Anishnaabek Art: Gift of the Great Lakes

*Anishnaabek* translates as “the good people” or “the real people.” Together the Odawa, Ojibway and Potawatomi comprise the Anishnaabek and have called the Great Lakes home for thousands of years. This exhibit features artwork created by the Anishnaabek as well as numerous other Great Lakes tribes during the past 200 years. Learn how these items tell the varied stories of Great Lakes indigenous tribes and hear the voices of the artists themselves as they share the importance of the teachings and traditions of their art.

This exhibit was made possible through the generous loan of Native artifacts from the Robert W. Streett Collection.

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The World of the Anishnaabek: Gitchi Gumeek

This exhibit is currently located just 500 feet from the shoreline of the world's largest body of fresh water: what the Anishnaabek call Gitchi Gumeek or the Great Lakes. The Anishnaabek—comprised of Odawa, Ojibway and Potawatomi tribes—called the Great Lakes home for centuries before the arrival of Europeans in the 1600s.

With water as the basis for all life, the indigenous people knew the special and sacred qualities of their homelands. To this day, the Great Lakes give the gift of food to nourish the people. The lakes also give the Anishnaabek a plethora of natural resources from which to create a sustainable way of life. Throughout their history, these natural resources have been used in everything, from making homes, tools and clothing to sacred items and art.

Together the land and the water of the Great Lakes make up the cultural fabric of the Anishnaabek. In diverse ways and during very adverse times, the Great Lakes have provided all the people needed. Many of these gifts from the clear water and the tender earth have been shaped into art. We invite you to explore this collection of art created by the Anishnaabek as well as other Great Lakes tribes. We hope that, more than just pleasing to the eye, you will find each piece as the voice of a people telling their own story.

Navigating the Change

The centuries that followed the War of 1812 marked a time of unprecedented change for Great Lakes tribes. With American rule becoming final after the war, tribal nations had to navigate the inevitable changes that came with that rule. American policies aimed at “civilizing” native people were a priority at a national level. Tribes displaced from their lands and resources were commonplace.

The very identity of tribes began to transform as Christianity was forced upon villages, appearances began to reflect those of Americans and tribal governments slowly gave way to American. It became illegal for tribes to practice their religion and many children were sent to government boarding schools, where it was strictly forbidden to speak their language or practice tribal traditions. What happened to native people in the United States is assimilation and destruction on a scale unprecedented. Not all tribes survived but some did. The ones that did survive used art as a valuable tool in their survival.

When a people can’t openly practice their religion or customs, that population must adapt in order to retain their beliefs and traditions. Art was more than just a source of income for tribes; it represented stories, teachings and traditions. Certain patterns were associated with a tribe or an area. Images on an item could relate to a clan or spirit. As individuals gathered the materials, stories about that plant or tree were passed down. Even the specific areas the materials were from had their own stories of culture and history.

During the 1800s and the majority of the 1900s, this traditional knowledge went “underground.” It wasn’t until 1978, with the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, that the Anishnaabek and other tribes could openly practice their spirituality in their homelands. Many of the items created by previous generations held information for current and future generations; generations that once again enjoy religious freedom. In many cases, these items transcended from art into that of a sacred nature.
What’s in the Art?

The land has always given to the Anishnaabek, and the art created by the tribe is a powerful testament to that generosity. The art can be seen as a way of paying respect to the animals, trees, plants, rocks and other inawemaagan (meaning kin or relatives) with which the Anishnaabek share the Great Lakes.

Beautiful images of flowers, bears, wolves, birds and fish adorn birch bark boxes. Intricate beadwork in floral designs is shown on clothing. Even everyday items such a handkerchief holder or a purse are works of art. In other cultures, the art often depicted people, such as European portraiture. In the Great Lakes, however, the focal point of Native art was the land, not the people.

A piece of art can also tell a story about a person or a community. A quill box with a wolf might represent the clan of the owner of that box. The colors in a beaded vest could signify the colors that are sacred to an individual. The design of a black ash basket could reflect if it was made by a Mohawk in New York or an Odawa from Michigan. Floral designs are normally associated with the Ojibway, while Odawa designs often include geometric patterns. With an eye for such details, one can begin to read the story an item tells. Such stories are important to the identity of a tribal community.

