

Artist: Aho Dene Native Crafts  
Credit: BDI/C



## Quillwork on Birchbark

Birchbark baskets  
are commonly  
decorated with quills.

After the design is drawn,  
small holes, for the quills to go  
into, are punched along the edges of the design with an  
awl. Coloured quills are flattened and inserted into the  
holes in a zig-zag pattern to create the design. On the  
underside, the quills are pushed down and the ends are  
hidden with an inner piece of bark.

## Other types of Quillwork

Other types of quillwork are less common. These include  
tipi quilling, quill wrapping on rawhide and quill plaiting.  
Sometimes bird quills are used in edging decoration.

There are several things to note when looking at a piece of  
quillwork. The quills should be shiny, indicating they have  
not been damaged. Rows of quillwork should be even and  
black quill ends should not be visible unless they are part  
of the design. Finally, there should be no sharp edges.



### FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

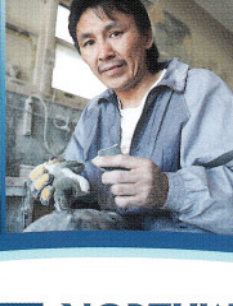
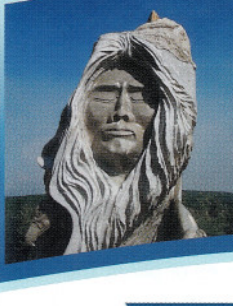
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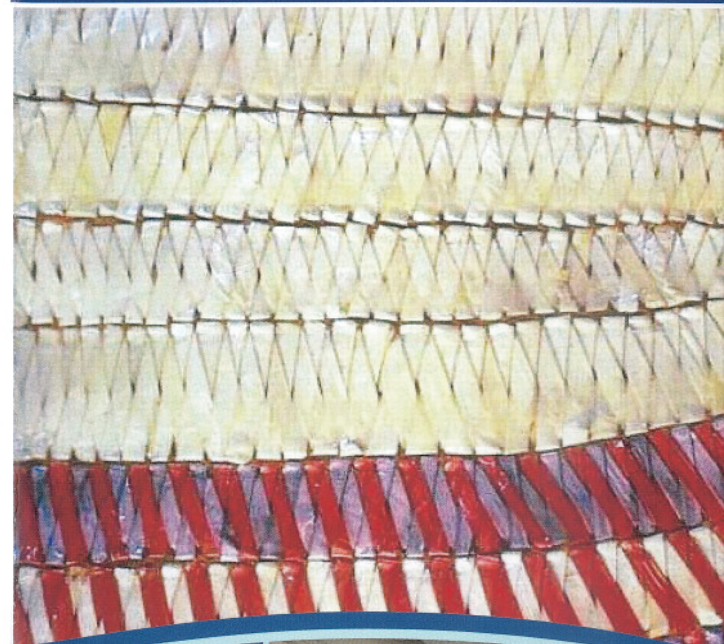


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# Quillwork

From Canada's Northwest Territories







Using the quills of the porcupine, this intricate art is used to decorate hide, fabric, and birchbark.

A technique practiced for centuries in many parts of North America, quillwork was the primary form of decoration by Dene women in regions where porcupines could be found. Around 1840, quillwork began to decline as glass beads became readily available to women in the Northwest Territories. Quillwork requires a high degree of patience, dexterity and attention to detail. Beads are much easier to use and do not need the difficult preparation that quills do.

Today, women in Fort Liard, Fort Simpson, Fort Providence and Jean Marie River continue to create this intricate style of decoration on clothing and accessories.

## The Quills

A healthy adult porcupine has approximately 30,000 quills. The snow white quills of a young porcupine turn yellow as the animal ages. Quills can be easily removed from a dried porcupine skin as they are needed or they can be pulled from a live animal. Throwing a blanket over a porcupine causes it to curl up into a ball, allowing easy access to the quills. The quills are carefully removed

with bare hands, gloves or pliers. The quills vary in length from  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch on the face to 4 inches on the back of the animal. Most of quills on the side and tail measure between  $2\frac{1}{2}$  - 3 inches in length.



After the quills are pulled, they are washed in warm water and detergent. At least nine changes of water are needed to remove the natural grease. Proper cleaning and rinsing is necessary to prevent the quills from yellowing over time. The rinsed quills are spread out over towels or newspaper to dry before dyeing.

Quills are coloured using commercial dyes. The quills are soaked in the dye for about 30 minutes to allow them to pick up the vibrant colours. The dyed quills are rinsed with vinegar to help keep the colour from fading.



Before commercial dyes were available, berries, flowers, plants, and lichen were used to create dyes. Quills were boiled in the dye mixture for about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  hours until they took on the desired colour. Dock root was used to produce brighter and stronger colours. Adding currants or gooseberries helped prevent the colours from fading.

Once the quills are dyed, they are allowed to dry for several days before the root end of the quill is carefully clipped to allow the air to escape. Quills are made pliable by placing them in a damp cloth, or in the mouth, and allowing the natural action of saliva to soften them. If required, the quill can be flattened by pinching it and forcing the air out.

Each quill must be softened again just before it is used. The quills dry and harden quickly so the quillworker must work fast.

Traditionally, quills were fastened with sinew. However, thread or dental floss are more commonly used today.

## Woven Quillwork

Quills can be woven into decorative bands using a bow loom strung with sinew or thread. Coloured quills and

intervening threads are woven in by the quillworker to create a design. Zig-zag and diamond patterns are the most common. Bird, animal or floral designs are rare. New quills are added as colour changes are desired or the length of the quill runs out. The quill band will lie flat if even tension has been maintained during weaving. This demonstrates the skill and experience of the weaver.



## Sewn Quillwork

Embroidered quillwork is usually found on hide clothing or accessories. Designs are drawn directly onto the hide either by freehand or from a pattern.

There are several traditional techniques of quill embroidery and many variations. Basic quillwork stitches include zig-zag (overhand), straight (band), line, checkerboard, rick-rack, sawtooth, diamond, triangle, and circle quilling.

The basic zig-zag technique involves folding flattened quills over two parallel lines of thread. A quill is inserted under the first stitch, and folded over and inward so the thread is hidden. This is repeated, back and forth, between the parallel thread stitches as the quilling pattern emerges. New quills are placed under the old allowing different colours of quills to be added into the design.

