol Cornelius, “Forces that Impacted Oneida’s Move to Wisconsin,” Oneida Cultural Heritage Department, September, 2013. <https://oneida-nsn.gov/dl-file.php?file=2016/04/FORCES-THAT-IMPACTED-ONEIDAS-MOVE-TO-WISCONSIN-9.13.pdf>

⁵ As the crow flies the distance would be about 750 miles, but travelers must go around the Great Lakes.

⁶ Jolene Rickard, a member of the Tuscarora Nation and a Cornell University professor, states that raised beadwork “marks a particular kind of landscape.” In this sense, it is poignant that those who were removed from the land were not originally part of the tradition. Rickard was quoted in New York State Museum online interview, “A Conversation with Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Beadwork Artist Karen Ann Hoffman and Dawn Dark Mountain,” November 18, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7431R2VHvOk>

⁷ Karen Ann Hoffman statement in National Endowment for the Arts, “Art Works Podcast: 2020 National Heritage Fellow Karen Ann Hoffman (Oneida),” July 31, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjmlCjx5iV0>

The emotional pain and isolation from relocation and being separated from the rest of the Iroquois Confederacy has been felt in this community since Oneidas first arrived in Wisconsin. To this day, elders talk about how their elders, and their elders, talked about the homelands and the move to Wisconsin. . . . For this community, beadwork connects people to their original culture, their homelands, and their brothers and sisters in the Iroquois Confederacy.⁸

Thomas and Hill returned to Wisconsin for several years to lead beadwork classes, and other teachers came in the early years of the twenty-first century as well. Rosemary Rickard Hill, whose Tuscarora family had been part of the beadwork trade for generations, introduced her preference for more colorful beads. The Oneida quickly took to raised beadwork, and before long, there were many individuals experimenting with the technique and taking it in innovative new directions. In a few years they were teaching their own classes and organizing regular beading circles. Loretta Webster started the first of these at her shop, Bear Paw Keepsakes, in 2009, and, due to high demand, established a beading drop-in day. Even after that venue closed, beading circles continued, eventually moving to other homes or the local community center. By 2015, as Betty Willems put it, this work had “become a way of life” in Wisconsin. Christine Munson explained, “I feel most Oneida when doing raised beadwork.” Working together remains an important part of the beadwork revival. Individuals find the circles and beading “extravaganzas” to be supportive, friendly communities—important places to come together with others. “How I prefer to bead is with a group of people,” Munson explains. “It’s just part of the beadwork process itself, all the stories that we’re telling, the jokes that are going on, what happened last week—that all gets beaded into the pieces. It becomes part of the project.” Even those who lived hours away from the reservation often made the effort to come to these gatherings.⁹

⁸ Quoted in Anne Pryor, “Listening to the Beads,” *Wisconsin People and Ideas*, (Wisconsin Academy Magazine), Summer, 2016. <https://www.wisconsinacademy.org/magazine/summer-2016/watrous-gallery/listening-beads>

⁹ The statements in this paragraph are from signage in the Wisconsin Academy’s 2016 “Beading Culture” exhibit and Pryor’s “Listening to the Beads.”



Two contemporary Oneida pieces included in the “Beading Culture” exhibit at the James Watrous Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin, in 2016. Left: Betty Willems, decorative boot (the Victorian-style boot was a popular souvenir whimsey form); right: Judith Jourdan, collar and cuffs. Photos courtesy Anne Pryor and the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters.

Thanks to the efforts of folklorist Anne Pryor and curator Jody Clowes, the James Watrous Gallery, which is part of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, featured Oneida beadwork in a 2016 exhibit in Madison. As part of the “Beading Culture” programming, bead artists were invited to and honored at a powerful panel discussion. Stories of joyous bonding over the beading table abounded; one woman exclaimed, “Wednesday nights [when one beading circle met] became a beacon of happiness!” Several individuals became so emotional when talking about pieces made for loved ones that they became teary—they explained that there was so much time and energy invested in these objects that reinforced being Haudenosaunee, part of a long tradition and a proud people, that there was no better or more meaningful gift.¹⁰

The emerging raised beadwork tradition of the Wisconsin Oneida is not derivative; contemporary beaders are making the technique their own and exploring new ways to use it. They are following the guidance that Rosemary Rickard Hill gave when she told her Wisconsin students that they would have to create patterns unique to their own people and place, a style distinct enough to be called “Oneida beadwork.”¹¹ Unlike the souvenir objects of the past that had to be produced quickly to sell at a low price point, many of these items take many months of work. They are exceptionally well done, in terms of both technical and aesthetic mastery. Many are made on a larger scale than was typical in the past, and most feature high, tight, and very precise beading. New materials, ranging from practical Pellon interfacing to elegant fourteen karat gold beads, are incorporated.

