Based on the words, work and images of contemporary Haudenosaunee and Wabanaki artists, North by Northeast offers a window into traditional arts as they are practiced in three communities in the northeast corner of the United States: the Wabanaki of Maine and two of the six Haudenosaunee nations: the Mohawks at Akwesasne and the Tuscarora at the Tuscarora Reservation in Niagara Falls, New York.

These artists create work based on tribal and familial connections and an ever-present tie to the landscape. Collectively, they represent some of the oldest, most viable traditional arts practiced in the region today.
One translation of the word Haudenosaunee is People Building a House.

The sky is the roof, the earth is the floor, the Mohawk nation is the eastern door, and the Seneca nation is the western door of our house. The Haudenosaunee, also known as the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy, are the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora.

Traditional teachings, stories, songs, symbols, language and arts – all of these shared understandings – tell us who we are as Haudenosaunee. Two of the most widely practiced art forms, beadwork from Tuscarora and basket making from Akwesasne, have been made for generations.
Akwesasne is known as the Haudenosaunee community with the strongest continuous tradition of basket making. More than a utilitarian craft, basket making is a cultural process, a way of learning about the cycles of nature and the right way to live in balance with the land by careful gathering of materials.

Sue Ellen Herne (Mohawk) & Lynne Williamson (Mohawk descent)
The Haudenosaunee worldview is incorporated into our beadwork patterns as well, such as the sky dome, the strawberry, the six-petal flower and clan animals – all symbols from our oral tradition. The distinctive Haudenosaunee form of “raised beadwork” features a layering of beads on a velvet background, creating a textural effect.

Sue Ellen Herne (Mohawk) & Lynne Williamson (Mohawk descent)
We are the Wabanaki, the People of the Dawn; the Maliseet, Micmac, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot. Our home is in the east where the rising sun first greets the lands of what are now known as Maine, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. While each tribe has distinct territories and governments, we share similar beliefs, languages, art forms, and traditions.

Jennifer Neptune, Penobscot basketmaker & beadworker

Miniature basket by Jennifer Neptune (Penobscot), photo by Martin Neptune
Our traditions tell us that we have always been here. In one of our creation stories the people were literally born from the ash tree, the basket tree, dancing and singing. For at least 12,000 years our people have been in this land creating beautiful objects from the resources surrounding us.

Jennifer Neptune (Penobscot)

Gloosekap came first of all into this country, into the land of The Wabanaki, next to sunrise. There were no Indians here then. And in this way he made men: He took his bow and arrows and shot At trees, the basket trees, the ash. Then Indians came out of the bark of the ash trees.

Wabanaki creation story told by Molly Setis, published in Algonquin Legends by Charles G. Leland

Basket by Jeremy Frey (Passamaquoddy), photo by Peter Dembski
If our ancestors were to return today they would not recognize our clothing, cars, or housing, but they would recognize the artists and their ways. The work we create connects us with our ancestors and those yet to be born, helping us remember who we are and were. The baskets, carvings, beadwork, tools, and items that have made their way into museums still speak to us, and teach us.

Jennifer Neptune (Penobscot)

Birch bark container by David Moses Bridges (Passamaquoddy), photo by Darel Bridges
For centuries, the Haudenosaunee and Wabanaki people have made baskets, canoes, lacrosse sticks, walking sticks, snowshoes, tools, drums, root clubs, birch bark containers and shelters from the bounty of the northern forest. Long before the weaving, carving or building begins; traditional artists must first find “their material.” Such knowledge is revealed in the particular; knowing just which tree to use or when to pick sweetgrass.

“Basketmaking is an occupation as well as a form of art. It is also about conservation and respect for using the bounty of nature and the talent of generations in making it into something of value, beauty and function.”

MOLLY NEPTUNE PAKKE [PASAMAGUJIESI]
The Haudenosaunee call it black ash, the Wabanaki, brown ash. The botanical name is Fraxinus nigra. To basketmakers, it is the “Basket Tree” because it provides the best natural material for making splints, the pliable strips of wood used for weaving baskets.

