

INDIAN TRADE BLANKETS IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

History and Symbolism of a Unique North American Tradition

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To lovers of the picturesque it is a source of keen regret that the Blanket Indian, the most striking and conspicuous figure this country has ever produced, is passing. And by this I mean the Indian who formerly wore a red blanket, a beaded buckskin shirt and leggings, a gorgeous war bonnet, and who painted his face, his hands and his horse in a manner wonderful to behold. Block Quote

—G. O. Shields from *Blanket Indians of the Northwest*, 1921

A veteran of the Indian wars, Shields, like many of his contemporaries, was convinced that the American Indian was a "vanishing race," a victim of "progress" and the inevitable sweep of Western civilization over a once-proud people now reservation-bound and without the warrior heroes of yesteryear. Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, American Horse, Geronimo, and Chief Joseph—"The Noblest Roman of Them All"—were all gone, replaced by a generation of hunters-turned-farmers, and poor ones at that. Had Shields looked carefully he would have seen many "blanket Indians" at powwows, giveaways, potlatches, funerals, saints' days, parades, rodeos, and in more traditional households on and off reservations. Writing in 1933, Luther Standing Bear, a notable Sioux, reminisced in his autobiography, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*:

Many an Indian has accomplished his own personal salvation by "going back to the blanket." The Indian blanket or buffalo robe, a true American garment and worn with the significance of language; covered beneath it, is the prototype of the American Indian, one of the bravest attempts ever made by man on this continent to rise to the heights of true humanity.

Ironically, the same year Shields's book appeared, Pendleton Woolen Mills embarked on its third phase of Indian blanket production with an eye toward Anglo as well as Indian consumers, advertising, "The Indian's Choice and the White Man's, Too." The marketing succeeded, providing "extra quality" as well as "historic interest to every buyer," especially with the "Beaver State Robe" line of blankets, which were larger and heavier than other Pendletons. The 1926 catalog reads:

Beaver State quality "Pendletons" were originally conceived for the Indians' exclusive use, and from their home in the heart of the great Cayuse and Umatilla Indian country the fame and usage of these fine Blankets spread to the other Indian tribes throughout America.

But these picturesque and serviceable "Beaver States" were not destined to remain only among the Indians' prized possessions. They have captured the fancy of the red-blooded

white man and woman who find in them equally as wide a range of utility in their homes and for their outdoor adventures.

There is no comprehensive history of the Indian trade blanket. Robert Kapoun, an Indian art dealer based in Santa Fe, has provided the best overview with his book, *Language of the Robe*, written with Charles J. Lohrmann in 1992. Contrary to claims of the publisher, the book is not "definitive," but it is a good starting point and does live up to the claim that it is now a "classic reference for collectors and trade blanket enthusiasts." Another very recent publication is *The Tradecloth Handbook* by Carolyn Corey, who with Preston Miller owns the Four Winds Trading Post on the Flathead Reservation in Montana. Corey and Miller possess museum-quality garments in their own collection and sell replicas and some older items as well. Four Winds has published this booklet in an effort to clarify terminology on cloth.

Wool is considered a material of worldwide importance for its insulating ability and for the prestige factor of ownership or beautification. It is, as *National Geographic Magazine* proclaimed in 1988, the "fabric of history," dating back 12,000 years in use by people in the windswept mountains and plains of Asia. Wool's unique properties of insulating against heat and cold while absorbing up to 30 percent of its weight in moisture without feeling "wet," as well as its resiliency and durability, make it the fabric of choice in much of the world. Wool fibers have minute overlapping scales or plates, all pointing in one direction like tiles on a roof. These interlock into felt under pressure, heat, and moisture. As many as 2,000 overlapping plates may be found in a square inch of wool felt.

