



# **Crosscurrents: Canada in the Making**

Textile Museum of Canada  
June 27, 2018-March 31, 2019

Resource and Activity Guide

## Crosscurrents: Canada in the Making

This land has long been the meeting place of many cultures. As powerful symbols of identity and place, textiles hold strong spiritual and material connections to the land and people around the world. Textiles and their stories move with people and reveal the ways in which cultural traditions change as diverse communities come in contact with new environments. *Crosscurrents* explores the diversity of textile traditions that enliven this country, an outcome of ongoing encounters between First Peoples, settler Canadians, and newcomers. It reveals a story of convergence—on the one hand a collision of cultures brought on by devastating historical events, and on the other, a mutual exchange of materials, techniques, styles and ideas.

Through collaborations and confrontations, memories, dreams and traditions converge to reveal a dynamic and multi-layered textile landscape across time. Hooked rugs, blankets, quilts, beadwork, basketry, textile-making tools and other iconic objects illustrate broad cultural crosscurrents and values that continue to inspire new generations of textile practitioners, highlighting stories of continuity, movement and transformation.

*Crosscurrents* draws from the TMC's rich Canadian collection of historic artifacts and loans from public and private collections, and features the artwork of Vanessa Dion Fletcher, Brenda Lee, Meghann O'Brien, Amanda Rataj, and Ovilu Tunnillie. Throughout the exhibition, commentary and responses by community members contextualize these objects within contemporary dialogue and experience.

Images: Cover: Vanessa Dion Fletcher, Cuff bracelet; Next page (clockwise from top left): Hooked rug, T99.5.3; Sewing kit, T03.7.1a-f; Quilt, T94.0378 ; Ceinture fléchée, T2008.9.2







## About the artists



**Vanessa Dion Fletcher** is an artist of Potawatomi and Lenape ancestry, living and working in Toronto. Vanessa works with quillwork, beadwork, and performance in her work that considers issues of identity, social exchange, political critique and the value of hands-on learning. In 2017, she was the winner of the Textile Museum's Melissa Levin Emerging Artist Award. Through this award, she travelled to Nipissing First Nation learn about quillwork from artist and educator Brenda Lee, who is also featured in *Crosscurrents*. The work in *Crosscurrents* includes quillwork samples Vanessa made while learning the technique as well as *Body Image*, a new work that uses quillwork to represent an abstracted female form and to explore connection with natural materials and community.



**Brenda Lee** is a Cree artist and educator from Ermineskin Band (Treaty Six Territory) in Maskwacis, Alberta. As a child, she learned sewing, beading, and other cultural teachings from her grandmother Nancy Oldpan, and then studied them at Portage College in Lac La Biche, Alberta. She currently resides in Nipissing First Nation in Ontario and teaches moccasin making, porcupine quill harvesting and quillwork, hide tanning, and regalia making. Brenda is also an advisor on cultural protocols, rites of passage for young women, and medicinal plant use and identification.



**Meghann O'Brien (Jaad Kuujus)** is a Haida/Kwakwaka'wakw artist from Alert Bay, British Columbia. She apprenticed under master weavers and was taught the traditional Ravenstail and Chilkat weaving forms. She uses her artwork to explore her Northwest Coast cultural heritage and rebuild and maintain bonds with her community. O'Brien is interested in working with natural materials to explore notions of time and space, and continues to work with traditional forms to create contemporary pieces. She is committed to raising awareness about weaving as a living art form through exhibiting, speaking, and teaching.



**Amanda Rataj** is a Toronto-based artist and craftsperson. She has a BFA from the Ontario College of Art and Design University. *Crosscurrents* includes a coverlet woven by Amanda, titled *Two Sides of the Same Coin*. Amanda took inspiration for the design of her woven coverlet from *Keep Me Warm One Night: Early Handweaving in Eastern Canada*. The piece explores this historic weaving practice in a contemporary context, informed by the modern

values of sustainability and locality that Amanda is preoccupied with as a craftsperson working today. These values are reflected in the materials Amanda chose to weave the coverlet with.





**Ovilu Tunnillie** is an Inuit artist who worked in drawing, sculpture, and carving. She is best known for her sculpture but contributed to the West Baffin Eskimo Coop print program and took part in the Coop's experimental fabric printing initiative in the 1950s and 60s. Yardage printed with a design by Ovilu entitled *Friendly Whales* is featured in *Crosscurrents*. Ovilu is regarded as one of the most accomplished carvers of her generation and is celebrated for the subject matter of her work which addresses subjects such as alcohol abuse, rape, and memories of being sent to a clinic in southern Canada to be treated for Tuberculosis as a young child.

