

Bandolier Bags

BEFORE THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY, most Native men in the Great Lakes region would have carried a compact leather shot-pouch to transport small utilitarian tools such as flints and bullets. By 1870, with large-scale importation of inexpensive, ready-made European trade goods such as glass seed beads and wool fabric into the Great Lakes region, bandolier bags emerged from the older shot-pouch tradition. Bandolier bags had a wide strap worn over one shoulder and across the chest, with the pocket resting on the opposite hip. Women decorated both the pocket and the strap with intricate beadwork. The bags quickly became classic symbols for Great Lakes and Prairie tribes, each with their own distinct bandolier style. Native men would wear the bags for social dances or powwows and for meetings with government authorities, thereby appearing in elegant dress while broadcasting their tribal identities to anyone who understood the intricate beadwork on their bag.

Ho-Chunk beadwork tends to be dramatically different from that of the surrounding Ojibwe (Chippewa) people in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Salient features of a Ho-Chunk bag include the use of loom beading (the beads are never sewn directly to the cloth); the same designs repeated throughout the strap and on the bag; straps that usually are sewn to the bag along the inside edge of the pocket; and rigidly bilateral symmetrical geometric designs against a white background. The aversion to the curvilinear, asymmetrical motifs found in later Ojibwe beadwork link the Ho-Chunk style more closely to Prairie than Woodlands arts.

The state of Minnesota is an extraordinarily diverse crossroads of Prairie, Woodland, and Plains styles of Native American art. The presence of the Ho-Chunk people—officially expelled from Minnesota in the aftermath of the 1862 US–Dakota War and then split into the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin and the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska—is frequently forgotten when recounting the history of the state. The Minnesota Historical Society's collection of bandolier bags from this region is among the largest in the world, but the vast majority of these bags are Ojibwe in origin. The inclusion of this Ho-Chunk bag fills a gap in our collection.

—Leah Bowe, *Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act* mediator



Ho-Chunk (Wisconsin and Nebraska, also formerly Minnesota, Iowa, and Illinois). Bandolier bag. Late nineteenth century. Glass beads, wool fabric. (JASON ONERHEIM/MNHS COLLECTIONS)



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