

# Rhonda Besaw

## Traditional Abenaki Artist

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It is always interesting to notice the way in which earlier indigenous art forms get used by contemporary native artists as the basic inspiration for their work. This article features some of the most recent work of Rhonda Besaw, a beadwork artist of Western/Eastern Abenaki descent, from Whitefield, New Hampshire, USA.

Rhonda's people, the Abenaki, are a Northeastern Algonkian people, and one of the five members of the Wabanaki Confederacy<sup>1</sup> – known in their own language as Wōbanakiak meaning 'People of the Dawn [ie eastern] Land' or 'Easterners'. Historically, Abenaki territory extended over much of northern New England, southern Quebec, and the southern Maritimes region of Canada.

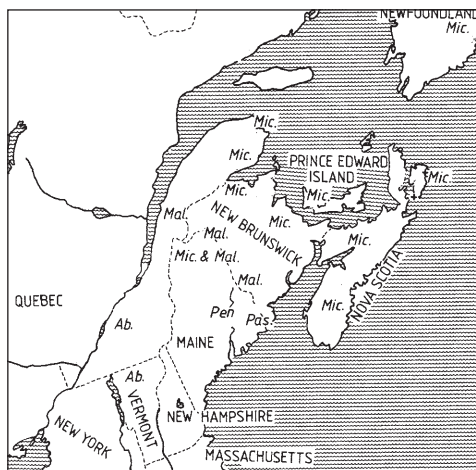


Fig 2 Map showing location of groups belonging to the Wabanaki Confederacy, abbreviated as follows:  
Ab = Abenaki; Mic = Mi'kmaq; Mal = Maliseet;  
Pen = Penobscot; Pas = Passamaquoddy

Throughout the 19th century, a wide range of beaded articles and other native material was produced for commercial sale by the various members of the Wabanaki Confederacy, largely as a means of economic subsistence. This was, of course, in addition to articles of clothing and other items made for indigenous use. Items such as beaded purses, needlecases, moccasins, tea cosies, collars and such like were in demand as souvenirs and curios, marketed to the non-native market.

Interest in Northeastern beadwork has increased in recent years, and there is now an established and growing number of traditional beadwork artists among the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) peoples, in particular. These include Samuel Thomas (Cayuga), Lorna Hill (Cayuga), Rosemary Rickard Hill (Tuscarora), Mary Lou Printup

(Tuscarora) amongst many others. All of these work in a technique known as raised beadwork, unique to the Haudenosaunee.

Compared with contemporary Haudenosaunee beadwork artists, however, the number of Abenakis who maintain their beadwork traditions is, at the present time, sadly limited. Indeed, Rhonda Besaw is one of a relatively tiny number of beadworkers continuing to work in the traditional style of her people.

Though the Abenaki themselves are particularly well known for their fine quality basketry, for the people of the Wabanaki Confederacy as a whole, beadwork has long been an important expression of cultural identity. It is to this broad tradition that Rhonda looks to revive ancient forms of decorative art.

Rhonda's work is notable for its high level of technical and artistic excellence, strongly rooted in Wabanaki tradition. Her beadwork embraces the rich repertoire of designs found in early Wabanaki Native art. Though undeniably decorative and meticulously conceived, Rhonda's work is also laden with symbolic content specifically relating to her unique heritage. Age-old double-curve motifs blend with leaf and flower designs to form a personal insight into an ancient worldview that is as meaningful in today's world as it was in former times.

Rhonda herself has a deep knowledge of her people's history and culture, and acknowledges a creative debt to earlier generations of her family:

"I very much believe that my ability to do beadwork is a direct result of my genes, my tie to my beadworking ancestors. My grandmother, who passed a couple of years ago, left me her 'Indian' stuff, mainly supplies of cloth and beads. It seems like whenever I need anything, I rummage through her stuff and find what I need. I bet she is looking over my shoulder and smiling to see it being used on these little purses."

A member of the Arts Alliance of Northern New Hampshire, Bead Society of Great Britain, and a juried member of the NH League of Craftsmen, Rhonda has hosted craft circles in her home for Native women and, in 2005–06, exhibited items of beadwork in *Pathways – Evolution in American Indian Material Culture*, a year-long exhibition at Fairbanks Museum in St Johnsbury, Vermont.