Image: Brenda Lee, Baby moccasins



## Curriculum Links

**Science and Technology:** The exhibition reveals the ingenuity of Indigenous peoples and early settlers as they relied on natural resources such as locally grown linen, foraged porcupine quills, and animal hides to meet subsistence and artistic needs. Students will discover how innovative new approaches for creating textiles have developed as new materials and skills are shared amongst peoples.

**Native Studies:** Through an analysis of historic textiles in the exhibition, such as the ceinture flechée, Haudenosaunee beaded souvenir pillows, and printed Inuit textiles, students will learn to identify factors responsible for the relationships among Indigenous peoples, and between Indigenous peoples and other groups, organizations, and nations.

**Mathematics:** Students will learn how mathematical procedures have contributed to the construction and design of a range of objects in the exhibition. For example, close inspection of woven, crochet and knit items reveal how they are constructed on a grid; the design of a printed textile from Kinngait (Cape Dorset) demonstrate how repeating patterns can be created through transformations; and the patterns of woven coverlets, and quilts incorporate tessellations to create their complex designs.

**Visual Arts:** Students will consider how the elements and principles of design have been applied in the creation of practical objects and works of art. Students will learn to identify art forms and styles that reflect the beliefs and traditions of a variety of communities that have called this land home.

**Social Studies:** Students will explore the contributions of various societies, past and present, to the development of Canadian heritage.



**Fashion and Creative Expression:** The exhibition provides an opportunity to study textiles that incorporate a wide range of materials and techniques. In particular students will also have the opportunity to compare approaches to garment construction through an analysis of clothing that has been knit, crocheted, and sewn.

**Language Arts:** Students will consider the different approaches used by community members to share memories, experiences and expertise related to the objects on display. Students will have the opportunity to create their own written response to an object of their choice.

**Canada and World Studies:** Students will consider the global events that have shaped migration patterns to Canada during the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.

Image: Pincushion (Mohawk), T2018.1.1





## Questions you might be asked

### **Why is the exhibition called *Crosscurrents: Canada in the Making*?**

The word ‘crosscurrents’ suggests the crossing, or intersection, of different moving forces. In the context of this exhibition, those moving forces are the cultural traditions, textile practices, and social relations of Indigenous, settler, and migrant populations in Canada. Some examples that illustrate this concept are:

- **Beaded souvenirs:** Haudenosaunee territory in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Lowlands was rich in natural resources: fertile land, rivers, forests, animals. These were the foundation of Haudenosaunee life in the region. As settler populations established and expanded settlements and agriculture on Haudenosaunee territory and hunting lands, Haudenosaunee people lost their land and access to these essential resources, necessitating the development of supplemental means of subsistence. One such means was producing beadwork objects that took the form of beaded pincushions, picture frames and purses and were designed to appeal to Victorian tastes for sale to tourists at fairs and exhibitions in the early 20th century. They are representative of the intersection of Indigenous beadwork traditions, the displacement and cultural disruption that colonialism caused in Indigenous communities, and adaptation to a changing environment and lifestyle.
- **Coverlets:** This exhibition includes several coverlets, patterned woven bed coverings made throughout eastern Canada. The early weavers of these coverlets were settlers of German and Scottish background and their designs reflect the distinctive cultural backgrounds of these weavers and their customers. The coverlets were treasured possessions and a show item in a bride’s trousseau. While most of the coverlets in *Crosscurrents* were made in the mid-19th century, one was made in 2017. This one was woven by Toronto artist Amanda Rataj. Her design was inspired by a



coverlet made in the 1800s, but as she made it, she took contemporary issues of sustainability, technology, community and locality into consideration. She worked with fibre producers such as TapRoot Fibre Lab, a sustainable, ethical Nova Scotia-based farm that produces and distributes small batch linen fibre products. In Amanda's coverlet, entitled *Two Sides of the Same Coin*, we see the intersection of textile practices that developed in early settler communities with contemporary social and environmental preoccupations ('think local' '100-mile' 'diy').

## **What is the history of the land where the Textile Museum of Canada is located?**

The Toronto Purchase was the surrender of lands in the Toronto area from the Mississaugas of New Credit to the British crown. An initial, disputed, agreement was made in 1787, in exchange for various items. The agreement was revisited in 1805, intended to clarify the area purchased. The agreement remained in dispute for over 20 years until 2010, when a settlement for the land was made between the Government of Canada and the Mississaugas for the land and other lands in the area. Previously, this land had been the home of the Seneca (Haudenosaunee Confederacy) and the Wendat-Huron.

