



# Native American Artist-in-Residence Program

## *Grant End Interviews: Apprentice Perspectives*

### Introduction

The Minnesota Historical Society's (MNHS) Native American Artist-in-Residence (NAAIR) program ends its first three-year grant period with Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies and plans for a second three-year grant period. To learn about the impacts of the program for apprentices of artists-in-residence, MNHS staff conducted interviews with the apprentices. In addition to these interviews, Wilder and MNHS conducted interviews with artists-in-residence, MNHS staff who work with the NAAIR program, and completed other evaluation activities during this grant period. This report focuses on findings from apprentices interviews.

Artists-in-residence receive \$25,000, access to MNHS's collections and collections at other museums, and support from MNHS staff working with the NAAIR program as the artists self-direct their program experience. As part of the program, NAAIR organizes a number of events at which to showcase artists' work and artists are required to do outreach in some form to their community as well. Some artists chose to share their learning with their community through mentoring apprentices.

Overall, apprentices appreciated the opportunity to increase their knowledge and improve their skill while learning more about their cultural patrimony. All apprentices that we interviewed wanted to continue doing the art form they studied, evidencing the importance of artists' apprenticeships for the cultural continuance of these art forms.

In total, three apprentices who were involved in the program during its first three-year grant period were interviewed for this part of the NAAIR evaluation. With input from the NAAIR team, Wilder developed an interview protocol to document the impact of the program for apprentices. MNHS staff conducted the interviews. Interviews took about one hour to complete and occurred in September and October 2016. These interviews were then themed and coded by Wilder, with the findings from this analysis presented in this report.

## Experiencing their cultural patrimony

All apprentices that we interviewed had limited experience with the cultural art form they studied prior to their apprenticeship, with one apprentice saying, “I used to watch my grandmother bead, but I didn’t really start beading until three years ago.” One of the apprentices came into the apprenticeship without much knowledge of the art form they studied at all, commenting, “That’s not really a part of the kinds of art that we as Dakota people do today.”

*Before my apprenticeship I was just helping my dad [an artist-in-residence] occasionally when he needed things. He’d have me stand by him and watch. I didn’t try to make anything until I was 16. I wasn’t trying to be an artist, just help my dad out. – Apprentice*

Each apprentice said that studying objects in MNHS’s collections was significant for them as a way to connect with their culture and their ancestors, with one apprentice noting the importance of physically handling these objects: “It’s different than seeing it online, when you can actually hold it in your hands.”

*The most helpful part of my apprenticeship was studying the Native American beadwork at MNHS. There’s to me a spirit that lives in each piece and I can feel it. – Apprentice*

*When I would finish one of my nice baskets, that’s what made me feel most connected. Because when I get done with a basket that someone made 200 years ago and no one is making now days... That’s what connects us most. – Apprentice*

*The collection we studied, it was fascinating to learn about old designs and how they tell a story, and also for me there’s a connection to my grandmother. – Apprentice*

## Impact of the apprenticeship

All apprentices that we interviewed talked about continuing to practice the art form they studied after their apprenticeship ends, and that the increased knowledge and improved skill that they gained from the apprenticeship will contribute to their cultural continuance of the art form. In fact, each apprentice said that they were now “highly interested” in the art form they studied, whereas before the apprenticeship they indicated a lower level of interest.

Some of this increased interest may have stemmed from the many opportunities for apprentices to learn about their art form. In their interviews, apprentices talked about their time with NAAIR as a learning opportunity. The apprentices readily supplied details about how to do their art form that they learned during their apprenticeship.

*It was all like cultural history, we were learning the different areas they were from and the different materials they used, so when we were going to different places and doing art shows we were seeing different styles and techniques. – Apprentice*

*When you go out to get birch bark, a lot of people think that it's all white on the outside. But at different times of the year it's different colors on the inside – in summer it's golden and in fall or early spring it sticks to the tree and gets an orange-ish or reddish color. We get different colors by splitting it into layers – it's like paper 30 sheets thick. Some trees produce brown or black, depending on if they're dead or alive. We check the depth of the bark by making a little cut. The bigger the tree, the thicker the bark. We try not to peel small trees so they will grow. If you go and harvest when it just rains and it gets hot out the next day, you can go get it and you don't even have to peel it. After you cut it the sheet will jump right off the tree onto the ground. – Apprentice*

Apprentices also mentioned improved skill with their art form as an impact of their apprenticeship. One apprentice noted the helpfulness of “having someone physically show you how to do it and seeing how they did it long ago” by examining objects from MNHS’s collection. Another apprentice talked about how this apprenticeship has inspired them to look into other art forms as well.

*Before my apprenticeship, I could barely do the art form and now I can make what my dad can make. He wants to stick with birch bark, but I want to dabble with quill or beadwork, or start tearing into any art form I want to try. – Apprentice*

All apprentices that we talked to wanted to continue doing the art form they studied, and had the intention of sharing it with others as well, with one apprentice saying, “I can keep doing it for the next 50 years if I live that long! I can teach ten times the amount of people my dad has.” Apprentices framed their desire to teach others their skills by explaining that many people in their community lack the knowledge or skills to do this kind of art.

*The apprenticeship inspired and motivated me to pass on my knowledge and skills to others, not just to the younger generation. There's a whole generation that didn't learn how to do beadwork because of colonialism. – Apprentice*

*We found all kinds of examples in the museum collections of ribbon work, so there was a point in time when people did that, but it's just been forgotten. I think being able to revitalize the art and being able to teach other people is really important. – Apprentice*

The apprentices we interviewed also talked about wanting to showcase or exhibit their work in the future, with some saying that they already have exhibited or have concrete plans to exhibit and others saying that they would be open to it. One apprentice said that, while they haven't exhibited their work independently yet, they have the connections to do so.

*I made two baby bonnets and one was on exhibit earlier this year in North Dakota and then I had another one in Duluth. – Apprentice*

*I want my pieces to be in museums. We've got more contacts with museums. You need to know the right museums and right people. I think that's the hardest part for artists. Many don't have the connections. – Apprentice*

## Summary

The goal of these interviews was to learn the impact of artists' apprenticeships, which is one way that artists-in-residence shared their learning with their communities. Apprentices that we interviewed expressed the significance of experiencing their cultural patrimony through their apprenticeships. Each of the apprentices planned to continue practicing their art form and wanted to teach others the skills that they have learned. These findings illustrate the significance of the NAAIR program for helping ensure the continuance of the art forms that apprentices learned during their time with NAAIR.

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