

FASHION

How Virtual Beading Circles Are Empowering Indigenous Women

BY CHRISTIAN ALLAIRE

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Tania Larsson's beading circle, conducted on Zoom Photo: Courtesy of Tania Larsson

In indigenous communities across North America, beadwork artists often gather at community centers to work on their latest pieces. These beading circles, as they're called, are more than just a social event. They're considered a safe space where community members can share and exchange their different

techniques, while providing emotional support for one another. The functions have true healing powers—a form of therapy if you will, that is experienced one stitch at a time.

These crucial gatherings, however, have suddenly come to a halt. The coronavirus pandemic has called for individuals to socially distance and stay at home, meaning these beading circles have paused. But one indigenous creative is keeping the spirit of these cultural meetings alive—and she’s doing so online.

Tania Larsson—a Gwich’in jeweler based in Yellowknife, Canada—kicked off a series of virtual beading circles last week. Her gatherings, conducted via the app Zoom, offer an online meeting space where beaders of all skill levels can gather to talk through their various projects. The aim is to keep creative morale high. Larsson initially got the idea earlier this month, after partaking in a Zoom meeting for Dene Nahjo, the indigenous collective that she is a part of. “It felt really good to have a group where we could check in with each other,” says Larsson. “It brought anxiety down and I thought, If I feel this good after this call, I should just organize a beading circle.”

Beadwork by Tania Larsson Photo: Courtesy of Tania Larsson

The artist hosted her first two Zoom beading circles last week. “It was kind of short notice: I threw out the idea on Instagram, and lots of people got excited about it,” Larsson said. For her first session, eight indigenous beaders from across North America ended up joining in, which lasted over three hours; for the second, about a dozen logged on. “We got to talk about our projects that we’re working on,” says Larsson, adding that they also shared tips about how to stay positive amid the current pandemic.

In that first session, the artists worked on a variety of projects. One sewed together miniature leggings for a doll that she was creating; others worked on statement earrings or a traditional moss bag. “The beauty about taking part in beading circles is that you can ask for technical help,” says Larsson. “This is how I got better at beadwork. I sat next to Judy Lafferty, who’s one of the most amazing beadworkers—she’s a master artist in the Northwest Territories.”

Beadwork by Michaila Taylor Photo: Courtesy of Michaila Taylor

One participant in Larsson’s first Zoom circle was Michaila Taylor, a Yup’ik artist and beader in Portland, Oregon. While the pair had never met, Taylor says Larsson’s virtual meetup came at the right time. She had been in self-isolation for five days, and was craving social interaction. “I usually bead with other people anywhere from three to five times a week,” says Taylor. “Knowing that we were all isolated and could empathize with each other on that level was really helpful and special. It speaks to the adaptability, perseverance, and resilience of indigenous people—that even through hardship, we continue to find ways to support each other and laugh together.”

Another participant on the first Zoom was Melaw Nakehk'o, who is Dene and Denesuline, from the Liidlii Kue First Nation in the Northwest Territories. This was Nakehk'o's first time doing a beading circle online, but the experience helped her feel a sense of calm, as well as a connection to her roots. "My late grandmother taught me how to bead when I was very young," she says. "I feel close to her [when] I bead and draw her flowers and designs. I love to trace her flowers and think of her hands, think that she must have loved doing this kind of work as much as I do."

Beadwork by Melaw Nakehk'o Photo: Courtesy of Melaw Nakehk'o

Larsson's Zoom beadwork sessions have inspired other artists to use the craft for good as well. Jamie Okuma—a Shoshone-Bannock and Luiseño artist based on the La Jolla Indian Reservation in Pauma Valley, California—has been in the process of developing online beadwork tutorials for her 46,000 followers. In the near future, she plans to collaborate with a number of small indigenous businesses. If her followers purchase a piece from a certain set of brands, she will send a number of them their own beading kit and host a Zoom tutorial on how to use it. "You learn from each other," says Okuma. "Everybody beads differently; there's no one way to do it." The artist also says there's power in hosting a circle now, given the circumstances. "If there's a bright side to any of this, it is making us have more human contact," she says.



j.okuma
46.9k followers



Larsson agrees about the healing power of the beading circle. “There’s an underlying panic and anxiety, and people really fearing for things,” she says. “Whenever you’re in a circle, you get to talk about those anxieties. It’s a nice way to be able to keep practicing our culture, sharing with each other, and giving each other tips on how to deal with the situation right now, so that you don’t feel alone.”



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