During times of immense pressure to assimilate into American culture and society, one of the only means for the Anishnaabek to retain their indigenous identity was through their art. During dark periods of the 19th and 20th centuries, it was illegal for Native people to practice their religion. Speaking their native language or participating in cultural events was strongly discouraged. American policies to “civilize” Native people were a harsh reality for all Anishnaabek throughout the Great Lakes. From government boarding schools to reservation systems, the life of Anishnaabek people was being dictated by non-Anishnaabek. One thing they could control, however, was how their art was made.
Aninaatig: The Maple Tree

The maple tree was one of the most utilized trees by the Anishnaabek and other Great Lakes tribes. Anishnaabek made their traditional homes (wig-wams) from maple saplings. Its wood provided great fuel for fires. Bowls would be carved out of burls and used by an individual over many years. Spoons and ladles were also carved for everyday use. A warrior often made his war club out of a burl or the root of the tree. A man’s war club was one of his most valued possessions as it served to defend his family, land and rights.

Maple sugar production was a major part of Anishnaabek life. Families adjusted their lives to the season when maple sap would run and sugar could be produced. Families returned from their wintering grounds in the spring and made camps immediately at sugar maple groves. So much sugar was produced, it could be stored in caches for lean winter months. These caches of maple sugar would sometimes be the difference between life and death during the waning months of winter. In addition, surplus sugar was traded with other tribes and later with the British and Americans.

What is a burl?

Burls are knot-like growths which occur naturally on many types of trees. The grain of the wood in these growths is twisted and interlocked which makes the wood resistant to splitting and ideal for fashioning into bowls and other items. Burls are also highly sought after by furniture makers and are used to create thin veneers, trim and inlays.

Wooden Ladle

Created from white cedar wood burl and used in the maple sugaring process
19th century
Abnaki

Wooden Ladle

Carved from tiger maple, this ladle was likely used in the maple sugaring process
19th century
Anishnaabe
Wooden Burl Bowl
19th century
Ojibway

Wooden Burl Bowl
Decorated with brass tacks
Mid 19th century
Anishnaabe

Mocuck
Storage container made from birch bark specifically used for storing maple sugar
Early 20th Century
Ojibway

Basket
Ojibway

Bentwood Carrier
Used as a tray for berry-picking; has slots for leather straps
19th century
Anishnaabe

War Club
Also called ball-head clubs, these weapons were used by the Anishnaabek for centuries. They were often made from hardwood trees. This example has incised images of spirits to aid the warrior who carried it.

Gunstock Club
Maple wood club with a steel blade which mimicked the look of European musket stocks. Decorated with engraved geometric designs and spirits including several thunderbirds.
c. 1850
Sioux

Pipe Tomahawk
Featuring an iron blade with brass tacks and lead inlay, this unique weapon is also a pipe. These items were used at diplomatic meetings between European settlers and Anishnaabek and became highly sought after trade goods and marks of prestige.

Stone Sling
**Baapaagimak: Black Ash Tree**

The baskets made from the black ash tree are nearly as synonymous with Native art in the Great Lakes as the birch bark quill boxes. Odawa, Ojibway, Potawatomi, Iroquois and other tribes made baskets from the splints of the black ash tree. These baskets served both a utilitarian purpose and as a sale item. Utilitarian baskets were used by not only indigenous populations but also early settlers, farmers and trappers. These large baskets could haul traps, game or food. Many of these work baskets were constructed like a backpack for ease of use.

Baskets made for sale to tourists took a much different form, often very delicate and smaller in size. Depending on the artist, colors were incorporated into the basket. Black ash baskets became a very popular item during the turn of the 20th century. The supplemental income earned from making baskets helped many native families survive difficult economic and social times.

Today gifts from the black ash tree are significantly threatened by the emerald ash borer, a beetle from Asia. This small invasive species has all but destroyed black ash trees in the lower peninsula of Michigan. Seeds of black ash trees are being preserved, and transportation of wood is regulated in Michigan. For centuries, this natural resource has been an integral part of Anishnaabek culture and way of life. Now, this special tree is fighting to survive. What happens to a people when part of their cultural fabric begins to unravel? When a relative is sick and in need of care? The Anishnaabek and other tribes must wrestle with these and other questions relating to the preservation of natural resources today.

![Emerald ash borer damage inside a tree.](image)
Feeding Families

The Odawa at Little Traverse, like many other tribes across the Great Lakes, faced the loss of their lands and natural resources at the end of the 19th century. Loss of resources resulted in difficult economic times, especially during the depression era. To compound this hardship, the early 20th century was also a time of intense discrimination, and many natives had a difficult time finding work because of their race and heritage. In the 1940s, 50s and 60s, Odawa men would gather downtown in Harbor Springs and wait to be selected as day laborers. Although employment opportunities were limited, there was still another means for an Odawa to feed his or her family: making art.

