

Proud to Bead Abenaki: A Conversation With Abenaki Beadworker Rhonda Besaw

By [Donna Laurent Caruso](#) March 25, 2012



milkyway rebirth on purse

Just in case you can't get to the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine to see "Twisted Paths: Contemporary W'Abanaki Art Informed by Tradition," before its end in May, [Indian Country Today Media Network](#) traveled there for you.

*We also interviewed one exhibitor from her home in the small village of Whitefield, New Hampshire: Abenaki beadworker Rhonda Besaw. She explained that she worked for thirty years in human services for the state of New Hampshire, had always made regalia, and then, prompted by an event that nearly killed her beloved husband, retired to live, eat, breathe, and dream traditional **Abenaki bead work**.*

We asked Ms. Besaw about the nature of some of her specific works:



Warrior Honoring Bag



Warrior Honoring Bag from Rhonda to Steve Hebert, Abenaki warrior

Could you explain the “Warrior Honoring Bag” worn by Steve Hebert as part of his traditional Abenaki **pow wow regalia**?

Steve is the ultimate Abenaki warrior. He is a warrior in the Abenaki way—it’s not about fighting, but about helping the community. He has always done what was asked of him and always did it in a good way, without seeking attention, and with humility. I have seen this in him through the years so I created the bag as a gift of gratitude.

The Abenaki do not have a reservation. We are spread out and our meetings are with the community at large to bring people together as well as for guidance and at different places. Steve has always been a help, to set up wherever we are as well as to “stand” at the door. We also have a pow wow one time a year, the best in the northeast: The Abenaki Heritage Weekend held purposely on Columbus Day Weekend. Steve has been one of the core volunteer people for this pow wow, (at the Mi-Ti-Jo Campground in Milton, NH).

The two eagles on the Honoring Bag signify the strength of this warrior. The rosette shows the Abenaki colors and they are the symbol of Steve’s clan, which is bear. Most Abenaki are bear or turtle clan. An old traditional Abenaki design, the double curve, which goes back thousands of years, as it was originally executed in quill work or paint, is also a part of the design. This type of purse, by the way, has not been made by an Abenaki that I know of, since the early 1900s. I’ve made about nine others now.

What is the story behind the purse on display at the Abbe that incorporates Abenaki petroglyphs?

The purse named “Petroglyphs” is one of my more spiritually-connected pieces, one of



Abenaki petroglyphs in beadwork

my favorites, because of the symbols in it. Gerry Biron specifically inspired that piece as he told me that he planned to go look at the petroglyphs in Bellows Falls, Vermont and find out more about who made them, and why. The purse is now in Gerry's collection and on loan from him to the Abbe. Gerry's book, collection and display "*Made of Thunder, Made of Glass,*" remains one of my main inspirations. His portrait of me includes me wearing one of my purses and also has my helper, my totem, a squirrel, on my shoulder. (Ms. Besaw's Facebook page, [Wabanaki Beadwork](#), includes an informative article by Biron about what was discovered about the petroglyphs at Bellows Falls).

Another person, also a curator and collector, who is a primary mentor is Richard Green of the United Kingdom. His collections are also published in book form. It was Richard Green who told me that my work was important to carry on in part because no one else was doing it. I was so busy researching and actually doing the work that I didn't understand what he meant, that my work is carrying on a nearly lost tradition.

You recently added new work to your web site, a pair of moccasins.

I just finished those moccasins for an Abenaki woman who is living far from home in South Dakota. I am so glad to know she will wear these Abenaki moccasins out there in the west and that the people there will learn that there actually is someone alive out here doing beadwork. I hear so often that no one in the east does beadwork! But beadwork is a way of communicating our culture so I like the idea of her little moccasins traveling to the people she lives with who will then see the difference in our work and style.



trillium medicine moccasins

One of the most enjoyable parts of commissioned beadwork for me is talking to the person who needs the work done. We talked a lot about what was going on in this lady's life and it resulted in incorporating a trillium plant, a traditional northeast woman's medicine, on the toe of the moccasin. On the side is the traditional double curve. I use brain-tanned deer hide as there are still people doing that in Cornish, NH. I learned how to make the Abenaki style moccasin from an Abenaki man, but I don't know anyone else who adds the beadwork. Parts of the work are so difficult that each time I make a pair I say I won't make another. But someone asked me recently to bead a traditional Penobscot design and I thought, "Well, I have to do it because I want the designs out there."

People who commission the work understand the undertaking and don't mind waiting. I work very slowly, under magnifying lamps, so they really do want the work done, as they do wait. On some, I use precious antique beads (some sent to me by Richard Green as well as others) and I let the people know about those beads. Some beads that have been gifted to me are so fine they are like pollen, and you have to use hair to bead them. Others are so unique I haven't ever seen any like them anywhere.

And what is the story about the purse named "Rebirth" that can be seen at the Abbe Museum?

I did this piece when my husband's sister was ill. We were traveling back and forth to help out and it was a really hard time for everyone. The image was as a result of a dream I had during that hard time. The purse's image symbolizes the Milky Way, and a line shows the ancestors traveling, to be reborn. My sister-in-law ultimately did pass over from her illness. So, this is a purse I won't sell, but rather, I would gift it to someone. I would simply not take money for it. The purse touches many people, as seen by their reactions at the exhibit.



milkyway rebirth on purse

Beadwork itself is a solace and helps heal. I have heard other bead workers say they heal from bead working as it removes you from sorrow, it puts your mind somewhere else, puts you in a prayerful state.

In addition, I hope my outreach will inspire someone else to pick up this art, to get the bug. When I teach, I bring my own beads. I tell people to buy the best they can afford, so as not to get discouraged. I didn't have anyone to put it all together and teach the entire process to me but now I can do that for others. The Mt. Kearsarge Indian Museum curators understand this and they will have me teaching there on May 20 and July 1, 2012.

If you are able to take one of these classes, you will be able to study the Warrior Honoring Bag in person as it will be on loan to the museum from Steve Hebert.