Rhonda's strong motivation to create traditional Wabanaki beadwork has an important focus. While the Eastern Abenakis of Maine and the Western Abenaki of Canada are recognised by the



Fig 1 Abenaki beadwork artist Rhonda Besaw, pictured making a floral-beaded purse, 2009.

state, provincial and national governments, the populations residing in New Hampshire and Vermont face a continued struggle for recognition from their respective states and the federal government. The creation of traditional beadwork is Rhonda's means of declaring her pride in her Eastern/Western Abenaki heritage:

"My main goal, through the creation of these purses and other traditional items, is to increase awareness that Abenaki people are still here, very much alive; and perhaps to dispel a few stereotypes about our people... Bearing in mind that the history books still used to teach in our schools say that Indian people here were just 'passing through'; that we all went to Canada and never came back; or that we must all be gone – just a quaint part of history."

Simultaneously acknowledging the debt to beadworkers of the past and the fact that art is an expression of who we are, Rhonda also has an innate sense of optimism and an eye to her people's future:

"My ancestors have lived in southern Quebec, northern New Hampshire, and all along the Connecticut River valley for hundreds of years. By doing beadwork in the same style and manner as my ancestors have done, I honour those that have gone before me, and give to those in the future. Through these tiny little beads, the story of our survival as a people can be shared. Through these tiny beads, perhaps my brothers and sisters, my relatives, can recognise a piece of who they are, and who they were. Perhaps one of them will be inspired to learn more about their culture, perhaps they may even be inspired to take up a needle and thread and tell their own story of survival. By sharing the story of these tiny beads, it will be known that the

<sup>1</sup> The Wabanaki Confederacy comprises the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, and the Abenaki (see Fig 2)



**Fig 3** Double-Curve purse, 2009. Wool, cotton, silk, glass beads. Length 15cm, width 15cm. Double-sided purse of red woolen cloth, decorated on each side with early style double-curve designs, predominantly employing the spot stitch technique. Lined with dark blue cotton, with a strap of beige-coloured silk cord.

**Rhonda:** “Double-curves are a very old design for the Wabanaki people, and very pleasing to the eye. The orange and green designs in the four corners of the curves are shaped like corn – honouring the gift of corn from Mother Earth. I just loved how the design on the one side came together, the curves just growing organically from one other. This design just flew from my needle, so I know my ancestors were pleased with this design! On the other side I did some old style ribbonwork in green satin ribbon to symbolise our mountains – represented by the triangles at the top of the purse. I see such ribbonwork on many of the old style Wabanaki clothing items and wanted to incorporate this old style in this purse. A Penobscot elder who I have the honour of calling uncle came over recently and I showed him this purse with all the double-curves and ribbonwork. He loved it, and what I loved is that he recognised the design, the ribbonwork, as he’s familiar with it on traditional Penobscot items. Again, it is that connection to the old ways that I so love.”



**Fig 4** Flower and Leaf purse, 2009. Velvet, cotton, silk, glass beads. Length 15cm, width 15cm. Single-sided purse, decorated in spot stitch technique using size 15/0 seed beads with small white tubular beads on dark blue velvet, lined with blue cotton. Zipper beaded edging and handle of twisted cord.

**Rhonda:** “This purse was inspired by many old Wabanaki beaded purses I’ve seen in museum collections. I noticed many of old pieces have this style of flowers and leaves. I really like the heart shape of the leaves, so I decided to give it a try, and used a few bugle beads on this purse too. Although it is difficult to see in the photo, there is a row of dark brown antique beads running alongside the clear beads. I was fortunate enough to purchase a few antique beads, and just couldn’t wait to try them on these old style purses. Great to think those old beads have found a home after all these years!”

**Fig 5** Flower and Zigzag purse, 2009. Wool, cotton, silk, glass beads. Length 15cm, width 13.9cm. This double-sided purse is decorated in predominantly size 15/0 beads on dark blue woollen cloth, and is lined with dark blue cotton. It has a handle of twisted cord.



**Rhonda:** “I was inspired to do this purse after looking at museum examples of old style purses. Notice how many of those old purses use floral as well as zigzag designs, so I used both styles together on the same piece. I did work in those double curves and fiddlehead type curves, as they just seemed to want to be there.”



