



My Favourite Indigenous Art

I saw these Kwakwaka'wakw (kwahk-wahk-ee-wahk) masks at the U'mista Cultural Centre when I visited Alert Bay in British Columbia. They caught my eye right away and I could NOT stop looking at them. They haunt my dreams to this day! Why do I like them? Well, although they're carved from wood, these masks seem alive. They have an expression, and their eyes seem to follow you. I've since been back to the U'mista Centre to learn more about the masks and Kwakwaka'wakw culture.

— Pam K., Winnipeg, Manitoba

IN THIS EDITION

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I think Métis beadwork is really beautiful. It's a unique style that was created by combining Indigenous beading techniques with European embroidery patterns. Someone told me you can identify a beader's family by the patterns or flowers in the designs. Métis beadwork designs include not just flowers but also buds, leaves, and stems. That shows a real connection to nature and the way plants grow. I like the way the beadwork makes everyday things special, like gauntlets, moccasins, and octopus bags like this one. These bags were traditionally used to carry flint, steel, tobacco, and pipes.

— Jason W., Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Can you believe that this beautiful flower is made from caribou hair? Caribou-hair tufted flowers take a lot of work. First, the hairs are selected by hand, then they are sorted by size and length, and then dyed. After artists stitch bundles of the hairs to a backing, such as animal hide, bark, or velvet, they precisely cut and shape the tufts to create their picture. Caribou-hair tufting takes a lot of patience and a lot of skill.

— Kathy F., Whitehorse, Yukon



Dancing bear sculptures always make me smile because the bears look like they're having fun. But these sculptures also have important meaning behind them. They reflect the traditional Inuit belief that people are linked to both nature and the spirit world. Long ago, Inuit shamans danced when they needed to communicate with spirits. A shaman would look and act like a bear as he beat a drum and danced. See how this bear is standing on just one foot? The artist has to work really hard to make sure the sculpture is perfectly balanced. It's not easy!

— Paul W., Vancouver, British Columbia

My favourite art takes place on a stage. I really like the shows put on by the Making Treaty 7 Cultural Society. Maybe that's because I belong to the Siksika Nation, so Treaty 7 is my homeland. Most people don't know much about it. Making Treaty 7 tells people about the treaty and its outcomes in what I think is the best way: through song, dance, acting, and photography. It looks at how all Canadians are connected to where they live. It doesn't just talk about history and the past. These actors want Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to think about living together today and in the future in a way that's good for everyone.

— Lisa B., Lethbridge, Alberta



SAMPLE MATERIAL



I saw an article online about Ojibwe photographer Nadya Kwandibens, and I was really captivated by her photos. This one is my favourite because it's so joyful. Nadya's photos show Indigenous people in a really positive light, and I especially love her statement about her work: "If our history is a shadow, let this moment serve as light." So inspiring! I also love that Nadya catches people doing normal things in everyday settings. She's inspired me to take photos of people in my community, too.

— Alex A., Island Lake, Manitoba

Painting a Painful Time

For more than a century, the Canadian government took Indigenous children from their families and forced them to attend residential schools, where they weren't allowed to express themselves using traditional languages or art. Anything that reflected their cultures was banned.

Still, some students managed to create art that incorporated their culture through beading, carving, sewing, and painting. These students created the artwork to try to preserve their traditional ways and their identity. Some of these pieces survived and today are on display in museums and galleries. They give a voice to the residential school survivors' pain and their deep desire to hold on to their roots.



Student painting, Alberni Residential School, British Columbia

Experiences Beyond Words

Visual artwork can convey feelings that words can't capture. Many residential school survivors and their children use art to express powerful emotions about their experiences and to make sure their stories are not forgotten. The artists express these things in a unique and personal way that reflects their reality.

Morning Star

When painter Alex Janvier was 8 years old, he was taken from his family on the Le Goff Reserve in central Alberta to the Blue Quills Residential Indian School near St. Paul. He was scared, and he wasn't allowed to speak his Dene language. So Alex found a new way to express himself—he began creating art. Today, using his Dene culture, heritage, and traditions, Alex creates unique abstract and three-dimensional art.

Alex's most famous work is *Morning Star*, a huge mural on the ceiling of the Grand Hall of the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Québec.



Morning Star, Alex Janvier

Spiritual Collages

Other government policies also separated Indigenous children from their families. Thousands of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children were taken from their communities to be raised in non-Indigenous families.

Jane Ash Poitras, a Cree painter born in Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, was one of those children. Although she didn't attend a residential school, her school only presented information from a non-Indigenous perspective. In addition to paintings, Jane also creates collages

using photos, newspaper articles, and feathers as well as historic and modern symbols.



Rebirth of the Four Coyote Spirits,
Jane Ash Poitras



Spring, the Bird Spirit, George Littlechild

Painting an Identity

Painter George Littlechild was removed from his mother's Cree community when he was a baby and placed in foster care with non-Indigenous families. By the time George was just 4 years old, he had lived in five foster homes. Bold and colourful, George's paintings reflect his Cree background. In his work, he tries to transform the negative parts of First Nations history into a positive future. Identity is an important theme in George's work. "If we learn about our history," he says, "we learn who we are."

Project of Heart

Project of Heart teaches students about residential schools and what the survivors have endured. Survivors tell their stories so students can hear the truth of what happened. They speak about languages, teachings, traditions, and values that were silenced by residential schools. Participants then work together to create art that acknowledges the incredible losses suffered by the residential school students, their families, and their communities. Students paint individual tiles that honour survivors as well as the thousands of Indigenous children who died in residential schools.



This Project of Heart mural is made up of hand-painted tiles.

Listen!