“Ash is the silk of the basket woods in terms of the twists and the kind of things you can do with it.”

*Theresa Secord, [Penobscot]*
The knowledge of what makes a good “basket tree” is traditionally the purview of men. Once the tree is felled and taken out of the woods, it is then trimmed, peeled and pounded. Although styles of ash preparation vary among the different nations, the basic “pounding” is a constant. The trunk of the tree is hit repeatedly with the blunt edge of an axe, causing the wood to separate along its annual growth rings into thin layers. These layers are then trimmed and shaved into strips for weaving.

“You have to look where the tree is growing. Don’t pick a tree near cedar because it will effect the quality of the wood.”

Henry Arquette (Mohawk)
Today, a healthy tree is a rare sight in the Northeast. Basketmakers attribute the poor quality of ash to various sources of environmental degradation – acid rain, groundwater pollution, clear-cutting practices, insect damage, and disease. The most recent threat to the tree is the emerald ash borer, which is slowly moving east.

“You can’t separate the tree from the tradition. How long the supply will last directly effects the tradition. There is a pragmatic as well as a long-term interest by basketmakers about the health of the tree. In Akwesasne, the building of dams in New York got all the trees flooded out. Now, we have to leave the St. Lawrence Valley to find suitable ash.”

Richard David (Micmac)
Northeast Woodland people have used the white birch tree for just about everything: wigwams, canoes, baskets, animal calls, quivers, buckets, cooking utensils, even sap containers for collecting maple syrup. White Birch bark is still sought after because it is waterproof, flexible and very resilient. Winter bark, the dark brown underside used before the sap runs, is used for building canoes and shelters, while spring and summer bark can be shaped into beautiful containers.
“I have taken the time to revitalize the skill of making traditional Abenaki/Penobscot etched winter bark buckets. As a native artist, it is difficult to maintain the tradition. One cannot purchase bark, roots, or cedar. You have to travel far and wide in search of quality bark. Searching and gathering is demanding and challenging because quality bark is rare these days. Huge logging companies search out the best birch trees for veneer lumber. I am left searching where the harvesters can’t go, close to waterways, where no roads exist.”

Barry Dana (Penobscot), photo by Marilyn Rogers
“Birchbark canoe construction has been a lifelong interest of mine. Many of the traditional crafts were passed to me from my family and members of my community at Sipayik. With the death of my grandfather, my nation’s last resource for bark canoe construction passed away. Though we often spoke of building a canoe together, he was too old and I was too young. In the end, I was left with his canoe-making tools and the desire to learn.”

David Moses Bridges (Passamaquoddy)
“Carving a completed war club averages about forty to sixty hours. Each club requires patience and time to reveal itself to the carver. I find a stand of gray birches and look at the base. They need to be a couple or three inches in diameter. I scrape any leaves away and if the burl stands out all around, then it’s a good one. Carving a completed war club averages about forty to sixty hours. Each club requires patience and time to reveal itself to the carver.”

Stan Neptune (Penobscot)
Sweetgrass is a salt marsh grass cherished by basketmakers for its pliability, color and wonderful smell. Either woven a couple of strands at a time or braided, it is the signature element of many Haudenosaunee and Wabanaki fancy baskets. Picked in the summer, the grass is cleaned, tied into bundles and hung in the shade to dry.

“In Mohawk and Haudenosaunee culture, sweetgrass is referred to as the ‘Hair of Mother Earth.’ Its sweet fragrance is appealing and endears us to our Mother Earth. We know that we are not disconnected from her when we can smell her sweet hair.”

SALLI BENEDICT [MOHAWK]
“Weaving is easy, preparing your materials is the hard part.”

