



Women's Wearing Blanket

Unknown Osage artist

ca. 1890-1900

Ht: 44"; W: 66"; D: 3"

T0809

[URL coming soon]

By Jami Powell (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

As a citizen of the Osage Nation and an anthropologist, my research on Osage art was initially inspired by grandmother Georgeann Gray Robinson, who was a renowned Osage ribbon worker. However, the way Osage ribbon work exemplifies the complex and ongoing colonial entanglements between American Indian nations and settler society further motivates my continued academic engagement with this topic.¹

Prior to attending the Otsego Institute, I conducted a great deal of research on Osage ribbon work. I have argued that as an Osage practice, ribbon work emerged from the unique historic, economic, social, and aesthetic choices Osage people—and more specifically Osage women—made when incorporating specific European materials into their daily lives. However, my previous research relied largely on text-based resources, object photographs, and interviews with Osage ribbon workers. Although I am a novice ribbon worker, before the workshop I had very little hands-on research experience with late nineteenth and early twentieth-century museum collections of Osage ribbon work. Since attending the workshop, I have started collections-based fieldwork at museums throughout the United States, and this experience has been instrumental in preparing me for the months ahead.

T0809, an "Osage Women's Wearing Blanket," was made between 1890 and 1900. While the online catalogue lists the physical dimensions of the blanket, the only material

included in the description is “wool.” From the photograph online, it appears that the ribbon work on the blanket is made from navy or black, orange, white, pink or faded red, and a light blue or green ribbons, and red wool broadcloth. The six hands appear to be made from navy ribbon, and are either piped with white ribbon or outlined with beads. Although this blanket is listed as Osage within the catalogue records, there are other key markers visible within the image that indicate this is an Osage blanket. For example, the distinctive geometric pattern of the blanket and the hands are recognized as hallmarks of Osage work by community members, contemporary ribbon workers, and other experts.²

After physically viewing the object, however, I was able to determine a great deal more about the blanket—things I was unable to ascertain from the photograph alone. As is often the case, the top edge of the blanket has the selvage exposed. In this instance, the selvage is undyed white wool, indicating the blanket is made with “stroud” or “saved list cloth.”³ Upon closer inspection, I could also tell that the silk ribbon used for the hands and the outside ribbon is black, not navy blue, and the three sets of hands are outlined with two rows of orange and one row of white beads. Lastly, I was able to determine that the ribbon work was hand stitched, not sewn on a machine.

Part of my dissertation research involves the co-curation of a virtual museum exhibit with the Osage Tribal Museum. As I travel to museums throughout the United States, I am digitizing Osage objects and conducting ethnographic interviews with Osage artists and community members within museum collections. The experience of researching this blanket—both online and at the Fenimore Art Museum—has made me consider more seriously the type of object photographs and descriptions we will include in the online exhibit, and will contribute to a more nuanced examination of Osage material culture within my dissertation.

¹ See Jean Dennison, *Colonial Entanglement: Constituting a Twenty-first-century Osage Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); and Nicolas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

² See Daniel Swan, “Dancing Societies and Organizations,” in *Art of the Osage* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004) 157-194.

³ See Cory Willmott, “From Stroud to Strouds: The Hidden History of a British Fur Trade Textile,” *Textile History*, 36(2), 196–234, November 2005.