Despite these challenges, the Odawa diversified and supplemented household incomes by producing art. Porcupine quill boxes were one of the most popular items, as well as black ash baskets. These two items could be produced entirely from resources in northern Michigan. Summer resorters and tourists would buy directly from the Odawa artists. During festivals and other events, Odawa art would be available for sale as well. The Odawa sold beadwork items such as clothing and jewelry. Wood carvings, picture frames and furniture were also sold. Some local artists in northern Michigan became very popular and their work was in high demand. As long as birch trees, black ash trees and other resources could be harvested, the Odawa could survive. The land had always provided for the Odawa and during difficult times, it provided again. To this day, Odawa artists still make art for sale in Michigan.

“It is a skill that belongs to us. Everything was stolen from us, the land, our way of life. This skill was given to us by the Creator and passed on from one generation to another. The soul of the American Indian is in each piece of artwork. That spirit cannot be taught. You can’t bless it in there. Besides, if everyone learns it to do it, what would be the value of the items?”

Victor Kishigo
Founder of Indian Hills Art Gallery, Petoskey Michigan

The Graphic, June 3, 1993

Cradle Boards

Cradle boards were used by the Anishnaabek and other Native peoples as a way to securely hold infants and leave the carrier’s hands free for other tasks.

Sometimes small toys to amuse the child were hung from the bow which jutted off the board. This bow of wood also protected the child’s head in case the cradle board fell or tipped over.
Works Progress Administration

During the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration (later renamed Work Projects Administration) was formed to help struggling families and individuals out of the Great Depression. Millions of federal dollars were directed into a multitude of projects to get people working. Many of the WPA projects involved construction, but one unique project dealt directly with the Odawa of northern Michigan: the Work Project Administration's Michigan Indian Handicraft Project.

Cross Village was the center of Emmet and Charlevoix artists’ activities. Here Odawa artists made quill boxes, snow shoes, baskets and carvings for sale. Much of the production of art was a community-based activity, as was gathering materials. Their artwork was shipped to various parts of the country for sale.

Anna Odemin, an Odawa from Cross Village, Michigan, created beautiful pieces of art during the WPA era. Her berry basket visited the president, and her quill boxes were collected across the state. In this rare occasion, one of her WPA boxes has found a home back in northern Michigan, at the Little Traverse Historical Museum in Petoskey. In the photo below right, you can see this very box on Anna’s work table.

Quill Box
This box was created by local artist Anna Odemin of birch bark, sweetgrass and porcupine quills. On loan from the Little Traverse Historical Society. c. 1930 Odawa

Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa History

The Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians (LTBB Odawa) had their status as a federally recognized Indian tribe reaffirmed by an act of Congress in 1994, but not without great struggle and perseverance. This accomplishment took over 150 years to achieve and spanned many generations of Odawa families who kept fighting for their rights to stay home and live as they had for hundreds of years.

First in 1836 and again in 1855, the Odawa from Little Traverse, along with other Odawa and Ojibway communities in northern Michigan, entered into major treaties with the United States. These treaties created a government-to-government relationship with the United States, reserved lands for the Odawa, provided services, compensation for ceded lands and preserved natural resources for continued use by the people. Unfortunately, the United States was negligent on upholding its end of these treaties which resulted in the Odawa fighting to regain these treaty rights.

Federal reaffirmation on September 21, 1994 was a major victory for the Odawa tribe. In order to obtain this status, the Waganakising Odawa had to show their relationship with the United States was never dissolved and that they as a tribe were unique, self-governing and distinct from other tribal nations. The evidence of their cultural continuity included historic documents, oral testimonies from the tribal community, legal representatives and expert witnesses. Part of the argument was that the Odawa still continued their traditions, language and ceremonies as they had for centuries, all in their homelands along the shore of Lake Michigan.

Traditional art was vital in showing the cultural continuity of the Odawa over centuries at Waganakising. With the tribe’s art playing a pivotal role in this historic event, the totality of all the diverse evidence was more than enough to have the LTBB Odawa intergovernmental relationship with the United States reinstated. As if speaking through the art, prior generations of Odawa lent their voices to the current generation and helped make the winning case that the Odawa culture was alive and well in Waganakising.
Bandolier Bag
Contemporary Métis bag made by artist Marguerite Houle.

