

Finding Our Way: Osage Ribbonwork and Revival

Jami Powell
Department of Anthropology
University of Denver

Ribbonwork, the cutting and sewing of ribbons into geometric patterns, is practiced by various Plains Indian tribes, for example the Osage Nation of Oklahoma. The ribbonwork of the Osage is placed upon traditional clothing, generally worn today for ceremonial activities. Unfortunately, much of the meaning of the patterns and colors of ribbonwork has been lost due to the acculturation of the Osage tribe into more mainstream, Western culture. Today, ribbonwork has become a symbol of the Osage Nation and a marker of pride for its members. The material culture study of ribbonwork uncovers some of its traditional meanings and transformation over time.

The Osage first came into contact with the French in 1673 when Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet wished to explore the Missouri River. The Osage, a semi-nomadic tribe occupied the areas South and West of the Missouri River and proved to be a strong ally of the French, not only in allowing their exploration, but also in war against other tribes and nations. In reward of their alliance as well as through fur trade, the French bestowed European goods upon the Osage. The Osage eagerly accepted and traded with the French for goods such as guns, metal tools and alcohol (Baird 1972:11-14). The Osage quickly adapted European trade goods to meet their own cultural needs and used many of these goods in ways much different than the Europeans had previously used them. This specifically relates to the Osage practice of cutting, folding, and stitching ribbons into geometric patterns, also known as ribbonwork. Many other tribes that are now considered *Plains Indians* such as the Pottawatomie, Sac & Fox, Omaha and the Winnebago (see fig. 1) also practice ribbonwork (Horse Capture 1982). However, each tribe is unique in its style and execution of ribbonwork. The ribbonwork of the Osage is unique in that it tells its own history through its change in style and complexity over time.



Figure 1: Winnebago ribbonwork. (Photo by Author)

Many theories exist about the origins of ribbonwork, and one such theory is that appliqué of silk ribbons was taught to Great Lakes Indians by French nuns. Through trade amongst tribes, this appliqué of ribbons must have diffused to the Plains Indian in the nineteenth century (Callahan 1990:119). However, the earliest example of ribbonwork occurs in the Plains Indian region in 1804, and therefore, this theory does not allow ample time for the diffusion of the art form (Powell 2008). Another theory states that, at one time, all Osages wore skins for clothing and on special occasions the skins were most likely decorated with geometric patterns and colored with dyes. When the Osage came into contact with the Europeans, cloth and ribbon as well as metal tools such as scissors and needles became available (Horse Capture 1982). The Osages then adapted these European goods to fit into their own cultural practices and needs. It was believed that the Osage and many tribes would not be able to preserve their own cultures after contact, trade, and subsequent acculturation into the *superior* and *civilized* European or Western way of life. However, according to David Baird, this was not the case.

“Throughout the period of European contact, the Osages had altered traditional habits and tastes as well as settlement location. A casual glance would suggest that the alterations were profound: they used guns instead of bows and arrows, rode horses rather than walked, used metal utensils rather than ones of stone and bone. Actually, these adaptations only facilitated traditional lifeways. Had the Osages lost access to European refinements, they could have resumed their traditional habits with little difficulty. For that matter they consciously rejected institutions that might have seriously altered their culture patterns.” (1972:26)

Just as the Osage adapted other lifeways, they also adapted their style of clothing when European goods became available. Hence, the environment in which the Osages were placed affected the material culture, but not the meaning and traditions of that material culture. This theory also speaks to the hybridization and exchange of culture and material culture which occurred during the period of culture contact between the Osage and Europeans.

According to Richard Conn, former curator of the Native American art department of the Denver Art Museum, there is not evidence of ribbonwork or anything resembling ribbonwork in Europe; therefore, ribbonwork must be a truly Indian innovation (Swearingen 1990). The first documented piece of ribbonwork appears in 1804, but does not have exact tribal affiliation. According to Jan Jacobs, this piece has few mistakes and the pattern is quite intricate, indicating that the practice of ribbonwork must have begun between the initial contact with the French after 1673 and before the first documented piece appears in 1804. Richard Conn also notes that in the mid-19th century, more intricate pieces begin appearing in the material record (Swearingen 1990). This greater elaboration and complexity of ribbonwork can be traced back to the increased volume and quality of the trade goods received by the Osage beginning in the nineteenth century. According to Garrick Bailey, “by the beginning of the nineteenth century, traders were not only supplying the Osage with guns, metals weapons, and tools, they were also providing a wide-ranging array of domestic and luxury goods that quickly became necessities... scissors, needles... and silk ribbon among them,” (2004:8). Scissors, needles and ribbons were available to the Osage previous to this transition, but probably in much smaller quantities. The increased supply and availability of these goods made ribbonwork a more widely used method and had a profound affect on the artistic traditions of the Osage (2004:8).

