

The Past and Future of Wyandotte Beadwork

Kim Garcia

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I pulled up the hill to the large, round building overlooking the small town of Wyandotte, Oklahoma. Heavy wooden timbers supported four overhanging porches at each cardinal direction of the perfectly circular building. A stone sign that read “Wyandotte Nation Cultural Center and Museum” surfaced from the landscaping of native grasses and rock. I had made the brief drive just across the Oklahoma state line to visit with Kim Garcia, a fellow citizen artist of the Wyandotte Nation of Oklahoma. Our Indigenous heritage has been an important component of our lives, and I was eager to meet with her to discuss her process and portfolio of Native American beadwork inspired by tribes of the Wendat Confederacy.



Kim Garcia describes her beadwork on display at the Wyandotte Nation Cultural Center and Museum in Wyandotte, Oklahoma

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Garcia and myself are both members of the Wyandotte Nation of Oklahoma, a federally recognized Native American tribe with over 6000 enrolled members. The Wyandotte Nation sits just across the Missouri border on 20,000 acres in Ottawa County, Oklahoma near the town of Wyandotte. Originating in the Upper Sandusky region of Ohio, the Wyandotte people were relocated by the federal government to Northeast Kansas in 1842 and then to Northeast Oklahoma in 1867. Along with a host of healthcare, social, and education programs for their people, the Wyandotte Nation operates a cultural center and museum to help preserve the traditions of past and present members. Kim Garcia manages the Wyandotte Nation Cultural Center and Museum, where she teaches classes on Native American beadwork.



Garcia was born in raised in Seneca, Missouri. While she has deep roots in Southwest Missouri, she enjoys traveling and being immersed in new cultures. “I love to travel and see new cultures and new people,” she said. Garcia has been to 17 countries and 49 states. “Alaska is the one elusive state I’ve not been to yet,” she added, looking hopeful to

make it there one day.

Garcia’s husband is from Mexico and she is fluent in Spanish. Lately, she has started learning French. “It wasn’t ever anything I really wanted to learn but just recently I thought it would help with my nasal sounds so I can learn Wendat language. I have really struggled with the nasal sounds in our language so the French will help with that,” she said. Recently, the Wyandotte Cultural Center and Museum has made efforts to preserve the language of its people, along with various other traditional skills.

“About seven years ago I was at a self-governance conference for the tribe. It’s one of my favorite conferences they have every year, mainly because they have a

lot of vendors that sell Native jewelry and art. I bought pair of earrings and I wondered if I could learn to make that,” she said. “I had never had an interest in beading whatsoever but I bought those earrings and started looking at YouTube and started learning to bead.” After she made her first set of earrings, she knew it was only the beginning. “They weren’t the best constructed but I still keep them just to remember where I came from,” she laughed. From that point, Garcia made it a point to work on beadwork every day for the past seven years.

Most of Garcia’s work is inspired by contemporary designs, but she has made traditional work also. “There is a Wendat pouch that was made in the early 1800s when we were in Ohio, and I’ve just seen pictures of it so I didn’t make an exact replica but it is very similar to that pouch,” she said,



referring to some of her work on display at the cultural center. Because the Wyandotte people struggled to survive wars with other tribes, and multiple relocations, few original pieces of beadwork have survived. Garcia sees her work at the cultural museum as the opportunity to preserve what has survived, while still looking towards the future. “I’ve taught all three of my boys to bead,” she said with pride as she showed me some beadwork that her sons have created.

More recently, Garcia has made extensive steps to begin teaching beadwork through the Wyandotte Nation social media platforms. “I have taught a lot of people and we have been teaching others. There are a lot of beaders now. In less than seven years we’ve went from just a handful to dozens of beaders,” she said. Garcia attributes the success to social media, mentioning the fact that many tribal citizens that don’t live in Oklahoma can access unlimited resources to learn the traditional artform.

“You’re not going to learn something until you’re ready to learn it”

Garcia highlights that the possibilities are endless when it comes to beadwork. “A lot of beaders find where their niche is and then they stick with that. I forced myself to learn every stitch that I saw out there,” she said. “People tend to lump beading into one category. In beading there’s so many different things” she added. “Do you want something loom, bead embroidered, brick stitch, peyote stitch, strung?” As she mentioned the different bead techniques, she acknowledged that most people have a preference. “For most people, I think the Native stuff they are looking for is bead embroidery. It’s my favorite way because it is like you are painting with beads.” She explained that bead embroidery offers more freedom when making a design as compared to loom work where the design must be more structured and linear.



Photo courtesy of William Swaim

One of Garcia’s sources of pride is the beadwork done for her sons’ pow wow dance regalia. “My middle son wanted to be a fancy dancer, so I beaded the things on his regalia like his headband and necklaces and moccasins... different things,” she said. “And then the next year my oldest son became a grass dancer for pow wow so I beaded all his things.” She elaborated, saying his regalia was quite complex. “It was a lot more strenuous. Just his H harness for his chest and his headband took over 200 hours to bead,” she said, remarking that her son’s tall height required her to spend extra time on the project.

Garcia explains that she prefers to get her supplies from businesses owned by Indigenous people. “I started getting my supplies at hobby shops. Like with anything,

the more you get into it the snobbier you become with whatever you're working with," she laughed. Fortunately there are a variety of vendors in Oklahoma, including Tulsa and Tahlequah, along with several online stores that offer jewelry supplies from Indigenous vendors. Garcia led me to a table lined with armatures that displayed her beaded jewelry. Elegant necklaces, bracelets, and even a beaded graduation cap and sunglasses were on display. "People say Natives like to bead anything," she laughed as she pointed to a beaded pair of shoes. Even the smallest items looked very complex. While the work looked extremely elaborate to someone like myself, Garcia seemed very nonchalant about the difficulty required to pull off such pieces. The stitches and techniques are all as unique as the individual pieces themselves. Combined various techniques with the sizes and colors of beads, the artistic and practical possibilities are endless. Garcia creates beaded items for decorative as well as ceremonial reasons, and admits that she stays quite busy. "If I said I'm open for orders, I'd have ten people lined up, and I always say I don't have time," she said, commenting on how long it takes to make even a small project. Like many other Native artists, she is generous with her knowledge and hopes to lighten her own workload through educating future beaders.

Garcia is content to look at the bigger picture with regards to the future traditions of indigenous art, and sees her work as part of a team effort to engage more people about the importance of her culture. "In the past there have been very few that were willing to teach, and in a few short years we have changed



that. In 20 or 30 years I would love to see that the Wyandotte Nation is one of the master communities of beading and that it is thriving. I think that represents Wyandotte Nation as a whole. We were struggling and trying to survive as a people, and then once we made ourselves more self sustaining now we are thriving. I see beadwork as a time when art was almost lost, but I want to see a time when we are considered the experts in what we are doing." NLM