In 2011, the Abbe Museum presented *Twisted Path II: Contemporary Native American Art Informed by Tradition*, an invitational contemporary art show featuring Native artists from the Northeast.

Native American artists have pushed the boundaries of what is considered traditional art for many years, often facing criticism for working with new materials or creating new designs. There is a perception that Native art is static; that it should never change, or is somehow less authentic with the introduction of new ideas and materials. But what is traditional? Are glass beads, introduced by Europeans and purchased at trading posts, traditional? What about a basket made to hold eyeglasses? Who decides, and how is that decision made?

As co-curator Rick Hunt, Abenaki, relates,

> I am always impressed by how functional pieces can move toward decorative and purposeful design. In this show, it is evident that the pieces reflect a movement away from tradition and become a reflection of the artists’ own personal psychology. There are beautiful ash baskets and Pop Art-type beaded bags, and even contemporary fashion design evolving from traditional northeast Native clothing.

When the first *Twisted Path* show was conceived, through a technicolor dream of mine, it was envisioned as an exhibit that would highlight the idea of the Native artist evolving and often struggling in this Westernized society. Questions about Native identity, spirituality, art, and traditions emerged. What was illustrated by that first show, and this one, is that Native people and our culture are very much alive and well and here to stay.

*Twisted Path II* continued a dialogue that introduces the broader society to the concept of the “modern Indian.” Native traditions have grown and evolved, allowing the adaptation and incorporation of new ideas, methods, and concepts into Native culture.

As a result, Native artists are allowed to step out of the confines of entrenched stereotypes in ways that let him or her maintain the integrity of their tribal identity. As such, Native artists are invited and encouraged to explore concepts of modern popular art that can contain distinctive yet subtle flavors of ancient cultures.

*Twisted Path II: Contemporary Native American Art Informed by Tradition* exhibited the work of five Wabanaki artists from New England. Their work, inspired by traditional materials, methods, and designs, breaks from tradition in important ways, becoming a form of expression unique to each artist.

Adapted from exhibit text by Rick Hunt, Abenaki artist and co-curator, and Raney Bench, former Abbe Museum Curator of Education.
George Neptune, Passamaquoddy

I started weaving with my grandmother, Molly Neptune Parker, at four years old. I’ve always spent a lot of time with my grandmother, so it only seemed natural to make baskets with her. The earliest memory I have of weaving was standing in her kitchen, refusing to let her help me with the first basket I made by myself, at seven years old.

Weaving has always been a very spiritual experience for me. Using the same techniques my ancestors did brings me to a time and place that my ancestors also visited, so for me it’s like we are all weaving together. I try to stay close to tradition; sometimes I intentionally copy a basket of my grandmother’s, sort of as a way to make sure that I don’t forget where I started. More often, I will have an idea in my head that I haven’t seen before, and when I try to explain it to my grandmother, she always rolls her eyes and says “Well, it’s your basket…” That’s how I know when I’m on the right track. I can’t help but feel triumphant whenever my grandmother falls in love with one of my newfangled ideas after seeing the completed piece.

It’s interesting because I never start a basket until I know exactly what it’s going to look like; I can’t ever start weaving and just see what happens. I also never make the same basket twice; even if I tried to, no two baskets are ever the same.

Chocolate Wedding Cake, by George Neptune, 201, brown ash, sweetgrass, dyes. On loan from the artist.

LEON, Passamaquoddy

As a child growing up on the Rez, I often dreamed of my own world. Alone, I saw fairy tale castles growing out of the shoreline. Women gently smiled down at me as their gowns softly glittered.
I learned how to bead from my Aunty Gal Frey and my mother showed me how to sew materials properly. Later, I furthered my studies at Parsons School of Design, but reality beckoned. I returned home on the train and finished my liberal studies degree at a community college. At this time I took a part-time job that led me to a full-time tailoring position.

At age 27, I come back to my childhood dream; hoping it isn’t too late and it hasn’t forgotten who I am. At one time I was lost in the world and I forgot why I loved living so much. I love making a woman feel beautiful. I don’t do it for the money; I do it for the emotion that radiates from the wearer. After 100 hours of labor on beadwork for five pieces, I now understand why only a handful of skilled embellishers still practice free-hand beadwork.

My dream is to inspire other Passamaquoddy people to make beauty in their own way. Within the few surviving materials of Northeastern Woodland double-curve motifs, I found inspiration. Ancient petroglyphs etched by shamans, woolen blankets and peaked caps resonate to form a new cultural identity. Today’s women remind us of all the beauty the Passamaquoddies can still give.

