

Native American Beadwork

“Beadwork teaches organization and discipline, pacing, and observation. It makes me stop and look at things a little longer and study them.” -Darrel Tso

Shirley Reader is a Native American who belongs to the Kiowa-Dine tribe. She will be graduating soon from Utah State University to become a teacher. When she is not teaching, she is participating with her family in regional powwows. As a fancy-dancer, she makes all the beadwork on her clothing. Her beadwork gives her a connection to her Native identity.

According to Jim Barta of Utah State University, “When she begins to bead for a particular family member, she waits for the design to come to her. Intuitively, she selects the special colors and appropriate designs. She knows when the pattern she is making is ‘not right’ because she will have trouble; perhaps the needles break or the thread continuously frays. She takes notice of these signs and often will stop beading. Usually, she will wait until another design comes to her before she starts again.”

Shirley explains, “When you do loomwork, it is important to know that you always must string your loom so that you have an odd number of beads in each (horizontal) row. This is because the median (bead) acts as the center point. You use it to flip your pattern so that one side will mirror the other.” This is what we call reflection in mathematics. It also helps us to better understand the concept that teachers explain to us when they say what you do to one side of the equation, you must do to the other side of the equation. With bead work it is like the middle bead is the equal sign.

As one creates beadwork geometrical patterns will begin to develop. The beader is constantly adding or subtracting beads to make sure the right shape and dimensions are being developed. The beader must be focused as to the color of beads being used. Color coordination is important. A beader selects the colors because of how they balance with each other. Some designs clearly show transformations like reflections, flips or slides. And symmetry in the designs are very important to the Native American artists.

Beadwork designs tell a story. Darrel Tso, also of the Dine tribe, says “A function of my beadwork is to relate a story. My vest uses a traditional buffalo design. It tells a story. On my shoulder, I have a star pattern, which will help the buffalo navigate as they migrate. At the bottom of the vest, I have beaded hoof marks in the ground, because where buffalo stepped, seeds would germinate into plants. the benefit of the buffalo is that they restore the vegetation. I have a lifeline on my vest which describes the passages of the buffalo. the buffalo give us life. Like in Nebraska, wheat farmers plowed the prairies and over 200 types of natural grasses were lost. This loss in turn affected crops, the topsoil quality, the animals that relied on those native grasses, and eventually people. The buffalo are necessary for the healing to take place, yet we took out the buffalo. To return or bring back the healing, we must bring back the buffalo.