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Title: Reading a Book by Its Cover: Using Symbology to Identify a Mystery Object

Abstract: This study intends to help the Indianapolis Children’s Museum identify the origin of a beaded necklace found within their collection without an object label or number, thus making it a mystery object. This paper will compare and contrast the mystery object to a similar necklace found within the Anchorage Museum’s online collection and highlight the differences between these two items with the theory of historical particularism. This evaluation will look at the use of glass beads and animal sinew within the two necklaces to discover the period and region that they belong to. To help understand the patterns within the mystery object’s features, the unidentified object's color and number symbolism will be compared to Plains tribes' cosmologies to decipher their underlying social meanings. This will be done to pinpoint the object's culture of origin and purpose. Further, this study's goal is not to determine a definitive identity for the mystery object but to showcase a new way of investigating unidentified objects found within collections that can assist in repatriation efforts. This theory-based research seeks to help the Indianapolis Children’s Museum create a new dialog with Native tribes in hopes of bringing the unidentified object from the collection home to its rightful owners.

SLIDE 3: WHAT WE KNOW:

So far, we know that this object was found within the Indianapolis Children’s Museum’s collection without any form of identification. Additionally, we know that this object is beaded and features colors like bright blue, red, black, light and dark green, white, and a light pink on the top of the pendant.

We can also tell that the necklace itself is made out of beads. These beads are small and round with a shiny gloss on them. They seem to be made out of a smooth material that can be manipulated into the numerous colors found. There are two different sized beads on the necklace, some being smaller and others being larger. We can also see that on the pendant, there is a grouping of three vertical stripes, as well as four groupings of five red beads and seven blue beads in one grouping. Lastly, we can also notice that the beads themselves are on something that appears to be almost leather-like. Its color is almost greenish brown, and it made me wonder whether it was some sort of plant material or animal material.

SLIDE 4: COMPARISON:

With all of this in mind, I decided that my first step would be trying to find something similar to what I was looking for. I started by going on the internet and searching for things like “indigenous beading” or “indigenous beaded necklace with a long pendant on it”. While doing this, I managed to stumble upon the Anchorage Museum’s digital collection that housed this beautiful Chief’s necklace. This necklace, according to the museum's website, belonged to the Dena’ina and/or Athabascan tribes. It’s attributed to being from the 1920s and was described as, “Red and white beaded necklace with a long rectangular beaded pendant that ends with wooden tassels” (Anchorage Museum, 2024). I found that the shape of the necklace, its beading, and coloration were very different, but that this was a good starting point. I noticed that it uses similar reds and whites but lacks the very impressive dark green and black beading that was the centerpiece of my mystery object. With this in mind, I decided to go to Google Scholar and try to figure out what native groups used red, blue, white, black, and dark green in their beading. While doing that, I found Pamela S. Eldridge’s article “Color and Number Patterns in the Symbolic Cosmologies of the

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Crow, Pawnee, Kiowa, and Cheyenne”. This article was *pivotal* in my research because it gave me a better understanding of how to analyze the mystery object before me.

Eldridge, in the article, explains that things like language, numbers, and colors are distinctly influenced by a society's culture. For instance, we as Americans have been raising to equate the colors red, white, and blue to the American flag, the Fourth of July, or sometimes even just politics themselves. Similarly, Eldridge says that the theory of historical particularism, created by Franz Boas, gives a basic understanding of number and color symbology whilst also giving a window into how language influences them. Eldridge says that things like colors, numbers, and language are universal human things that every culture experiences. One could even go as far to say that their human symbols of society. Eldridge says, “To explain, according to Boas, the genius of any culture resides in its language and its related process of communication, i.e. the arts... (Boas 1908: 80)” (Eldridge, 6-7). After I read this, I found myself relying upon my sociological knowledge I gained in my undergraduate education to conceptualize this thought. If language truly is the foundation of how we as humans express ourselves, and things like art and colors are a part of that, I wondered how exactly the Dena’ina language defined things like blue, black, or green. After doing more research, I was able to find the *Dena’ina Athabascan Junior Dictionary*, compiled by Albert Wassillie. In this dictionary, I was able to find terms for black, dark blue (which can be seen in the mystery object on the top of the pendant), light blue, and green. However, in the dictionary, there were two different words for the color green. The first word was described as being green, like leaves, making the color in my mind dark but still somewhat lighter than an army or navy green. There was also a word for green wood, but nothing for a dark, rich green like the one on the mystery object necklace. This made me think that the necklace could not have belonged to the Dena’ina or Athabascan tribes of Alaska.

