

# WEAVING TRADITION

Weaving fabrics from flexible materials like plant fibers and animal fur has been happening since time immemorial. The need to make clothing to protect people from the elements is as old as humanity. But the styles and methods of making fabrics differ from place to place and across time. It is especially interesting that in most cultures weaving has been strongly associated with women. So, in this article, we carry on the celebration of women's history recognized last month.

Weaving textiles is not just a utilitarian task. Textiles are embedded with cultural symbolism that requires special skill and knowledge to produce. Think about patchwork that was first created by Seminole women in the late 1800s and continues as a Seminole tradition today. Patchwork designs carry meaning that communicate specific ideas. The artistic skill required to make patchwork includes special knowledge of the symbols that adorn the garments. The same is true for clothing across cultures, and Indigenous people in the Americas have produced some of the most beautiful and useful examples of clothing in the world.

Since they are made from organic materials like plant fibers and animal fur, textiles do not usually preserve well over time. They require special contexts, those that lack oxygen, to keep from decaying. One example is from peat bogs in northern Florida, where 7,000-8,000-year-old mats, bags, and baskets woven from palm fibers were preserved in the muck and identified by archaeologists. The Seminole ancestors that made these textiles showed great skill, weaving fabrics that had as many as 26 fibers per inch! For thick fibers, that's a tight weave even by today's standards.

Indigenous people of the Americas who craft textiles today are carrying on a tradition that goes back hundreds of generations and may represent one of the very oldest skills still practiced by Indigenous artists.



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**Photo:** Seminole woman weaving textiles at the Tropical Hobbyland tourist camp, Miami, Florida. (ca. 1930)  
Photo by Stanley Hanson

