



MEET CHARLENE HOLY BEAR, THE LAKOTA ARTIST WHOSE BEADED VANS WENT VIRAL

BY JACKIE SIZEMORE



WHEN LAKOTA ARTIST CHARLENE HOLY BEAR POSTED A PICTURE OF THE BEADED SHOES SHE MADE FOR HER SON, SHE HAD NO IDEA THEY'D GO VIRAL OR BE FEATURED IN 'VOGUE.'

Charlene Holy Bear first learned how to bead when she was five years old. Her older sister taught her how in an effort to keep her away from messier paints. Three decades later, Holy Bear is a full-time artist, selling her beaded creations through her website, art shows and markets. Her older sister, [Rhonda Holy Bear](#), who adopted Charlene, is an established artist as well, known best for her traditional Lakota dolls.

In an interview for *Crixeo*, Charlene Holy Bear talked with me about the picture of her young son's beaded Vans that led to her viral fame. "Justus was four years old, and we were going to the Gathering of Nations powwow in Albuquerque, and I didn't have enough time to get his regalia ready, much less bead them, and so I beaded his Vans on the way there." The road trip took three days. Holy Bear took a picture of her son at the powwow and posted it to her Facebook page. Afterward she decided she'd like to have her own beaded Vans, but as so many artists have experienced, life got in the way of her passion for the project. Holy Bear's own pair of Vans collected dust in a box for a year, but her plans for beading them didn't change.

Then the communications director of PayPal contacted her, citing a Pinterest image of beaded Vans. But Holy Bear hadn't posted to Pinterest. At the time, she was new to social media, just trying to figure out how to grow her network and art career. Luckily, whoever had felt inspired to pin Holy Bear's beaded Vans picture had credited the Lakota artist, allowing PayPal's Amanda Miller to find her to order a custom pair.

"It took me three or four months just to make them because it was kinda trial and error," Holy Bear explained. Today a pair of beaded Vans typically takes her two weeks to complete, though she can finish in a week if she needs to meet a tight deadline.

With her first custom order shipped, Holy Bear returned her attention to her own pair of Vans. She beaded one side and ended up showcasing the Vans at art shows, hoping they might spark interest in custom orders. It worked. Orders began trickling in, and Holy Bear documented every completed pair on [her Instagram account](#). Each post led to more interest, more followers and more custom orders.

By September 2017 the Lakota artist had attracted 20,000 followers on Instagram. With this confidence boost, she turned her attention once more to her own still-unfinished pair of Vans. "I had just started using better-quality beads, especially the metallic gold beads. I put the real 24-karat gold beads on my shoes' other side, and I immediately noticed the difference." After she shared her excitement with her Instagram followers, people began reposting the picture.

Two months later, *Vogue* called.

Then came a custom order from someone who knew the creative director at Vans.

Soon a representative of Vans directly reached out to Holy Bear. But when Holy Bear received the email asking if she needed more shoes to bead, she didn't think it could be true. "I [knew] Vans [was] very supportive of their artists. People customize their shoes, they offer customized shoes, and I just... I didn't believe them." She decided to respond anyway, just in case, explaining that she did have several custom orders to fill. The representative assured her that shoes were on the way. "The next thing I know, my FedEx guy comes walking up with a big old box of Vans."



COURTESY OF CHARLENE HOLY BEAR

According to Holy Bear, the *Vogue* article has made its way to Hong Kong, Brazil and even China. For the Lakota artist, the beaded Vans are “an exploration on modern Native identity, especially like the Natives that live in the city,” but the creations are also crossing over to non-Native fans who are drawn to the skillfully handmade art.

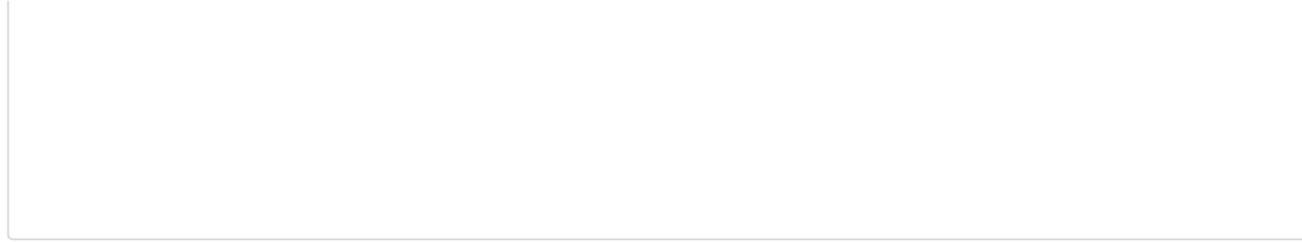
Holy Bear’s process is mostly intuitive. When she’s working on a new pattern or color scheme, the first shoe is the biggest hurdle. “I’ll put one color by another color and it doesn’t work, but I’ll keep going with it because I’m thinking I can make it work. Then, if it doesn’t work, I have to tear out all that beadwork again, reinforce where I end it, then start over.” With one shoe done, though, the second typically goes much faster.