Houle was born in 1973 and spent much of her childhood in northern Vermont, Michigan and Ontario. Marguerite’s grandmother taught her beadwork and gave the young girl her first loom, saying, “If you know your colors and you watch and listen to what is around you in the world, you can bead anything you think of.” Marguerite has been doing beadwork ever since, incorporating many traditional and contemporary Woodlands and Great Lakes designs into her work.

Heddle
Used by beadworkers to string their warp threads on. The beading was done contemporarily as a demonstration.

1880-1890
Anishnaabe

Loom
Ojibway

Storage Bags
These yarn bags were hand woven from commercial plied wool
c. 1890
Ojibway

Cedar Bag
Woven cedar bark bag
c. 1890
Ojibway

Bandolier Bag
Contemporary hide bag with quilled decorations and metal tinkling cones
Odawa

c. 1890
Ojibway

Bandolier Bag
Contemporary Métis bag made by artist Marguerite Houle.

Bandolier Bag
Child’s bag made from red trade cloth and beaded floral designs

Ojibway

c. 1890

What are bandolier bags?

Bandolier bags are highly decorative pouches which were popular among the Anishnaabek from the late 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. They are similar to bags that European soldiers used to hold ammunition cartridges. The Anishnaabek versions were beaded by women and worn as part of the ceremonial garb of men.

The image on the right shows an Ojibwe man from Minnesota preparing for Midewin ceremonies and wearing a bandolier bag across his chest. These beautiful accessories were not used to hold actual belongings but rather were symbols of importance, wealth and ceremony.
Moccasins
Tanned hide with wide cuffs and beadwork in geometric patterns
Ojibway

Moccasins
Tanned hide with exaggerated black velvet cuffs and extensive beadwork on cuffs and vamp
Ojibway

Moccasin
Tanned hide decorated with dyed porcupine quills c. 1850
Huron or Iroquois

Child’s Moccasins
Tanned hide with floral beadwork on black velvet cuffs and vamp and red ribbon trim along cuff edges

Wooden Canes
Carved canes with snipe and otter effigies

Bandolier Bag
Winnebago (Ho-Chunk)
Scout Jacket
Hide jacket with silk embroidery on
the front, shoulders and sleeves
1816
Cree

Moccasins
Tanned hide with beaded decoration
and fringe
c. 1890
Menominee

Moccasins
Tanned hide with quill work decoration
on vamps and cuffs. The cuffs also have beading
and ribbon accents
Mid 19th century
Iroquois

Ribbon Shirt
Orange silk shirt with blue and yellow ribbon
applique
20th century
Winnebago (Ho-Chunk)

Moccasins
Tanned deerskin hide with delicate
porcupine quill decoration on the moose
hide vamps
c. 1840
Métis

Moccasins
Tanned hide with beaded decoration on
black velvet vamp and cuffs
Ojibway
Jingle Dress
Dress of purple cloth with black velvet shoulders and cuffs. Decorated with floral beadwork and metal tinkling cones across the belt and skirt

Ojibway

Vest, Breech Cloth, Leggings
All three pieces are made of hide with black velvet covered in beaded designs

Late 19th century

Ojibway

Hide Shirt
Hide shirt with beaded floral design on front panel. Incised brass buttons and fringe also decorate the shirt

1875-1885

Ojibway

Man’s Shirt
Cloth with brown velvet cuffs and front panel. Decorated with floral embroidery and ribbon

Ojibway

Leggings
Wool leggings decorated with beadwork and ribbon

Odawa

Jingle Dress
Dress of purple cloth with black velvet shoulders and cuffs. Decorated with floral beadwork and metal tinkling cones across the belt and skirt

Ojibway

Vest, Breech Cloth, Leggings
All three pieces are made of hide with black velvet covered in beaded designs

Late 19th century

Ojibway

Ojibway

Leggings
Wool leggings decorated with beadwork and ribbon

Odawa
Gauntlets
Leather gloves with black velvet cuffs. Beaded floral designs on both sides of the cuffs
1870-1880

Ceinture Fléchée
Also known as an assumption sash, this fingerwoven sash is made with wool thread and is an example of a style worn by both the native population and many French Canadians in the 19th century.
1840-1860

Garters
Fully beaded bands with wool tassels. Garters were fastened just below the knees and over the top of leggings on ceremonial outfits.
19th century
Ojibway

Firebag
Black velvet with hand and loom-beaded designs and yarn tassels
c. 1880
Cree

Beaded Bag
Black velvet bag beaded in the Niagara floral style with silk edging
c. 1830
Iroquois

The Niagara Floral Style
Another popular tourist souvenir created by native women were small beaded bags. These purses came into style when changes in early Victorian fashion ousted huge skirts in favor a slimmer silhouette that did not allow for pockets. Instead, small purses called “reticules” came into fashion. Iroquois women quickly began producing purses for this market and their distinctive floral beadwork evolved into a unique style named the “Niagara Floral Style” after the location where many items were sold.