At the time of European overseas expansion into the Americas, Native Americans in Mesoamerica and in the Andes were quite familiar with the properties of animal wool, especially alpaca, llama, and Vicuña. In North America mountain goats, bighorn sheep, musk-ox, and especially the American bison provided outer wool used for garments, robes, and blankets. These were labor-intensive to manufacture and their use was often restricted to special ranks within society or by gender. Europeans were a wool-clad folk when they established beachheads throughout the Americas. It did not take long for a blanket and cloth trade to develop as Native peoples saw many possible applications for the short-napped fiber material manufactured in all major European countries. By the 1830s blankets had replaced animal-wool robes and skins in much of North America. The following statement in 1836 by Ramsay Crooks, president of the American Fur Company, to a blanket manufacturer in England is a poignant reminder of the blanket's importance to Indian people:

Permit me to remark that uniformity in our goods is of much importance. The Blankets of the different sizes should be of the same dimensions, weight, quality & finish, no one pair varying materially with another pair; and so with every thing else. Our Indians do not use many articles, but of the few they do require they are capital judges—the person who has no other possession against the rigors of a northern winter than a single Blanket becomes fully competent to decide whether the article does or does not impart the requisite degree of warmth.

Contrary to many popular images of this early blanket and robe trade, in the beginning it was not very colorful or nearly as interesting in design elements as it would become by the late 19th century. Very few examples of the earliest blankets traded directly to Indians survive, although blanket-cloth integrated into Indian costume is found in museums and private collections,

especially as part of leggings or sashes or headgear. Other uses included elaborate embroidery for special social or ceremonial attire, such as Osage wedding blankets with ribbon work, and classic Plains embroidery on blanket cloth.

During the 16th and 17th centuries English and French "broadcloths," finely napped and pressed for use in blankets and coats, were common trade items in eastern North America. Broadcloth was associated with towns or provinces or with specific tribes. White blankets from Normandy were among the more popular, and *etoffe iroquoise* (Iroquois cloth) was dyed purple, a color found frequently in Iroquois attire from the 17th century to the present.

The most popular of French blankets appears to have been a basic white with a blue stripe at each end and a blue lily embroidered in thread at each corner. Another type of cloth was called "Escarlatine," which one expert has defined as a "strong woolen cloth of good quality particularly appreciated in America by the Indians."

During the 18th century, with mechanization of the wool industry, England took full advantage of the expansive Indian trade market and built upon an established reputation of producing the finest woolens Europe had to offer. The towns of Witney in Oxfordshire, Stroud in Gloucestershire, Kersey in Suffolk, and much of Yorkshire—especially Halifax and Leeds—specialized in three types of woolens shipped overseas.

What we might find at a typical 18th-century fur trade post in New France or on the English frontier would be a medley of the type of blanket called "duffle" or "duffields." Most were natural white blankets with red or purple stripes at each end; some duffles were dyed solid colors; and a few had stripes at intervals, but none had candy or rainbow colors until much later. The duffles were often manufactured in long "pieces" on the power looms and then sold as "doubles" or cut to order in the field. These "shags," or "pieces" were also tailored into capotes or outer garments of various styles, the most popular being the "mackinaw" coat. The striping, a hallmark of Indian trade blankets, originated in Gloucestershire in the 18th century for the East India Company's trade with Asia, but it caught on and was quite popular with Indians, voyageurs, and colonial Anglo-Americans as well.

A second type of blanket found by the mid 18th century was the "point blanket," also confusingly called "Kersey" or "Kersey cloth," a common staple cloth of Yorkshire that was used for military uniforms and garments for the poorer classes. According to the late Charles Hanson, who researched the point blanket thoroughly, these blankets originated with the French for trade with their Indian allies, probably during the period of the Fox Wars. A 1715 French account book lists ten two-point blankets as expense for Indian service. In his independent research, Francis Back found references to the "point" system of sizing as early as 1694 in New France. The oldest surviving example of a "point" blanket dates to 1775 and is in the Museum of the Fur Trade in Chadron, Nebraska.

