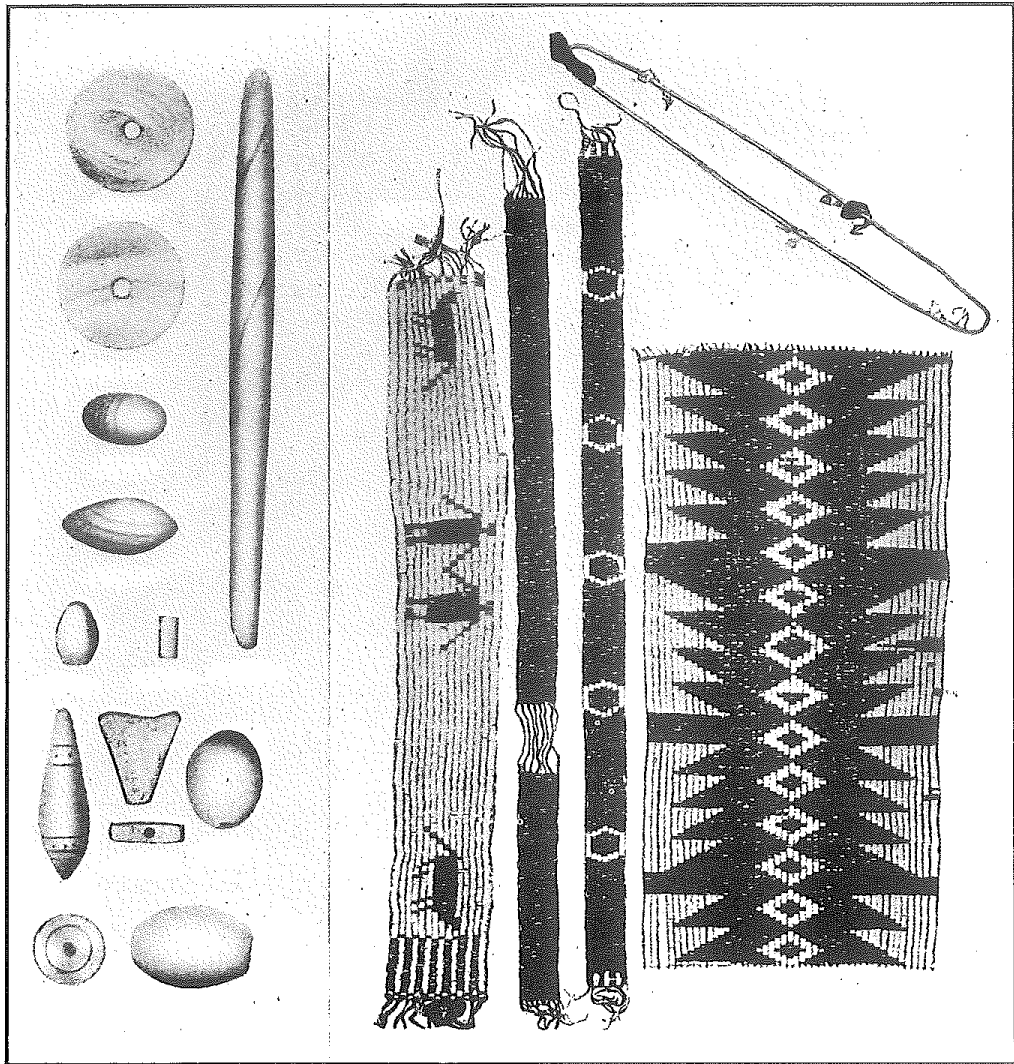


# DENVER ART MUSEUM

DENVER, COLORADO

## *Department of Indian Art*

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## IROQUOIAN AND ALGONKIN WAMPUM

MANUFACTURE AND USES

**WAMPUM.** This word is a contraction of the New England Algonkin "wampumpeak or wampompeage." "Wamp" means "being white", "umpe or ompe" means a string (of shell beads), and "ak or ag" is the sign of the plural. Thus the significance of the whole word is "strings of white shell beads." "Peak" was also used by the early whites.

This is the common name given to the shell beads of the American Indians. It now generally refers to the purple and white cylindrical beads of the Algonkin and Iroquoian Indians of the northeastern United States, especially the latter, who carried the use of these beads to its greatest development.

