

Introduction to Blackfoot Quillworking Techniques

By Deborah Magee Sherer, Amskapi-pikuni (southern Blackfoot)

Suggested age group: 12 years and up

Special Note: Quillwork is considered a sacred art, and among Blackfoot people, quillworkers are given or transferred the right to do quillwork in ceremony. Out of respect to Blackfoot tradition, please do not work with actual porcupine quills until you have the transferred right to do so. You may use other media to construct the bracelet, using the same techniques as traditional wrapping. This lesson plan includes photographs showing the technique with quills, followed by photographs showing the technique with raffia.

Goals:

The goal of this lesson is to introduce students to a basic overview of porcupine quill decorative embroidery among the tribes in North America. Specifically, quill embroidery among the Blackfoot will be discussed and the technique of wrapped quillwork demonstrated. Students will make a facsimile of a quilled, contemporary bracelet. The bracelet can be fashioned from heavy cardboard or plastic strips (instead of rawhide, which would be the traditional base material) and wrapped with thin strips of various colored, non-fabric ribbon (instead of porcupine quills.) Quill wrapping is the simplest form of quillwork.

Objectives:

1. Students will understand how porcupine quills were used as decorative embroidery among Native American tribes. Specifically, Blackfoot quillwork was a sacred art and women had to be given the right to do it through a special ceremony.
2. Students will understand the complexity of quillworking by discussing traditional methods of gathering, washing, and dyeing quills.

3. Students will understand how porcupine quills were wrapped on rawhide and used in various objects, specifically a simple bracelet.

Introduction:

Porcupine quillwork was the method of applying embroidery to clothing and accessories long before the white man came with glass beads. In Blackfoot mythology, it was taught to the Long Ago People by Thunder, a spirit being. It was traditionally a woman's art and the woman had to be given special permission to do the work through a ceremony by another quillworker: the right to do quillwork was transferred from one quillworker to another. Many tribes, such as the Blackfoot, had quillworking societies with certain customs and traditions. Many of these customs and traditions have been lost as glass beads brought by white traders gradually took the place of quillwork. There are many methods of using quills for embroidery; quills were wrapped, woven, or sewn down and there are different techniques for each.

Porcupine quills are a natural white in color with a black tip. Before the white traders, natural dyes were used from a variety of sources, but with a limited palette. The Blackfoot used mostly yellow, blue, brown, orange, and red dyes.

Learner outcomes:

Students will appreciate the thought and effort that went into traditional Native American technology. The learner will understand how Native peoples took what they had from the environment and used it in a way that brought beauty to everyday objects. Lack of technology, such as not having bead factories, did not mean lack of beauty or aesthetics.

There are two sets of photographs below: one of an actual quillwork bracelet being made, and a second set showing how these techniques can be adapted to work with other materials. The instructions and photos are followed by a list of further resources.

Quillwrapped bracelet

Materials:

---pictures of quillwork used to decorate clothing and accessories; wrapped quillwork included pipebag panels and armbands worn by men; picture of simple wrapped quilled contemporary bracelet *see 'Further Resources,' below, for references to websites with images of quillwork

---strips of stiff, non-fabric ribbon (the kind used for gift wrapping) 3 inches long by 1/8" wide. Wider ribbon can be split easily to more manageable strips. You can clip the end of it resemble a quill. It will also make it easier to insert the ribbon in the wrapping process. Note: Younger children may require a wider ribbon.

--- 1/4" to 1/2" wide strips of heavy cardboard or thin plastic cut to the average size of a wrist (6"-7"). Plastic milk cartons work well. These will be the base for the "quill" wrapping. Older children can use strips 1/4" wide, which is more in keeping with traditional size.

---glue

---graph paper

---pencils, crayons or colored pencils

---paper punch

---optional: large beads, such as crow beads.

