

Rediscovering the Tradition of Painted Caribou Belongings in Eeyou Istchee

A Community-Based and Community-Led Research Project

Margaret Orr, Natasia Mukash and Paula Menarick

Volume 5, Number 1, 2021

Special Issue: Indigenous Knowledges

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1079232ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18357/kula.132>

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Publisher(s)

University of Victoria Libraries

ISSN

2398-4112 (digital)

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Cite this document

Orr, M., Mukash, N. & Menarick, P. (2021). Rediscovering the Tradition of Painted Caribou Belongings in Eeyou Istchee: A Community-Based and Community-Led Research Project. *KULA*, 5(1), 1–10.
<https://doi.org/10.18357/kula.132>

Article abstract

One of the core programming goals at Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute is to rediscover, relearn, and reintroduce the traditions of our historic belongings through the display, study, and research of belongings currently cared for by museums outside our region. In 2017, we received funding from the Canada Council of the Arts for a multi-year research and knowledge creation project, "Rediscovering the Tradition of Painted Caribou Coats in Eeyou Istchee." Our project brought Eeyou knowledge together with surviving examples of painted caribou coats and accessories from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries usually referred to, and classified as, "Naskapi" by museums and "experts" outside our region.



PROJECT REPORT

Rediscovering the Tradition of Painted Caribou Belongings in Eeyou Istchee: A Community-Based and Community-Led Research Project

Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute

Margaret Orr

Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute

Natasia Mukash

Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute

Paula Menarick

Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute

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Keywords: Decolonization; self-determination; Eeyou Istchee; community-based research; painted caribou coats

Introduction

Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute (Figures 1 and 2) opened in 2011 after many decades of planning and fundraising. For decades, Elders in Eeyou Istchee had wanted somewhere to preserve and strengthen "the ways." Part of our cultural programming involves research into historic collections extracted from our territory in the last centuries. This research allows us to rediscover, relearn, and reintroduce the traditions of our ancestors that are revealed in belongings currently cared for, or incarcerated by,¹ museums and other memory institutions. This project report shares our process and some of our research outcomes from a community-based research project partially funded by the Canada Council of the Arts, "Rediscovering the Tradition of Painted Caribou Coats in Eeyou Istchee." The goals of this project were to bring Eeyouch²

¹ Using terminology like *incarceration* to describe belongings held in museums is becoming more frequent, a term which presents an alternative view to museums as "places of care and preservation" to places of detention, removal, and imposed authority, as explained by Dylan Robinson (2020): "Instead, what exists behind the glass goes by other names; they have life, they are living beings, or they are ancestors. Indigenous people have intimate kinship with these beings. As such, the fact that they are 'held' behind glass, in drawers, in storage might be understood in terms of containment and confinement of life. Encountering 'loved ones' behind glass, in drawers, and in storage puts into question the ways in which museological standards of 'preservation' and 'conservation' might instead be understood as containment or even incarceration" (87).

² Eeyou (Eeyou/ Iyiyiw, Eenou/ Iyiniw) means "the people" in our dialects of Iiyiyiumuwin (the Cree language). Eeyouch is the plural form of this word. Cree is a language used across Canada, with many dialects, and is the descriptive term that Eeyou refer to themselves by, though our name for ourselves is Eeyou in the coastal area and Eenou in the inland communities. Eeyou Istchee means "the people of the land" and refers to our self-governing territory that spans 5,271 km² (2,035 sq. mi.), though our original territory prior to colonisation spanned 450,000 km² (170,000 sq. mi.) (Wikipedia 2020). For this report we will use Eeyou and Cree interchangeably, but we are only referring to our own region, not the entirety of the area where all dialects of Cree are spoken.