The meaning of the term "points" requires explanation. Using indigo or black dye, full and half bars were added to the blankets to indicate a standard of trade value in "made beaver" (one full size beaver for each full point or bar). The bars also indicated size and/or weight of blankets. The most famous purveyor of these "point" blankets historically was the London based Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), which placed its first order for "500 pair of pointed blankets" in 1779, giving an

exclusive contract to the manufacturers of Witney in 1805. The "search file" on point blankets at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg contains this interesting note:

From 1781 onwards there are references to striped blankets, their size and value, but very little indication of color. The sizes, weights and points were not standardized until some time after 1860.... In 1826 Peter Skene Ogden wrote of "plain blankets," and "Green blankets." In 1830 John McLoughlin wrote regarding his supply of "Guns and Green blankets." In 1844 George Simpson mentioned red blankets in a letter to the Committee advising that the quality of the dye should not be sacrificed.

An invoice for blankets shipped to Victoria for use by the Western Department of the HBC in 1864 gives some idea of scale and color variations. The order lists 35,500 individual blankets worth over £10,000. Of these, 16,500 are plain white with indigo blue bars (stripes); 7,000 are blue; 7,000 are green; and 5,000 are scarlet. No mention is made of multi-stripes in colors. Many of these were destined for potlatches along the Northwest Coast.

It is unclear when the famous candy-stripe HBC blanket first came into use in North America. One reference in the HBC Archives, in a letter from Thomas Hutchins in Albany to the governor and committee, establishes a firm link to striping of blankets as early as 1781. A 1798 letter places an order for "Thirty pair of 3 points to be stripd with four Colors, Red, blue, Green, Yellow, according to your Judgment." Beginning in the 1820s, the HBC experimented with three- and four-bar blankets, which came to be known as "chief's blankets" among Indians and traders. An order to a Leeds woolen manufacturer from the St. Louis-based firm of Pierre Chouteau and Company, dated November 17, 1838, is thought to be one of the first references to the multi-striped blanket that became the standard "Hudson's Bay blanket." Clearly, some candy-stripes were available, but American artists who have depicted the multicolored HBC blanket in widespread use prior to 1840 do not have good documentation on their side. Still, it makes for a very colorful image and is not anachronistic with production history. One document in the HBC Archives, dated 1886, lists: "Plain blankets with black stripes, in indigo, scarlet, green, light blue; and a striped blanket of white with stripes of indigo, green, red, yellow."

To this day the HBC carries a line of point blankets still manufactured in England for their department stores (now called "The Bay" in Canada). Other companies, such as the Montreal-based North West Company and the American Fur Company of John Jacob Astor, also ordered blankets by points, standardizing a system across North America acceptable to both Indian and white consumers. So successful was the point blanket that by the 19th century, the typical trade blanket was the three-point white with a single dark stripe at each end. Charles Hanson notes:

This was a good wearing and sleeping blanket for the average person. The traders sold thousands of ready-made woolen capotes, but the Indians eventually began to make their own blankets in a crude, squarish style. They liked the white capotes to wear on winter war expeditions because they provided the best camouflage.

The third type of trade blanket was the "rose" or "rosed" blanket, made of superior, untwilled wool. Usually white in background, two roses in smaller blankets and four in larger ones were hand-sewn into the corners using red, green and yellow yarn. Manufactured primarily in Witney, these blankets adorned the beds of middle and upper-class English households and were special presentation blankets in the Indian trade. Annuity goods given by the United States Office of

Indian Trade in 1797 included 36 "rose blankets" to the Eel Rivers Tribe and 44 rose blankets to the Piankashaws.

Thus, from the East, we have three styles of Indian trade blankets that met yet a fourth tradition coming from the Southwest. In Spanish America, settlers on the northern frontier of New Spain developed their own blanket and rug industry out of necessity. Called "Rio Grande Blankets" and most frequently associated with the weaving town of Chimayo, these Spanish-American blankets followed two traditions: Pueblo Indian cotton weaving on the back-strap loom, which dates back to around 700 A.D.; and Spanish harness or treadle-loom weaving, brought from Iberia into North America. When first contacted in the 16th century, Pueblo Indian men were found spinning and weaving rectangular pieces of cotton cloth, which were often colored with vegetable and mineral dyes prior to wearing as a wraparound garment or as a shawl.