Step 1: Have children discuss pictures of traditional quillwork, specifically wrapped quillwork on breastplates, armbands, and pipebag panels. Discuss geometric designs as seen on armbands and quillwork on Blackfoot shirts. Discuss how the quillwork is done in strips, or bands, whether wrapped or sewn and this facilitates weaving in geometric shapes. Dye colors: Explain to children that mostly modern dyes are used for quillwork now. Modern

shapes are being used for much quillwork now, such as seen in barrettes, bracelets, and earrings.

Step 2: Use the graph paper to draw out a strip the same size as the bracelet. Have children draw out a simple design across the strip alternating different colors. Color the design.

Step 3: *See figures 12-15, below

Select ribbons to match the color of their design. Using the attached photos as a guide, wrap the ribbon around the cardboard or plastic until strip is covered. Use glue to fasten the end “quills” more firmly into place.

Step 4: Punch holes in the ends of the bracelet and use ribbon to make a simple tie. If desired, a large bead, such as a crow bead may be used on the tie to make it adjustable.

Steps for wrapped quillwork

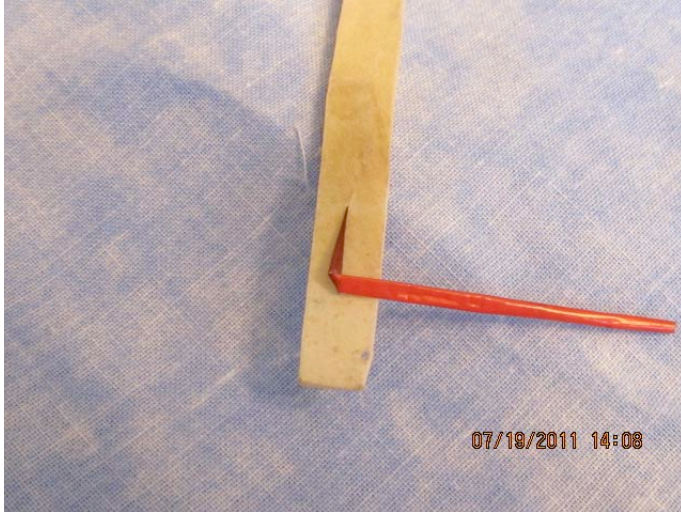


Figure 1: Back of rawhide strip with quill folded over at right angle from tip.

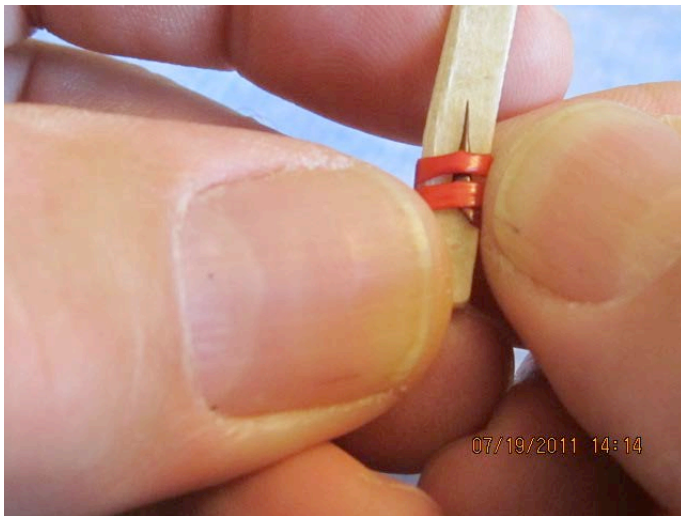


Figure 2: Quill wrapped around rawhide strip (2 wraps).



Figure 3: Red quill wrap completed and new quill (yellow) inserted under red quills, tip first.

