

Gloria Bell

Caledon, ON

Métis Nation of Ontario

23 years old

Beading My Identity: Tales from a Métis Grandmother

A drop of blood glistens for a moment on my finger and falls onto the soft, smooth hide. The needle has pricked my finger once again as I try to thread the beads onto the four-petal design. The blood spot looks like a little bead on the tan hide, yet it is misplaced, so far from the flower that I am trying to make. I always prided myself on my ability to create perfect beaded designs for my family and now in my old age, my eyesight is failing and I keep piercing my fingers with the needles. It wasn't always so. When I was a young Métis woman I could stay up all night and bead, sew, bead, all the little sparkling gems onto hide shirts, moccasins and mitts. I prided myself on my work and all my sisters would come and ask me for help. I was the one they turned to if they wanted a new design, or help on a difficult technique.

Although learning beadwork was not an easy task, and there were many times that I wanted to give up, my mother encouraged me to go on. Like our Métis people who have persevered through so much animosity, my beadwork designs have been passed down through my family, giving hope, courage and beauty to another generation of Métis.

Things were not straightforward in my days as a young Métis woman; we were discriminated against because we had both Indian and European blood. People in my community called me "half - breed" and it stung, and cut deeper than they would know. Yet my mother who had married a Scottish man was proud of me, and her Anishinabbe and Cree traditions, and I drew strength from her stories. Let me tell you of when I first learned to do quillwork; it was a long time ago.

The wigwam was cozy and warm, there was a ray of light streaming down and illuminating my mother's tan, care-worn face. She squinted over her piece of hide and placed the bone white needle in and out to hold the beads in place. Red, green, purple, white, blue and yellow colours turned the hide into a wonderful sight - like a field of wildflowers in the summer sun. I wondered at my mother's nimble fingers and liked to guess at the pattern she would make, maybe it was a star or a flower or some symbol for an underwater being -- or maybe a spirit of the forest. My mother hummed a melodic tune as she worked, her nostrils flared as she hummed along and looked back at me as I worked on my own little piece of quill work.

I let out a huff and puff. I had been trying to split the quill to wrap it around the leather fringe for what seemed like eons and still could not manage it. My fingers were stiff and cramped from trying to work with the quills. But mother was insistent that I learn this quillwork so I could decorate my own clothing one day. I did not like to worry about the future and did not imagine ever having to take care of anyone but myself. The black and red quills made a nice cross-latch pattern, I was trying to make it shaped like a Thunderbird to represent the power in the heavens and earth. A favourite story that my mother told me was about the Thunderbird. It was a powerful god who looked at the good and the bad people in the world and spread its sheltering wings over both. I felt that the Thunderbird with its beautiful dark-brown feathers and white-snow crest, its powerful cry and sharp as flint talons, would be able to take me away with one fowl swoop. Sometimes I dreamed that the Thunderbird would pick me up from my encampment, piercing me lightly with its sharp strong talons and bring me to its nest where I could preen its feathers. Then, I thought, I would not have to help my mother tan the leathers or pick berries or harvest wild rice.

My mother warned me though, that the Thunderbird was a spirit that was both generous and dangerous. Like the fast-flowing river that could dash a man and his canoe to many splinters, so too could the Thunderbird judge humans and put them in a terrible place or bring them up to live with him in the clouds. I hoped that I would be the one to live up in the heavens and not be dashed against the rocks like a grey clam. As my mother told me in stories and songs, there were also powerful spirits in the waters so I did not like to get too close, except some days when they would harvest clams and then use the pearly interior shell that reflected like a rainbow, to make

beads. My mother and I would take a large stack of shells and break them into pieces and then rub the shells with flint and other rocks to make them smooth. Then we would drill them and make holes to string them on necklaces and put them on leather garments.

After working on my quillwork for many days, I eventually found the rhythm of the materials and my fingers eased into the task. That summer I became a woman and created my first real quillwork design - it was a five-petal flower with curling tendrils and had a large Thunderbird who spread its wings across the earth and sky. I gave it as a gift to my sister, who was mourning the loss of her husband. Her tears ran from her eyes when I gave her the gift and I knew that the hours I had spent making this were not in vain, in fact, it seemed these designs had healing properties. From that moment on, I tried to learn everything I could about quillwork and beading and took a great amount of pride in the designs I created.

