

The Meaning of Bead Designs

Indian patterns were made up of symbols combined in various ways. The meaning of these designs was not fixed, so the same symbol would often have different meanings to people within the same tribe, and among the different tribes which might also use it. The Indian artists pictured in their work the common objects of everyday life, the great powers of nature, the sun, moon, stars, the winds, trees, animals, birds or whatever might suit their whims and fancies. On clothing, certain designs were believed to have the power to protect the wearer from harm. In modern beadwork, one often sees a series of numbers or letters, apparently copied from flour sacks, packing cases or other articles not of Indian origin. These are explained as "white-man's medicine". That is, the Indian reasoned that, like himself, the white-man covered his belongings with protective patterns. Knowing the many wonderful things the white-man could do, it was certain that his "medicine" must be very strong and so his "designs" were often borrowed with the hope that some of their great medicine power might come with their use.

The designs used by the Plains Indian tribes were geometric, that is, they were made up of squares, triangles and other straight-sided figures, while those of the Woodland Tribes were mainly representations of flowers and plants. One of the most common designs in Plains beadwork is the pointed triangle, either divided into halves of different colors or including a small rectangle. This generally represents a tipi. A triangle built up of a number of small squares often is interpreted as a hill. Another common design is made up by short patterns of parallel lines, some times broken up by short patterns of a different color. These lines represent trails, and the breaks in the lines camping-places or other stops made on the journey. Nearly all of the Lakota (Sioux) designs are done on a white back-ground, which represents the snow-time or winter, which was the great time of the year for men to go on the war trail and achieve honors and glory. Other colors, which had a symbolic value in designs representing military achievement, were: red, which indicated wounds inflicted and received; blue or black, which indicated victory or enemies killed; yellow, which indicated horses, for tawny or dun-colored horses were especially prized; green, which indicated the grass-time or summer.

In religious and ceremonial designs, red represents the sunset or thunder; blue represents the sky, the West, water and day; yellow represents the dawn or sun-light and black represents the night.

You will secure the best results if you work out your pattern on a crossruled graph paper before you try to start beading. Draw it in full size and color it. Keep the design as SIMPLE as possible and do not try to use too many colors. On your first attempt it will be well to limit yourself to red, blue and yellow in addition to the chalkwhite beads for your back-ground.
Good luck!