Some Indigenous artists express themselves through music. A Tribe Called Red is an Ottawa-based group that blends electronic dance music, hip hop, reggae, and dubstep with First Nations singing and drumming to create a whole new sound. The award-winning band is made up of three DJs: Tim “Zoolman” Hill, Bear Witness, and Ian “DJ NDN” Campeau. They talk about their art, influences, and culture below.

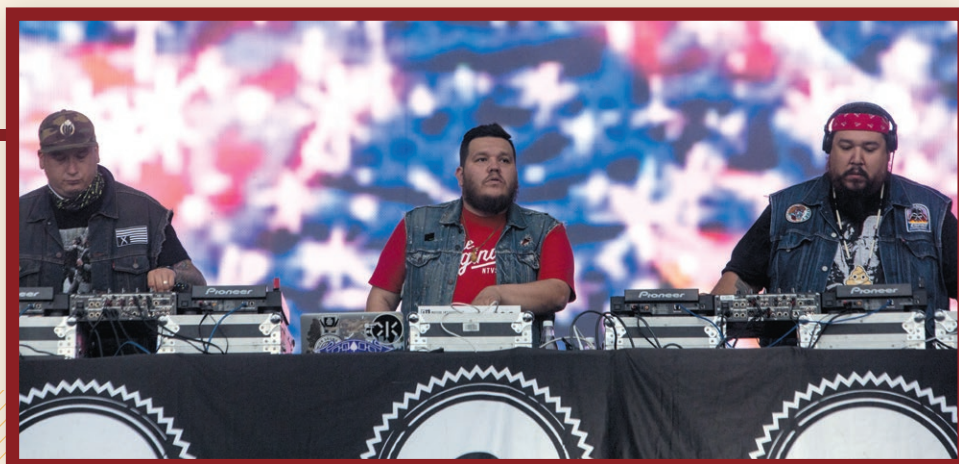
Zoolman: I’m Mohawk, part of the Six Nations confederacy of tribes. We have communities all across North America, especially in New York, Wisconsin, and Ontario. As Indigenous people, I think we’re political from the moment that we’re born. The very fact that we’re alive and we continue to do the things that we’re doing and fighting for makes us political. We’re fighting for our language and culture, and reclaiming ourselves after the drama of residential schools. Indigenous rights are gathering momentum. It’s not reaching everybody in the wider public, because it’s really evident that some non-Indigenous people just like where they are. Those folks are going to have a tough time because not only are they going to hear from the native community, they’re going to hear

it from their own community. I think that Canada, in particular, has been growing so much to recognize its Indigenous people. I’m really proud because this level of recognition is something I’ve never felt in my entire life. I’m sure the conversation right now would surprise my grandfather. My father is surprised. It’s an exciting, scary time right now. I’m glad that people don’t want to be ignorant anymore about our history and that they want to educate themselves.

Bear Witness: If you watch our “R.E.D.” video, we stretch out to the future. We’re talking about the past, but we’re also talking about the present. It’s about people treating people like humans, it’s about knowing how you’re connected to the world around you and the earth and the sky and all of that. But what that means exactly to every person is different. It’s about that state of mind where individuals get their power back.

DJ NDN: The Indigenous idea of nationhood doesn’t have to do with race. It has as much to do with what people contribute to the community and how we are all in this together, and that if you’re not doing as well as I am, I need to help you out.

On their website, A Tribe Called Red says they “believe Indigenous people need to define their identity on their own terms.”





Eekwol, a member of the Muskoday First Nation, creates music with a positive message.

What are you learning from Indigenous artists in Saskatchewan?

Eekwol: I think the key word is *diversity*. I think we really need to look at our Indigenous nations and groups within Saskatchewan. We have several treaty areas. We have so many different language systems and we have different groups. Saskatchewan is so huge. We have the Dene way up north all the way down to the Dakotas.

So, there's a lot of diversity. I think a really important aspect is to look at those northern communities or those more rural communities and really draw out the amazing art that is coming out of them right now.

What is happening in those rural places?

Eekwol: I can speak as a hip-hop artist. I am very familiar with the rap world and how young Indigenous people have really taken to rap music and pop music and the hip-hop culture.

With technology, we have this capability to record and to share through social media and YouTube, of course. So, we're seeing a lot more of that happening. There's a lot more of that connection to social media and the Internet, and a lot of young people are using music as a means to communicate identity.

Saskatoon's Eekwol raps about her Saskatchewan surroundings and Cree culture. Born Lindsay Knight, she began performing in the late 1990s. Her musical goal? To promote social change and the quest for knowledge and self-discovery through her music. "I rap for the desire to make something powerful and creative."

How would you describe or summarize where Indigenous arts are in our province [Saskatchewan] right now?

Eekwol: I would say the Indigenous arts are really thriving right now. We have such an expansion of mediums. We look at visuals and multimedia, we have so many young artists coming out of their traditional territories, but also out of academia.

It's a really exciting time for the arts because, obviously, with technology we are able to really showcase on an international scale. So we're seeing that happen.

What Does a Treaty Look Like?

Treaty 4 is an agreement, made in 1874, between the British Crown and the Cree and Salteaux peoples in Saskatchewan. In April 2015, about 230 high-school students gathered at First Nations University of Canada in Regina to take part in Treaty 4: The Next Generation Project. Students discussed Indigenous rights in Saskatchewan, which is Treaty 4 territory. They also talked about how those rights affect the future of people living there. Then, they worked together to show what it means to be an ideal Treaty 4 citizen.

They created this mural from 230 individual pieces of art. They're arranged in four quadrants, like the images on the Treaty 4 flag. The students drew everything from First Nations and Métis symbols to peace signs and more.



Let's Talk

1. What have you learned about the connections between people's art and their identity?
2. How do you use art to express your feelings?

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