



THE POETRY OF THINGS

NICHOLAS BREEZE WOOD
talks to JANEY VERNEY
about the making of magical
and ceremonial objects.

Janey: You are well-known among the shamanic community worldwide as a person to go to for fans, rattles and ceremonial items. Your beadwork is valued by medicine teachers and is quite beautiful. How did this all start?

Nick: Well, I've made things all my life. As a kid it was model soldiers and tanks, but then as I got older I became a painter and started taking inspiration from Persian miniatures and Tibetan art.

Then I got a bit frustrated with painting, as I would lavish hours and hours of time on doing fine geometric patterns - and I liked using gold leaf too - so a painting took a long time. Around this time I first found the Medicine Wheel teachings and I wanted some ceremonial and medicine objects of my own. So I saved my pennies and bought some bits and pieces mail-order from the US. When they came they were dreadful, really badly made, so I thought "I can do better than this", and taught myself beadwork - it seemed an almost natural step from the detailed paintings I was doing. My first few efforts were far worse than the things I had bought from the US! But I stuck with it and my skills gradually improved. I also fell in love with beads and working with natural materials - animal skins, handling wood and feathers and so on.

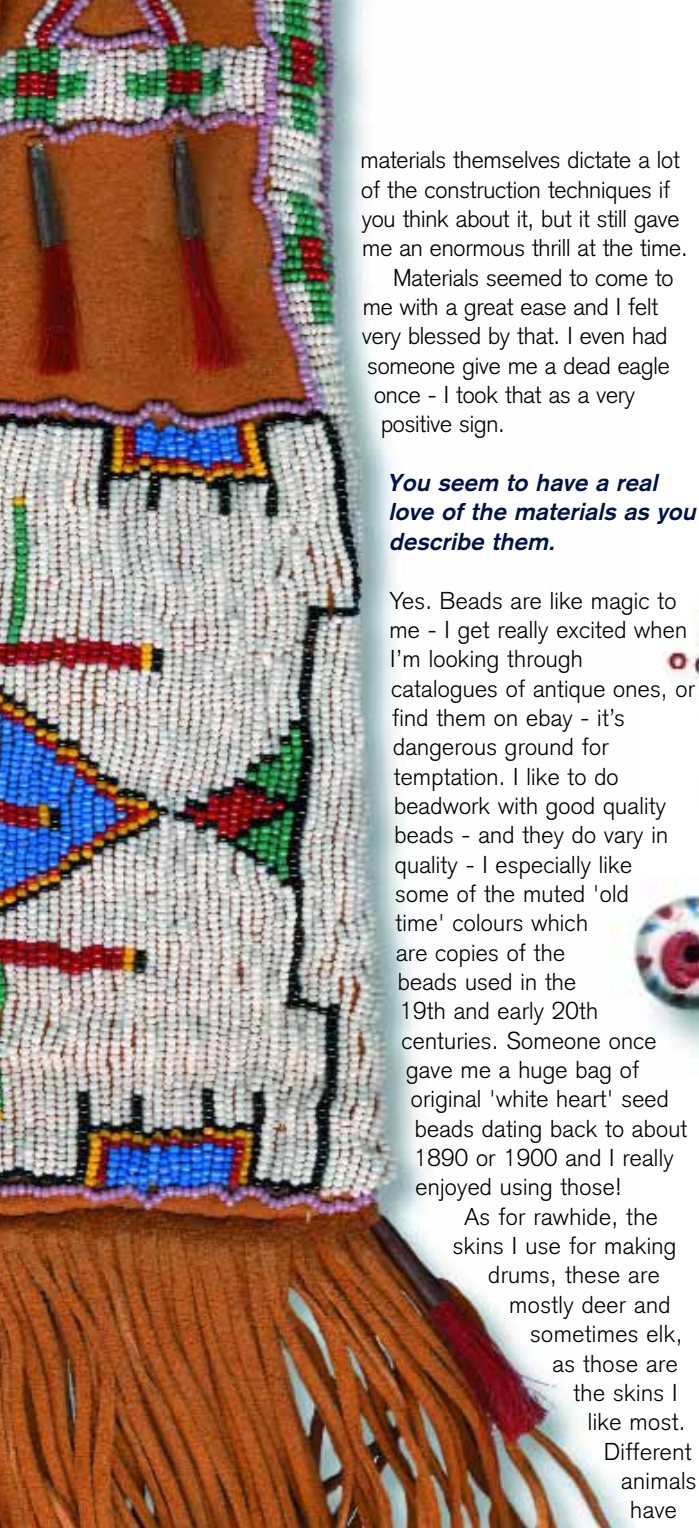
What is the context from which your craftwork comes?

