

colours for the SPIRITS

Native American Church Style Gourd Rattles Nicholas Breeze Wood

Gourd rattles used in peyote ceremonies are highly colourful objects. Their history begins towards the end of the 19th century, when the tradition of using the psychoactive cactus crept north into the United States from out of the natural growing areas of the plant in Mexico. This use of peyote gradually developed into what became known as the Native American Church, a mix of Christian and Native American spiritual ways.

Many of the objects in the Church are highly beaded, often done in the stitch which takes its name from the plant, *peyote stitch*. This is a stitch which allows very beautiful graduations of colour; each bead being put on one at a time. The colourful beadwork is said to be pleasing to the spirits, and also beautiful to the human eye when under the effect of the peyote. It is a slow stitch to do, a peyote rattle taking perhaps several days of beading to complete.



The rattles are made using a gourd often called a *bell gourd*. This is thick-walled, woody and very strong. The gourd is cut in half and one end is used for the rattle. A stick passes completely through the gourd and a wooden choke is made to fit into the open end at the gourd's base to keep the rattle's filling in.

The stick, both below and above the gourd is then covered in a layer of buckskin and beaded. In addition to the beadwork, tassels hang from the bottom of the stick and a horse hair tuft decorates the top. Sometimes this tuft is further decorated by using small, brightly coloured feathers from parrots or other birds.

The rattles are made to be taken apart so the filling of the rattle can be changed or added to.

Bell gourds are the best gourds to use as they are very tough. I have found whole bell gourds in dried flower shops in the UK. Other small gourds can be used but having thinner walls they may not be as strong so care will need to be taken when they are used.

The wood for the handle needs to be perfectly round and smooth so that the beadwork will be neat when it is finished. I have found commercial dowel from a D.I.Y. shop is ideal. The wood will need to be shaped like the unfinished handle shown in the photo below.

The top thinnest section (a) passes through the hole in the top of the gourd, allowing the gourd to rest against the step (b). The next section (c) is inside the gourd and the wooden choke sits on the top of the leather that covers the handle (d).

At the tassel end, the wood is cut to match the top end (a), so that when the tassels are put onto the handle they will not be raised up above the wood, which would result in the beadwork having an ugly bump in it.

The tassels (often 12 in number - the number of Jesus's disciples) are generally twisted (*plied*) rather than just plain lengths of cut leather, and often additional peyote stitch beadwork is added here by wrapping a strip of leather round them making a tube which is then beaded to

match the handle.

To bead the handle the wood needs to be covered with thin buckskin or other leather to make a soft bed for the beadwork. Often the beadwork will have a parting in the middle, allowing the wood to be seen. This part of the handle can be polished or even painted if you so wish. When I attach the leather, I generally use a drop or two of *super glue* to hold it in place, then sew up the seam.

The horse hair tuft at the top of the rattle pushes on to cover the top part of the wood (a). This is made of a tube of leather which is then in turn covered with the horse hair. On top of this horsehair covered leather another layer of leather is put on making the bed for the beadwork.

This is quite a tricky thing to make, I often use some super glue to hold the horse hair in place before I bind tightly round it with cotton thread. Over this I put the top layer of leather. It is important to fix the horse hair tightly, if you don't the hair will come out and you'll soon end up with a bald rattle.

For this you need the thinnest leather you can get, as a thick layer will make the horsehair tuft tube much wider than the beadwork on the handle which will make the rattle look unbalanced.

Take care when constructing the tube, while it is place at the top of the

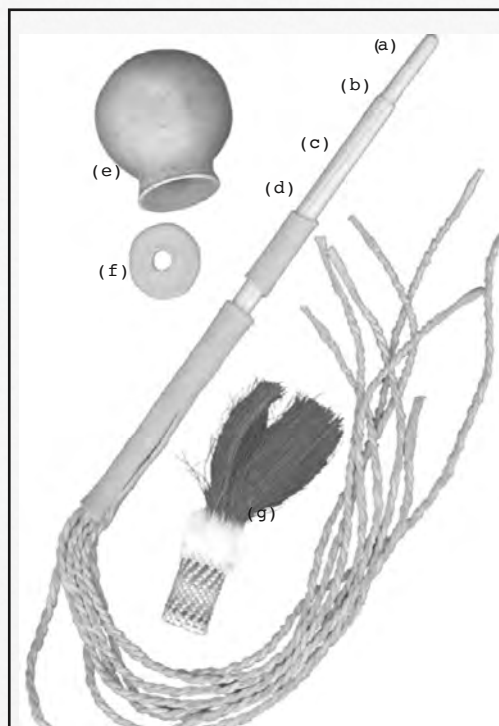
rattle handle - it is easy to bind the horsehair and bead the tube so tightly that it makes it impossible to pull it from the wooden handle. This will make the rattle impossible to take apart. To avoid this it is a good idea to pull the horsehair tuft tube from the handle occasionally while you are working to keep it loose enough.

THE BEADWORK

Peyote Stitch, together with its companion stitch Comanche Weave, are styles of beadwork found on many Native American objects. They can be tricky to do, but once you have mastered them, they will give you hours of satisfying craft work.

In both stitches the beads are strung together to form a sort of net which is only fixed to the leather under the beadwork at the beginning and the end of each thread. The beads are put on one at a time to sit in places created by the structure of the previous row. This allows patterns of great complexity to be created, and the smaller the beads, the finer the finished design will be.

There is no space in this article to give instruction for Peyote or Comanche Weave beadwork. The subjects have been covered in earlier issues of Sacred Hoop (see below), but now the magazine has colour pages we would be happy to create a special feature on it in a forthcoming issue, should we receive enough requests to do so. If you would like to see this in Sacred Hoop please let us know.



PHOTOS:

Left - Main Image : Contemporary rattle beaded in peyote stitch. Shown just less than life size.

Inset : Close up view of an area of Peyote Stitch beadwork (left) and Comanche Weave Beadwork (right) greatly enlarged. The peyote beadwork is unfinished and shows the 'up - down' edge of beads which make the spaces to receive the next row of beads.

This Page : The parts of a peyote rattle ready to start beading the handle. The gourd is cut (e) and the choke for the open base has been cut (f). The stick is made and shaped, the tassels have been put onto the bottom end and the handle has been covered in leather ready to start the beadwork. A completed horse hair tuft tube is also shown (g).

For instructions on how to do Peyote Stitch see Sacred Hoop Issue 5.

For Instructions on how to do Comanche Weave see Sacred Hoop Issue 12.

For an article on the Native American Church also see Sacred Hoop Issue 12.