Traditionally, the patterns and colors of the ribbons used had great symbolic importance and religious significance. Light colored ribbons represent the moon, sun, sky and sunlight while red ribbons represent earth and life. Dark blue and black ribbons represent day and night (Jacobs 2008). Traditionally, ribbonworkers would have sought a balance of colors (see fig. 2), symbolizing a balance of the elements within the life of the person that wore the ribbons (Powell 2008). The patterns of the ribbons also had symbolic meanings. Diamonds symbolize a man's body, triangles symbolize teepees, and arrows symbolize protection. Theoretically, the pattern of the ribbons could tell a great deal about the person wearing them (Powell). Clan symbols such as paws, symbolizing the bear clan may also have been used as well as symbols indicating one's affiliation with a certain village (Callahan 118).



Figure 2: Stripped ribbon pattern illustrating a balance of colors (Photo by Author).

When trade goods and materials used for ribbonwork became more readily available, patterns appear to become more intricate. People would deviate from traditional patterns possibly in search of some individuality or for aesthetic purposes. One example of such deviation is an early 20th century blanket from the Denver Art Museum Collection (see fig. 3). The horses on the blanket are a symbol of prosperity or possibly even a representation of the surname of the family (Bailey 2004:11). The colors of the ribbon are balanced, but the pattern is very different than contemporaneous pieces or even more modern pieces. The arrows are a very traditional pattern which appear in this work, but the curved pattern is very unusual and has no known religious or ceremonial significance. The unique pattern of this blanket serves as a communication of individuality and exemplifies the changing style and complexity of ribbonwork through the advance of techniques as well as trade goods. Another consideration of the design of this blanket is the fact that it was produced after the oil boom which made the Osage a very wealthy people, enabling them to purchase more valuable goods, such as cars and horses. The display of the horses on the blanket is symbolic of prosperity.

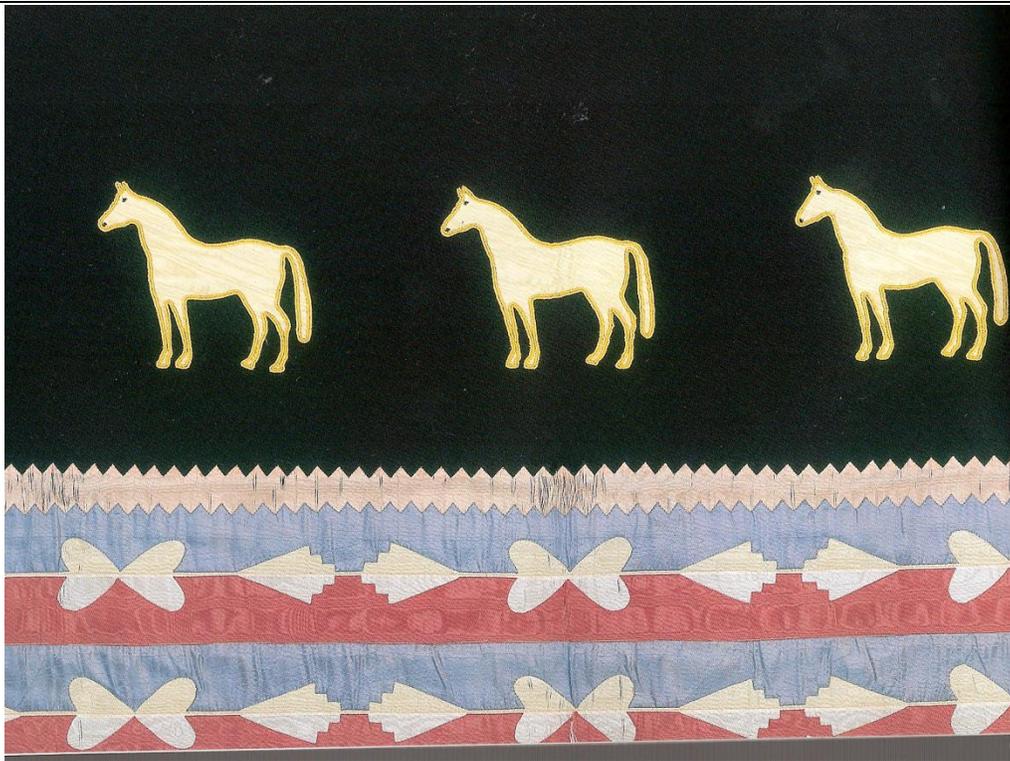


Figure 3: Blanket, early 20th century (Photo by Author).