As I was involved in Native American teachings, I was naturally drawn to those craft traditions. I felt an

immediate interest in the material culture of the Plains peoples like the Lakota, Crow and Cheyenne, and I gradually found out more about their ritual artefacts from books and museum collections. I studied the materials used historically, and the way they worked with them and put their objects together. I was really lucky - or blessed - as I came across many original pieces that I was able to examine and handle. It was a great thrill to see how traditional pieces were made. I remember once holding a 19th century pipe bag after I had recently made one - having had to guess one part of it's construction - and lo and behold, the maker of that old pipe bag had solved the problem in the same way as I had. No great mystery really I suppose, as the

Above: Peyote beaded feather flat fan, beaded medicine stone fetish and scattered Venetian and Tibetan glass, amber and shell beads, together with a neolithic arrow head





materials themselves dictate a lot of the construction techniques if you think about it, but it still gave me an enormous thrill at the time.

Materials seemed to come to me with a great ease and I felt very blessed by that. I even had someone give me a dead eagle once - I took that as a very positive sign.

You seem to have a real love of the materials as you describe them.

Yes. Beads are like magic to me - I get really excited when I'm looking through catalogues of antique ones, or find them on ebay - it's dangerous ground for temptation. I like to do beadwork with good quality beads - and they do vary in quality - I especially like some of the muted 'old time' colours which are copies of the beads used in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Someone once gave me a huge bag of original 'white heart' seed beads dating back to about 1890 or 1900 and I really enjoyed using those!

As for rawhide, the skins I use for making drums, these are mostly deer and sometimes elk, as those are the skins I like most. Different animals have

different skins and the way you can work with them is different too. Deer and elk are nice to use, very responsive.

The thread I use in beadwork is polyester sewing thread, it's easy to get and strong too. Sometimes for special ceremonial objects I use traditional deer sinew, but you have to strip it off the chunk of sinew and soak it in your mouth to make it soft; it doesn't taste too bad but it's really hard to use.

Take two identical rattles, or two feather fans - I know that one has a breath of life that the other does not, and that's not down to my making because just as much skill has gone into each. It's more like spirit breathed into the one and not the other.. I don't do it - it just happens

When it comes to using animal parts like fur, claws and feathers, I have to go with a mixture of my own ethics and the requirements of the law. For instance I sometimes use bird of prey feathers, but the laws are a bit complex in the UK about having them, so I try to keep legal.

I also keep within my own ethics and I will never buy a bird of prey feather, or sell one, that's a mark of respect. So if people buy a beaded eagle feather from me, for example, that feather has come to me because it has been given to me from a moulting bird which has suffered no harm. I don't sell the feather, I only sell the beadwork - the price would be the same for a piece of beaded stick as it would be for the beaded feather.

With fur and claws I have a similar ethical view, I won't buy them, I use them if they are given

to me. Sometimes though I will make a trade for them, it depends on the circumstances.

You have to draw a line somewhere. I hate the way animals are kept and killed for fur and won't condone such things.

What sort of people come to you for craftwork and ceremonial items?

You name them and they come, from starry-eyed new-agers to experienced shamanic teachers and practitioners. I even get Native Americans come to me sometimes to make objects for use, maybe in Native American Church peyote ceremonies - I am always feel so touched and honoured when that happens.

Are all the pieces you make used ceremonially?

I make everything as well as I can, as my policy has always been I won't make anything I would not wish to use in ceremony myself.

I guess really I make two kind of things. Firstly there are the purely 'craft' objects. People order them and they may or may not work with them themselves - or they may be a present for someone.

Then there are the 'medicine' objects. Medicine objects are *alive*, they have a special quality to them that tells me that the object, the person who commissioned it and me as the maker, are in some sort of sacred dance. These maybe start out as a regular craft commission, but somehow they are different. That's the interesting work.. and often the most difficult - if an object's alive, it has a life of it's own - sometimes they give me a hard ride in the making of them!

How can you tell the difference then - when does an 'ordinary item become 'alive'?

Take two identical rattles, or two feather fans - I know that one has a

Above: beaded buckskin pipe bag.

Left: a selection of simple rawhide rattles.

Insets: 18th and 19th century glass trade and seed beads, an eagle claw and a glass replica tibetan dZi bead - all shown life size.



breath of life that the other does not, and that's not down to my making because just as much skill has gone into each. It's more like spirit breathed into the one and not the other.. I don't do it - it just happens.