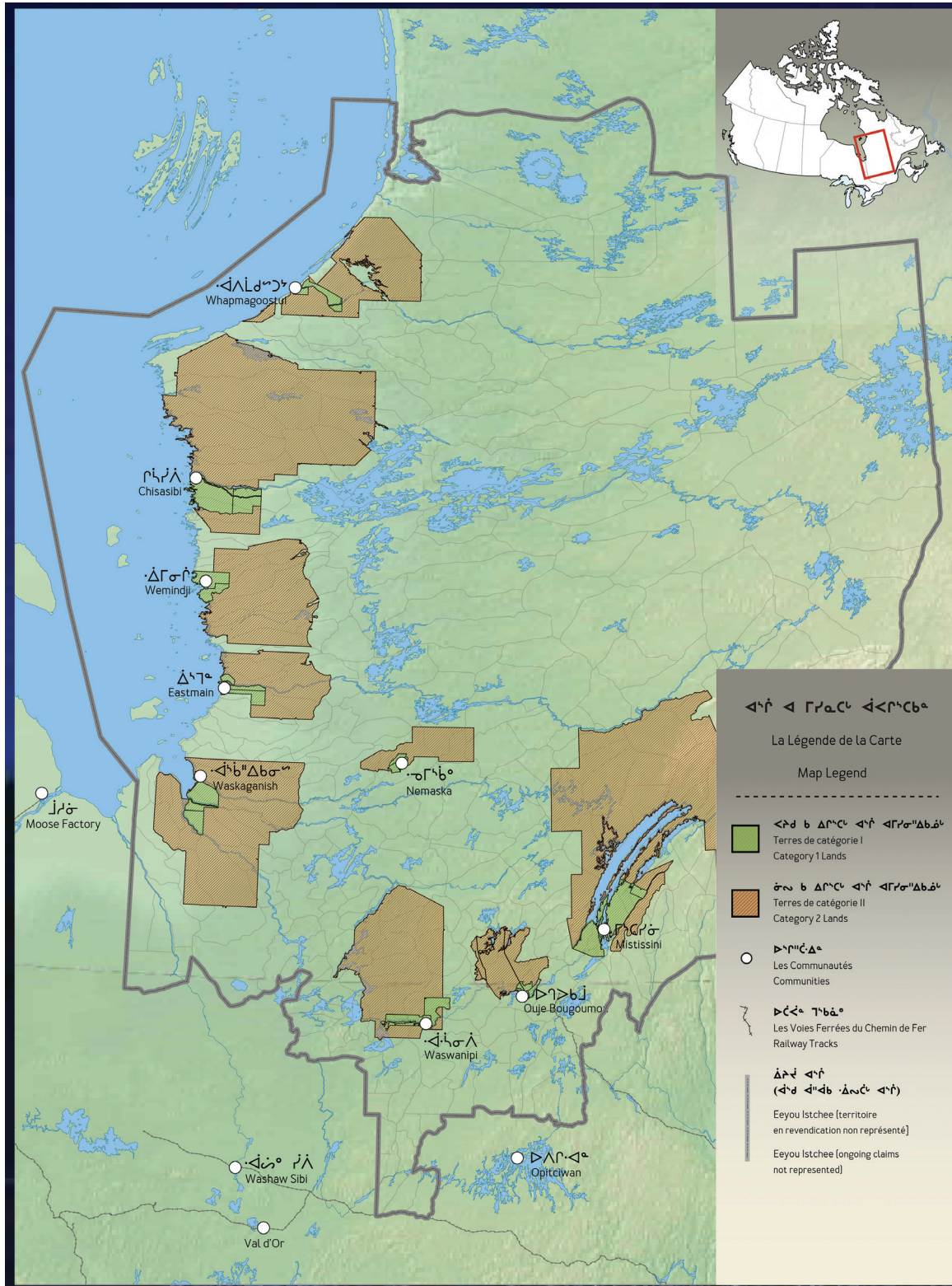


Figure 1: Map of Eeyou Istchee. Image courtesy of Cree Nation Government.

knowledge together with surviving examples of painted caribou coats and accessories created and worn in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that are usually referred to, and classified as, “Naskapi” by museums and “experts” outside our region. We relate to these belongings as Ancestors, with their own spirit and energy or life force.³ Our research found that without any records naming the makers or owners of these

³ In the editorial process it was pointed out that we have capitalised some uses of *Ancestors* and *Caribou* and not others. We resisted the grammatical rules of making this consistent. This paper draws together writing from different people and we have left the choices of capitals as they were originally written because this was what made sense at the time the words were typed. This resists what Peter Cole refers to as



Figure 2: Aanischaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute, 2012. Photo by Mitch Linet.

belongings, nor their ancestry or community lineages, the precise regional origins of these coats can never definitely be known, but our community researchers connected with our ancestors' belongings in ways that cannot easily be described in words on a page.