The style is characterized by oval shaped flowers often created in two different shades of the same color with long, thick stems. They were created on black velvet or red trade cloth and often edged in silk.
Glengarry Hats
During the 19th century the Great Lakes was home to an expanding tourist market at iconic sites like Niagara Falls. Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) women tapped into this growing market by creating beaded and embroidered hats, purses, belts and other items which catered to the Victorian and European style and sensibility of the tourists.

One of the most popular items these women created were Glengarry style hats. Made popular in Europe when Queen Victoria dressed her children in this traditional Scottish item, the hat quickly became one of the most sought-after styles and was worn by both tourists and many Anishnaabek.

Glengarry Hat
Brown velvet embroidered with dyed moosehair
*c. 1850
*Huron

Glengarry Hat
Decorated with floral beadwork and silk ribbon in the Niagara floral style
*Mid 19th century
*Iroquois

Toque Hat
Hat with visor made from red velvet, Decorated with floral beadwork and blue ribbon
*Iroquois

Round Cap
Black velvet hat with floral beadwork in the Niagara floral style
*1870-1880
*Iroquois

Hair Ornament
Loom-beaded with yarn tassels
*Potawatomi

Métis Bag
Embroidered with silk thread in a floral pattern
*Métis
Wiigwassaatig: The Birch Tree

The birch tree is unmatched in terms of sheer use by Great Lakes tribes. Without the birch tree, life in the Great Lakes would have been much more difficult. The birch tree, like all other trees and plants, is seen as a gift to the Anishnaabek. The gifts the birch tree gives help the living, and at times, the ones who have walked on.

The bark of the birch tree was used to make canoes, in which the Anishnaabek and other tribes traveled great distances to carry out trade, fishing and even war. Canoes could bear loads weighing several tons, thus making them indispensable in the economic environment of the Great Lakes. Wig-wams (traditional homes) were covered in birch bark due to its water-resistant nature. Containers were constructed out of birch bark for everyday use. When dry, birch bark makes an excellent tinder for fires. In ancient times, many Anishnaabek were wrapped in birch bark as part of their burial ceremony. But gifts of the birch tree did not stop there.

Birch bark quill boxes and other decorated containers became a staple of Great Lakes artists during the 19th and 20th century. Tribes developed their own unique style of quill boxes employing different shapes, designs, colors and patterns. The Iroquois have their own style which differentiates them from boxes made by Odawa or Ojibway artists. Centuries prior, a simple piece of birch bark was used to assemble a canoe, which would carry goods and people across great distances aiding in exchanging cultures. During the 20th century, a piece of birch bark used to create a piece of art also traveled great distances, bringing messages and again helping to exchange cultures.
**The Aki: Earth**

The *Aki* (earth) provided everything the Odawa and other Great Lakes tribes needed to not only survive but also thrive in a diverse environment. As non-native settlers began coming to northern Michigan, competition for land and resources became fierce. Combine exploding non-native populations with policies aimed at eliminating native rights, and the struggle to survive became that much more intense for tribes.

Traditional hunting and fishing became “illegal” by American standards. Land was cleared by loggers. Game became scarce and the simple task of feeding children became a daily struggle. But the Aki provided for the Anishnaabek during these dark times. The art produced from raw materials gathered from the woods, fields, swamps and shorelines literally kept families from starving. Birch trees, black ash trees and other flora have always held a special place in the Anishnaabek world.

If the Odawa had been removed out of the Great Lakes into the plains, an indefinite amount of artistic and cultural knowledge surely would have been lost. Without access to the resources to produce the art, the simple truth is that the art would have ceased to exist. Without direct connection to the materials themselves, the stories associated with the birch tree or the maple tree would have lost their intrinsic meaning. The harvesting methods would also be a forgotten skill as would the very location of special plants and trees. Part of producing art is knowing the natural resources and the cultural significance in harvesting them.

