Lenape Porcupine Quillwork

Porcupine quillwork, often called quill embroidery, remains a living Lenape art that we practice as an expression of our relationship to land, identity, and continuity, rooted in a time before the bead trade when our designs begin with the beings and places that sustain us: the porcupine whose quills we gather with respect, the plants, barks, roots, and minerals that provide natural dyes, and the hide, birchbark, wood, and woven fibers that carry our patterns. We prepare quills by cleaning, sorting, softening, flattening, and dyeing them, then apply them using wrapping, plaiting, weaving, and embroidery techniques that demand patience and precision, creating strong bands of color and finely ordered designs that hold as much meaning as beauty. We bring quillwork onto the things that move with us through daily life and ceremony, including regalia and dance items, moccasins, leggings, garters, belts, sashes, and the edges of hide garments, as well as bags and pouches for medicines, tobacco, and personal tools, birchbark baskets and containers, bark cases, and other vessels where decoration strengthens the object's purpose and helps it "speak" about who we are. We also carry quillwork into jewelry and adornment: earrings, hair ornaments, cuffs, chokers, and decorative bands, so our art stays close to the body and close to the teachings.

We continue to favor design languages that emphasize balance, reciprocity, and clarity through symmetry, repeating geometry, and high-contrast color fields that remain legible at a distance. In our practice, quillwork is not separate from function; it is a way of keeping knowledge alive through making, passing techniques and patterns across generations so the work remains both personal and communal, and so the wisdom of our ancestors continues to guide us toward a sustainable future.

Porcupine Quillwork in the Delaware Lenape Tradition

References that ground this tradition in the ethnographic record and museum collections include object-based documentation in the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian collection records, which describe Eastern Woodlands quillwork materials and techniques through cataloged examples.

M.R. Harrington's The Indians of New Jersey: Dickon Among the Lenapes *(Rutgers University Press, 1938), Frank G. Speck's writings on Delaware/Lenape culture and material life (including* The Delaware Indians: A Study in Ethnic Identification *in later reprint editions)*

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Porcupine Quillwork Instructions

Materials Needed

- Porcupine quills (natural or dyed)
- Leather (preferably brain-tanned or thin commercial tanned)
- Leather sewing needles
- Fine nylon thread
- Sharp scissors
- Ruler
- Pencil, pen, or permanent marker
- Small bowl of room-temperature water
- Paper towels
- Teaspoon (for flattening quills)

Note: Porcupine quills can be naturally colored or dyed.

Planning

You always want to have an idea of what you want your project to look like. Take the time to sketch on paper before marking out lines on the leather. Make a paper template of your project so minimal leather is wasted.

Preparation Steps

1. Cut out leather according to a paper template.
2. Draw lines on leather with a pencil and ruler to match your desired design.
3. Cut approximately 2 feet of nylon thread and thread the leather sewing needle.
4. Place desired quills in a small bowl of room-temperature water for 5–10 minutes. Then place them on a paper towel before starting the work session.

PORCUPINE QUILLWORK

Applying Porcupine Quills Using "Zigzag" Technique

1. After threading the needle, create a small knot at the end of the thread, then push the needle through the back of the leather, coming up on the outer line where the quillwork will begin.
2. For the "zigzag" technique, you will need to flatten the quills first. On a flat surface, use the back of a teaspoon to hold the end of the quill, apply slight pressure, and slide the spoon upward a few times until the quill is flat. *Note: The sharp end of the quill should be snipped off after it is removed from the water.*
3. Place the first quill down with the end facing inward at the top of the line directly beneath where the thread was pulled through. Sew down the quill, going all the way through the leather to anchor it. Next, push the needle back up through the leather at the top of the opposite line.

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4. Fold the quill over to the opposite line and sew it down, going all the way through the leather as in the previous step.
5. Fold the quill back to the beginning side, slightly overlapping the quill onto itself. You will notice the zigzag pattern starting to appear. Continue sewing down and folding until there is not enough quill left to complete another fold.

Adding a Quill

- Cut off the excess of the last quill, leaving a small tail.
- Lift the quill, loosen the last stitch slightly, and insert the new quill.
- Retighten the stitch.
- Move forward, folding the remainder of the previous quill with the new one, and continue the technique.

Applying "Line Stitch" Technique

(Quills do not need flattening.)

1. Start by pushing the threaded needle halfway through the leather at the point where you want to begin the line stitch.
2. Create a loop by making a small backstitch. This loop will be used to sew down the first quill.
3. After sewing down the quill, guide the thread under it and do another backstitch about the width of the quill. While pulling the thread tight, you will notice the quill has spun around slightly. Repeat: guide the thread under the quill again, then do another back stitch, watching for the quill to twist again. You will notice a twisted rope effect being created. Continue until just before you run out of quill.
4. Adding quill to this style is the same as with the zigzag style. Lift the last quill, loosen the stitch slightly, and insert another quill. Then retighten the stitch. The tail of this quill will be snipped off once you have completed the design.
5. To end the technique, after reaching your desired design, sew through the leather and make a knot on the back of the project, securing the work on the other side.