The Lakota artist mentions two major differences between working with Vans and with traditional moccasins. The canvas of Vans is very thick, and needles frequently break when Holy Bear beads the toe area. “I’ve really gotten to know how these [Vans] shoes are constructed,” she said. In contrast, traditional moccasins are much easier to bead because the material can be laid out completely flat before the actual shoe is constructed.

Before Holy Bear gets to work on a shoe order in her home studio, she checks if the customer has color preferences. Some request a pair that looks similar to something she’s posted online. A big draw for custom shoes is that the left shoe can be different from the right. For those custom orders, Holy Bear explained, “I keep with the same rhythm and flow of the colors, but I’ll change a color to a darker green or a lighter green.”

Even pairs of factory-made shoes aren’t exactly identical, but Holy Bear sees possibility in the differences. “One shoe might be a little bit darker, more muted; the other a bit brighter. I’ll use those differences to my advantage to play with the colors, so like a darker background against a transparent bead will appear darker than it would on a white canvas.” For all the decisions that go into Holy Bear’s process, she admitted, “Most people don’t really notice the subtle differences.”





As for the beads themselves, Holy Bear works mostly by vibe. A weird color becomes a challenge to incorporate into a shoe in an interesting way. She loves going to her local bead store to look at the colors in person, but she also orders specific colors online through stores like [Shipwreck Beads](#).

One particular purple bead has turned into an ongoing quest. She first encountered the color at a Sioux Trading Post in South Dakota. Though she didn't use the beads for six months, the earrings she eventually created were a huge hit on Instagram. When she moved back to New Mexico, she saw the same color hanging on the wall of her local bead store and immediately bought the entire stock. After another artist began eyeing the same color, the bead store called Holy Bear with the news: the color had stopped being produced and the store had the last two hanks left. Holy Bear ended up splitting the last of the beads with the other artist and is waiting for another purple beading inspiration to strike sometime in the future.



COURTESY OF CHARLENE HOLY BEAR

Going globally viral is a dream for so many artists, but for Holy Bear, this road has been one of perseverance. She offered this advice to other Native artists: "Don't give up, and don't undersell yourself." She said, "I see a lot of beadwork artists who value the work and their time, but they're also in a boat where they need the money so they'll undercut themselves, and I know that because I've done it myself. I've learned a lot of hard lessons, because you're sitting there and giving away a good chunk of your time just to be able to buy groceries." But for all the times that Holy Bear thought about quitting, finding people who are enthusiastic about her art and vision has made it all worthwhile.



COURTESY OF CHARLENE HOLY BEAR

Holy Bear's journey demonstrates that artists shouldn't limit themselves to one route. "I work with beadwork, but I'm a doll artist too, and I'd never beaded Vans before in my life, and now I'm a beaded Vans person!" One spur-of-the-moment decision to creatively solve the problem of giving her son something cool to wear has opened a whole new avenue to explore.

Holy Bear, who sees herself as an artist first and Native second, has empowered other Natives with her art. Those who've purchased her beaded earrings have shared with her that wearing them helps them feel connected to their tribes. Many of the patterns are of Holy Bear's own design, but she's always happy to hear her creations inspire these feelings.

Regarding cultural appropriation by corporations, such as [Urban Outfitters using the Navajo name](#) to describe an already-trademarked design, Holy Bear said, "I'd prefer if someone wanted to wear something that was on-trend that is Native-based that they buy it from a Native artist or someone who is working with a Native artist."

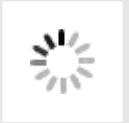
If you would like to purchase a pair of Holy Bear's famous custom-beaded Vans, there is a wait list. Her custom creations are sure to make any outfit pop with beautiful color combinations and eye-catching patterns. To see the beaded items currently available, visit her [online shop](#).

You can follow Charlene Holy Bear on social media: Instagram [@c.holybear](#) and Facebook [@CHolyBearLakotaDollArtist](#).



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