



**Ida Claymore, Suitcase, Lakota, Minneconjou Lakota, North America, United States, Great Plains region, 20th century, beads, hide, metal, oilcloth, thread 2010.19**

### **Suitcase Stories**

This beaded suitcase holds many stories. The first story is about the artist, Edith or “Ida” Claymore, a Minneconjou (Min-na-CON-ju) Lakota artist. Claymore lived on the Standing Rock Reservation, located on the North and South Dakota border, where she made this beaded bag. Claymore applied traditional native beadwork to a non-traditional object, in this case a western-style satchel. The bag’s beaded décor tells another story, of a traditional Lakota courting scene. A young man brings a gift of many horses to his potential mate. She accepts the gift and, in doing so, accepts his proposal. In this way, this bag represents the many worlds and identities of Native people living within two cultures—native and non-native, traditional and contemporary.

### **Creativity from Confinement**

This beaded suitcase was produced around 1880 to 1909 in response to life on the reservation. By the 1870s, the U.S. government had begun to confine Native Americans by force to reservations, internment camps, and boarding schools. The reservation era between 1880 and 1960 was a time of profound cultural upheaval for Native people of the Great Plains. Paradoxically, while the reservation period suppressed male artistic traditions, which often centered on themes of war and hunting, women’s arts flourished. Confinement and government bans on many traditional activities created a period of “enforced leisure,” allowing women time to work on their art. The result was a tremendous blossoming of beadwork, traditionally done by females.

Prior to Native people’s confinement on the reservation, most beadwork was applied to objects created for tribal use. With the introduction of new materials introduced by European-Americans, Native women artists began to experiment, creating marvelous hybrid objects. They meticulously embellished non-traditional objects with tiny glass beads, like this western-made suitcase. Many Plains artists appropriated western motifs, such as the American flag and alphabetic inscriptions, fusing them with traditional Native motifs and designs in their beadwork.

Bags were a common medium for beadwork in the Plains tradition, especially during the highly nomadic period following the arrival of the Spanish to North America. Decorative items needed to be portable, and bags were essential for moving camp. This bag, a factory-produced hard-sided suitcase, updates the tradition for the reservation era. Beaded bags were made for the western markets, but they were also created as honor gifts to be given to family and friends to mark a special occasion, such as a wedding.

### **Tradition and Innovation**

These new beaded forms were among the many innovative ways Native artists adopted and adapted western goods to Native traditions. Native beadwork came to the Americas with European traders in the 19th century. A handful of early glass beads were so valued, they might be traded for a horse. By the middle of the 19th century, beads had become a “traditional” medium of Plains culture. Beadwork surpassed quillwork as a means to decorate traditional Native clothing and utilitarian and ceremonial objects. Quillwork requires weaving together flattened and dyed porcupine quills into bison, deer, or elk hide; glass beads, by contrast, are durable, come in a vivid range of colors, and are more easily sewn onto hide or cloth. Distinct regional or tribal difference in style and technique developed in beadwork. Lakota beadwork on the late 19th century is often known to have a fully beaded background of one color, often blue or white.

On this suitcase, Claymore applied beads to deer hide and then attached the hide to a commercially made leather and metal suitcase. To create the design, glass beads are attached to buffalo or deer hide several at a time by a technique called the lane stitch.

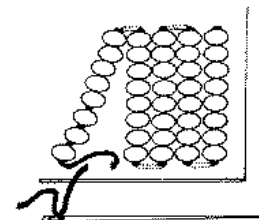


Illustration adapted from “Sioux Style Lazy Stitch Beadwork,” by Steve Nimerfro  
Originally published in *Moccasin Tracks*, March 1982

To illustrate this story of courtship, Claymore used pictographic conventions usually found on traditional Native painted or drawn works. Pictographs are stories that are told through pictures. Beaded narratives created by Plains women during the reservation era were an extension of

pictographs that had been drawn by men for many generations. On the Great Plains, men's pictographs usually recorded stories of battle, visionary experiences, hunting, and courting. Women mostly beaded geometric designs, as found atop and on either end of the suitcase. When women did create the rare object with pictographs, they usually depicted domestic and courting scenes.

### **A Story in Beads**

This beaded suitcase tells the story of a courtship in two phases. The upper scene shows the suitor with an eagle feather in blue wearing a distinctive pipe bag. He is presenting a gift of many horses, represented by rows of horse heads, to his prospective wife. She stands in a fine red robe beside a row of cooking kettles. The second part of the story appears in the lower half, as a girl in blue leads a gift horse bearing the man's pipe bag to the woman in her camp. Her acceptance of the gift, and the man as her husband, is illustrated by her taking the reins of the horse. She stands beside a rack laden with her handiwork—quilled hides, pipe bags, and beaded blankets. The camp scene, featuring a tipi, implies a traditional Lakota setting. It is the story of a union between an accomplished horseman and a woman highly skilled in domestic and fine arts.

The other side of the suitcase features two cowboys lassoing cattle, both steers with identifiable brands. Claymore left no record to explain any possible connection between the two narratives. It is possible that she was showing the first scene to illustrate the traditional ways of Plains people, and the second to reflect the realities of contemporary life on the reservation.

### **About the Artist**

The beaded signature suggests the artist's name is Ida or Ede Claymore. The signature is difficult to read, but it is likely a nickname. Provenance records state that Edith Gilbert was born in 1858 and married to Joseph Claymore by Native custom around 1878. They had seven children together. A photograph in the collection of the State Historical Society of North Dakota shows a couple, identified as Joseph and Mrs. Claymore (Joseph's wife Katherine, whom he married after Edith) of Standing Rock Reservation, standing behind a table full of beaded suitcases and satchels. The MIA's suitcase, with cattle roping scene, is seen in front of Joseph. This photograph was probably taken at a fair around 1914, at which the items on the table were

available for purchase. Mary Anne Victoria Claymore owned this beaded suitcase prior to the museum purchasing it at auction. Mary Anne is the daughter of Joseph and his wife Katherine, whom he married after Edith's death in 1909.

Only a very few beaded suitcases exist. All known examples were produced by the Lakota, from either Cheyenne River or Standing Rock Reservation in the Dakotas. Claymore's suitcase is considered to be one of the finest. A perfect illustration of resiliency and creativity, her work beautifully blends tradition and innovation.

### **Questions for Discussion**

Where on this suitcase do you find pictographs—pictures that tell a story?

Where do you find geometric designs?

Using the images on the suitcase, create a story. How does it begin, what happens next, and how will it end?

In what ways does this suitcase tell us about life on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota in the early 20th century? Consider the object, the materials, and the images.

Edith Claymore created objects that incorporated the traditional and contemporary. In what ways do people today also combine traditional designs with contemporary objects?

If you were to decorate a suitcase or backpack with images that told stories about your life and identity, what would you include?