¹⁰ I was present at this event and these statements come from notes I took during the discussion.

¹¹ Quoted in Pryor, “Listening to the Beads.”



The way the raised beads follow the contours of the design are quite evident in this view of Christine Munson's "Seasons" purse, 2011. Photo courtesy of Anne Pryor.

The quality of this work was recently recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts, which awarded its 2020 National Heritage Fellowship—the nation's greatest honor in folk and traditional arts—to Stevens Point resident Karen Ann Hoffman.¹² Hoffman is not only a consummate bead artist, but a cultural ambassador and highly vocal spokesperson for the raised beadwork style. Beadwork has become a full-time endeavor for her after retirement. She holds the highest standards for herself and others. She states, "Sometimes, when I'm beading, I swear I can hear the old beaders whispering in my ear. Encouraging me to 'do it right, do it well.'" The elevated beads, in her words, "[ride] high and proud." [The] mounding nature and piled-on opulence are what makes [the style] distinctive and rich. It's a celebration of abundance."¹³ She is passionate about the responsibility to encode the deeper meanings and teachings of her people in every stitch, and about teaching raised beadwork to younger people. What is passed on is more than technique or a way of working with beads: it is the pride and self-respect of being Oneida.¹⁴ Others express this as well. Laura Manthe states, "It's really important for me to keep this going. That's why I teach [raised beadwork] to the kids at the school."¹⁵

Hoffman explains that Oneida beadwork today incorporates three distinct forms or streams.¹⁶ The first is a continuation or adaptation of the whimsy or trade item tradition, wherein small objects like pincushions, mats, and picture frames are constructed and embellished. These items reference the raised beadwork of the past (which many Oneida have studied extensively), but also have new, often highly personal meanings. Stefanie Sikorowski used the lobed shape of a common pincushion style, for example, but made it larger and more exuberant. She conceived of it as a "unity pillow" to be carried by the ring bearer at her daughter's wedding. Every family is said to have beaded picture frames to show off family photos; because they literally surround

¹² See <https://www.arts.gov/honors/heritage/karen-ann-hoffman-oneida-nation-wisconsin> Accessed 1/15/21.

¹³ Karen Ann Hoffman, Keynote address, Wisconsin Regional Artists Program (WRAP) (online) conference, September 18, 2020.

¹⁴ Hoffman quoted in Pryor, "Listening to the Beads," and stated in "A Virtual Conversation with Karen Ann Hoffman," Wisconsin Museum of Quilts and Fiber Arts, June 12, 2020.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_nMGcsoTt8

¹⁵ Quoted in Pryor, "Listening to the Beads."

¹⁶ She has delineated these streams in several talks, including the WRAP conference Keynote Address and the NEA's Art Works Podcast.

loved ones in culturally meaningful beadwork, tribal members value them highly, and frequently make and give them to one another as gifts.¹⁷



Stefanie Sikowski, Unity Pillow, 2015. Photo courtesy the artist.

Sometimes it is the motifs that add cultural symbolism. James Kelly adopted the lobed shape of the standard table mat, as a case in point, but gave it added meaning by beading each lobe as a representation one of the six nations of the Iroquois confederacy. Loretta Webster beaded a bag incorporating the iconic turtle, and a "medicine hat" on which each panel represents an Oneida medicine plant. Rebecca Webster beaded a bag with motifs from ancient Haudenosaunee pottery.¹⁸

The second type of beadwork that Hoffman points to are regalia items, made to be worn (see image of Judith Jourdan's collar and cuffs, above). Regalia is seen as ceremonial and would not be sold outside the community. Oneida dancers now perform in powwow regalia adorned with dramatic raised beads, and given its new significance, the designs make their tribal affiliation instantly recognizable. Garments with raised work can also be worn for other types of special occasions. Rebecca Webster beaded a graduation stole to celebrate completing her Ph.D., as an example, and now wears it as she escorts her University of Minnesota students at their own graduation ceremonies.¹⁹

¹⁷ Information from signage and panel discussion at the Watrous Gallery "Beading Culture" exhibit.

