

THE ARTIST

Masks of Ned Bear: “Pawakon” — Spirit-guides of Nature

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Ned Bear

Ned Bear’s carved wooden masks are well known in New Brunswick and beyond; his reputation for creating spirited pieces is growing internationally. He currently resides within the city of Fredericton, New Brunswick. His late father was a Plains Cree from Muskoday First Nations, just outside Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, and met Ned’s mother while stationed in New Brunswick before being sent to France in World War II. Coming from a family of nine siblings, Bear recalls that his family barely survived financially. His father was wounded in the war and received a meagre pension, and his mother supplemented this with housekeeping work and childcare.



Today, Bear attributes his artistic outlook to his boyhood experience of living in abject poverty. “I believe these life events of scarcity in material possessions did affect my worldview perception. This, of course, reflects upon my creative approach and how I attempt to express my artistic concepts, which are essentially spiritual in nature, or perhaps I can say spirits of nature.”

Bear has always felt a communion with various spiritual aspects of life that were close to his heritage. As a young boy, Ned was playing within the community when he came across a white-haired Native Elder carving in his workshop. Immediately he felt a calling to stop and observe this old man. As he did so, he began to feel very calm and reassured, and knew at once that he had it in his heart and soul to be a carver also. For Bear, this was an extraordinary happening and he considered it as a very personal epiphany. To this day, he is still not quite sure if this event really occurred, or if it was actually a waking dream or vision. Whichever it was, the experience inspired Bear and he became determined to become an accomplished carver. With little or no support he pursued this vision, and has been an accomplished artist of natural media for the past 20 years.

Bear received formal training at the New Brunswick College of Craft and Design in Fredericton, and was the first Aboriginal student to graduate from that

institution. He credits George Fry (former Director of the school and a close personal friend) for making a major difference in his artistic career. About to give up on his academic studies, Bear was persuaded by Mr. Fry to return and continue his studies; Ned eventually graduated with Honours. Ned pursued further studies in Native & Fine Arts at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (now known as The First Nations University of Canada) in Regina, Saskatchewan, and then moved on to study at The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He holds a Bachelor of Education degree from University of New Brunswick with his major in Native Arts; with this discipline always being his choice, he also continued to pursue a master's degree in Art Education.

Bear's focus is on giving a contemporary interpretation to traditional spiritual beliefs. He expresses this in sculpted masks of various wood types, and also works in carving figure-forms into marble or varied limestones. Ned has been involved in the research, production and playing of the traditional Native American flute and hand-drum. Among other professional involvements, he is Co-Chair of 'Nations in a Circle', an East coast First Nation artist-support organization. Ned continues to participate in numerous national and regional solo and group art shows, presenting artworks that are guided by his sense of spiritual values gotten from his Native background and from his keen interest and personally dedicated studies in 'Taoism' — a comprehensive eastern philosophy.

He is currently teaching part-time the art of Native-flute making and playing to students of the music department at the Leo Hayes High School in Fredericton. He also recently received a research fellowship from the 'Smithsonian Institute', New York City, set to happen this fall, and was also awarded with Canada Council support to carve several 'pawakon' (spirit-helpers) along a historic Native trail in New Brunswick.