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The Secret's out; Our Artists were Subversive

Aloha!

I am writing this in Hawaii and it is warm and sunny with the most wonderful tropical wind blowing off the ocean. A soft moist wind that makes your hair curl and your skin feel like silk.

I love it here and to think I have to come back to all that snow and ice. I am in a small community and staying with family in a private home with a beach a block away. The landscape is spectacular with rugged mountains and a turquoise ocean with huge waves that surfers ride from sun up till sundown.

This morning I sat on the beach and watched the sun come up. I ate mangos, papayas and pineapple for breakfast and drank coconut milk, all growing in the backyard of course.

I am going to start writing historical romances to make money so I can keep coming back 'cause I'm sure not making any writing about us! Just kidding, I love us and I don't mind being poor but it is beautiful here.

I have seen lots of art since I arrived and so I've been thinking about our own artists and wondering how many people know what an important role they have played in all the changes we have come through as Aboriginal people.

Like many of you, I have been privileged to have always been surrounded by artists, artisans and craftspeople. My nokoms, mom and aunties created bark and willow baskets, tanned hides like soft velvet and beaded, quilled and embroidered beautiful floral designs on jackets, moccasins and gloves. They made quilts from worn out scraps of family clothing and hooked colourful stories on old burlap potato sacks and braided rugs for front doors.

My dad and uncles made snow shoes, dog harnesses and sleds from local wood and rawhide. One uncle carved animals that lived in our territory and my aunty made dolls. These were the toys we played with as children and some of us still have and treasure them today. It was these people in our family who inspired me to write, my brother to make films and another brother to paint.

All this beautiful work supplemented our income and paid for food, clothing and other necessary things. Without this art we would probably have gone hungry many times especially when the price of fur was down. No one ever thought about it as "art" but the people who did it were respected and loved.

These people were also exceptional storytellers and often the most culturally knowledgeable. Priests were not afraid of them, nor Indian agents or the Hudson Bay Company 'cause they were just creating "Indian stuff" to sell. Who could possibly have thought they were subversive? But they were.

While creating "Indian stuff" they were passing on cultural traditions and sharing knowledge. They were, as an old Marxist said to me one day when we were talking about the "radicals and revolutionaries." And long before them were the artists who created petroglyphs, medicine wheels, pictographs and effigies: who painted dreams, visions and heroic deeds on tipis, red river carts and winter counts. Yes the lives of aboriginal people have always been rich with art, stories, music and dance, even during the darkest times.

The 1960s were an exceptionally exciting time culturally, spiritually and politically for aboriginal people across Canada. This was the decade that produced artists like Daphne Ojig, Jackson Beardy, Norval Morrisseau, Alex Janvier, and many others. These artists explored new mediums in which to work, blending western technologies with aboriginal ideas and concepts.

They put on canvas or sculpted stone cultural images and stories that had been kept hidden for too long. Through their art they addressed issues of colonization, the political and cultural tensions between Aboriginal and European traditions. They created controversy and dialogue among their own people and forced us to do some critical thinking and they introduced the country and the world to "Native Art."

Following these artists, came writers, poets, singers, musicians and dancers. The ceremonialists, artisans and craftspeople who had kept it all alive watched old ways merge with new and changed again. At first there was a fear at what was happening.

"We can't mess around with those things," they said. "They are secret, sacred and mysterious."

And there was fear, too, on the part of the new artists, for who wants to be shunned by their people? But there were teachers and old people like Stan and Adam Cuthand, Smith Atimoyo, Ernest Tootoosis, Ernie Benedict, Art Solomon, Mariah Cardinal, Lizette Ahenakew, Ida and John MacLeod. The list is long, but they gave support and courage, reminding us that culture is not static, that we can respect it by taking it up and giving it life. And that is what has happened.

One would have to look hard today to not find art and books or hear music, see dance and theatre created by our people. Names like Allan Sapp, Judy Anderson, Louise Halfe, Neal Macleod, Sherry Farrell Racette, Gerald MacMaster, Marilyn Dumont, Leah Dorion, Eekwol, Christi Belcourt, Mary Longman, Randy Lunday, Gregory Scofield, Jay Ross, Tompson Highway, Andrea Menard, and the Cuthands, not just one or two or three, but the whole family. Can you imagine!

Rita Bouvier, Kennetch Charlette, Gary Farmer, Tantoo Cardinal, Marjorie Beaucage, Shane Belcourt, Gilbert Anderson, Kim Anderson and the list goes on and on. Thousands of artists, sculptors, writers, poets, singers, songwriters, film and video makers and musicians. Traditional, contemporary and classical. My goodness, we even have blues and jazz singers and would you believe there are 10 opera singers and at least five classical composers with a distinct aboriginal sound, of course.

Names that are not just "rez," "community," or "hood" but are national and international. Not bad, I would say, for a people who were supposed to be dying 50 years ago.

I will risk you throwing something at me and remind you again that it was Riel who said, "My people will sleep for a 100 years and then it will be the artists who will lead them."

And lead us they always have. No stealing of band funds here, or counting the votes of dead people on election day or selling our children's resources. Our artists have always led us in an honorable way, given us pride in who we are and courage to face the future with excitement and hope.

How much more political can you get then that?