Overview of Our Project

The Caribou is a highly respected animal, as the Caribou carries everything someone would need to survive off the land. The caribou not only give themselves for us to nourish our bodies through their flesh but give us gifts to use as well. Every part of the caribou is used to make objects; nothing is wasted. For example, the caribou skins are turned into hide to sew moccasins, coats, and mittens; the caribou bones and antlers are carved into working tools for preparing the hide; the caribou muscles (tendons/fascia) are dried and used as sinew for sewing; and so on. With all that the caribou provides for the people, in return we honour the Caribou in many ways, such as painting, beading, embroidering, and quill working hides (our clothing), as beautifully as we can, to show the Caribou respect and honour.

Our research was led by Natasia Mukash, an artist/curator from Whapmagoostui Cree Nation; Margaret Orr, a multimedia artist/curator from Chisasibi Cree Nation; and Paula Menarick, an artist/curator also from Chisasibi who has lived for many years in and around Ouje-Bougoumou Cree Nation. Many other community-based researchers, including Elders, youth, and wisdom/knowledge keepers, were part of our project.

ways of linearly encoding a western vision of the world
 ways of encrypting experience so that little by little we are all molded
 into believing unthinkingly that there are beginnings middles ends
 believing that experience can be diagrammed graphed morphed this

the idea of capital versus small letters as being reflections of the world
 is a way of "class"ifying words caste-ing them
 and those who use them differentially
 it is a way of playing with value and with naming
 some words (we are to assume) are common some proper
 and because I do not see any noun as being un"common" or im"proper"
 and rather than using caste nomenclature orthographic diversion
 in the practice of capital and small letters
 rather than being equitable and capitalizing them all
 I capitalize only the ones which ask to be capitalized
 by which I mean I am writ the things which become words "write" me
 retroactively and in so doing make the choice themselves
 as to how they prefer to be and if at all on paper (Cole 2002, 449)

community members, or intermarriages or other cultural exchanges that frequently took place (and still take place today). Many of these coats were extracted from our territory, which originally spanned 450,000 km² and overlapped with that of our neighbours.

It is important for museums today to understand all of the confusion about the term “Naskapi” since it can mistakenly be used exclusively rather than expansively in understanding regional ancestries, and what has been called Naskapi by anthropologists and collectors is vastly different to how we understand the term today.⁷ Unless there is accurate documentation stating that the maker or wearer of the coat was from a Naskapi community, these coats should not be referred to as Naskapi coats because this term is unnecessarily exclusive. Like many belongings extracted from Indigenous Nations, the terms of reference need to be redefined in decolonizing processes led by Indigenous experts, which will take time and resources. Our research focuses on *our own* understandings of our cultural collections, using our own authority to interpret our own histories. Our right to self-curate our own culture, past and present, is guaranteed under the United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

Community Resources and Project Activities

An Overview of Our Activities

The project activities listed here demonstrate how we decided to undertake research into our historical belongings in a contemporary setting, using our community resources and knowledge.

Our project started with extensive research to evaluate external publications and museum holdings, and we consulted with Elders to evaluate the theories and opinions held by external “experts.” We created a project Facebook page as one method of sharing and gathering community content. We also held community consultations to gather community knowledge from local experts. In 2018 and 2019, we undertook two research trips with Elders, knowledge keepers, master craftspeople, youth representatives, and culture teachers. On one trip, we travelled to view painted caribou coats and other belongings in Gatineau at the Canadian Museum of History and in Ottawa at the National Gallery of Canada.⁸ The other trip was to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.

In addition, we held artist residencies at Aanischaaukamikw to activate the knowledge that was being shared during this project and to demonstrate how our contemporary artists still draw inspiration from the landscapes in Eeyou Istchee, in line with the artistic creations of our ancestors expressed on their belongings. These residencies featured two Eeyou artists, Tim Whiskeychan of Waskaganish Cree Nation and Margaret Orr of Chisasibi Cree Nation. Margaret, as one of our project researchers, included elements of creation and inspiration from the historic caribou belongings in a second series of artistic workshops held in Ouje-Bougoumou, Mistissini, Eastmain, Chisasibi, and Whapmagoostui.⁹ In 2021 we plan to feature an exhibition of historic and contemporary painted caribou hide belongings at Aanischaaukamikw to showcase new creations from the project alongside historic belongings in our collections, including some that are on loan from other museums.