After this, however, I decided to return to Eldridge’s article in hopes to find some sort of meaning from the colors and numbers I was seeing.

SLIDE 5: KEY ANALYTICAL POINTS:

After realizing that I needed to find a different route to learn about the necklace, I looked towards Eldridge’s explanation of different color theories to help me come up with a conclusion on who this necklace belonged to. In the article, I found Marshall Salhins's idea of colors being cultural codes as one of the most useful ideas. Salhins believed that these codes delivered to us through things like color signal different ritual, political, or social activity. We as humans can perceive hundreds and thousands of different colors, hues, and shades, but we somehow understand what the colors blue or black look like. This is because these colors are considered cultural primary colors, or ‘simple colors’ (Eldridge, 17). These colors can be considered the most singled out or distinct colors within specific cultures that reflect things like social categories or hierarchies within the realm in which they function. These categories could be mythical, artistic, ritualistic, social, or even economic. To rationalize this, I used the idea of my sorority to help me. For example, I am an alumna of Alpha Chi Omega - meaning that I have been taught the ritualistic meanings of the sororities colors scarlet and olive. These colors hold mythical meaning to me and symbolize a greater, metaphorical message. Without my knowledge of the rituals of Alpha Chi Omega, these metaphors and symbolic signals would be lost to me.

Additionally, I found the theory of structuralism presented by G.H. Gombrich to be useful when approaching the mystery object as well. According to the theory, design as a universal phenomenon serves as a cognitive tool in assisting viewers in understanding cultural and artistic patterns. By applying the principles of design like repetition, balance, contrast, opposition, dominance, and harmony, the viewer can

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understand a deeper structure of an object; the deeper structure of an object can be defined as the cultural patterns layered within its use of color and design. With this in mind, one can even say that numbers fall into the category of cognitive tools to help viewers understand the cultural, ritualistic, or even artistic patterns they're seeing. For example, if you are raised in a society that believes that the number three has a mythical meaning of protection, it would make sense for a totem or amulet that you owned to have groupings of three pendants, beads, or charms on it. In these terms, the more groups of three, the more protection given to you as the handler of said object. This is how I rationalized deciphering the use of number groupings in the mystery object.

However, before diving into this theoretical work, I wanted to pin down what physical materials were being used in the mystery object and what exactly could be learned from them.

SLIDE 6: BEADWORK FINDINGS:

With this in mind, I researched different forms of indigenous beading and found significant similarities between the mystery object and the beadwork of the Crow Tribe. According to the National Park Service (NPS), the Crow tribe used borders of white beads to outline darker design areas, similarly to how the stripes on the pendant of the necklace were outlined with white. I also discovered that the line of pink beads on top of the pendant was another staple of the Crow and Cheyenne tribes, as the pink beads were traded with the Plains natives by Italian traders from Murano. Because of this, this color bead is called "Crow Rose" or sometimes "Cheyenne Pink". This hue features a combination of light blue and dusty pink. Additionally, I found another example of the use of these "Crow Rose" beads in an image of Crow-made bandolier bags on the NPS's webpage dedicated to the Crow tribe. Besides pink, these bags had light green, red, white, black, and both light and blue beadwork in geometrical shapes in stark groups of three. However, I was disappointed not to find the dark green beading in the mystery object necklace on this webpage. This was when I decided to go to the British Museum's website and search for Crow beadworking. After doing this, I found an image of a pair of moccasins that featured the dark green *and* three-stripe pattern found on the necklace's pendant. The only problem with this was that the moccasins were accredited to both the Cheyenne and Crow tribes. I decided to sit with this information for a little bit and see where it would take me.

