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wawisihcikan - adornment

The travelling exhibit entitled "▷·Δ·Ρ॥Γb▷ wawisihcikan - adornment" takes a look at adornment through an Indigenous perspective.

a·dorn·ment

/ə'dɔrnment/

noun

1. a thing which adorns or decorates; an ornament.

"the necktie is no longer a necessary male adornment"

the action of adorning something.

"precious stones have been used for the purposes of adornment for over 7,000 years"

The meaning of adornment according to the dictionary states the use of item(s) that decorate, embellish, enhance, beautify, or enrich. It could be said adornment is the finishing touch that distinguishes the wearer.

Adornment from an Indigenous perspective goes beyond the items' beauty. It is an artistic expression that conveys many levels of communication. It makes connection to a spiritual foundation, the importance to land and place, and defines inherent culture.

Early adornment provides a sense of knowledge about our ancestors that reflect the natural world in which they lived. The seasonal round of birth and rebirth shape our world view in a circulatory way as everything is interdependent.

Spirituality has been the foundation for Indigenous peoples' lives and an 'intrinsic quality of creative activity.' These artistic expressions were woven into the fabric of daily life. 'Artifacts were generally created as items to be used, not as 'art'. Bags, pouches, along with awl and knife sheaths were functional yet beautifully decorated.'

Through European contact and trade metal goods, cloth and glass beads were incorporated into the repertoire of the maker. Even as the use of trade materials increased, traditional styles of embellishment remained with the use of these traditional materials still being utilized to this present day, maintaining connection to ancestors and cultural traditions. 'Contemporary artists/artisans are keenly aware of their responsibility as guardians of traditions from which their imagery and inspiration derive.'

'More than beautiful ornamentation, adornment is a visual language expressing the joy of creativity, pride in attention to craftsmanship, and the desire to share with others. Above all, it honors oneself as well as one's people by doing a thing well.' (Sherr Dubin, Lois. *North American Indian Jewelry and Adornment*; Harry N. Abrams, Inc. New York. p11,12,18)

This exhibition was curated by MJ Belcourt and organized by the Art Gallery of Alberta for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program. The AFA TREX program is financially supported by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.

COVER IMAGES:

Top: Left Image - Erik Lee, *Bracelet Cuff*, 2021, Sterling Silver, Collection of the artist

Right Image - Elaine Alexie, *Quilled Dene Floral Bolo Tie (detail)*, 2021, Mixed media
Elaine Alexie - Private Collection

Bottom: Carmen Miller, *Split Toe Moccasins*, 2021, Beaded, handsewn home tanned moose hide
Collection of the artist

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program

The Art Gallery of Alberta is pleased to present this travelling exhibition to venues throughout Alberta. Currently the Art Gallery of Alberta serves approximately 60 venues in over 40 communities. Exhibitions on tour from the Art Gallery of Alberta easily adapt to space requirements of smaller venues: schools, libraries, museums, health care centres and other community facilities. The exhibitions are organized in such a manner as to make unpacking, packing, hanging and shipping as easy as possible. Along with the exhibition each venue receives an Educational Interpretive Guide. These materials enable teachers to use the exhibition within the school curriculum.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Collection is the primary source of works featured in the travelling exhibitions. Other sources for exhibitions may include community partners, archives, private collections and loans from artists. Each year we welcome new venues to enrich their community art through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program.

Our Thanks

The Curator - MJ Belcourt

The Artists - Elaine Alexie, Erik Lee, Carmen Miller

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts

and to the many individuals, organizations and communities who contribute to the success of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program each year.

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Elaine Alexie
Ditsuu A'Tan Ky'uu Gaonahtan - Grandmothers teachings through flowers signature necklace, 2021
Antique/vintage micro seed beads, caribou hide, vintage trade beads, antique torse beads, silver components, silverberry, dentalium shell, 24 kt gold
Elaine Alexie - Private Collection

Elaine Alexie

Elaine Alexie is a member of the Teetl 'it Gwich'in Nation in the North West Territories, Though from Fort MacPheson, the majority of her upbringing was on the land in the Yukon. These facts are instrumental to who she is as a person and her land-based art practice.