Sometimes you just know that what you make is going to fly because of the nature of the thing, or because of the person who commissioned it. If I am making a special rattle for a shamanic teacher for instance, I am pretty much expecting that object to come alive pretty quick. Another example - a woman recently asked me to make and fill a traditional protection bundle for her baby, to put the baby's umbilical cord in it. That can't help but be a special object, you just can't go into a shop and buy one of those!

Also connecting closely with someone's energy as I make their item can have a profound effect on that thing and the whole energy dance that's going on.

So how do you feel a person's qualities effect the object?

It so much depends on the person. Let me give a couple of examples.

I made a rattle for an experienced teacher a couple of years ago, and all the time the rattle talked clearly to me. It told me it needed to be painted in certain colours, it told me it needed iron that had been through the fire tied to it, it told me it needed silk brocade on the handle not beadwork. So I had to make it like that and everything went smoothly.

Then again I did a beaded bag for someone I didn't know. That was difficult from the moment I started - it fought me. I made stupid mistakes I don't normally make,

like the patterns in the beadwork didn't work so I had to unpick it and start again. All the time the bag was

fighting me and I had to tune in to ask why.

When I did that, the bag told me it was mirroring the nature of the woman who had asked me to make it. Once I understood what was going on it went better. When it was finished I told the woman what I had felt about it, what the bag was saying to me about her and she agreed completely. She knew she needed to change the way she moved through life. To start with I had thought this bag was 'just' a craft object, but it turned out to be a medicine object and the bag taught both me and her.

When you say the bag or the rattle 'told' you, what do you mean exactly?

Um, how can I explain this? OK, let's put it this way - how do you know the way you are sitting or lying down is making your leg feel uncomfortable? It doesn't hurt exactly - it's not gushing with blood, but you know it is uncomfortable. How do you know this? You have an urge to move it, you have a sense you are out of balance, a sense that something has to happen to make it right.

It's like that with me and medicine objects, it's like there is an uncomfortable feeling in me, and moving in a certain way is the only way to cure it. Or to put it another way, it's like having a hole in me that only a certain something will satisfy and fill.

You beaded me a medicine feather recently, and you seemed to get a picture of how it should be really quickly when we talked about you making it - what happened there?

Well, it was a raven feather, so I knew it was going to be black. Raven is a bird of power and there is a darkness around it too, so I immediately came up with beadwork that was red and the darkest blue, almost black - it needed to be a statement rather than a bit of decoration.

I also sensed into you, sensed you were not scared of power and not scared of the drama of life and death, and that your wish for the raven medicine feather was sincere and not a passing fancy. So there was a *solidity* to the feather, so again red and blue-black seemed solid colours and that satisfied that 'movement of my uncomfortable leg'. I choose the very deep blue as it had more depth to it than a purely black bead would have had.

It needed other elements in the design too, and gold felt appropriate, so I put in some gold

Sometimes if I am led along an intuitive path to create something I don't know what it is, I don't know what it is made out of, I don't even know what it is for.. all I know is I have to make something, and the making kind of unfolds as I do it.





Above: copy of a Native American men's society 'doughnut' rawhide rattle

Below: ceremonial eagle leg bone whistle and painted rawhide protective case



beads here and there. I intended there to be four, one for each sacred Direction, around the handle. But because of the diameter of your raven feather quill this made my intended pattern impossible. So I had to do three - one for each world - that was Spirit's intervention in the design and actually that seems to suit you better, as I know you work a lot with the three worlds and not so much with the Four Directions. I don't believe in accidents - that's just Spirit sticking it's oar in!

I used white buckskin to cover the quill end of the feather, as there was no way yellow-coloured commercially tanned buckskin would go with the blue-black, metallic gold and red of the beadwork. I also felt it needed a slightly 'ghost-like' quality to it, 'Other-worldly,' and slightly stark, which I thought the white buckskin would give it.

You speak about Spirit 'putting it's oar in' - do you consider Spirit works through you?



Yes. This is the case sometimes if I am led along an intuitive path to create something - I don't know what it is, I don't know what it is made out of, I don't even know what it is for.. all I know is I have to make something, and I have to start with these little bits of materials and the making kind of unfolds as I do it.

I have a drum like this. It started with a single stone left on a sweatlodge altar. I knew I had to make a bag for that stone, which I did. Then it was left to 'brew'. I didn't know what I was to use the bag for for some months - until I knew it had to be built into a drum.

So I made the drum. And then the drum got a life of its own, and over the years has developed and grown and had so many things tied to it that my partner and life-friend, Jan, says it's Spirit's way of keeping me fit - it weighs so much to carry around!.

That drum will probably tell me one day it has to have a house built for it, and then a series of gardens around the house and a moat and city walls around the gardens... me .. what do I know - I just supply the hands!

