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Southeastern Bandoleer Bag, c. 1840s.

A flat rectangular pouch made of black cloth, attached to a wide shoulder strap of the same material. Pouch and strap decorated with multi-colored semi-floral designs in spot-stitch beadwork, and lined with printed cotton. No information exists on its origin. Comparison with other examples suggests a Cherokee origin of c. 1840.

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Southeastern Bandoleer Bags

The development of bandoleer bags among the Cherokee, Creek and Seminole Indians started in the 1820s, when their small twined-woven bags on narrow fingerwoven shoulder straps gradually changed into larger pouches made of red or black cloth, on wide shoulder straps of the same material. Red yarn tassels fringed the bottom edge of the pouch and the tabs at the ends of the shoulder strap. The front of the pouch, its triangular flap, and the shoulder strap were decorated with multi-colored beadwork in a spot-stitch technique. The abstract curvilinear designs of this beadwork changed into a more complex and floral style by c. 1840, although the former abstract patterns remained popular among the Creek and Seminole Indians. Most of this beadwork stands out in white outlines against the cloth background. The preference for red or black cloth may relate to the former use of red and black dyed deerskin for garments.

This beadwork on shoulder bags, moccasins, and other garments was essentially a new art expression; suggested derivations from prehistoric Southeastern art are questionable in view of the disappearance of these earlier arts several centuries before the adoption of beadwork. Most of the new beadwork designs were apparently native versions of the patterns observed on commercial printed cotton (calico) that was often used as a lining in the shoulder bags.

Without the unifying force of the older and extinct art traditions there was a free experimentation with new designs preceding the emergence of new tribal styles after c. 1840. Attempts to identify these tribal styles are frustrated by a lack of documentation. Despite the survival of many shoulder bags, they are seldom if ever mentioned in the ethnohistorical literature. The historical records deal primarily with the growing influence of a mixed-blood elite and their support of the adoption of Christianity and American culture. Resistance of the full-bloods resulted in a marked social stratification. Presumably it was among the conservative part of the native population that this beadwork emerged as a conscious expression of ethnic history.

In the enforced removal of the Indian population from the Southeast to present Oklahoma in the 1830s, many thousands of Indians perished. The artistic creativity of the native

women played a role in the survival and revival of Southeastern Indian culture. The beadwork of these uprooted people contributed the emergence of a regional intertribal art style, referred to as "Prairie Style" art.

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Literature:

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Bandoleer Bags

By 1800, the Indians in the eastern part of the country had been engaged in trade with Europeans for over two hundred years. Wool and cotton fabrics had to a large extent replaced deerskin for garments. Beads, silk ribbons, and the acquaintance with colonial folk art were stimulating new ideas and new techniques of ornamentation, and were to have a profound effect on the arts of the native people.

In their adjustment to the fur trade, and as long as the French, British and Americans were occupied with their territorial wars, the Indian tribes had maintained a measure of social and political independence. This came to an end in the War of 1812. In the subsequent subjection of the native peoples, and despite the white man's refusal to recognize the basic rights of the Indians, much of the artistic creativity of the native women was motivated by their efforts to maintain and revitalize their Indian identity.

Starting in the 1820s, elaborately bead-worked shoulder bags became popular Indian apparel in the Southeastern parts of the country, followed in the 1830s by the Delaware in Kansas, and by the Ojibwa and other tribes of the Upper Great Lakes region in c. 1850. In each of these regions these so-called 'bandoleer bags' were the more elaborate versions of earlier hunter bags, presumably influenced in their shape by the shoulder bags of the colonial military.

Widespread was the halfway change in the beadwork patterns on the shoulder straps; remarkable is the frequently dissimilar decoration of pouch and strap, treating them as totally separate objects of decoration. Much of the beadwork on the bandoleer bags was apparently inspired by designs observed in American folk art, on printed cotton, and on commercial ceramics. But the inspiration was channeled through dreams, as stated by several of the women artists. Dreams did not necessarily give the designs a symbolic meaning, but the creation of these new designs challenged the artist's imagination, thereby giving them an emotional value that went beyond a merely decorative quality.

In contrast to their native proto-types, these spectacular bandoleer bags served no practical purpose. Primarily worn by the men on festive occasions, this apparel earned prestige for the women artists. Large numbers of these bags have survived, indicating their once great popularity. Unfortunately, only very few of these bags have any recorded history, making it difficult to identify tribal styles.

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