After doing some thinking, I decided that it would be incredibly beneficial to know *how* exactly the mystery necklace was put together and with *what*. With this in mind, I decided to do some research on different ways that Crow and Cheyenne did their beadwork and with the materials they used. After looking very closely at the necklace, I decided that it appeared to be done using an overlay stitch on the top and bottom of the pendant and a modified lazy stitch, or "Crow stitch", on the horizontal parts of the necklace (the three stripes and the part that goes around your neck). According to the NPS, when using an overlay stitch, the beads were threaded on sinew, a material that comes from the connecting tendons of animals like buffalo, goat, or deer, primarily by women that aimed to bead curved lines or tie down lines of white beads to outline darker areas, similarly to the three-color striped pendant on the mystery object. The NPS continues by saying that when Crow women used the modified lazy stitch, beads were placed on top of the material being used in parallel rows and sown down after. These rows that were created were then used to fill large areas, again pointing to the pendant part of the mystery necklace. Interestingly, in *Beads: Symbols of Indigenous Cultural Resilience and Value* by Malinda Joy Gray, it says that for many indigenous cultures, beadwork designs come from dreams. With this in mind, I wonder if this piece correlates to a social ritual centered around dreams, like the Cooked Meat Singing, a dream feast. The feast was arranged in response to a dream of an individual in the community. When arranged, a message

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invited only certain people to feast, and those who came had to bring medicine rocks... Each of the guests (there were usually twenty) had a stick painted red. These sticks were placed behind the lodge pole... The feast took place at the time of the first snowfall. There was a buffalo hunt. A strip of tender meat four feet long was taken from along the backbone and used for the feast” (Eldridge, 49).

With this in mind, I decided to move forward in figuring out what exactly the beads of the necklace were made of and how that reflects on its greater identity. To answer the question of what kind of beads the mystery necklace is made with, I looked towards the Buffalo Bill Center of the West (BBCW) in Wyoming. The BBCW says that most beads being traded on the Plains were made of glass and replaced the primarily native made bone, shell, copper, and stone beads that were being used pre-contact. These beads were easily tradable because they were small and transportable on pony pack trains in the early 1800s, giving them the name “pony beads”. However, “seed beads” were still being traded throughout the Plains because they were smaller than “pony beads,” but by the 1840s, they could be sold in bulk, making it easier to mass manufacture them. Because of this, glass beads were made more uniform in shape and size, causing the Plains tribes to transition from quillworking and shell beading to glass beads from Europe. This is where the Italian traders that had the Crow Rose glass beads come into the story. With all of this being said, it’s safe to conclude that the mystery necklace was beaded using European glass beads. However, the University of Wyoming Art Museum says that these glass beads were brought by fur traders to the Plains in the early 1800s, but after 1870, the beadwork became more intricate and recognizable to each distinct tribe. With this being said, I believe that the necklace was created before the 1870s but after the early 1800s due to its use of European glass beads and its geometric, simplistic styling (University of Wyoming Art Museum, 2009, 2).

SLIDE 7: SINEW:

The next thing I wanted to focus on was the use of sinew and what exactly it was. According to a “Hunter-Gatherer Data Sheet” published by the University of Missouri, the main source of protein in the Crow’s diet was the buffalo, but they also ate things like deer, elk, badgers, skunks, and wolves. I wanted to see if there was any other use for materials made out of any of these animals, and I found that the buffalo was used to create things like rawhide and shields. Further, this data sheet mentions numerous times the importance of the buffalo to the Crow for customary, political, and ritualistic reasons. The University of Missouri says that it was customary for men to prepare buffalo sausage when on a warpath to the other men with them as a form of luck for the war party. Additionally, buffalo hunts were one of the only times that the Crow had a centralized form of political power, because men would do four required deeds that were necessary to becoming chief, thus giving the man who completes these acts the power to serve as chief and to decide when and where the village should be moved. Ritualistically, buffalo sinew was used to carry out death rituals involving tipi covers. Because of this, it would only make sense for the necklace to be beaded on buffalo sinew.

