



Indigenous Art and Craft

## Me, Dan Levy, and the Mighty Bead

20 January 2021



By Michelle Woodvine

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I don't know about you, but when Dan Levy speaks, I listen.

So, when the Schitt's Creek star [invited his Instagram followers](#) to join him as he embarked on the 12-week [Indigenous Canada course](#) offered by the University of Alberta's Faculty of Native Studies, I was all in. I knew enough about Canada's history to know that the story is almost always told from the perspective of what we in the writing world refer to as an unreliable narrator—a very white, very colonial narrator.

Determined to find another perspective, I signed up.

Every lecture was brilliant. Mind-opening, heart-breaking, and awe-inspiring at every turn. Then, in the final class, which focussed on Indigenous art, Dr. Tracy Bear said this:

"Many people see Indigenous quill- and beadwork as beautiful works of art, and yet not many people know that beadwork often functions as a means of communication... [It] often told a story that could be deciphered in the materials and designs used. Generation to generation, parents and grandparents used beadwork to illustrate stories and pass on knowledge."

Wait, what? How can something as tiny as a bead do all that? How do Indigenous artists use beadwork to communicate such fundamental elements of history, culture, and identity? With the course as a launching point, I began to explore, reading every article I could get my hands on, visiting beading circles, discovering the thriving online beading community, and talking with Indigenous bead artists.

*"Generation to generation, parents and*

*grandparents used beadwork to illustrate stories and pass on knowledge.”*

(For links to resources, check out the sidebar at the end of this article, and the companion piece [Indigenous Beading Resources & Artists: Read, Follow, Learn.](#))

Beads can be smaller than the head of a pin or large enough to comfortably fill the palm of your hand. They can be made of glass or wood, stone, copper, clay, bone, teeth, claws, seeds, shells, pearls, or repurposed everyday objects. No matter what form they take, beads and beadwork are intricately intertwined with the lives, cultures, and identities of Indigenous Peoples across North America. As today's Indigenous beadwork artists reclaim their images, motifs, and stories, they continue to nurture and evolve an art form that has been practiced on this continent for tens of thousands of years.



Image credit: [marimele from Pixabay](#)

Before the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous beaders crafted beads using both local and imported materials. Using bone awls and sinew, they adorned everyday, special-occasion, and spiritual objects with beaded motifs that told stories of the natural world, significant events, clan affiliations, kinship groups, and spiritual connections. For some groups, working with beads was considered a sacred act.

When European settlers introduced glass beads, linen thread, and metal needles, Indigenous beaders made use of these new materials to add detail and complexity to their designs. In the years that followed, Indigenous beadwork, like other forms of Indigenous art, was (and continues to be) stolen, appropriated, misrepresented, and destroyed. For children in the residential school system, beaded items—important connections to their families and cultures—were confiscated and destroyed; just one of many attempts to cut the thread of story connecting Indigenous children to their past and, in many cases, their futures.

Today, it is often through beading that these vital connections are re-established; the threads of story picked up and shared once again. Beading circles around the country provide safe, supportive places of knowledge sharing, healing, identity, and resistance—thriving even

during the COVID-19 pandemic as Zoom sessions connect beaders from coast to coast.

To learn, we must first listen. I wanted to learn more about this connection between art and identity, so I needed to listen—not only to online articles and news stories, but to the voices of Indigenous artists themselves.

Malinda Gray is one of those artists. An Anishinaabekwe beadwork artist and Ph.D. student at Trent University in Ontario, Malinda completed a master's thesis on Indigenous beadwork as a form of resilience in the face of colonialism and the residential school system. Her work asserts that, "Beads should not be portrayed as trinkets that Indigenous people have sought to trade. They play an integral role in repairing cultural ties and spiritual beliefs. By bringing the community of different generations together, [beading] can be a therapeutic display of cultural resiliency."



Beaded Hawaiian Medallion, designed and created by Malinda Gray as a gift from Trent University to Manulani Meyer.

Volcano: glass beads and tufted caribou hair. Sea and sky: dyed porcupine quills. Lei: glass beads. Border beads: tortoise shell and lava rock. Necklace beads: mother-of-pearl and cedar wood.

Photo and artwork credit: ©Malinda Gray, 2019.

As we talked at length about art and identity, Malinda explained that every choice she makes in her work, from motifs to materials, has meaning and tells a story. When the Anthropology Department at Trent University commissioned her to create a piece to honour the 20th anniversary of the Indigenous Studies department, and the visit of Dr. Manulani Aluli Meyer, a Harvard-educated Indigenous Hawaiian lecturer, and author, Malinda designed and created a beaded medallion that told the story of their relationship and celebrated both of their cultures (see photo, above). Motifs included a volcano—to represent Madame Pele—made with glass beads and tufted caribou hair; the ocean and sky, made with porcupine quills; and a floral lei made with glass beads. Tortoise shell and lava rock beads around the border, and mother-of-pearl and cedar beads in the necklace, connected the lands and waters of both cultures.

When I asked Malinda about the power of Indigenous art as activism, her take on it was pragmatic: While someone might hesitate to attend a protest rally out of fear of being arrested—or worse—they'd not hesitate

to visit an art exhibit focussed on the same issue. Art does not replace other forms of protest, it acts in concert with them, honouring Indigenous histories and speaking to issues facing Indigenous people in settler society today.