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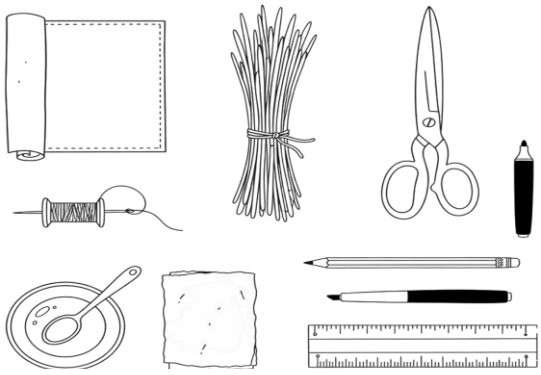
Porcupine Quillwork Instructions

PAGE 1

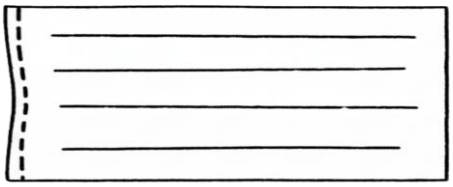


Materials Needed

- Porcupine quills (natural or dyed)
- Leather sewing needles
- Fine nylon thread
- Sharp scissors
- Ruler
- Pencil, pen, or permanent marker
- Small bowl of water
- Paper towels
- Teaspoon (for flattening quills)

Note: Porcupine quills can be naturally colored or dyed.

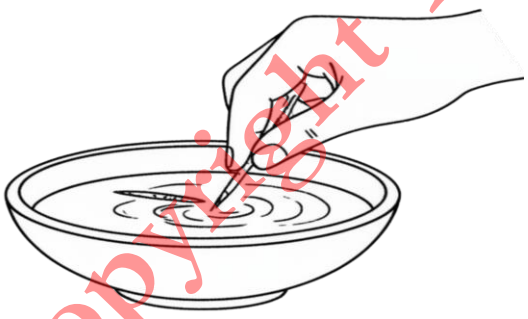
Steps 1 - 3



Preparation Steps

1. Sketch on paper before marking out lines on the leather.
2. Cut out leather according to a paper template.
3. Draw lines on leather with a pencil and ruler to match your desired design.
4. Cut approximately 2 feet of nylon thread and thread the leather sewing needle.
5. Place desired quills in a small bowl of room-temperature water for 5–10 minutes. Then place them on a paper towel before starting the work session.
6. Snip the tips of quills.
7. Flatten quills with a spoon.

Step 5



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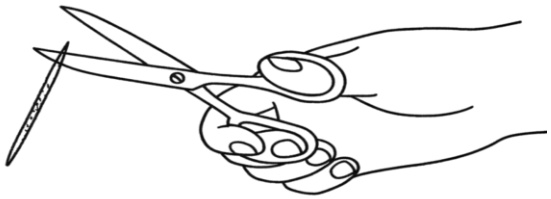
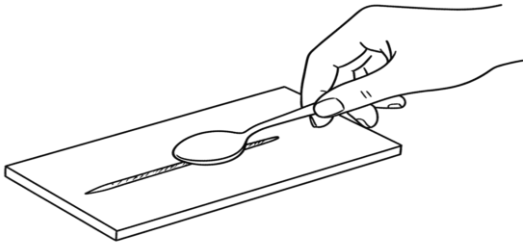


Step 7



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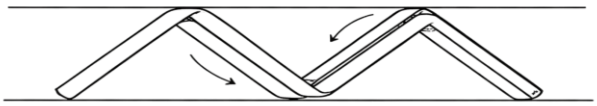
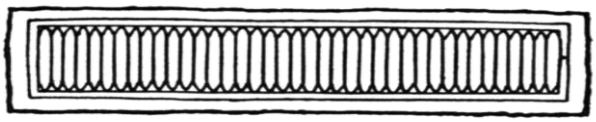


Applying Porcupine Quills Using "Zigzag" Technique

1. Knot sinew or nylon thread.
2. Flatten the quills first. On a flat surface, use the back of a teaspoon.
3. Place the first quill down with the end facing inward at the top of the line directly beneath.
4. Sew down the quill, push the needle back up through the leather at the top of the opposite line.
5. Fold the quill over to the opposite line and sew it down,
6. Fold the quill back to the beginning side,



Adding a Quill

1. Cut off the excess of the last quill, leaving a small tail.
2. Lift the quill, loosen the last stitch slightly, and insert the new quill.
3. Retighten the stitch.
4. Move forward, folding the remainder of the previous quill with the new one, and continue the technique.

Applying "Line Stitch" Technique

(Quills do not need flattening.)

1. Push the threaded needle halfway through the leather.
2. Create a loop by making a small backstitch. This loop will be used to sew down the first quill.
3. Guide the thread under it and do another backstitch about the width of the quill.
4. Adding quill to this style is the same as with the zigzag style. Lift the last quill, loosen the stitch slightly, and insert another quill.
5. To end, sew through the leather and make a knot on the back.

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