The Textile Museum of Canada is located in The Ward, an area in Toronto's downtown core where many newcomers to Toronto first settled from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century. Officially known as St. John's Ward, it is bound by College Street to the north, Queen Street to the south, University Avenue to the west and Yonge Street to the east. Some of the groups that lived in this densely populated neighbourhood include African-Canadians, refugees from the Irish Potato Famine, African-Americans who escaped slavery through the Underground Railroad, Russian and Eastern European Jews, Italian and Chinese immigrants. Many members of these communities were employed in the garment industry, working in the factories and tailor shops in the neighbourhood. This history is



referenced in the exhibition through the inclusion of objects from 2015 Armoury Street Dig, most recently the site of a parking lot adjacent to the Museum where the future Toronto Courthouse is to be built.

Image: Rear of 11, 13 Centre Avenue, taken February 26, 1937 (City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 200, Series 372, Subseries 33, Item 139)





## **I'm Canadian but my family's traditional textiles aren't represented in this exhibition - why?**

This exhibition represents a small amount of the myriad textile traditions that are and have been practised in Canada. We began building this exhibition from the Textile Museum of Canada's collection. Of the 14,732 objects in our collection of objects from around the world, just over 1,600 were made in Canada and the majority of these pieces were made by European settlers in the 19th and 20th century. Examples of these pieces are hooked rugs, coverlets, quilts, needlework samplers, children's clothing, and lace. Many of these textiles have been included in *Crosscurrents* as examples of the textile traditions settlers brought to Canada. Historic and contemporary textile practices of First Peoples are shown through textiles from the Museum's collection and loans from artists. Pieces that show some of the significant textile traditions in Black Canadian communities have been borrowed from other museums and organizations. In order to include perspectives from community members whose traditions are not fulsomely represented by the objects in the gallery, we asked newcomers, artists, donors, and members of the communities in which objects were made to speak about why these objects matter to them.

For example, Marta Keller-Hernandez, an arts administrator who moved to Canada from Spain in 2012, shared a response to a late 19th century travel sewing kit that belonged to a woman who lived in Gimli, an Icelandic community in Manitoba. Marta responded to the sewing kit by saying:

"The day to pack had finally arrived. I looked at the two large suitcases while wondering 'How can I fit 29 years' worth of stuff in these?' Then I made the decision: Let's bring those things that will be more useful or that I think I'm going to need. When I looked at this object for the first time, I imagined a woman, immigrating to Canada in the 1900s, thinking pragmatically about what she was packing in

her suitcase. I then remembered that, like her, I packed a sewing kit that has allowed me to fix my clothes for the past 6 years."

Marta's response to the sewing kit speaks to the continuity of experience shared between settlers who came to Canada in centuries-past, and newcomers who continue to migrate to Canada, seeking stable government, safety, reunification with family, etc. As the title 'Canada in the making' suggests, the story of Canadian textiles is not complete, it actively continues with the arrival of new migrants who bring their own textiles, techniques, and traditions.

**I am interested in learning more about the textile traditions of Indigenous peoples in Canada. How can I learn more through the Museum's collection and its programming?**

An essential part of the story of *Crosscurrents*, of the encounters and exchanges that have shaped textile production in Canada, are textiles made in Indigenous communities. The Textile Museum has historically had relatively few textiles made by Indigenous people in its collection but has recently acquired two new collections: beaded objects made by Haudenosaunee people in the early 1900s for sale to European tourists, and 181 pieces of printed yardage made by Inuit artists in Kinngait (Cape Dorset), Nunavut in the mid-20th century. Pieces from both of these collections are included in *Crosscurrents* and objects have been borrowed from other organizations and people to show the work of contemporary Indigenous artists who work with textiles. Upcoming exhibitions planned at the TMC through 2020 will continue our engagement with contemporary Indigenous artists.



## How are the quills for quillwork harvested?

A healthy adult porcupine has approximately 30,000 quills, varying in length from 1/2" to 4". Porcupines naturally shed their quills and regrow them.

The most common way porcupine quills are harvested is from dead porcupines, often roadkill. The porcupine must be fresh so the quills will not smell. The quills can be grasped in groups and pulled out.