**Fig 6** Fiddlehead purse, 2008. Wool, cotton, silk, glass beads. Length 15cm, width 14.6cm. Single-sided purse of black woolen cloth, decorated with predominantly spot stitch beadwork in size 13/0 beads. Edged with red silk ribbon, lined with cotton cloth, with a silk strap (not shown).

**Rhonda:** “This is one of my favorite designs. I have used it on my moccasins that I have danced in for ten years! The fiddlehead fern is one of the first edibles that appears in the spring. They are very nutritious, and so tasty. They must be harvested while they are tightly closed, and they so closely resemble the double-curve design seen in so many of our old beadwork designs. At the top of the design is the sun, returning life to our land in the spring. Again, this design is to honour the plants that feed us, for in their giving, we live. This purse sold recently at the Mt. Kearsarge Indian Museum gift shop in Warner, New Hampshire.”



**Fig 7** Strawberry purse, 2008. Wool, cotton, silk, glass beads. Length 15cm, width 14.6cm. Single-sided purse of dark blue woolen cloth, decorated with a in a mix of size 13 and size 15 beads. Lined with cotton cloth, with a silk strap (not shown).

**Rhonda:** “The beaded design on this purse symbolises the wild strawberry plant – one of the first edibles that appears in the spring. How welcome to see it after a long, cold winter! Such designs tie together the spiritual and the physical worlds as we give thanks for the plants that feed us. This purse recently sold at the New Hampshire Antiquarian Society’s Art Show in Hopkington, New Hampshire.”

**Fig 8** Crow purse, 2009. Wool, cotton, silk, glass beads. Length 15cm, width 15cm. Single-sided purse beaded in size 13/0 beads on red wool, edged with blue satin ribbon and lined with cotton cloth.

**Rhonda:** “The crow is a special creature to me. The inscription in green is upside-down and has to be viewed by inverting the purse. In other words, from the crow’s perspective. The green is to symbolise growth, and you may notice that some of the letters are tightly furled, awaiting future growth, and some are fully extended and open. The brown dots around the green ‘flower’ (dotting the I), symbolise seeds. The white ‘rays’ represent pure energy. As viewed with the purse right side up, on the left bottom, you notice a brown squiggle with a curl that is my mark, it symbolises the squirrel – the curl is her tail. Above the crow are blue and white domes, which symbolise blue skies and white clouds. Above that are the snow covered mountains of New Hampshire, and the orange triangle shapes symbolise the sun, the light which we all share. ☺



**Fig 10** Haudenosaunee purse, 2008. Wool, cotton, silk, glass beads. Length 15cm, width 15cm. Single-sided purse, beaded with zigzag designs on black wool, using size 13/0 beads.

**Rhonda:** “This purse is a little different from many others I’ve done as it is made in Haudenosaunee style and has a false flap at the top. I adapted the design from an old purse in the Made of Thunder, Made of Glass exhibit that I saw on display at the Mt. Kearsarge Indian Museum. My version is a tribute to the Haudenosaunee people who, like our Wabanaki beadworkers, did such beautiful work. This purse was sold recently at the Mt. Kearsarge Indian Museum gift shop in Warner, New Hampshire. ☺

**Fig 9** Petroglyph purse, 2009. Wool, cotton, silk, glass beads. Length 15cm, width 13.9cm. Double-sided purse made of red wool, decorated predominantly in spot stitch technique in predominantly size 15/0 beads and lined with red cotton.



**Rhonda:** “The inspiration for the design of this beaded bag came from ancient petroglyphs such as those along the Connecticut River at Bellows Falls, Vermont. These old stone carvings in rock were most likely done by the local Abenaki Indians as this area was historically a good fishing spot. I find the messages in these rocks so intriguing, contemplating the meaning, and wondering who placed them there? So why not do them in beads?!!!

Many of the ancient petroglyphs carved or scratched in rocks show faces that are gender neutral, some with ‘rays’ around their heads. Other carvings show full body figures that can be readily identified as male or female. This gave me cause to think of how, with my 21st century mind and eyes, I might make a modern-day petroglyph. This is what I tried to accomplish in this beaded bag.

The very dark blue beads outlining the ‘rays’ are cut on one side to give them an interesting random sparkle and a roughness that one sees on rocks. Notice the copper colour beads in the very centre of all the ‘stars’ and along the seed pods on the green curves. These signify the spark of life. I like how the light hits these copper coloured beads. It reminds me of how important and valued copper was to Native people in this area.

