

Collections from the Heart: The Bill and Michelle Tracy Indigenous Art Collection

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For their honeymoon, Michelle Tracy said she wanted to go to Coppermine, a hamlet on the mainland Arctic coast (now called Kugluktuk, in Nunavut). “We couldn’t even afford a hotel,” but Michelle wanted to “go north.” So north they went. At Hay River, NWT (on the south shore of Great Slave Lake) “as soon as we hit the place, boy, we wanted to have their stuff for sale in the hotel shop. It was our first big encounter with real Indigenous art, including sculpture, beadwork, tapestries, textiles.”

And it was the start of the Bill and Michelle Tracy Indigenous Art Collection, the merger, back in 1975, of their separate collections. Michelle remembers her first “collectible,” a pair of moccasins made in Norway House with a vamp embroidered with silk thread, given her when she was in grade 8 by Uncle Morris Ukrainec. He was a hunting guide and cook in a lodge in northern Manitoba and the moccasins were simply a gift. But they triggered an enthusiasm in Michelle that has never gone away. “I really loved those moccasins – hand-made, smelling of red willow smoke, dyed red. Oh, yes, I wore them! I even wore them on a date when I was at university.” Bill’s collection began when, at age 8, on a family trip in Nova Scotia he just had to have a souvenir miniature birch bark canoe and tipi; he still has them.

Michelle had always been interested in Native culture, “in the people who lived close by us near Pine River, Manitoba (95 km north of Dauphin). I went to a one-room schoolhouse from 1958 to 1966, with kids from a Metis family.” She was raised as a Ukrainian who didn’t speak English until she was five and then given enunciation lessons by her mother “so I wouldn’t have an accent.” Her paternal grandfather built many of the Ukrainian churches, Catholic and Orthodox, in and around Pine River. Bill, by his own admission, is “just a white guy” who traces his American ancestry back to the 17th century. He grew up in Maine, worked at an archaeology

site in Illinois, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Cahokia Mounds, the largest pre-Columbian settlement north of Mexico.

I visited the Tracys in their Sherwood Park home. It's impossible not to go on an immediate walkabout through the main floor rooms – all walls and shelves bear some eye-catching item. Two Navajo rugs presented as wall-hangings, woven of goat hair and natural dyes, caught my eye; then a sealskin on its frame – retrieved from a dumpster – with an applique image of a shaman who, by his headdress Bill guesses is typical of the Coppermine area (loon skin trims his headdress). Under a pane of glass in a coffee table a number of exquisite Iroquois beaded bags are arranged, dating back to the 1840s, sold in Niagara Falls to tourists of that era. The Tracys purchased the latest of this collection from an antiques dealer in Winnipeg – and you can tell by the design of the beaded flowers something of their origin.

I wandered over to an assembly of ceramic pots perched on top a cabinet, all from the American South West, mainly from communities along the Rio Grande. A large pot by Glen Nipshank from Athabasca who studied in Santa Fe is evidence of the shared Indigenous influences in North America. From the potter Marie Martinez the Tracys commissioned a Navajo pot decorated with mummified horned toads, “a creature addressed as ‘Grandfather’ in the desert.” They watched as it was fired right in the flames in a plain box stove.

On a wall behind the sofa I peered at a painting executed by the Inuit artist Nauja of Rankin Inlet who depicts a family tucked into a sled pulled by a dog team while caribou and musk oxen safely graze near the coast of Hudson Bay. And below it a small but very elegant print of a sinewy weasel made by an artist in Cape Dorset but sold as a “postcard” at an auction in Winnipeg.

“We think of our collection as a whole even though it is made up of many parts,” Michelle explained. “Each piece will have its own story, so it's a very personal collection.” And she picked up the very latest piece they had purchased, just a couple of weeks earlier, “an old-style birch

bark basket from a store in Prince Albert, the sort of place where local people bring in their stuff, a kind of trading post, really.”

Of their own education as collectors, Michelle says: “You grow up in our communities talking of ‘Indians,’ as though they are all alike. But you start to see their differences as to what is considered beautiful, what their cultural icons are. You start looking at differences in beadwork among cultures. Not everything is geometric!”