During the trading era, “the Osage were able to transform and adapt their cultural institutions and lifestyles to their dramatically changed circumstances,” according to Garrick Bailey (2004:137). However, after the oil boom, during a time of extreme wealth, the elders struggled to keep Osage culture and traditions alive while the younger generations began to adapt to western culture and lifeways. Within a generation, the picture of traditional Osage life changed drastically and Osage clothes were only worn for special events and western clothes bought from Kansas City or Oklahoma City were preferred in daily life (Bailey 2004:137). Many traditional religious ceremonies also faded during this time, along with general knowledge of the religious significance of the colors and patterns of ribbonwork. According to Bailey, “the rich symbolic meanings of most of the forms and designs were lost or eroded following the collapse of traditional religious institutions and practices at the turn of the twentieth century” (2004:10). The I’n-lon-schka, a ceremonial dance performed by the Osage, however, continued during this period and thus kept traditional Osage dress and ribbonwork alive (Jacobs 2008).

Through the 1950s the I’n-lon-schka remained small and did not have very many participants. “When I was younger, hardly anyone danced,” says Jan Jacobs. Although the I’n-lon-schka continued, the decline in the material culture of ribbonwork had a great effect on the number of participants. Georgeann Robinson, a full-blood Osage woman, realized that only three women in the tribe during the 1950s knew how to ribbonwork. These women—Harriet Chadlin, her aunt, Martha Gray, and Josephine Jack—all elders who still practiced ribbonwork (Horse Capture 1982). In order to keep traditional Osage cultural practices alive through ribbonwork, she began researching ribbons in the Osage Museum and in old photographs. She also used a great deal of trial and error in teaching herself to ribbonwork (Powell 2008). Robinson, along with her sisters, Louise and Genevieve Gray, opened the Red Man’s Store in 1956 and began selling ribbonwork and traditional Osage clothing items. The name of their

business, “The Red Man’s Store” was a product of its time in which Native Americans were referred to as “redmen”, but also identified that it was an Indian owned business (Jacobs 2008).

When the store first opened, Robinson encountered a great deal of criticism from other tribe members. Other Osage people complained about the high prices of a man’s suit or a woman’s dress. However, this criticism came from people who were unaware of the expensive materials used and the man hours it took to make the traditional dress (Jacobs 2008). When Robinson began her work, she used all of the modern conveniences of man, including mercerized thread and a sewing machine. The ribbon she used and which is still used by many today is 100% Swiss Taffeta, because “it doesn’t unravel as much as other ribbons and it is stiff, making it easier to work with,” according to Robinson (Horse Capture 1982). A single thread and a very sharp needle must be used to baste the ribbons and also when finishing the ribbons on a machine.

According to Robinson, there are two different types of ribbonwork. The first style is the four-strip or overlay pattern (see fig. 4) which is generally used on larger items such as women’s skirts and blankets. The first step in any ribbonworking is choosing the colors which will be used. Two contrasting colors of two inch wide taffeta ribbons must be cut to the necessary length. These two ribbons must then be machine stitched with a one-eighths inch seam along one side. The *right* side of the ribbons, the side of the ribbons that will face out, are sewn facing one another at this point. This seam is then pressed open and these *base ribbons* are set aside. Then, two more contrasting colors of taffeta ribbon, each three inches wide, are also cut to length. The chosen pattern for the ribbons must then be traced onto the *right* side of each of these ribbons. The patterns must be symmetrical when laid atop the base ribbons. After the pattern is drawn on the ribbons, they must be cut and turned along the traced pattern and hand basted to the base ribbons. These ribbons must then be stitched over the basting thread with a sewing machine (Powell).