Another memorable moment in my life was my first Métis dance. Everyone in our community wanted to look fancy so all the women got together and beaded moccasins and vests for their beaux and family members. I was lucky at that time, I had a beau named Andrew and made him and myself a pair of fancy moccasins with bead work all over the top of them in a wild-flower design. While wearing those moccasins, he was the handsomest man at the party. I remember dancing at the ball...

We heard the sound of jigging and moved towards the lilting, pulsing rhythm. Entering the crowded space, we saw a fiddler with rosy cheeks rubbing away on the strings. He was tapping his foot in time to the mantic nocturne his instrument produced.

My insides coiled tighter and tighter as the fiddler played faster and his toes started tapping involuntarily. The demon within me was dying to get out, it was like the music was drawing the toxins out of my body. The room spun around as I took a few steps and my mind reeled, the ceiling became the floor and the floor the ceiling. The tune shifted pace to a slower beat and I began to feel better. The people around me cleared the floor and began to dance; their lithe bodies were elegant. There was a mix of white and brown faces in the barn, all illuminated with revelry from the dance. Their hands moved. The feet of the men with their moccasins brushed

the floor and created a whooshing sound and pounded and shook the space. They danced and jigged, circling around and around. They took off their sashes and used them like a maypole, each dancer turning and twisting like a snake in time to the music. Smiles were abound in the room and I noticed Andrew had also joined into the dance as well. His hair bounced around his head like a red flame. Many people were fascinated with his red hair. He basked in the attention and jigged like no one and everyone in the room was watching. His hands firmly placed on his waist, his feet danced as if inhabited by a Wendigo, they moved so swift and so gracefully. Men and women danced in a circle, prancing around and tapping their toes to the beat. I could not help smiling.

Our spirits soared as the dancing continued. The fiddler started another fast paced tune and the whole crowd starting jigging, many others stood around clapping their hands to the beat, longing to engage in the rhythm somehow. It was as if the fiddler knew the hearts of each of the dancers and was in tune with them, his swelling breast beat in time with ours. We moved in unison while some jeered and cheered at the dancers in the middle who were flaunting their ability. They lived to flaunt. Their bright sashes and metal earrings glinted on their bodies drawing the eyes of everyone in the room.

The music was still playing and the fiddler was driving away at the instrument, as if the fiddle had a mind of its own and possessed the player. I let the music wash over me like water and was enveloped into the sound. The music, like the beading, had healing properties and I felt that some of the hatred and anger that my Métis family had experienced ebbed away through the energy and vitality of this dance and the beauty of the beaded costumes that the dancers wore.

Andrew really appreciated the moccasins I had made him and wore them to every single dance after that. Not soon after that first dance, Andrew proposed to me and I accepted. I liked to think it was due to my wit, but I think my beautiful beadwork designs had a much larger role.

Now in my age of wisdom, I sit and hold these beaded moccasins and I feel the memories rise to the surface of the beadwork, and I can almost hear the joyful tune of the fiddle and the scuffling

of moccasins on the wooden-barn floor. I hope that the beaded designs I have given my family will provide the same joy that they have given me. I pick up my needle and begin to bead again.

Author's Statement

Cultural expression for the Métis was and is a vital component of identity. This story aims to shed light on the vital role of Métis and Aboriginal women who decorated objects and clothing for their loved ones with beadwork, quillwork and ribbon work and the stories behind these items. Often, Métis stories focus on the contributions of men such as Louis Riel or Gabriel Dumont but do not express the voices of Métis women who were essential to the production of Métis arts. My Métis ancestors come from the St. Andrew settlement at Red River, Manitoba. This story is loosely based on the tales my mother told me of her family's experience of being of mixed-heritage and also draws on my contemporary interest in beading. In the past, my family often used clothing to express their Métis identity. One photograph from the mid-nineteenth century shows all the men wearing sashes and beaded moccasins, gazing solemnly out at the photographer. This story aims to give voice to the women's hands that decorated moccasins, and beaded vests that clothed their families' bodies. If the hands of my grandmother could talk, perhaps this is what they might say ...