Before an artist sits down to make an item, many hours of hard labor go into gathering materials. This effort serves as an invaluable lesson to the budding artist and imparts a deep respect for the process. Oftentimes, this gathering is a group effort as aging artists rely on younger members to help gather. As in many educational practices in a tribal community, elder and youth generations work side by side. Gathering of materials may take an entire summer and fall. Traditionally actual production would have taken place during the winter months. In the spring, with a surplus of items, individuals could head out to sell goods and thus take care of their family.

Today, many of these life-giving natural resources are dangerously close to extinction. Invasive species, over-development and disease all threaten plants and trees vital to the Anishnaabek. State, tribal and local organizations are working to preserve and protect flora and fauna as well as the natural habitats that house them.

**Quill Box**
Contemporary box made from birch bark and porcupine quills

**Porcupine and Quills**

(Footnote: The Aki (earth) provided everything the Odawa and other Great Lakes tribes needed to not only survive but also thrive in a diverse environment. As non-native settlers began coming to northern Michigan, competition for land and resources became fierce. Combine exploding non-native populations with policies aimed at eliminating native rights, and the struggle to survive became that much more intense for tribes.)
**Quilled Pouch**
Six-sided pouch made from birch bark and sweetgrass and decorated with fine porcupine quills and moose hair in a floral design.
c. 1858
Huron

**Quill Box**
Round birch bark box decorated with dyed porcupine quills
c. 1900
Ojibway

**Quill Box**
Large box decorated with dyed porcupine quills in a floral design with a quill-wrapped strap
c. 1870
Anishnaabe

**Quilled wall pocket**
Hanging pouches which are quilled and beaded and attached to a wooden backing
Anishnaabe

**Quill Box**
Oval box made from birch bark and sweetgrass. Decorated with natural quills by contemporary quill artist Arnold Shawano Walker.

**Quilled Pouch**
Six-sided pouch made from birch bark and sweetgrass and decorated with fine porcupine quills and moose hair in a floral design.
c. 1858
Huron

**Quill Box**
Round birch bark box decorated with dyed porcupine quills
c. 1900
Ojibway

**Quill Box**
Large box decorated with dyed porcupine quills in a floral design with a quill-wrapped strap
c. 1870
Anishnaabe

**Quilled wall pocket**
Hanging pouches which are quilled and beaded and attached to a wooden backing
Anishnaabe
Encompassing a variety of styles, artists and time periods, these boxes (above) were loaned to the Harbor Springs Area Historical Society by Mary Beth and Charlie Clark and displayed in our exhibit during July 2015.

**Napkin Holder**
Square birch bark container with quilled floral designs and sweetgrass edging
*Anishnaabe*

**Trivet**
Birch bark trivet with a maple leaf design in green, white and brown quills with sweetgrass edging
*c. 1900*
*Odawa*

**Belt**
Loom woven quill work belt with geometric designs. The back has been left unfinished.
*19th century*
*Eastern Cree*

**Belt**
Loom woven quill work belt with geometric designs, a finished, hide backing and rawhide ties.
*Métis*

**Snow Shoes**
*Ojibway*
The Missing Case

Sacred items created from the land have always been central to indigenous spirituality. The Great Lakes tribes vary in their beliefs but one common denominator is that certain items have a sacred value. The Iroquois use false face masks in ceremony but the Anishnaabek do not. Pipes are a universal sacred item, as are eagle feathers. Great Lakes tribes use drums in ceremonies but the uses, shapes and designs of the drums vary. Each item and each ceremony is unique to the tribe that uses it.

Museums around the world display items that are of a sacred nature, whether they are pipes, drums, feathers or masks. Tribes generally do not agree with this practice and, in many cases, request the items be returned. In the United States, there is a law that aids tribes in having their sacred items returned to them. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990 gives tribes and individuals the opportunity to have ancestral human remains and sacred items returned. In a sense, NAGPRA is a continuation of the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act. In Section One of the 1978 law it states, “On and after August 11, 1978, it shall be the policy of the United States to protect and preserve for American Indians their inherent right of freedom to believe, express and exercise the traditional religions of the American Indian, Eskimo and Native Hawaiians, including but not limited to access to sites, use and possession of sacred objects and the freedom to worsh...”

In order to honor tribal beliefs and fully implement this law, sacred items had to be returned to tribal communities. During this exhibit, an empty gallery corner represented where those sacred items might normally be on display. Out of respect for the tribal communities and for the items themselves, they were not displayed as part of the Anishnaabek Art exhibit.

To this day, the Great Lakes tribes use sacred items for their ceremonies. As old sacred items are being returned from museums, new items are being created from the gifts of the earth. And so the culture continues.