¹⁸ Information from signage at the Watrous Gallery "Beading Culture" exhibit.

¹⁹ Panel discussion, Watrous Gallery "Beading Culture" exhibit. The practice of wearing a graduation stole parallels the use of handwoven *kente* cloth stoles that African Americans wear at graduations to demonstrate a kind of transnational Black pride.



Karen Ann Hoffman, "Flame Urn." Courtesy James Gill Photography, used with permission.

The third stream of Wisconsin Oneida beadwork, according to Hoffman, is contemporary art, i.e., items which push the tradition in new ways and are meant to be shown in aesthetic and educational contexts. This is the category that Hoffman's own work usually falls into.²⁰ Often, her pieces are ostensibly functional, but primarily serve as display objects that move into the realm of cultural commentary. She developed a series of "furniture" items, including lampshades and footstools, for example, that all hold deep cultural meaning.²¹ Two of her footstools refer to Wisconsin Indian issues. "Treaty Rights Footstool" (2014) honored the "Wisconsin Walleye War" of the 1980s and 1990s, when there were violent clashes every spring in the northern part of the state. After Ojibwe people tried to exercise their treaty rights and take their full allotment of fish, angry mobs of non-native protestors showed up at area boat landings to stop them.²² A single walleye is featured in the center of the Treaty Rights footstool, representing these altercations and evoking solidarity with the Ojibwe who stood their ground even under assault. "Mound Man" (2017) similarly references a way in which native people were dishonored. The central image represents the only surviving anthropomorphic effigy mound (i.e., an earthwork that takes the shape of a person) in North America, located near the town of Baraboo. (The effigy mounds are from the Late Woodland period, and are approximately 1000-1200 years old.) Although Man Mound is a noted landmark, part of its legs were plowed over to create a road. Hoffman made a point of fully restoring this figure—honored as a kind of ancestor—to his

²⁰ Hoffman's works have been collected by such prestigious institutions as the (Smithsonian's) National Museum of the American Indian, the Field Museum of Chicago, and the New York State Museum.

²¹ "A Virtual Conversation," Wisconsin Museum of Quilts.

²² Six Ojibwe bands made this decision together, primarily as a way of feeding their families. Thousands of white protesters showed up at boat landings to protest. For many years, there were nights on end of racial slurs and assaults. Non-native sympathizers came to the landings as well, both to show solidarity and help prevent violence. I was present at some of these truly frightening events.

rightful stature. She purposely chose the footstool form in order to bring attention to feet, and the way this figure had been desecrated.²³



Two raised bead artworks by Karen Ann Hoffman. Left: "Mound Man Footstool" (2017), courtesy James Gill Photography. Right: "Treaty Rights Footstool" (2014), courtesy New York State Museum Contemporary Native Art Collection.

A timely recent example of social commentary worked into raised beadwork is the "Good Medicine" face mask made by Stefanie Sikorowski in 2020 as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was featured in an online exhibit called *Masked Heroes: Facial Coverings by Native Artists*. On the small "canvas" of the mask, Sikorowski beaded a view of the earth, referencing the global nature of the pandemic and its transmission. She included two raised strawberries, which look as if they are placed at the hearts of North and South America, respectively. Since the Haudenosaunee consider the strawberry to be an important healing plant, the title has multiple meanings.²⁴

The spiritual power of raised beadwork often comes through in this way due to specific motifs, but the process of beading is itself experienced as part of spiritual attunement. As indicated in Hoffman's remark about feeling the guidance of beading forebears, there is a sense of belonging and nurturance that comes through. Many feel it necessary to enter into the work in a receptive frame of mind, and thus offer prayers and gratitude by burning cedar or sage at the beginning of any project.²⁵ There is also a sense of communion with the beads themselves. Sandra Westcott Gauthier says she only gradually learned what is perhaps the most important part of the beading process: to "let the beads talk to you."²⁶

²³ WRAP Keynote address; Karen Ann Hoffman, International Iroquois Beadwork Conference (IIBC) online meeting, September 26, 2020.

²⁴ The "Good Medicine" mask can be seen in the online exhibit, "Masked Heroes: Facial Coverings by Native Artists," *First American Art* magazine, April 26, 2020. <<http://firstamericanartmagazine.com/masks/>> Hoffman gave a beautiful explanation of the meaning and teachings of the strawberry in the "Virtual Conversation," Wisconsin Museum of Quilts talk.