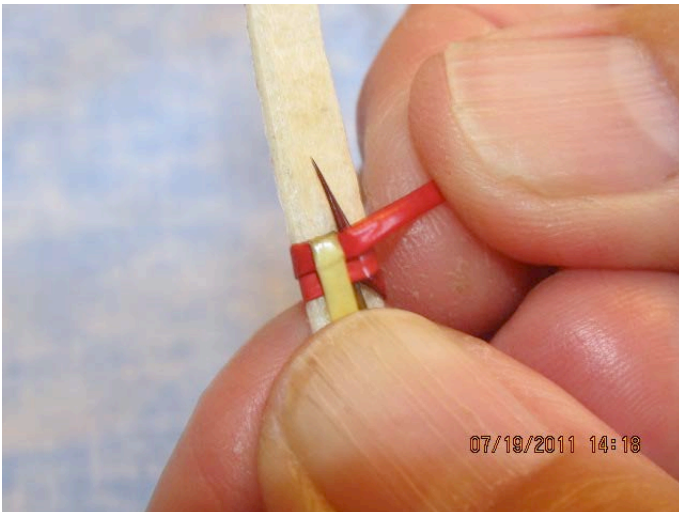


Figure 4: To begin second wrap of new quill, fold the new quill down over the wrapped quill.



Figure 5: Fold the wrapped quill at right angle over the new quill.



Figure 6: Lock the two quills together by folding the new quill (yellow) over the red at right angle.



Figure 7: Continue wrapping yellow quill at least twice or until it gets too short of another wrap. Insert new quill as before. Ends of quill sticking out from bottom can be cut with scissors or sharp knife.

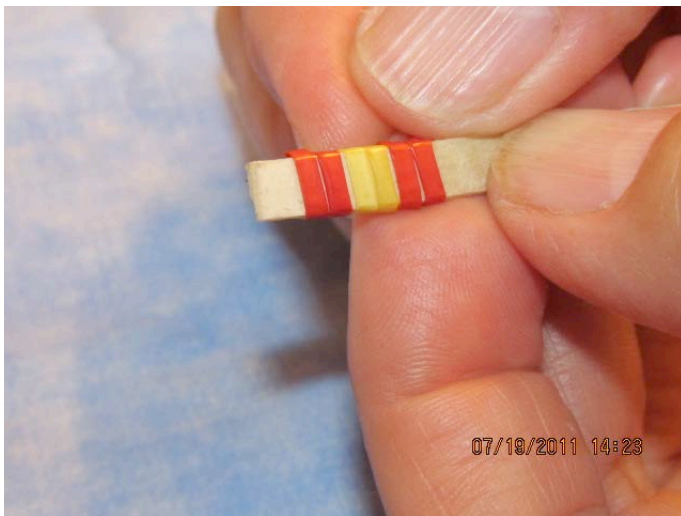


Figure 8: Front of wrapped quillwork should be smooth.

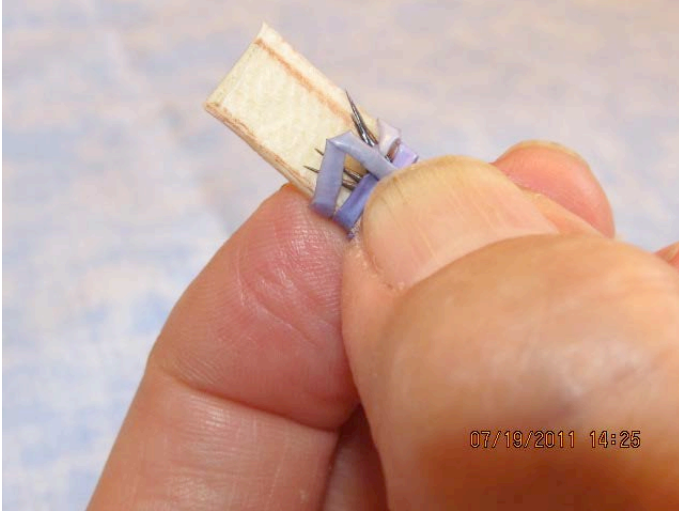


Figure 9: When end of rawhide is reached, quill is folded at a right angle toward the work and tucked under the wrapped quills. Use a toothpick to help guide the quill under the work. Ends of previous quills may be cut away.