By this time I was enchanted. But I wanted to know by what criteria the Tracys make a purchase? There must be some logic or pattern or principle behind their selection. After all, they both have a practiced eye. Michelle has a MA in Clothing and Textiles from the University of Alberta that included conservation practices. Bill was head of planning at Alberta Historic Sites. They have travelled widely, and repeatedly to the same communities and artists. They have been involved in appraisals. They have curated five exhibits from their own and others’ collections and have contributed to at least four, all locally. For Michelle, each piece must be “significant and unique” in their collection, and they have avoided “kitsch.” “We have focused on collecting modern material, from Indigenous cultures as they are today: 90% of our collection is post-1970,” according to Bill. “We buy directly from the artist – feeding her family with income from her beadwork, say. We couldn’t afford old stuff and we weren’t educated enough to recognize fakes.”

Then they noticed how the “culture of collecting” has changed over the decades. Michelle: “Neither the artists nor the collectors see their work anymore as ‘just’ useful, or ‘women’s work’. Now they make goods of aesthetic value.” Bill gives an example: “In Maine, within ten years of local basket makers’ ‘signing’ their baskets, new work was selling for \$100. As for where does craft end and art begins, what is folk art, what is meant by traditional? We engage all the time in these questions.”

I bring up the thorny issue of “repatriation,” an issue described by The Canadian Encyclopedia as “Most Indigenous ethnology collections found in Canadian museums today were gathered (and sometimes confiscated) by missionaries, government agents, amateur and professional collectors and anthropologists during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Today, many Indigenous nations are requesting that these items be returned to their true home.” Has any group requested that the Tracys do the same? No, because the Tracys’ collection has not been “confiscated” but been purchased, item by item, often from an artist or craftsman, otherwise at auction, or at a pawn shop or “wild west” souvenir shops. And none of these have “requested” that the purchase be returned. Michelle: “We don’t always have the complete provenance for a piece but we substantiate as much as possible by our own research on the internet.”

From the beginning, they had decided they were collecting ultimately not to sell but to make a donation to an appropriate university museum.” This is Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology at Brown University, Bill’s *alma mater* in Providence, Rhode Island.

In 2018 the Tracys were invited as “guest curators” to work with The Musée Héritage Museum in St Albert in assembling the exhibit, *In Their Footsteps: A Century of Aboriginal Footwear in the Canadian West*. The Museum’s website described the event as highlighting “the diversity, innovation and artistic expression found in the strong traditions of the Dené, Cree, Métis, and Plains peoples of Western Canada,” as selected in part “from the extensive Tracy collection.”

Initially, Michelle was a bit apprehensive about how their part in the exhibit would be received, about “being challenged by Indigenous critics,” but they needn’t have worried. The Museum’s Program Manager, Sharon Morin, said in a conversation with me, that, “as a principle of working with non-Indigenous collectors, I want to know: what is the relationship of the ‘white’ collector to their collection?” Having gotten to know the Tracys, she knows they are not “stealing” but are “building relationships with the artists. “They are doing this with their hearts.”

When the exhibit opened last August, Michelle discovered that their collection “was appreciated by visitors from northern Alberta who recognized-so-and-so’s work in a pair of moccasins. This was very moving. Some visitors came two or three times to see the baskets and then the footwear.” Michelle spoke with the Museum interpreters with stories of the individual moccasin makers, enhanced by knowledge of instructor Joyce Beaver as to place of origin of the artefacts. (Pointed or rounded toe? Tucked vamp to bottom?) Sharon told me that the visitors “were enamoured of how respectfully the moccasins were displayed.”

Before leaving the Tracys’ home, I asked to see some of this footwear. Taken out of the special storage boxes Bill had built for them - the Tracy Collection is catalogued in 46 binders - they were arrayed among other treasures on the dining room table, a kaleidoscope of colour, pattern, and style. Cuffs for leggings for a woman’s dance regalia and the pow wow dress itself, weighted by beadwork on home-tanned deer hire. Mukluks still smelling of smoke and otter fur, made for Michelle by Philomene Umpherville, who makes one pair a year. A pair of beaded sneakers that Michelle ordered from Barb Morin, a high school counselor in Prince Albert. By an unknown maker, silk-wrapped moccasins with horsehair edging, edged in quill work, its pointy style typical of the north until the 1930s.

Michelle and Bill were getting ready for several weeks’ road travel around Mesa, Arizona. As I took my leave, Bill showed me the maps they used for their itineraries, literally Indian Country maps that show all the reservations and the roads, not highways, that connect them. “We’ve been on most of them,” buying from the artists they meet. Their hope for this trip was to meet the extended families of the potters whose work they have collected. “Locals” have become “family” and another way of “collecting.”

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