Reflections on Our Trip to the Royal Ontario Museum

In 2019, a group of Elders and knowledge keepers travelled from Eeyou Istchee to the Royal Ontario Museum. This trip followed a week-long workshop at Aanischaaukamikw, where we looked at the historic caribou belongings in our collections and made contemporary creations inspired by these works. Members of the research group had travelled from Chisasibi and Whapmagoostui for the initial workshops. We travelled by air from Chibougamau airport to Montreal, then stayed overnight in Montreal near the airport. Some of the Elders travelled by plane from Montreal to Billy Bishop airport in Toronto, while the rest of the group took the VIA train from Dorval to Toronto Union Station. In Toronto, we stayed within walking distance of

⁷ José Mailhot’s (1986) work includes the multiple spellings of Naskapi in different time periods and referring to people in multiple geographic locations, from the Atlantic coast to James Bay: Nashkopy (393), Nashcoppe (395); Nescaupick (395); Naskapit (398); Nascapis (399); Nacopie (403); Naskopie (404); Naskapee (404); Nascaupees (405); Nascapsee (405). See Mailhot for a discussion of the wider language grouping of Algonquian or Algonkian, an all-encompassing term that is also used in some museum documentation. See also Bishop and Brousseau (2016) for a discussion of Naskapi, Eeyou, and our other regional neighbouring Nations.

⁸ Paula Menarick, Laura Phillips, and Natasia Mukash had been to see the painted coat at the National Gallery of Canada in December 2015, before it went on display in the 2017 *Our Masterpieces, Our Stories* galleries. The National Gallery was willing to lend this coat to Aanischaaukamikw in advance of its display, but we were not able to complete the negotiations in the time frame required. Visiting the coat in storage with Greg Hill, Audain Senior Curator of Indigenous Art, to examine it in detail and take photographs was a wonderful opportunity. When we returned with the group in June 2018, the coat was on display, but we were invited to view it in the gallery prior to their public opening times, which meant that the case could be opened and we could view the coat without a glass barrier between us. We thank the National Gallery for these generous accommodations for our visits.

⁹ We had a workshop planned at the hotel in Montreal where the patients and families stay when they are flown for specialist treatment that the Cree Health Board cannot provide in the region. However, this had to be postponed with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. We hope to reschedule this workshop and hold additional workshops in some of the other Cree communities and possibly in some urban centres where Eeyouch live.

the Royal Ontario Museum and spent three days in the secure storage areas looking at belongings from our region. Some of the Elders were in their eighties, so we built in a lot of rest time so that they would not be too exhausted from two days of travelling. Prior to this trip we had been sent reports of the ROM collections, from which we were able to select the belongings that most interested us for this trip.

Paula Menarick (2019) shared these details about our trip to the Royal Ontario Museum in August 2019:

There are many caribou teachings that were shared throughout both weeks of the research project¹⁰ and everyone had a chance to share their community teachings about the Caribou. In this research project we had participants from Whapmagoostui, Schefferville (Naskapi) and Chisasibi. Teachings were rich and touched on many other topics because they are all intertwined and connected in the Cree way of Life. All participants pulled more and more puzzle pieces together to further understand the teachings of our ancestors. . . .

The participants approached this workshop with great respect and interest because of how we were all taught growing up to honour and respect the caribou. We were very excited to visit many of the caribou hide painted objects. As the caribou hide objects were presented to the group many of us felt an instant connection to our ancestors and culture especially through being able to touch and handle the objects.¹¹ To us these are not only objects but living objects. We all felt very fortunate and honoured to be able to connect with our ancestors this way.

Knowledge Shared During Artist Workshops, January-February 2020

In planning the community workshops, Margaret used “practice-based research” methodologies, defined by Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds (2018) as the process of actively participating in a creative process informed by critical exploration research. For the workshops, Margaret’s critical exploration research included looking at painted caribou-skin coats in museums, visiting the coats in person, and reading about them. Listening to stories told by others is another form of critical exploration. Actively participating in a creative process to know more about the research formerly undertaken results in knowing more about the creative practice of making the caribou-skin coats.

Margaret chose not to share her thoughts on the spiritual elements of making the coats, which are unique and private for each person and should not be speculated about. These are her feelings about the physical action of making designs and participating in this project, shared in her project report (Orr 2020):

After seeing painted caribou-skin coats and accessories at the Royal Ontario Museum and at Aanischaaumikw, I marveled at, and respected, the skill of the artist and the amount of time it must have taken to produce one full coat. Some coats were done very quickly with minimal amount of lines and forms covering the coat. The more detail and more area covered by paint, the longer it takes to make. There were other items of clothing that were made and painted on too. Some were matching sets.