SLIDE 8: SIGNIFICANCE OF COLOR:

Now that I understood what the necklace was made with and the stitch that was used to create it, I felt comfortable moving forward in deciphering its use of color. To do this, I look towards Pamela Eldridge’s article on the Plains indigenous cosmologies. Eldridge says that color is culturally significant in the Crow universe and can be split into at least four different categories. “White (tsi’a), gray (xi’ri), blue (c’ua), black (cipita), green, yellow (cir’e), brown, and red (hicia) had specific social function... Special colors and furs were used for dress and for ritual objects” (Eldridge, 41). Continually, the article says that white had a symbolic magical element and hinted towards the supernatural and even death (Eldridge 41). Additionally, the color white represented Crow garden magic that was centered around white flowers of

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the tobacco plant. According to Eldridge, tobacco was linked with white medicine and power. “Thus, a ritual was needed in order to understand what conditions tobacco might or might not be safely used. The Crow would often sleep, seeking vision, in the tobacco garden” (Eldridge, 41-42). To go along with this, white symbolized ghost energy, something that alerted the Crow to things like poisoning, illness, accident, and even supernatural situations. Because of this, white has been correlated with the Sun Dance, a ritual done for an individual to receive the right to avenge a death (Eldridge, 42).

Continually, the color blue was considered to correlate with the Morning Star, magical transport, and the moon. However, Eldridge mentions that there are no correlations between the color blue and any known rituals revolving around the moon or its phases. Black, however, is the color of strength, magical protection, revenge, and supernatural assistance. In a Crow folktale, it can even be found that black alludes to immortality and power. “The boy got the black horse the river man had told him about... The boy painted his horse... put a plume under each hoof and came on the ice... He could not be killed” (Eldridge, 44). Because of this, the color black has been tied to the supernatural, derived from nature and the power of survival. This was incredibly interesting because it made me like maybe the necklace has some form of ritualistic meaning, especially because of its use of magical colors like white and black.

Eldridge goes on to discuss how the Crow used to paint their faces red and that the color can be categorized with magic sticks, the hunt, and water. In folklore, these sticks belonged to Red-Woman, who was shown with a magic stick. She often appeared at places where things would be skinned, desiring some form of meat. Because Red-Woman was associated with the hunt and water, she was also associated with the spring. Red-Woman also alludes to the presence of the Seven Dipper Stars, whom she killed and made a part of the night sky. Interestingly, red points to the Cooked Meat Singing ritual. With this in mind, it's interesting to note that the beaded mystery necklace has 19 larger glass beads; even though there are only 19 red beads, could this be an allusion to the Cooked Meat Singing ritual?

SLIDE 9: SIGNIFICANCE OF NUMBER:

In terms of Crow number symbology, the number three symbolized ritual fertility. According to Eldridge, “In the folktale “The Dwarf’s War” three symbolizes magical sexual encounter and was classified with physical weakness. To elaborate, a young man was counseled by an older woman. The advice given the youth was sexual in nature and concerned with his immediate safety. According to the folktale: three (d’awi) lovely Crow women were tanning hides in a nice tipi and were sexually available. The old advisor was concerned that the young man would be helpless among them. The old woman (said) “she (one of the young women) will say, “Let us sleep with you and then we’ll let you go.” “Of course you’ll be helpless and do it”. This folktale possibly provided mythological justification for ceremonies such as the Crazy Women’s Dance” (Eldridge, 37-38). The Crazy Women’s Dance consisted of one woman that carried a six-foot pole and sleigh bells. This woman acted as the leader of the group while partners kissed and painted one another’s faces with a red strip around one eye. This is interesting to acknowledge because of the use of red in the necklace and the three stripes on the pendant.