The blue wavy lines along the border symbolise the river. I chose the colour of the dark blue silk ribbon along the edge to also represent the river.

Regarding the two ‘faces’, the grey one represents the male, the multicoloured dark blue represents the female. Notice the grey beads have a shine to them, this is how some of our granite rocks look when the sun is shining on them, a slight sparkle. Some of the old petroglyphs show beings with rays around their heads. One theory is that these are feathers from headdresses, but in my beaded petroglyph these rays signify the male power/energy, the light of the sun and fire. I have been taught that in Abenaki culture, man is the keeper of the fire and the protector of life, thus man is very powerful in his own way.

Notice the female face is done in matte finish mottled dark blue/purple beads, which reminds me of how some of the wet river rocks appear. They become very dark. I have been taught that women have a very strong connection to water, and are the givers of life. From the top of the woman’s petroglyph comes the curled up fiddlehead design, a very ancient design, signifying new life in the plant world. The little white and copper coloured beads along the fiddlehead are seeds, and around the woman are blossoming flowers. The woman’s mouth is an open circle – the circle of the life force, in keeping with the giver of life theme, with white tubular beads, more energy symbols.

The ‘stars’ are on the other side, so many, twinkling and shifting. Some believe the stars are where our Native ancestors originated and that we will return to the stars when we pass on. The totality of this design signifies physical life on one side, and spiritual life on the other. ☺



**Fig 11** Cattail purse, 2008. Wool, cotton, silk, glass beads. Length 15cm, width 14.6cm. Made of red wool, this single-sided purse is beaded in size 13/0 beads, the predominant technique being spot stitch. It is lined with red and white check-patterned cotton, with a long, thin strap of white silk.

**Rhonda:** “The cattail plant was a very important plant for our people. Some parts are even edible. The leaves were also woven into mats, and the cattail fluff was used as material for babies’ diapers (nappies). A plant of many uses, a gift from Mother Earth, and honoured in beads on this little purse! ☺



**Fig 12** Hand purse, 2009. Wool, cotton, silk, glass beads. Length 16.5cm inches, width 15cm (excluding fringe). Double-sided purse made of royal blue wool, decorated predominantly in spot stitch technique in size 15/0 beads. It is fully lined with dark blue cotton fabric, with a long, thin, black silk strap (not shown).

**Rhonda:** “I was inspired to make this purse after re-reading some of our old Abenaki stories about good and evil. Although in these stories, good does not always triumph, on this bag I showed the ‘white’ hand larger than the black. The hand designs show the duality of man – the white symbolising goodness, brightness, and life. My hope is that the side of goodness will indeed outweigh the darkness. But I don’t see the dark side as necessarily evil, just another opposite, another side of us, or simply another place. A petroglyph incised on the ‘Great Rock’ in Middleborough, Massachusetts has a design of a hand shaped just like this one. I have a great interest in such petroglyphs, these old recordings from our ancestors!”

The small star designs remind me of the Milky Way, where we go when we pass over. They remind me of looking up in the sky and seeing the spirits of our loved ones looking back at us from the stars. Some of our stories say that we are the Star People. And notice the small fire-coloured stars on the other side are made of two sets of the four directions!”

The double curves, which I always love to use, look to me like our curled up fiddlehead ferns – and the growth we see in plant life in general. They appear here in green and brown – the colours of Mother Earth. Notice that, on the front, the double curves are opening symbolising life and growth; whilst on the other side, they’re tightly closed representing night, darkness, life closing in on itself. The clear beads placed along the length of the double curves to me symbolise the morning dew sparkling on the freshly growing plants. ♡

(continued from page 15)

indigenous people of New Hampshire are still here.”

The explanations of the symbolism in Rhonda’s work that accompany the illustrations here are included so people will understand the thought that goes into the placement of each and every bead on every piece she makes.

“In an attempt to create a thing of beauty, everything has meaning and a place. These of course are conscious not random choices. And when a stray or odd bead happens to appear, well, it is welcomed and included too, as guidance comes not only from the conscious mind but also from the spirit.”

Over the last several years, Rhonda Besaw has sought to be part of her people’s indigenous applied arts revival and, as the examples of her creativity shown here testify so well, she will almost certainly inspire others to follow in her footsteps. In doing so, she ensures the survival of a rich and irreplaceable form of cultural expression.

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