Figure 10: End of wrapped quillwork should be look something like this. An exacto knife can be used to carefully trim any quills sticking out of the work.



Figure 11: Example of a simple, quillwrapped bracelet.

Wrapped fabric ribbon 'quillwork' on plastic base



Figure 12: Plastic milk carton base and non-fabric ribbon ready to be wrapped.

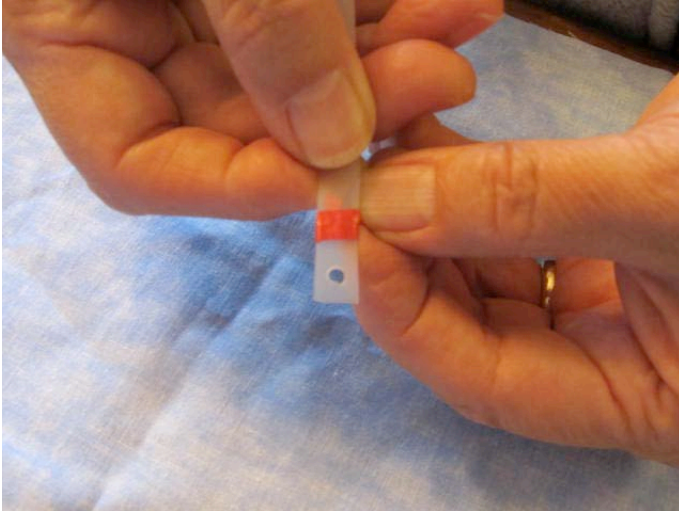


Figure 13: Starting the wrapping on the plastic base.

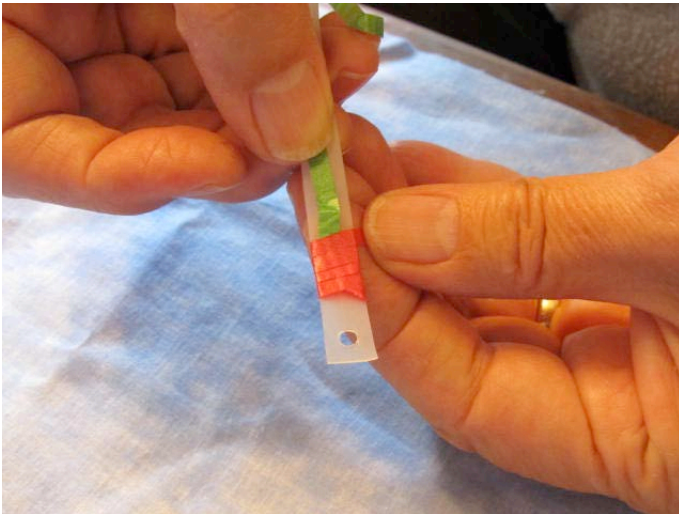


Figure 14: Back of bracelet showing how ribbon is inserted.



Figure 15: Simple, ribbon-wrapped bracelet done in traditional wrapping style.

Further resources:

There are detailed images of the quillwork on the Blackfoot shirts elsewhere on this website.

For further resources and information, see:

Blackfoot Digital Library videos on quillworking (see especially interviews with Debbie Magee Sherer and Darrell Kipp): <http://blackfootdigitallibrary.org/en/category/subject-lcsh/art/quill-work>

Canadian Museum of Civilization:

<http://www.civilization.ca/cmcc/exhibitions/aborig/mocasin/mocbf2be.shtml>

National Museum of the American Indian: go to ‘collections search’ at:

<http://www.americanindian.si.edu/searchcollections/specifics.aspx>

and type ‘porcupine quillwork’ under ‘material’; their photos can be enlarged

-see also NMAI’s ‘Education’ section, <http://nmai.si.edu/explore/foreducatorsstudents/>