Called *mantas* by the Spaniards, these all-purpose blankets were listed in many inventories in colonial New Mexico. Used to pay fines, taxes, and as a legal form of currency, *mantas* (like "point" blankets) served as a material bridge between two cultures. But relations with the Pueblo Indians soured, turning to open rebellion in 1680. When Spaniards returned to reoccupy New Mexico in 1692, cotton weaving continued among the Pueblos, but wool from imported Spanish *churro* sheep became the fabric of choice among Spaniards and the adjacent Navajo, both of whom have made an art form of textile weaving from that time on.

This early blanket trade in the Southwest was primarily an internal institution. Unfortunately, not a single example from the period 1600-1800 has survived. Descriptions indicate manufacture of long *frazadas* or blankets, as well as carpeting (called *jergo*) and *serapes* (similar to course sackcloth). *Añil* (indigo), urine, brazilwood, and herbs were used to produce a limited number of colors. It is likely that the early Rio Grande blankets contained alternating stripes woven in indigo blue and natural undyed brown and white wools, a pattern replicated by the Navajos and one that continues to this day among Hispanic weavers north of Santa Fe.

With the opening of trade between Santa Fe and the United States in 1821, an expanded market brought new materials to New Mexican weavers: three-ply wool yarns dyed red and scarlet with cochineal, natural yellows, silk and cotton threads, and calico printed cotton cloth. The trade extended between St. Joseph, Missouri, down to Santa Fe, and beyond to Chihuahua. From St. Joseph traders carried the blankets north on the Missouri River to Plains tribes who by the 1830s used them for saddle blankets and general wraps. Graphic evidence of this trade is found in the watercolors of Swiss artist Karl Bodmer, who painted "Kiasax (Bear on the Left)," a Piegan Blackfoot married to a Hidatsa at a village near Fort Clark in present-day North Dakota during the winter of 1833. Kiasax is wearing a southwestern blanket which was described at the time as "Spanish" but could possibly be of Navajo origin. Mexican traders also carried American goods and homemade serapes, blankets, and shawls to California where they obtained horses, mules, and Chinese silk in exchange. In 1840, 20,000 Rio Grande blankets were sold in northern Mexico alone.

In an era of westward expansion and treaty-making, which placed high demand on blanket manufacturers to fulfill government annuities to Indian tribes, surprisingly few mills produced blankets. A survey of woolen manufacturers in the United States in 1845 lists eleven mills turning out blankets, and only one of those, the Buffalo Manufacturing Company, is categorized as specializing in "Indian blankets."

Following the Mexican War, blanket production for trade increased, especially after 1856 when English chemist William Henry Perkins accidentally discovered how to make aniline dyes from coal tar. Navajo and Spanish-American weaving developed independently from this point on, but design elements—from Pueblo basketry and pottery, Persian rugs, and especially Mexican-inspired elements such as diamonds, center-dominant motifs, and enclosed borders—became popular, encouraging a "hybrid" style of weaving. With the arrival of the Santa Fe Railroad in the 1880s, a tourist trade developed for generic as well as collectable Indian blankets and rugs. By 1900 Fred Harvey hotels and concessions promoted Indian craftsmen and helped catalyze an interest in less expensive Spanish American weaving from the Chimayo area, whose Ortega family is best known for producing rugs, blankets, and woolens of all kinds.

In the Pacific Northwest many tribes spun yarn and wove blankets for their own adornment and for trade, a craft that fascinated Canadian artist Paul Kane on his trip to the region in 1846. Conceivably, some of the earliest settlers in Oregon who arrived from New England or the Midwest brought with them blankets made by Joseph Capps & Sons of Jacksonville, Illinois, established in 1837, the oldest commercial manufacturer of blankets with Indian design elements north of Spanish New Mexico. Bay Company blankets could be purchased at Fort Vancouver and other British posts, but they were expensive and impractical for many daily uses. Seizing the moment, the Willamette Woolen Manufacturing Company opened its doors in 1856 and produced its first blanket in 1858. In 1859 blankets from Salem were displayed at the California State Fair. The *Oregon Farmer* reported on October 22 of that year: "An old sewing machine which had been brought across the Isthmus of Panama with the Pratt family was used to hem the ribbons on the blankets which were exhibited in California."