I incorporated personal stories in my designs. In my gun cases (Figure 3) my story is about the water, land, sun, and sky, and energy lines at the tip of the case to ensure a connection to the animal. I kept in mind that the animal presents itself to the hunter and used very bright colors in my designs to be sure they know they are being honoured by these creations.

Research Creation Outcomes

The direct community participation in project activities means that we cannot measure the longer term impacts of the project, other than to say that they are immeasurable.

Natasia Mukash (2018) speaks of how she approached the research process, as an artist and designer:

For us, the Cree our spirituality comes from surviving off the land, which we still practice today. . . . The Elders I spoke to went directly into their Ancestral knowledge of their parents and grandparents about the traditional ways prior to contact with Europeans. They did not need a book to confirm these teachings or memories. Their gentle teachings about bringing back the knowledge of painting on hides,

¹⁰The first week was a research and creation week in Ouje-Bougoumou, followed by the trip to Toronto.

¹¹This can also be described in the way “blood memory” is used to reference the connection to our land. See Monique Mojica, “Stories from the Body: Blood Memory and Organic Texts,” in *Native American Performance and Representation*, edited by S. E. Wilmer (University of Arizona Press, 2009).



Figure 3: Canvas gun case [2020.06.01] made by Margaret Orr, inspired by painted caribou coats, 2020. Photo by Peter Olson.

which we still practice today but in more contemporary forms that are still very much alive. . . . Our designs differ from family to family and person/artist. This allowed me to see the connection between artists today and artists of the past. . . .

Our cultural identity has not been forgotten but has remained visible in the clothes and accessories we use every day . . . some information and teachings must only be accessible within our people's knowledge, this is most certainly for the Cree, by the Cree. Some knowledge about sacred and ceremonial parts of our culture must be kept for only some community members to know.

The physical creations from our project (see Figures 4, 5, and 6 for a selection), some of which were added to our permanent collections, as indicated by their object numbers below, include:

- Caribou hides fixed white, prepared by Katrina Orr of Nemaska, Frances George of Whapmagoostui, and Elders from Mistissini, one of which we added to our permanent collection for display purposes [2019.15.01]
- A historic painted caribou coat [2019.07.01]
- Antler and bone painting tools made by Gordon Shecapio Blacksmith of Ouje-Bougoumou [2019.16.01-08]
- Hide scraps with painted demonstrations using the tools by Natasia Mukash [2019.17.01-02]
- Artworks by Tim Whiskeychan [2019.02.01-04; 2019.03.01-.86]



2020.07.01
[checkered pattern]

Figure 4: A contemporary painted hide [2020.07.01] by Margaret Orr, Paula Menarick, Cree-Lynn Shecapio, and Emily Sam. Photo by Peter Olson.



Figure 5: Bag made by Margaret Orr during the project workshops, which she gave to someone as a gift. Photo by Margaret Orr.



Figure 6: Tools carved from bone and antler [2019.16.01 - .08] by Gordon Shecapio Blacksmith. Photo by Natasia Mukash.

- Artworks by Margaret Orr [2019.13.01 ab; 2019.13.02]
- Artworks by Natasia Mukash in her *Caribou Universe* series, *Past / Future* and *Reflection* [2020.05.01-.02]
- A contemporary painted hide [2020.07.01] by Margaret Orr, Paula Menarick, Cree-Lynn Shecapio, and Emily Sam
- A canvas gun case painted in the style of the ceremonial outfits by Margaret Orr [2020.06.01]
- Painted moose hide child's-sized mittens by Margaret Orr [2020.06.02 ab]

The above list does not include the many creations by community members who participated directly in our workshops, or who carried these teachings into their own artistic process.

In conclusion, we hope that what we have outlined here shows how we have applied Eeyou values and worldview to this project, which was initiated to meet some of the core programming goals formulated as part of the concepts that drove the foundation of Aanischaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute. Through our community-based research, we connected contemporary Eeyouch to the painted caribou belongings of our ancestors in museums far from our region and demonstrated that it is possible to recognize many familiar elements despite these items being absent for many generations.

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How to cite this article: Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute et al. 2021. Rediscovering the Tradition of Painted Caribou Belongings in Eeyou Istchee: A Community-Based and Community-Led Research Project. *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies* 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.18357/kula.132>

Submitted: 06 May 2020 **Accepted:** 29 January 2021 **Published:** 22 June 2021

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