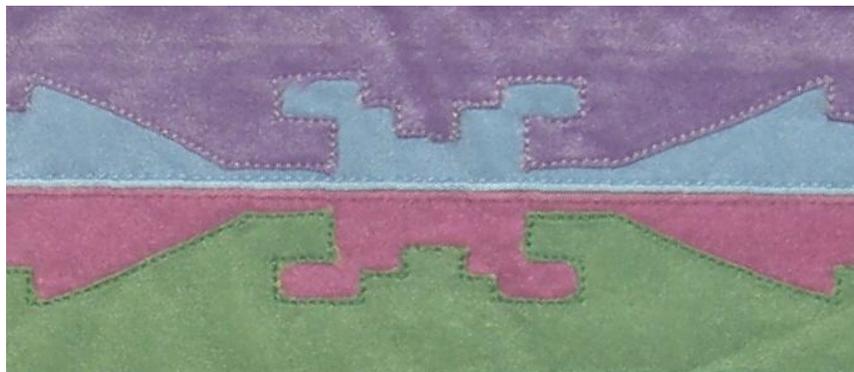


Figure 4: Four ribbon or overlay pattern. The blue and pink ribbons are the *base ribbons*. The pattern is drawn onto the purple and green ribbons which are then cut and turned to make the geometric pattern. (Photo by Author).

The second style of ribbonwork is the stripped ribbon pattern (see fig. 5). This pattern is more often used on men’s suits and is much more complicated than the four-strip ribbon pattern. The complexity of this pattern and the fact that it is used on men’s suits and not on women’s skirts also speaks to the importance of the men in Osage ceremonial activity. To begin this pattern, colors must also be chosen. In the stripped ribbon pattern, the colors are repeated and must be symmetrical. All of the ribbons are cut in one inch strips at whatever length is needed. These ribbons are then basted together one atop the other (see fig. 6).



Figure 5: Stripped ribbon pattern 2 (Photo by Author).



Figure 6: Basted 19-ribbon stripped ribbon pattern (Photo by Author).

Starting on the first ribbon also known as the top ribbon the pattern is laid on top of the ribbons and marks must be made where the ribbon needs to be cut. The ribbons are then cut, folded, and basted to create a layered diamond pattern (Swearingen). The diamond pattern in the stripped style of ribbonwork also prominently displays the diamond, symbolic of the male wearing it. Once again, to finish this style of ribbonwork, it must be machine stitched over the basting thread.

Through the efforts of Georgeann Robinson and her sisters, as well as increased interest by young Osages during the 1960s and 1970s, the revival of Osage traditional dress was stimulated (Callahan 1990:108). Traditionally the patterns and colors used in ribbonwork had religious significance and spoke to the aspect of ribbonwork as a reflection of cultural values. When traditional forms of ceremonial dress were revived, families would select patterns based on old photographs of family members. Unknowingly people were choosing ribbons with traditional Osage religious significance. However, people generally chose these patterns either for aesthetic or ancestral significance, which arguably speaks to this era of ribbonwork as a reflection of cultural values as well, although they were not specifically, but unconsciously, chosen for that purpose. The colors used in ribbons during this time of revival were also used for aesthetic significance. The pastel colors are usually placed in the center and the darker colors are placed on the outside. This is the way the colors were placed traditionally as well, but during revival, lighter colored ribbons were placed in the middle because it made the design more noticeable (Jacobs 2008). While there is no known reason why the lighter colored ribbons have always been placed on the inside of the patterns, it likely relates to this idea of aesthetics. The selection of color combinations and patterns also reflect the personality and individuality of the wearer of the Osage traditional dress (Callahan 1990:109).

When Robinson first began practicing ribbonwork, she saw it as a craft. She made very basic and traditional patterns, regressing back to the early days of Osage ribbonwork. However,

as Robinson continued to research and develop her skills in ribbonworking, she transformed this craft into an art form and began to deviate from traditional patterns to create art. When asked if she thought of her work as art, she replied, “I used to not, you know. I just thought of it as a craft but anymore I feel like it is an art. It is something that I do, that is created by me, and I sometimes deviate from the norm to do something a little different. When I think of all the time I have involved in it, I have as much time in my piece of ribbonwork as an artist has in a painting or a beautiful picture” (Horse Capture 1982). The changing view of Robinson and her role as a ribbonworker exemplifies the recursive nature of ribbonwork. She began ribbonwork as a way to keep her culture and heritage alive, but it transformed her into an artist and forever changed how people view ribbonwork. This idea of ribbonwork as a form of art once again changed its role and significance with in the Osage culture, as not only a traditional pattern placed upon clothing, but also as a form of Osage cultural expression.