**HISTORY.** Beads of whole or partially broken shells seem to have been extensively made by all the Indians of the eastern seaboard, as considerable quantities have been found in excavated burials and village sites. But the greatest authorities are pretty much in agreement that the cylindrical shell bead of rather small size was not made before the advent of the whites at the beginning of the 17th century. In 1609 the Dutch settled at Manhattan. The penurious home government refused to send the colony small silver coins. As something was necessary it was decided that cylindrical shell beads should be used. The nearby Indians learned the art of making the beads and steel awls for drilling were in great demand among them. In 1628 the New England English adopted the practice, but not till 1630 did the Indians around them accept the beads as money. There was much trouble with counterfeiting in stone and glass and in very badly worked shell. Owing to counterfeiting and value fluctuations, dozens of laws were passed relative to wampum. In 1746 John Campbell of New Jersey set up a wampum factory which was carried on by his descendants until quite recent times. The Campbell and other late wampum can easily be distinguished by the length of the beads. This late wampum was principally made for the Indians of the west, who adopted its use long after the Eastern tribes.

**ABUNDANCE.** It is difficult to conceive the vast quantities of wampum which were made and used in the 17th and 18th centuries. 1844 figures indicate that one person's yearly output was about 100,000 beads, and that as many as 100 people were making beads at the time. The total amount made must have run into the millions in number and the tons in weight. What became of all this enormous supply is a question which puzzles investigators, as the amount now in existence is rather small.

It is known that much wampum was buried in Indian graves and destroyed by fire as in the Iroquoise White Dog Ceremony.

**SHELLS USED.** The chief source of the purple and white wampum was the common round or hard-shell clam *Venus mercenaria*, commonly called quahog or hen. The conch, the periwinkle, (*Pyrrula carica* and *Pyrrula carnalicularata*), the whelk, (*Buccinum undatum*) and fresh-water shells of the genus *Unio* were other sources of raw material.

### PROCESS OF MANUFACTURE

There are no exact account of the methods used by the Indians in making wampum. The following description is of the method used by the whites.

**ROUGH SHAPING.** The shells were broken with a hammer and chisel into bits averaging 1 inch in length and half an inch in diameter, the thin edge being first chipped off. The lip of the clam provided the purple, which shaded from pale violet to deep purple, while the white came from the inner part of the clam or from other varieties, especially those having a central column. In parts of the clam shell the purple and white alternate in bands, which accounts for the numerous streaked beads.

**FIRST GRINDING.** These rough bits were set in a notch sawed in a

stick. This notch was opened and closed by bending the ends of the stick up and down. The shell so placed in this crude vise was held against a grindstone and shaped into an octagonal figure. The bits were then set endways in the vise so that ends could be ground square.

**DRILLING VISE.** A rough bead was set in a second notched stick, one end of which was securely fastened to the bench so as to stick out horizontally. From the other end a weight was suspended by a wire, the pull of the weight being sufficient to hold the bead tight in the notch.

**BOW DRILL.** One end of a steel saw file was drawn out to a point about an inch long with a flat chisel point, while the other was fitted into a wooden or steel breastplate. A large spool was slipped over the drill and tightly wedged. To rotate the shaft a bow was used, the string being wrapped several times around the spool.

**DRILLING.** After the bead was securely gripped in the vise, the point of the drill was set against it, the breastplate braced against the chest of the operator and the bow moved alternately right and left. The drill was frequently withdrawn in order to remove the particles of ground shell. Water was constantly applied to keep the drill and shell cool. In most cases the beads were drilled from both ends, but expert operators often went through from one end.

**FINISHING.** When a number of rough beads had been pierced they were strung on a wire, one end of which was fastened to the bench. Beneath this wire and parallel to it was a grooved grindstone moved by a foot treadle. The strung beads were held on this stone with one hand and turned on the wire with the other. In a short time they were reduced to a uniform size, well rounded and polished. The finished beads were assembled on strings about a foot long, 15 to 20 beads to the string. A good worker could make 5 to 10 strings a day and sell them for 12 to 15 cents for the purples and half that for the white. Finished beads were from 1-8 to 3-16 inches in diameter and 1-8 to 7-16 in length.

