

Whitefield artist's beadwork is a tribute to her Native American ancestry

By Melanie Plenda

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Rhonda Besaw sits at her table fabric in front of her, tiny bead in one hand, needle in the other. With the first prick of the needle, she starts the conversation with her ancestors.

"I take up the needle and I get from it a feeling of connection to the creator and the creative source," said Besaw, a Whitefield artist specializing in traditional and contemporary Wabanaki beadwork. "It's not work, it's a form of prayer or meditation for me. It's a connection to my ancestors and a testament to the survival of our people. How we are still here. We've held on and are still doing the things my ancestors did. It's very much my passion.

“But it’s not all about me; I can’t separate what I do from what my ancestors did. It’s all connected.”

In fact, ask Besaw about her background, and she’ll tell you about her grandparents. Her grandfather, whose family line was of French-Canadian and Indian descent in southern Quebec, settled in Berlin. Folks were following the logging industry, she said, so many unskilled laborers would come down from Quebec to find work. Some of her ancestors also continued down into southern New Hampshire, where they took up work in shoe shops, she said.

As for her grandmother’s people, that line would follow along the Connecticut River Valley, into New Hampshire and Vermont, constantly crossing the Connecticut River.

For her part, Besaw was born in Littleton, the third generation born in the United States. When she was younger, her mother taught her how to do embroidery.

“A lot of the stitches are the same in beadwork, but instead of using threads you’re using beads,” she said. “And this also is a part, long ago, of our native history. The nuns up in Quebec used to take in young native women and teach them embroidery, but the young native women would take that and very quickly incorporate beads.” Besaw said she grew up knowing of her native history—she is Abenaki and Canadian Metis— but it wasn’t until 1996 that she started really exploring the material culture of her heritage. Her entrée? Beads.

“I started doing beadwork in 1996,” she said. “So I started getting interested in that aspect of who we were. So I went to a Mi’kmaq woman to make clothing that honored my ancestors. And I had a picture of a skirt that I wanted to make. And I had not done well in home economics, I couldn’t sew, all I could do was embroider. But she very much encouraged me to give it a try.

“So she taught me the beading stitches, which were very simple. And I picked up on it very quickly. And I learned very quickly too, it’s very labor intensive. But once I started doing it, and having the experience of embroidery, I just took to it. And that, that opened up a whole world of reading about the old designs and the old beadwork. And then developing my own designs.”

She discovered that native people have decorated their clothing items going back as far and time imagined, she said, often using paint to color their clothing as well as dyed porcupine quills and moose hair.

“Then when the Dutch traders showed up in the 1600s with beads,” she said, “we saw those beads and incorporated them into what we were already doing, so it was like the tools changed. And instead of using bone needles and sinew, we started trading for metal needles and thread. And then instead of hides, we started trading for hides for wool.

“But some of our designs that we still use today are designs that were used long ago. So a design that might have been used on painted clothing in the 1600s we still have those designs.”

If a piece is commissioned, Besaw said, she usually will talk to the person buying the piece to get a sense of what he or she is looking for. With that idea in mind, she then looks for ways that she can bring a technique or design aspect from her culture into the piece.

“I use a lot of medicine plant designs in my work because historically we would have put medicine plant designs on our clothing to give us the protection and the aid that we needed. And often what you need most is the thing that is most available to you,” she said. “For example, wild strawberry is a plant you see in very old beadwork designs. And fiddlehead ferns are one of the first plants that comes in in the spring. It comes first to feed us.”

She said some designs come to her from “the dream world.” In her culture, she explained, the dream world is a very real place.

“Something you receive in a dream is a gift and you have to make it right away, otherwise you are not honoring that gift,” she said. “So sometimes when I dream of a design I wake up and draw it out very quickly with all the colors. So in that way I’ve made it. Then, it’s all there already when I go to make the piece ... the hard work is already done.” It’s a similar sense of spirituality and respect that goes into the native regalia, or ceremonial clothing, she works on.

“You have to prepare yourself to be in a good frame of mind to do it,” she said. “The energy you put into it is like a prayer and it’s an energy and a prayer that the person who’s wearing the regalia is going to carry with them. They of course will add their own energy, but in the beginning, you have to be aware of your energy as you make it. It’s a spiritual endeavor and to me it’s such an honor. It means more to me than anything. It’s more precious.”

She also said, those pieces take as long as they need to take.

“In the Abenaki language, there is no word for time. There is no word for art, for it is just what we do,” she said. “I really can’t call what I do a career, it is just what I do. We all have our gifts. Some people have gifts for song or dance and they use those gifts to honor the creator. I was gifted with good hands and good eyes and ability, nothing more. Everyone has their gifts. People just don’t often realize what they are.”

For more information about Rhonda Besaw, to see more of her work or for inquire about classes she offers visit www.RhondaBesaw.com/
