

“Her mother taught her as a young girl to make quill boxes and baskets.”

America by the Europeans that the craft of quilling was almost lost.

Today, porcupines are no longer used for food. Their quills are now obtained by throwing a blanket over a porcupine -- the quills stick into the blanket, and the artist literally has a sheet of quills with which to work. Porcupine quill boxes are made from birch bark that has peeled on its own from trees and is decorated with porcupine quills. Some boxes are completely covered with quills, while others show the birch bark underneath. The natural colour of the porcupine quills is white with a black tip, but different colours can be made with dye. They are trimmed with sweetgrass and are completely lined inside with birch bark.

One tiny quillwork basket requires hours of intense concentration, mathematical precision and painstaking attention to detail and design; not to mention the time and skill required to collect and prepare the raw materials. Porcupine Quills must be stripped, washed and sorted according to size (note the evenness of the quills on your basket) and then are left natural and/or dyed according to the design intention.

"We are fortunate that people like Rose Rice and Jean Pegahmagabow passed on the art to the next generation, because it is a part of the Anishnaabe culture we never want to lose," says West Parry Sound District Museum Manager Jamie Monastyrski, adding, "The museum is fortunate and honoured to have the opportunity to preserve and maintain this collection of Anishnaabe quill boxes for our community and region to be enriched by."

When I was young, my great grandmother and I arranged visits for every Monday evening. I would go to her place and sit with her in her kitchen. She had to be 90 years old at this point. She would bring out all her materials, one by one, birch bark, sweet grass, the porcupine quills... she would explain the best time of the year for these materials to be picked. Each material used was prepared with great care, and took weeks, even months to get ready for quill box making.

Step by step, she would show me how to make quill boxes, her signature style and how to use everything. We would eat cookies and she would laugh at my technique. I would try and try but they were never as perfect as hers, but then again, she had 80 years or so on me. And every Monday night, she would share more with me about this ancient art form where her grandmother spoke through her -- and her grandmother through her -- connecting me to ancestors through the art form. She was teaching something more, about having patience, about not wasting a thing, and about the old times. ❁

Harmony Rice is Potawatomi from Wasauksing First Nation. She currently resides in the Parry Sound area with her family and is the Creative Director and Publisher of a national arts and culture magazine called SPIRIT.



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