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WARNER

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Contemporary gallery opens at Indian Museum

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What are medicine bags decorated with space-age beads doing in the Mt. Kearsarge Indian Museum?

Displayed alongside traditional creations, they are part of the current exhibit in the museum's new Contemporary Art Gallery, "Like Breathing: Native American Quill and Beadwork," which runs through Oct. 31.

What the pieces have in common is that they are all new.

The gallery grew out of a request by basket-maker Bill Gould and craftsman Darryl Peasley, who asked if the museum could provide a space for high quality, locally produced art. Gould- makers from Warner, are the first Native American juried members of the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen.

Executive Director Lynn Clark and Curator Nancy Jo Chabot liked the idea. The gallery would not only benefit the artists but also inform visitors that native culture is alive and flourishing.

"Our vision was to interpret traditional native art and techniques in new ways. Everything exhibited in the contemporary gallery is new," Clark said.

The gallery opened in May with "Splendid Clothes, Splendid Traditions," featuring regalia (clothes worn for ceremonial occasions) and accessories made by artists Monica Alexander, [Rhonda Besaw](#), Natalie Holt Breen, Andy Bullock, Chris Bullock, Liz Charlebois and Darryl Peasley. Regalia was also featured in paintings and photographs by Tammy Bucchino, Annie Holt and Pam Tarbell.

"The artists appreciated the opportunity to have their

pieces displayed in both an artistic setting and an educational setting," Chabot said.

"We had a setup in the center that explained each of the different pieces of the regalia.

You'd see pieces displayed as works of art in the cases, but how do you put it all together?"

Clark said that some of the regalia and accessories in that exhibit, which ran from May 15 to July 15, were traditional in style, while some had a more contemporary look.

Beads on beads

Beaded medallions are popular regalia accessories right now, according to the museum's deputy director, Carolyn Bullock, who is of Abenaki descent. Liz Charlebois, an Abenaki from Warner, made one for her soccer-loving 10-year-old daughter to wear at this summer's Intertribal Powwow. In hot pink and neon green, with a soccer motif, it's definitely modern.

The pendant is on display in the current exhibit.

"We chose to do this exhibit on beadwork and quill work because we have a grant from the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts where we've been offering beadwork and quill work classes and demonstrations. Part of the grant was that we would display some contemporary work," Clark said.

The exhibit's title, "Like Breathing," comes from artist Rhonda Besaw's website: "To me, beading is breathing. It is that natural and essential. Just as breathing keeps the physical body alive, beadwork keeps my spirit alive."

Besaw created a beaded bag of about the same shape and size as the 19th-century ones in the museum but with her own design, inspired by old Abenaki stories about good and evil, darkness and light. The bag is beaded on both sides, with a black hand and black trim on one side, and a white hand and white trim on the other.

On the artist's statement that accompanies her work, she writes, "A petroglyph incised on the 'Great Rock' in Middleborough, Mass., has a design of a hand shaped just like this one. We give thanks to our ancestors for these recordings."

Gerry Biron, whose matrilineal grandmother was a Mi'kmaq from Nova Scotia, collects those 19th-century beaded bags. He has created a series of paintings showing women wearing the bags and other beadwork.

Biron's paintings follow a consistent pattern: They are colorful except for the women's faces, which are done in black and white. At the top of each painting, in a small circle, is an animal representing the subject's clan.

His portrait of Goldie Jamison Conklin (Made of Thunder), in which she wears a bag with a large, central heart motif, illustrates the European influence on native art. During the 18th century, heart-shaped Scottish brooches became popular with the Iroquois, and the design was often incorporated into their artwork.

Deborah Dostie, who is Dine'/Metis, used 14,700 tiny beads to create Life Mates, a "painting" of two wolves. While loom beading is a traditional art, making a picture out of beads is modern, and the beads that were chosen give it a contemporary feel, Clark said.

Lynn Murphy's medicine bags are beaded with traditional peyote, or gourd, stitches. She used to use Japanese delica beads, but because they were perfectly uniform in size, the finished product wasn't flexible. She now uses dichroic beads which, thanks to their irregular size, allow the bags to be flexible and to move as the body moves.

Beads, tools, a loom, and a stuffed porcupine occupy a display case showing the steps in the quill work process.

"We like to have an educational component in each exhibit, and this case serves that purpose," Chabot said.

"Porcupine quills are not hollow - they have a foamy substance inside that allows the quills to be flattened," Chabot said. "Each quill is flattened, then they're either sewn down or used on a loom. The antler and the bone shown in the case are used for flattening, but more traditionally you would flatten it in your mouth. That flat side would be your decorative element and get sewn down into leather or punched into a loom."

This technique is represented in Dave Holland's thunderbird design on a leather pouch, and in Monica "Little Flower" Alexander's quilling on birchbark.

Bullock said that the use of a steel needle to go through the soft center of the quill is a relatively new technique which enables the artist to make looped earrings and delicate choker necklaces.

Some of the work will be for sale, Clark said.

Looking ahead

"We'll have two new exhibits in this room each year, starting out with people that we know who are fine craftspeople and expanding out to people that they know who are exceptional native craftspeople. It will expand and widen with each new exhibit," Clark said.

"Next year, we're considering an exhibit on containers, which would include baskets but would not be limited to baskets. We would put it out there to the artists and see what they come up with. There's a woman in Vermont who does basketry out of every sort of recycled material imaginable. We'll feature native artists as they reinterpret their traditions. The same people will do very traditional ash and sweetgrass baskets as well as experiment with new materials."

The gallery's impact goes beyond just art, though.

Murphy values its educational aspect because, she said, many people have outdated stereotypes about Native Americans, or, as she prefers, First Nation.

She recalls the prevailing attitude during her childhood: Don't draw attention to your heritage. It wasn't really talked about, but she understood even as a child that it was in one's best interest to keep a low profile.

"We were hidden in plain sight," she said.

Times have changed, but the stereotypes remain.

"When people learn that I am Abenaki, some ask me, 'Where are your feathers?' " she said.

Or, they think that the sacred dances, and the regalia worn, during the annual powwow are just a show, re-enacting Native American life in the old days. Not so, she said.

"The dances are part of a religious ceremony to worship the Creator. They are a living part of our culture," she said.

Also, she has encountered people who don't think the contemporary art is authentic.

"People think that if it's not done like it was done 300 years ago, it's not real," she said. "I'm a science teacher and I know that if something remains static, doesn't evolve, it won't survive."

Three hundred years ago her ancestors were using Czechoslovakian beads, traded by European explorers. Before that, they had to make their own beads out of shell or stone. So, the new beads were an artistic evolution, and the art is still evolving, Murphy said. The dichroic beads she uses are made of glass developed by NASA for satellite mirrors and for the re-entry tiles on space shuttles.

The contemporary art gallery, Murphy said, is a chance to say, "We are still here - we're not extinct!"