Throughout the 1860s Willamette had contracts for blankets to the Oregon Indian Agency, producing 4,000 pairs of blankets in 1861. Blankets were often manufactured in pairs—*i.e.*, doubles—and then cut later into singles. Doubles were more easily shipped than cut blankets. Furthermore, doubles served as a multipurpose over-and-under sleeping cover. Gray and white seem to be the only colors, ranging in price from \$6.40 to \$8.25. Other mills were soon in operation. Oregon City Mill produced a thousand blankets a month in 1868 and followed the HBC's example of assigning "points" in 1870. Large blankets remained available only in white, but a "plaid" 4-pointer and 2½ -point blankets in blue, green, sienna, scarlet, and gray were also sold. Clearly, by the end of the decade blankets "made in Oregon" were here to stay.

The next period of Indian blanket design, 1880 to 1930, is the most spectacular and was the inspiration for Dale Chihuly's early interest in collecting trade blankets. During this period, described by Kapoun and Lohrmann as the "golden age of the American Indian trade blanket," five companies competed for the Indian and non-Indian trade. The Illinois-based Capps Company turned its attention to a line of blankets with tribal association such as "Comanche," "Navajo," "Ponca," and "Moqi." Oregon City Woolen Mills, founded in 1864, followed Capps's lead, as did the Buell Manufacturing Company of St. Joseph, Missouri, and the Racine (Wisconsin) Woolen Mills, both started in 1877. During the 1880s all of these new companies benefited from the introduction of the double-shuttle Jacquard loom, developed in France in the 1840s. This innovation made possible the creation of textiles with a positive design on one side and a negative of the same image on the reverse. By the turn of the century these four mills were using power looms to churn out splendid blankets that appealed to Indians and whites alike. Buffalo Bill sported Capps blankets in his Wild West Show; housewives throughout the country could follow the lead of the Racine Woolen Mills' "Cozy Corner Girl"; and in Indian

country every trading post and reservation general store was stocked with blankets to be worn, admired, exchanged, and given away.

But it was the final competitor, Pendleton Woolen Mills, that would eclipse all others in time. Inspired and directed by Clarence Morton Bishop, Pendleton began operations in 1896 from a foundation as a wool scouring plant built three years earlier. By the late 1920s the company employed 500 workers. Taking advantage of its location near several Indian reservations to promote a reputation that it cared about its Indian as well as its "pale face" trade, Pendleton exploited tribal names on blankets and endorsements by individual Indians, including Joseph of the Nez Perce, Chief Peo, and the Yellow Hawks of the adjacent Umatilla Reservation. By World War II the company boasted over 200 patterns of Indian blankets and continues to surprise and delight collectors and powwow-goers across Indian America.

Since their introduction in 1915, "Beaver State" robes have outsold all others within the Pendleton line as a general category. Many Indian as well as non-Indian households, particularly in the Pacific Northwest, boast one or more. Among single designs the most successful in Pendleton production history is the "Chief Joseph" robe, first introduced in 1930 and produced in 4 colors up to 1952 but available in 16 colors today. This example of a "high prestige robe" is directly associated with a well-recognized figure to all Indians and most other Americans. Its long evolutionary development spans from 1901, when Joseph was featured on the Pendleton catalog wearing the "Wild Indian's Overcoat," to the present, when many commemorative robes and special theme blankets are woven in limited numbers for special occasions or audiences. These include the "Circle of Life" robe, "White Buffalo Calf Woman" robe, and the "Oregon Heritage Collection" series, available in an edition of 500 during the mid 1990s. Most recently, Pendleton has issued a special blanket for the exhibition, *Wrapped in Tradition: The Chihuly Collection of American Indian Trade Blankets*, and has embarked on a series of special edition blankets as part of the Lewis and Clark bicentennial commemoration.

Just visit any Pendleton store today and I think you will agree that the Indian robe business is alive and well. The robes may no longer wrap people and horses as frequently as they adorn beds and sofas, but they are still a part of the collective material culture of North America that has deep historical roots.

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