To continue, the number three is very closely correlated to the number four to the Crow. Four was considered one of the most important numbers to the Crow because it represented the supernatural and completion. It symbolized spirit guardians and the spirit world while also being the sun’s number. In Crow cosmology, the world was created by four ducks, therefore explaining why the Crow mostly organized themselves into groups of four when doing rituals and supernatural activities. Further, the number four was necessary for the four seasons through the use of the colors red, yellow (perhaps maybe this is what the green stands for), white, and black in the rituals of the Little Dog Society; the Little Dog

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Society sang songs and whistled into the four cardinal directions for ritual healing. Also, the number four was important for death rituals. “When an individual died his body was wrapped in the yellow part of the tipi cover called aede’cire... Then the body was placed in the fork of a tree or on a burial scaffold of four forked poles” (Eldridge, 31-32).

Another sacred number to the Crow is the number seven. The glass beaded necklace features one group of seven light blue beads, making the number seven pivotal to understanding the necklace. According to Eldridge, the number seven has several different meanings for the Crow. “It symbolized supernatural assistance in the face of danger, the consumption of something forbidden, and the subsequent transformation of human children into stars” (Eldridge, 32). Continually, seven was also a number linked to creation and sacred medicine counseling. Things like the Seven Star persons and the Seven Cranes were seen as counselors to the Crow, even crediting the Seven Cranes of giving the Crow the sweat lodge. Because of this, seven was very important when it came to sweat lodge construction and procedures. “Here again surfaced the mysterious relationship between the number seven...and tobacco. The sweat lodge was a place where there was tobacco, healing and ritual sharing. Seven was the number of tobacco” (Eldridge, 34).

With all of this being said, it’s incredibly interesting seeing the ties to the necklace through color. However, it is safe to say that the necklace does hold some social meaning amongst the Crow tribes.

SLIDE 10: HOW DOES THIS ALL MAKE SENSE?

Ultimately, the objective of this research is not to give a definitive answer on what this beaded necklace was or is, it’s to create an open dialogue between the Indianapolis Children’s Museum as it’s custodian, and indigenous tribes as it’s owner. By applying the linguistic theory of historical particularism created by Franz Boas, we can agree that the piece does not belong to the Dena’ina tribes of Alaska due to the lack of a word for dark green, a color clearly used in this necklace. Furthermore, by using the ideas of theorist G.H. Gombrich, we can tell that because of the type, color and designs created with the beads used point towards the piece being created by a Crow woman, especially with the use of the modified lazy stitch, something that was even nicknamed the “Crow stitch”. With this being said, these things also tell us that it was produced sometime after the early 1800s and before the 1870s. Continually, by looking at the colors of the necklace through the lens of theorist Marshall Sahlins, we can see that it gives social coding that alludes to things like nature magic, ghost energy, fertility, tobacco, and rituals like the Cooked Meat Singing and the Crazy Woman Dance. Based upon it’s use of numbers like three, five, and seven, we can tell that points towards some form of Crow cosmology.

Despite knowing all this, it does not mean that I feel like it’s appropriate to define what this beautiful piece is. As a growing and learning academic, I have learned that it’s okay to ask questions, and admit that you do not know things. It’s important that we within the anthropological field do not forget that, because if we do, we tend to place blinders on ourselves. We loss sight of what the point of it all actually is, and that’s giving groups like Native Americans the agency to decide their own destiny, including their material remains. With that being said, I will leave you with this.

After using things like colors and numbers to figure everything I could about this object, I found myself analyzing almost everything I owned the same way. Everyday, we walk past things that we take for granitate because we do not recognize the social messaging behind the details hidden in it all. But, when you really pay attention, it can be so incredibly rewarding. When it comes to anthropolglcal work, paying

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attention and using *everything* you have access to places a new tool in your investigative toolkit that gives an item found in a collection some form of identity.

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