In 1981, Robinson began work on her *masterpiece*, a stripped pattern made with nineteen ribbons. She was making this piece for her son, Keith Robinson, to wear. It is customary for Osage dancers to get a suit of their own, which is not handed down, when they come of age (Callahan 1990:108). Part of the suit Robinson was making for her son traveled with the Smithsonian Institute on an American Indian art exhibition (Horse Capture 1982). Robinson passed away in 1985 before she was able to finish this piece. She gave the piece to her Granddaughter Lisa Powell to finish, for her father to wear. This piece is still incomplete due to the large amount of time, energy, and mastered skill it takes to complete a piece of this magnitude. Recently, plans have been made for each of the male members in Robinson’s family to dance in the suit once, thereafter the suit will be placed on permanent loan to the Museum of the American Indian or the Osage Museum and Cultural Center in Pawhuska, Oklahoma.



Figure 7: Tailpiece to Georgeann Robinson’s 19-ribbon “Masterpiece” (Photo by Author).

Traditionally, the I’n-lon-schka was a very important ceremonial dance to the Osage and therefore, special ribbonwork was probably worn for such an occasion. Today, ribbonwork and the clothes that an Osage dancer wears for the I’n-lon-schka are still very important. Robinson felt that, “ribbonwork is the dance... the dance is ribbonwork. Without the clothes the dance wouldn’t be the same; they would just be men and women... the clothes make you one with the

dance” (Horse Capture 1982). This sentiment of the clothes making an Osage one with the dance speaks to the tradition of Osage dance, of which ribbonwork is an integral part. When wearing traditional Osage dress, as did one’s ancestors, a person is able to connect with their heritage and past in a very special way.

Over the past thirty years, ribbonwork has become a more widely known art form among the Osage people. While in the 1950s the I’n-lon-schka had maybe sixty participants, through the 1970s and 1980s the participants numbered over three hundred and today there are close to one-thousand participants on a Saturday night during the I’n-lon-schka (Jacobs 2008). The increased interest and participation of Osage people in the I’n-lon-schka has furthered the art of ribbonwork as well as the number of people who practice ribbonwork. Traditionally, simple patterns of ribbonwork may have been worn on a daily basis and more elaborate patterns were reserved for special occasions such as the I’n-lon-schka. Today, traditional Osage dress is reserved for special occasions like the I’n-lon-schka, and all of the ribbon patterns on the traditional Osage dress are elaborate (see fig. 8). Ribbonwork is not only used on traditional dress, but as art work in the homes of many Osage people. Ribbonwork patterns have also been transformed into other art forms such as jewelry (see fig. 9).



Figure 8: Four women’s skirts with four-strip ribbon patterns (Photo by Author).



Figure 9: Sterling silver bracelet with four-strip ribbon pattern (Photo by Author).

Just as ribbonwork became more elaborate and colorful during the nineteenth century when more trade goods became available, the increased knowledge of ribbonwork and the increased skill of ribbonworkers after its revival have made designs more elaborate. Today, people have changed the meaning of ribbonwork which is placed on traditional Osage dress. It has become an expression of individuality as well as a marker of the skill and creativity of the ribbonworker who made the suit. Some people today choose colors because of special meaning or importance; young Osage dancers have even chosen ribbon colors based on the colors of their college alma mater (Powell 2008). Although the colors and patterns of ribbonwork do not have the same religious significance which they once did, the patterns and colors used today are just as important as they were two-hundred years ago.

On a microscopic level, the changes of style and complexity of ribbonwork speak to the skill of the individuals making the ribbons as well as the availability of trade goods. However, on a telescopic level, ribbonwork tells the story of the Osage people and their journey after European contact. While today, traditional clothing with ribbonwork is generally worn a few weekends a year during the ceremonial I'n-lon-schka dances, it remains a vital part of the Osage tribe. Today, ribbonwork is viewed as a form of art, and not just as ornamentation on traditional Osage dress. When ribbonwork began, it served a religious purpose and today, it serves ceremonial and cultural purposes. Ribbonwork not only characterizes the history of the Osage, but has become a physical, tangible symbol of the Osage Nation.

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