²⁵ This was expressed by Milwaukee-based beader Jim Kelly at the "Beading Culture" exhibit. Hoffman also talked about the "right state of mind" in the "Virtual Conversation," Wisconsin Museum of Quilts talk.

²⁶ Quoted in Pryor, "Listening to the Beads."

Raised beadwork has become such a strong element in Wisconsin Oneida life that many feel it is changing the face of the reservation. “You see it in the community all over; it’s everywhere,” observed Christine Klimmek, coordinator for the Oneida Nation Art Program and a beader herself. In addition to seeing such work in private homes and at events like powwows, residents have also seen large-scale objects made as part of public art projects on display at Oneida; examples include a large raised-bead quilt and an intricately beaded cape.²⁷ There is also excitement in the community generated by the fact that the young people are now inheriting raised beadwork as part of their visual cultural legacy. As Sandra Westcott Gauthier explains, these pieces [make] people look back at what we used to have, what we used to be. That’s how I look at it. . . . It lets people know that what we are doing is bringing back what we once lost.” “We’re creating our own history, “adapting this medium to our lives,” says Klimmek.²⁸ Karen Ann Hoffman calls raised beadwork “an unbreakable link to our past and [a] suggestion of our future as Iroquois people.” It is “deeply connected [to what came before], but pushing forward.”²⁹ The beadwork functions as a missing link.

The fact that the beadwork is functioning this way offers a very interesting dynamic. It relates to but does not neatly fit into established theoretical frameworks. Raised beadwork can in one sense be considered an adapted or “invented” tradition in the Wisconsin Oneida context, for while many individuals of this community had done beadwork in the past, this specific technique was effectively imported from other Iroquois communities at the end of the twentieth century. Eric Hobsbawm, who articulated the concept of invented traditions in 1983, argued that they might be consciously invented by identifiable historical actors, or might emerge more informally within a brief and dateable period and then establish themselves with great rapidity.³⁰ While there are elements of both scenarios in the Wisconsin Oneida story, neither is exactly applicable.

Another framework which bears partial relevance in this context is the idea of cultural authentication. Tonye Erekosima and Joanne Eicher posited this model to show how artifacts or practices that are received and selected from another, outside culture can be “authenticated”—i.e., made meaningful in their new context and transformed into something seemingly “native.”³¹ Since all of the people involved in the raised beadwork interchange are Haudenosaunee, this is not a close fit, either. Nevertheless, it is helpful to have a model or framework that demonstrates how fully “outside” elements can be incorporated into a different cultural context and fully experienced as authentic.

The Wisconsin Oneida view raised work as something that is rightfully theirs as Haudenosaunee people (and the Haudenosaunee are the only people who do it); they literally experience it as the missing link, a way of coming “back” into themselves and their broader cultural identity. This is a unique situation, and we are invited to come up with new terms and frameworks. We might call it a [re]claimed tradition, in which the Oneida are retrieving something they feel connected with

²⁷ Quoted in Pryor, “Listening to the Beads.”

²⁸ Both Klimmek and Gauthier are quoted in Pryor, “Listening to the Beads.”

²⁹ Hoffman, stated in NEA, “Art Works Podcast.”

³⁰ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, 1983.

³¹ Joanne B. Eicher and Tonye Erekosima, “Distinguishing Non-western from Western Dress: The Concept of Cultural “Authentication. *Proceedings* of the 1980 Annual Meeting of the Association of College Professors of Textiles and Clothing, 83-84. The model was developed as a way of stretching the concept of “tradition.”

but were apart from. That is certainly valid, but it does not convey the intensity of the relationship. The technique is also emotionally welcomed and *embraced*; it is a *felt tradition*. (Hoffman states that when she was introduced to this work, she “fell in love.”³²) Raised beadwork has not only been incorporated into the Oneida community, furthermore, but changed it. This runs deeper than any academic label. It has been such a powerful catalyst that it has even spawned new cultural spokespeople like Karen Ann Hoffman.

In sum, the fact that many are working with beads in this way has revitalized the Wisconsin Oneida. As Betty Willems puts it, “We still have our past and we can expand that and make it better.”³³ The revitalization is operating on many levels: raised beadwork is embraced and holds meaning as an art form, a means of personal expression, and a vitally important part of Haudenosaunee identity. Beyond returning to something that was lost, each beaded object, bead circle, and indeed each beaded stitch brings the Oneida into a new promise of the future. This is an exciting and still-evolving story, which I am honored to bring to the attention of the textile community.

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