Tonight, the woman from my fairy tale smiles and dances, her dress softly billows as she moves, lights glitter on columns of beaded double-curves.

Leon’s work is funded in part by Native Arts New England, a program of the New England Foundation for the Arts, made possible with funding from the Ford Foundation and Anonymous donors.

Max Sanipass Romero, Mi’kmaq/Laguna & Taos Pueblo

My work stems from many influences. We are constantly reminded in our ever evolving environment, that many inspirational ideas can be conceived through the simplest of notions.

"Always keep your eyes open... never go to sleep in the car...keep watching because whatever you see out the window or wherever, it can inspire you."

As far as I can remember, the importance of creativity and Wabanaki Culture have been significant to myself and my family's lives. The knowledge of what a three-dimensional form is was taught to me at an early age. The Tea Pot and set is an example of traditional Mi’kmaq basket making that has been handed down to me from my grandparents and from their grandparents before them. To be inspired by those who came before you is a beautiful concept; they are my first teachers.

The use of plaster and plaster gauze came to me when experimenting with plaster dip fabric. I found the frozen contours of the dry plastered fabric so beautiful; a sense that the object has been petrified and shot still forever. My initial experiments with plaster dipped fabrics played with the idea of 'frozen in space'. Layers of heavy plastered fabrics draped from one wall to the other, the contours frozen. The idea of the human form came to me while experimenting with plaster gauze. George Segal [an American painter and sculptor associated with the Pop Art movement] suddenly came to mind. He inspired me to take my work to another level. Redefining the human form and placing it in a moment of random instance and petrifying emotion. Even though I am a Native artist, I want my
work to speak to the viewer, encouraging open interpretation of the installation, despite cultural background.


Rhonda Besaw, Abenaki

In 1996, a Mi’kmaq woman taught me the simple beading stitches that I still use today. To me, beading is breathing. It is that natural and essential. Just as breathing keeps the physical body alive, beadwork keeps my spirit alive. Beadwork designs that are influenced by the world around me, such as mountains or medicine plants, keep me observant, grounded and grateful to Mother Earth. Designs received from the dream world and visions are a most treasured gift. I marvel at waking up in the morning with a beadwork design fully developed in my mind. The colors, the patterns, the symbols and the meaning - it’s all there! Every stitch becomes a prayer of thanksgiving to my ancestors and the Creator. My needle just flies when making such a project! These designs are the most powerful; the physical manifestation of spirit captured in bits of glass and cloth.

In 2006, I saw the Made of Thunder, Made of Glass exhibit of beaded purses at the Abbe Museum. I was fascinated with these beautiful little bags made so long ago by Wabanaki hands. The exquisite craftsmanship and individuality of the beadwork designs inspired me to want to revive this style of purse. Although my unique purses are not reproductions, they are made in the same manner and style as the old ones. Through this mix of old and new, traditional and contemporary, I hope to honor those who have gone before me and give to those in the future.
Sarah Sockbeson, Penobscot

I have been an artist my entire life. Even at a young age I was intrigued by art; Native art in particular. Being Penobscot, I had seen baskets in museums and in the homes of my family, and was always fascinated by them. I was told stories about my great-grandmother who was a basketmaker in the early 1900s. I wanted to be a part of this tradition, but unfortunately, in my family, it was not passed down to my generation. I still found ways to practice art, and in high school I began painting and experimenting with various mediums.

In 2003, Jennifer Neptune asked me if I would like to apprentice with her and learn how to make baskets. I was honored to have the opportunity to work with a skilled masterweaver, such as Jennifer. She showed me first how to split ash splints, how to prepare my material, and taught me the traditional techniques necessary to weave ash and sweetgrass baskets. Since then, I have sharpened my skills with each basket woven.

Although I am using traditional material and techniques, my style comes from the place I live today, in this modern society. Basketry, to me, is a fine art, and in order for the tradition to survive, it must evolve. My goal is to embrace the modern world and combine natural elements with bright innovative colors, along with original designs, to create a fresh approach to a timeless art form. It is important for my work to appeal to a modern audience, while still remaining true to cultural traditions. It is personally important to me, not just as an artist, but also as a Native American, to create art that will inspire future generations, and keep the tradition of basketry alive.

As for my inspiration, I look to the past, present and future. I see it as being vitally important to acknowledge the traditions of the past. I have a responsibility to honor my ancestors that have practiced the art of basketry long before I was alive, to ensure that it
is not lost or forgotten. It gives me great pride knowing that I am able to perform this tradition in almost all the same ways it was done years ago. To create a work of art out of raw material such as the ash tree is almost magical. As I weave, it is almost like having a spiritual connection with the past.

![Image](image_url)


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