



Rhonda is proud of her Eastern and Western Abenaki heritage and sees her beaded bags as a bridge that can help people better understand Native American culture. The Abenaki are one of the tribes located in the northeastern United States, Quebec, and the Maritime provinces, and along with the Passamaquoddy, the Penobscot, the Malecite, and the Mi'kmaq, are referred to as Wabanaki.

Although Rhonda has been making traditional beaded clothing like skirts, leggings, and moccasins since 1996, it wasn't until 2006 that she discovered her true passion — the beaded purses — after seeing artist and collector Gerry Biron's "Made of Thunder, Made of Glass" exhibit of American Indian beadwork of the Northeast, at the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine.

"I saw all these beautiful purses," she says. "I could have stayed there forever. Every purse was different. That really planted a seed. I started reading a little and there wasn't much information about them, so I got Gerry Biron's book. Then I said to myself, 'I'm going to make a couple.'"

After she put her newly created purses on eBay, she was contacted by a gentleman from England who is a collector of Native American art and a noted author. They struck up a correspondence and he encouraged her, offering critical information and advice on the traditional Northeastern Wabanaki style of beaded purses. "He helped me with my technique, style, and materials," says Rhonda, "and told me to use smaller beads and silk ribbon, and to do the beading on both sides."

Because the purses made in the 1800s and early 1900s were traditionally unsigned, very little is known about their makers. Gerry Biron, now a friend and mentor, told her that what was missing from the old purses was their symbolism, the maker's motivation, and why they created their purses the way they did. Now, Rhonda signs her purses with a swirl logo — which is her mark representing a squirrel — inside each one. She also includes a story with each purse to help others understand the significance of the beads she's chosen and the design she's created.

As she continues to follow her passion of creating Northeastern-style Wabanaki beaded purses, many doors have opened that convince her that she is on the right path. "Connections are being

# A PROUD HERITAGE... RHONDA BESAW REVIVES A BEADWORK TRADITION

By Eileen Alexander

Incredibly beautiful and exquisitely detailed, the beaded purses made by Rhonda Besaw of Whitefield reflect a heritage that is thousands of years old. Rhonda's beaded bags are made in the Wabanaki tradition, incorporating natural images and employing traditional curvilinear designs, especially back-to-back curves. They also reflect the value system and spiritual beliefs of her Native American ancestors.

"These purses haven't been made since the early 1900s, when they were purchased by tourists visiting Niagara Falls and Montreal," says Rhonda, who is of Abenaki descent. "Some of the designs I create today are similar to what was used several millenniums ago." Although she follows the same process as her Native American ancestors, her beaded bags are not reproductions. "Part of what I want to accomplish is to appeal to the eyes of present-day people."