That drum has been working with me for about fifteen years, and that's another important thing - you can't rush some things. If they have

a life of their own, they have a time of their own as well.

All you can do is stay with that uncomfortable feeling inside and work to make the feeling bearable. It's like a poetry, or balance about things. How do you know when the line of a poem is right? It just feels right doesn't it. It's like that making medicine objects.

And for that matter ceremony is like poetry too - when the poem works it works, and when it doesn't, it doesn't - and no amount of analysis or dissection can give me a rational answer why not - I just know in my gut.

You say you know in your gut - but are there other ways of finding out whats needed?

Well, shamanic journeying to consult my spirits is one way. If I were making a personal medicine bundle for someone, I might well journey to visit my spirits and see what they tell me to include in it.

I'm still a painter, and recently I have been doing a Tibetan thangka, a traditional devotional painting, of three powerful, wrathful protector-beings for a Tibetan Buddhist friend. Although he is a traditional Buddhist, he asked me to journey to see what my spirits said about the way the thangka had to be painted. On the journey I was taken to see a spirit representative of the powerful and downright terrifying central figure in this thangka, and given the empowerments I needed, as well as instruction about all the ceremonies I had to do in order to paint the thangka correctly. I told all this to my Buddhist friend who agreed with everything, and told me to paint the thangka as the spirits had said. I have learned to trust the spirits - they know far more than I do!

Are there any items you personally wouldn't make?

That depends on the heat of the bank managers breath (laughs)! But yes - of course there are. I would not make objects that are intended to manipulate people or events, or used to have power over other people. But then, in a way all objects do that - if I make a feather fan for healing work you could say on one level it will be used to manipulate energy.

I guess it depends on the nature of the manipulation. Basically, if I sensed it was for a dark purpose, I wouldn't touch it with a bargepole. The same with the materials. You could give me a beautiful animal skin to use, but if I sensed it didn't want to be part of the item, I would honour my feeling and the skin's message to me, and not use it.

How do you put a price on your work? If your work is sacred how can you charge for it?

Well, I have to eat. And sometimes a piece of craftwork takes a long time. A pipe bag, for instance, you are talking about maybe forty or sixty or even more hours of concentrated beadwork. Money is how we trade in this culture, so that's the trade I have to have. I do make things for free for some people, sometimes, it depends on the person, the timing and the object.

Sometimes I trade and sometimes I ask that the person give me a gift in return, because sometimes you can't put a financial value on the work. Sometimes I make things and I don't know who they are going to go to in the end, but I make them and give them away to the person who feels right.

What would you say this work has taught you?

It's taught me a load about energy and the dance of spirit and matter, and that has made me more sensitive, more aware of the energies of things, places and people. I have also had a chance to explore the wonderful world of sacred objects which I don't think I will ever be bored with. The creative dance between humans and the sacred is breathtaking.

You used to teach quite a few workshops about sacred craft and shamanism, but recently you have not been so active; are you planning to do any more teaching?

Yes. I like teaching, as it is a great way for me to learn too, and I get a buzz from seeing people feel that poetry start to stir inside them, seeing them learn to listen to the voice of Spirit. Making things is fun, but much more importantly, I think it's absolutely fundamentally essential for us as healthy human beings. I think creativity and a connection to the sacred is a big part of our deep human nature.

And because I see a lot of people who have had creative disempowerment pushed into them all their lives, I feel the need to pull that glob of disempowerment out of them and coax them to gain their power back, and then they begin to realise that spirit talks to them just like it talks to me, and then they trust their guts more and realise they can make things too... that's real magic!

But no, I have not been teaching recently. I've really been on an intense personal journey I guess. A couple of years ago I was in great danger of going blind because of an unexpected serious eye condition and was put on heavyweight drugs to help save my eyesight, for which I needed all the personal and sacred space I could get.

I have also been exploring Tibetan and Mongolian shamanic traditions which have taken my personal practice to a new place, and I've begun doing ceremonial healing work for people at the demand of my spirits, so all of that has eaten up a lot of the time I had for teaching.

But the poetry of things and ceremony is my life, so I daresay I'll keep muttering on to people in circles about it from time to time - I don't think I would be able to stop myself anyway, and I'm not sure anyone else could stop me either.

It's just too much fun experiencing how Spirit touches this physical world through magical objects. And besides - I like playing with beads.

Above: red silk brocade armband with cowrie shells, worn when undertaking shamanic journeys to the land of the dead

Left: beaded and tassled buckskin 'possibles' bag



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All the craftwork used to illustrate this article was made by Nicholas Wood

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