SYLVIA GABRIEL (PASSAMAQUODDY)

In order to weave ash into baskets, it must first be made into thinner, smoother strips. Several tools are used in the process. The splitter, a handmade wooden V-shaped device, is placed between the knees and the ash splint is pulled up through a slit at the top. After the ash is split, basketmakers use a tool called a gauge. A gauge is a handmade tool with a row of evenly spaced metal blades, set into a wooden handle that slice the trimmed ash into narrow, uniform strip.
Once the ash is prepared, the splints are then usually woven around a wooden form called a block or a mold. These handmade forms give the basket its size and shape and like other basketmaking tools are kept in families to maintain certain styles and to train the next generation.

“Basketmaking is a traditional art. I use the same tools that have been used throughout time. My splitting tool belonged to my grandmother. I have blocks that have been passed down.”

Molly Neptune Parker (Passamaquoddy)
Used for everything from harvesting potatoes to washing corn, the utility basket has a long history of being put to work in the Northeast. Traditionally made by men, these baskets have no dyes or sweetgrass ornamentation; their beauty lies in their simple, elegant form.
Many basketmakers expanded their repertoire of making functional baskets into more “fancy” decorative collectibles. Using their imagination and creative abilities, Haudenosaunee and Wabanaki basketmakers could fashion ash into just about anything. In developing creative solutions for economic survival, these artisans also helped establish a market for handcrafts in the Northeast.

Ever adapting to changing cultural and economic conditions, these artists have successfully maintained their cultural identity and entrepreneurial ways in some of the most remote regions of the Northeast, just like their ancestors.

“Trading is deeply rooted in Mohawk culture and many Native artists will trade work with each other because they believe that there is more significance in something that has been individually crafted from one’s hands. No dollar can match the time, thought and love that goes into each creative art form.”

Nido Perkins (Mohawk)
Eastern Woodlands people have always been attuned to the marketplace. In the nineteenth century, aware of the Victorian love of ornamentation, beadworkers invented “raised beadwork,” elaborately crafted layers of beads on velvet.

Today, beaders continue to create work for personal use, community gatherings and for extra income. Given as gifts at births, weddings and anniversaries, beadwork plays an important part in contemporary spiritual and social traditions. For many, it is a personal as well as community-based expression of being Haudenosaunee or Wabanaki.
Dolly Printup Winden remembers her Tuscarora grandmother Matilda Chew Hill as a patient teacher. A recognized bead-worker, Matilda Chew helped organize the Tuscarora community into a beadwork “cottage industry” at Prospect Point in Niagara Falls, New York.

Her grandmother’s life and work continues to inspire Dolly Printup Winden: “My grandmother would say, when you sew, you are bringing your blessings back to you because you push your needle up and then bring it down to you, like a blessing.”
“Beadworkers took ancient designs that in the past had been painted or painstakingly stitched in porcupine quills, and used silk ribbon and beads to transform them into exquisitely beaded clothing, moccasins, hats, bags, watch pockets, tea cozies, and pincushions. Double curve designs were transformed into brilliantly floral designs inspired by medicinal plants and flowers.”

JENNIFER NEPTUNE (PENOBSCOT)
While individually created, these arts are traditionally learned and community shared. Passed down from one generation to the next, traditional arts are usually learned in an informal way, either by observation or by example. Such artistic expression, reflects a group’s cultural values and is rooted in a shared way of life.
“It’s an old question that people have asked “What does the art form of Akwesasne basket making mean to its people?” One answer that was provided by an Akwesasne elder is that, “it brings us together.”

Salli Benedict [Mohawk artist]

Through workshops and apprenticeships, the Akwesasne Museum and the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance have encouraged ways to involve the next generation. Many of these programs bring master traditional artists together with younger students.
More than just lessons in technical skills, such efforts help establish on-going personal and cultural relationships; encouraging the participation of all generations in conserving traditional arts.

“Basket making for me is about innovation and creativity within the context of a traditional art form. The functionality, the materials and shapes have been a legacy to each generation. I honor that legacy and believe I have a responsibility to continue it, basing it always on our traditions and the knowledge of literally thousands of years.”

Molly Neptune Parker (Passamaquoddy)
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Beaded bag by Nina Perkins (Mohawk); photo by Roger Harmon