Rebecca Belmore, Trace, 2013-2014  
Canadian Museum for Human Rights Collection, P2016-3-1  
Photograph by CMHR, Ian McCausland

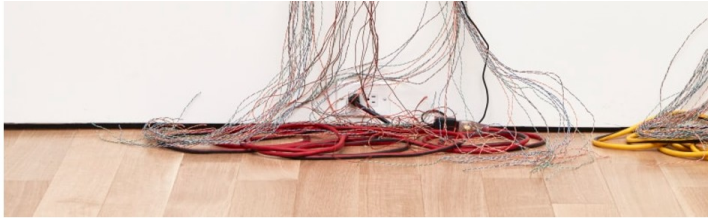
Complex stories of beaded resilience and resistance can engage the public while also creating community through collaboration. Métis artist Christi Belcourt's [Walking With Our Sisters](#), for which over 1,800 pairs of beaded moccasin vamps (the decorated tops of the moccasins) were contributed and organized by a grassroots community of volunteers, honours the more than 600 Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIW) in Canada. See also, for example, the massive, beaded blanket sculpture, [Trace](#), created from slugs of hand-shaped Red River Valley clay gumbo by Anishinaabekwe artist Rebecca Belmore and a community of volunteers in Winnipeg, Manitoba, for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR; see photo, above).



Image Credit: "[Beaded Moccasins on Display in Western Arctic Regional Visitors Centre - Inuvik - Northwest Territories - Canada](#)" Artist uncredited. By [Adam Jones, Ph.D.](#) - [Global Photo Archive](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

No matter the size or scope of their work, Indigenous beadwork artists tell stories on a time continuum connecting past, present, and future in thought-provoking and innovative ways. Artists like Anishinaabe (Odawa) artist Barry Ace who, in a nod to his ancestors' adoption of new materials in the form of glass beads, used salvaged electronic components to create beautiful floral motifs on his stunning *trinity suite* (2015): *Bandolier for Niibwa Ndanwendaagan (My Relatives)*, see photo above; *Bandolier for Manidoo-minising (Manitoulin Island)*; *Bandolier for Charlie (In Memoriam)*. His choice of materials connected the power of medicinal plants to the way capacitors and resistors store and release energy. The bags themselves contain iPads that display photos and video clips—sharing parts of his own story.





Barry Ace. Anishinaabe (Odawa). *trinity suite: Bandolier for Niiibwa Ndanwendaagan (My Relatives)*, 2011-2015. Mixed media (motion sensor display monitors, fabric, metal, horsehair, extension cords, mirror, plastic, capacitors and resistors). Overall: 234 × 38 × 8 cm (92 1/8 × 14 15/16 × 3 1/8 in.). Art Gallery of Ontario. Purchase with support of the Max Clarkson Family Foundation and the Dennis Reid Fund, 2018. © Barry Ace. Photo © Art Gallery of Ontario. 2018/3586

Perhaps like me, you've reached this point in the story and you'd like to learn more, and you'd like to support Indigenous bead artists, but you're not sure where to start.

Start by being a conscious consumer. When you buy Indigenous beadwork, remember that you're buying art—art that honours thousands of years of history and experience, art that takes time and skill to create. Explore the online beading community and get to know the artists. Instagram is a great place to start! If you can't buy directly from an artist, look for stores that credit the artist and where they're from.

Finally, keep listening and learning. Check out the work of Indigenous artists, writers, and filmmakers; learn about the issues affecting Indigenous communities through a non-settler lens.

And if you decide to take the U of A Indigenous Canada course—and I hope you do—tell them Dan and I sent you!

## Additional Learning

- [University of Alberta Faculty of Native Studies Indigenous Canada course](#)
- [âpihtawikosisân](#) (information about cultural appropriation)
- [Justine Woods](#) (slow fashion & the Ryerson University beading circle)

## General Interest

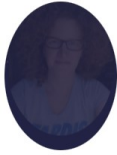
- [Land and Beaded Identity: Shaping Art Histories of Indigenous Women of the Flatland, by Carmen Robertson](#) [PDF]
- [Art and Wellness: The Importance of Art for Aboriginal Peoples' Health and Healing](#) [PDF]
- [Beading the Way: Adornment and the Quest for Cultural Survival](#)
- [How Indigenous artists are taking back what the fashion industry stole](#)
- <http://archaeologymuseum.ca/beadwork/>
- [Beading as an art form: land activism, cultural history and resurgence](#)
- [Beadwork revival a life's journey for artist Naomi Smith](#)

## Workshops and Suppliers

- [Beaded Dreams](#)
- [Native Canadian Centre of Toronto](#)

Featured photo credit Malinda Gray.

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## About Michelle Woodvine

Michelle Woodvine is a Toronto-based freelance writer and editor on a quest to never stop learning and making. When not wordsmithing for others, Michelle can usually be found working on her trilogy of speculative fiction novels, learning a new skill, or goofing around with her family (including her very own rocket scientist, two teenage boys, and one feisty ginger cat). Follow the weird, wonderful, and wordy adventures @woodvinewrites or visit [www.woodvinewrites.com](http://www.woodvinewrites.com)

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by Kim Fenton | Feb 21, 2024

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by Fiona Ellis | Dec 6, 2023

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