Elaine started sewing and beading at an early age, learning the skills from her mother and being inspired by spending time on the land. Since around 2012/2013 Elaine has been studying traditional Gwich'in techniques of adornment and in her personal art practice began using traditional techniques and materials to inform her contemporary sensibilities. In her beadwork, for example, she has been studying traditional designs and then drawing her own designs based on the styles and forms specific to her region. This has also involved learning how to use traditional materials, such as silverberries, which were used traditionally on dresses and tunics and dentalia shells, which draw attention to global trade and climate change. She has also recently begun learning techniques of porcupine quill work. Her more recent studies in museum collections has also influenced her. As she relates, as soon as she started her research in museums and collections the deeper she started thinking about bead working traditions. She began looking at things more closely and then re-creating those practices. As she states

My research informs my creative practice and my creative practice informs the research process. It's all very intertwined and ...like a handshake.

As an artist, Elaine aims to present works which show the beauty of Gwich'in culture and how her works honour Gwich'in practices and how these practices demonstrate love of family and land. In her works she tries to use as many traditional materials as possible that represent her culture and demonstrate how her reclaiming of these techniques reclaims practices that have fallen out of use. For herself, learning about and using traditional materials has been a powerful and healing journey and helps her learn more about who she is as a Gwich'in person and Indigenous woman. Finally, over the years Elaine has developed a deep appreciation for museum collections and how they can teach one so much. As she indicates, her studies in such collections have helped her to grow in her artistic practice and allowed her to share this experience with others.



Erik Lee
Earrings, 2021
Sterling Silver
Collection of the artist

Erik Lee

Erik Lee is a multi-disciplinary artist who's primary current professional work is in the jewelry stream. This Plains Cree artist, from the Ermineskin Band in Maskwacis, Alberta, is versed and studied in the visual languages and aesthetic - both historically and currently - of the material culture of his Indigenous Cree lineage. Erik's work is rooted in the sensibilities of Cree artwork and reflects the geometric and floral designs in Cree art, clothing and embellishment. Erik has, however, imbued these aspects of Cree art into a high end, contemporary, fine art jewelry style.

Art has always been a part of Lee's life. As a child he was always drawing and sculpting and pow wow regalia and wearable art has always been a part of his framework.

While he graduated from Grant MacEwan College (now MacEwan University) in Edmonton with a Diploma in Digital Arts and Media, Lee has maintained his interests in 'fine art' and has actively pursued his interests through the years. For a period of five to eight years he focused on sculpture, working in stone, antler and bone. He then moved to Vancouver and worked with Kwakuitl wood carvers on the west coast. One of his friends during this time was engraving silver and copper and Lee, fascinated with the medium, began making silver and copper jewelry. After moving back to Alberta Lee continued his self study, expanding his craft to include semi-precious stones in his work and teaching himself other techniques. He then had the opportunity to apprentice with Navajo and Zuni artisans in the United States and applied their techniques to his own work.

As an artist Lee's aim '*...is to blow people away*'. As expressed by the artist, his goal is to advance and innovate and build on the visual language and cultural heritage of the Plains Cree people. As he states:

We (the Plains Cree) have so much to offer in visual expression and I want to do my part to continue that but also to innovate and build on that. Plains Cree art is an evolving thing and it is a great gift to be a part of that; to present it so new audiences can see it. Our art is not a stagnant thing: it is evolving and it is as much a part of the art world as anything hanging on a museum wall.



Carmen Miller
Tufted Cuff, 2021
Beading, caribou tufting on hide
Collection of the artist

Carmen Miller

Carmen Miller was born in Edmonton but, as her father was in the military, the family travelled and lived all over Canada and she was raised in many places. Her family came back to Alberta in 1978 and settled in Hinton where Miller currently lives.

As expressed by Miller, she has always been interested in art. She states that she became obsessed with beads when she was about 8 years old and started making beaded chains. While she has tried almost every type of art work, she has always returned to beading and the bulk of her work involves this technique. About 27 years ago she also began caribou and moose-hair tufting and her work at present focuses on both beading and tufting. Though most of her practice concerns jewelry production, however, she also makes moccasins, mittens, bags and birch bark containers.

Carmen Miller's primary reason for creating is for the enjoyment of making things. When it comes to sharing her work, however, her aim is to focus on the Métis aspect of her art and to educate others concerning Métis practices: to carry on the teachings and make sure the knowledge is not lost.