**PRIMITIVE METHODS.** It is suggested that if cylindrical beads were made by the prehistoric Indians something like the following processes were used. The shells were roughly shaped with stone tools. Drilling was done in two ways. A tiny stone drill was fastened to a slim shaft. The rough bead was held in one hand against the point of the drill, which was rotated by rolling it with the other hand on the worker's thigh. Or else the drill was rotated between the palms of one worker while another held the bead. Finishing was done by rubbing with sand.

### USES OF WAMPUM

**MONEY.** As outlined under "History", the Dutch and English used shell beads as a medium of exchange. The laws of both colonies make much mention of the value wampum was to have. It was handled loose, by foot-long strings and by units called fathoms, the word in this connection not being a measure of length but a count. 360 white and 180 purple beads made a fathom. Purple beads were twice as valuable as white. Purple beads averaged about 5 to the penny and were legal tender up to forty or fifty shillings.

Wampum was used in enormous quantities to pay tribute demanded from the Indians by the whites. 500,000 beads were sometimes demanded and paid. Reference 1, page 35, gives many examples of this practise.

**ORNAMENT.** Investigators have formed the opinion that personal decoration was the first purpose of wampum. The accounts of the early explorers are full of mention of this use of shell objects. While large shells and pendants and disk-shaped beads were most used for this purpose, there is ample evidence that the small cylindrical beads were also

used. Collars, necklaces, headbands, armlets of several sizes and decorations sewn on clothing were all made from wampum.

**BELTS** for ceremonial use made of cylindrical beads are the most famous objects made of wampum. They attained their highest development among the Iroquois, though all the eastern Algonkin tribes made use of them. In the League of the Iroquois every official act was accompanied by the use of these belts. Many belts were only made for temporary use, after which they were dismantled. The beads were put back into storage. Only very important belts were preserved. Belts also served as memory-aiding records of ceremonial formulas and practices. Combinations of the purple and white of the shell and red paint smeared on the beads were the means of expressing many ideas by a sort of picture writing. White was significant of peace, good health, prosperity and other good things, while purple was the sign of sorrow, death, mourning, hostility and similar conceptions. Red was connected with war. Belts served as the official credentials of embassies and as summons to war. Treaty-making was always accompanied by the making and exchanging of belts. Belts were part of mourning ceremonies. The giving of belts as atonements for murder was a common practice. Those belts which formed the official records of the Iroquois League were in charge of an hereditary keeper. Some years ago those which remained intact were placed in the New York State Museum at Albany.

The ceremonial use of belts is a subject of too great complication to be more than mentioned in this paper. At some future time the matter will be more extensively discussed.

**BELT-MAKING.** The beads were woven by the women on long parallel strands of vegetable fibre, leather or string. Both ends of the strands were put through holes in pieces of skin to keep them evenly spaced. They were then fastened to the ends of a bow to keep them taut. The beads were worked in and out of the strands with a needle, the length of the beads being at right angles to the strands. The completed belts usually had end fringes. The belts ranged in size from 1 to 5 or 6 feet long and from 2 to 15 inches wide. The latter width is very exceptional, 4 to 6 inches being the average width. Between 1 and 2 thousand beads made up an average belt. There are references to belts of 7,000 beads.

**STRINGS** of wampum, a foot or so long and usually tied at one end into small bunches or sheaves, were used like the belts but in connection with matters of lesser importance. Meanings were given the strings by many different arrangements of color. Among the northeastern Algonkin strings of wampum are an important part of the marriage proposal ceremony.

Compiled from the following sources by Jean Allard Jeançon and F. H. Douglas:

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1. Wampum and Shell Articles of the New York Indians—Beauchamp. Bulletin 41, 1901.

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2. Beads and Beadwork of the American Indians—Orchard. Contributions, Volume 11. 1929.
3. The Penn Wampum Belts—Speck and Orchard. Leaflet 4, 1925.

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4. Article on Wampum—J. N. B. Hewitt. Bulletin 30, Vol. 2, page 904.

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5. The Functions of Wampum among the Eastern Algonkin—Speck. Memoirs, vol. 6, no. 1. 1919.
6. Personal conversations with Arthur Woodward, of the Los Angeles Museum.

Pictures of wampum, 1, 2, 5; Colored plates, 3; Pictures of bead manufacture, 2; Description and picture of belt-making, 2.