

THE SIMPLE PURITY of Anishnaabe Quill Boxes



Harmony Rice and daughter, Nadia-Bay Rice-Monastyrski examine a completed quill box.

By Harmony Rice with photos by Cody Storm Cooper

From generation to generation, Anishnaabe quill work reminds us of another time when the world was full of patience, humility and respect for all living things

Walking through the woods far away from any road or trail, I can remember my great-grandmother walking up close to the birch trees, inspecting them and touching them with great care from under her big paisley cotton hat. She would continue walking through the bush if the tree was too young or had a disease. If the tree was healthy and ripe however, she would stop and turn back to my granduncle or my grandmother and say: “yes, this is a good one.” They would offer tobacco and prayer, and would pick the bark from the tree. The day would be spent picking birch bark. At the end of the day, they would go home with a bundle or two of birch bark at their sides and begin to prepare for the labour-intensive process of preparing it for my great-grandmother’s livelihood: her quill boxes.

Today, her work can be found at the West Parry Sound District Museum in one of the largest quill box collections in Canada. The Museum’s collection has works that are as old as 100 years, while others have been made as recently as five years ago. The collection contains quill boxes from Wasauksing First Nation, Shawanaga First Nation and other communities in the Muskoka Parry Sound region and features traditional Anishnaabe designs. The current exhibit gives museum-goers a glimpse into the simple purity and eco-friendly aspects of the artform.

The work of Rose Rice, a master quill box maker and a Pottawattomi member of Wasauksing First Nation, along with the works of Big Jean Pegahmagabow and Clara Baker are at the museum, among others. These women grew to be respected and honoured Elders in their community. Learning this art form from their mothers and grandmothers, they worked hard to maintain traditional quill art today by teaching the art form to their nieces, daughters, granddaughters and even great-granddaughters. Several of these descendants are active today in keeping this art form alive. Many designs are rooted in history and have been passed down from generation to generation.

“Her mother taught her as a young girl to make quill boxes and baskets,” says Rose Rice’s grandson and accomplished artist, Alex Zygniuk. He adds, “The lineage is important. She (Rose) made her baskets just like her grandmother made hers. She made them exactly the way she was taught, the symmetry and the proportion was exactly the way she learned.”

Although traditionally, it was common for mothers to teach daughters and grandmothers to teach granddaughters, the art form is open to everyone to learn. And with colonization having its devastating effects on Anishnaabe traditions, art and culture, quill work nearly became a lost art. Through the commitment and dedication of these women in our local communities, the art form is still practiced and is growing in our communities. It is important for any that are interested in learning the art form, to do so.

Originally, bowls and baskets were made from birch bark to collect berries and medicines for storage, with quillwork adorning the bowls and baskets used for special occasions. In history, when a porcupine was hunted, everything would be used in a very eco-friendly process and nothing was wasted. Quillwork predates contact with artifacts featuring quillwork from both porcupine and bird on clothing and utensils that are over 500 years old. It wasn’t until glass beads were introduced into North