Another method is to search for a live porcupine in the woods, approach the animal from behind and throw a blanket over it. Quills will stick into the blanket and the animal will run away. This doesn't hurt the porcupine and it will regrow quills to replace them.

Porcupines naturally shed their quills so if there is a porcupine at your local zoo, the staff may let you have the quills that are shed.

Quills need to be cleaned and rinsed to remove grease; they can then be dyed, dried, the root end clipped off, and then softened again with a damp cloth before being used for embroidery or weaving.

Thank you to Brenda Lee for sharing this information.

Image: Quills, photo by Vanessa Dion Fletcher



## Questions to ask your students

1. Many of the techniques (knitting, quillwork, etc.) used to create the objects in the exhibition would have traditionally been passed on from generation to generation through instruction from one family member to another. What skills and knowledge do you feel are important to pass on to the next generation? Compare your answers to those of your teacher, parents, grandparents, older adults in your community.
2. Look closely at the patterns on your clothes and other textiles at home and at school. Which patterns were created while the cloth was being created (knit, woven, etc.) or created afterwards (appliqué, printing, embellishment with beads, sequins, etc.)?
3. What treaty/treaties were signed to define the relationship and responsibilities between Indigenous peoples and the British or Canadian government in the region of Canada where you live? Discuss the roles of Indigenous peoples, settler Canadians, and newcomers to ensure treaties are acknowledged and respected.
4. Why is this land often referred to as "Turtle Island"?
5. Choose a quote that has personal meaning to you. Using graph paper, sketch out a design for a sampler, thinking about how to graphically represent the letters of the quote and what motifs to add that illustrate the meaning or feeling of the words.

Image: Sampler, T98.0159





## Online Resources

Explore the Museum's collection of Canadian textiles through our online collection database at **[collections.textilemuseum.ca](https://collections.textilemuseum.ca)**. You can either search the database by using keywords such as 'Canada' or 'hooked rug' or browse the collection by region, material, type and technique.

*Collective Threads* (**[collectivethreads.ca](https://collectivethreads.ca)**) is a bilingual TMC website with educational resources and video narratives that feature newcomers and immigrants to Canada. Participants share their stories and their most treasured objects in captivating interviews, intended to create empathy and foster dialogue through an appreciation of the shared experiences that shape human identity.

*Narrative Threads: Crafting the Canadian Quilt* (**[narrativethreads.ca](https://narrativethreads.ca)**) offers a dynamic vision of Canadian heritage, presenting an engaging virtual space for cultural institutions and the public to share artifacts of material culture that have been part of everyday lives. Integrating unique collected and personal objects through an interactive online platform, this project embraces the myriad of experiences and histories that make up our country. With each quilt 'block' added, Narrative Threads reflects the unifying power of embracing the richness of our differences.

*TXTilecity* (**[txtilecity.ca](https://txtilecity.ca)**) is a mobile app and website that explores the role textiles have played in shaping Toronto's urban landscape, offering a fresh look into the history of this diverse and dynamic city. The featured audio and video narratives include archival images and interviews with local historians, garment workers, union leaders, fashion designers and artists; a particular focus is the history of The Ward, where many newcomers to Canada settled throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Ministry of Education for the Province of Saskatchewan has developed a Treaty Education Curriculum ([tinyurl.com/y6vroov4](https://tinyurl.com/y6vroov4)), which includes a range of discussion questions and topics that can be applied across the country to discuss the history of treaty negotiations in Canada and the role of all Canadians in treaty obligations.

The story of Sky Woman and the creation of Turtle Island can be found on page three of *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* ([milkweed.org/book/braiding-sweetgrass](https://milkweed.org/book/braiding-sweetgrass)) by Robin Wall Kimmerer. This book is available through the Toronto Public Library in print and digital formats.

Access art and writing by artist Vanessa Dion Fletcher through her website at [dionfletcher.com](https://dionfletcher.com).

Learn more about artist Amanda Rataj's process and practice on her website at [amandarataj.com](https://amandarataj.com).

In this video ([youtu.be/dzlAKBOhXTM](https://youtu.be/dzlAKBOhXTM)), artist and educator Brenda Lee speaks about learning beadwork as a child and her ongoing work to share her skills and knowledge.

See more work by artist Meghann O'Brien at [jaadkuujus.com](https://jaadkuujus.com) and read about her current activities on her blog at [meghannobrien.com](https://meghannobrien.com).

A short article and a video about artist Ovilu Tunnillie can be found at [thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/ovilu-tunnillie/](https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/ovilu-tunnillie/).