



# Native American Artist-in-Residence Program

## *Grant End Interviews: Artist Perspectives*

### Introduction

As 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, MNHS staff conducted interviews with artists-in-residence to learn about the impacts of the program for artists. In addition to these interviews, Wilder and MNHS conducted interviews with apprentices of 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 artist 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.

The overall impact of being an artist-in-residence, as noted by artists during their interviews, was their increased capability for the cultural continuance of the art form they practice. The residency increased artists' knowledge and skill about their art form, deepened their connection with their ancestors, expanded their professional networks, and resulted in more opportunities to share their work and expertise. In each of these ways, artists are now better equipped to promote the cultural continuance of their art form than they were before their residency.

All five artists-in-residence who participated 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 artists. 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.

## Cultural continuance

Each artist talked about the significance of their time in NAAIR for the cultural continuance of the art form they practice. Artists saw their participation in the program as a form of cultural continuance through connecting with their history, and also saw their increased ability to share their knowledge as a strategy for cultural continuance. These are two major themes that emerged from artist interviews: connection to history and sharing learning.

### *Connection to history*

All artists expressed how important it was to study objects from MNHS's collections because this represented a connection to their history. There was acknowledgement that NAAIR was a unique opportunity for them, with one artist saying, "Most people on the reservations don't get to see the stuff like [MNHS has] in the collections." Artists appreciated feeling close to their ancestors by viewing these cultural objects and talked about the power of interacting with objects made by their ancestors.

*One of my first reactions when I saw this collection was "My goodness, someone else did this work!" because I had not seen anyone else doing it. To see these older pieces in museums, that was absolutely thrilling. – Artist-in-residence*

*It really didn't dawn on me until I went into the collections and I could hold these things in my hands. The intergenerational transfer was not just from me to my apprentices, but also from those people who came before me to me. Just to touch something that a Dakota person had made 150 years ago brought that idea of responsibility forward to me, to help make sure that their story is told. – Artist-in-residence*

All artists also talked about how seeing objects in MNHS's collections answered questions about their art form, gave them ideas for doing their art more effectively, and inspired them to deepen their knowledge and skill level.

*I studied a lot of objects online because that's all I had access to, but being able to actually handle the objects and see how each object was beaded and how the colors were used helped me improve my design. – Artist-in-residence*

*Being able to have access to the museum and the objects they have, there's birch bark cutouts that I found one time, hundreds and hundreds of cutouts of flowers and leaves, so an idea popped into my head: Instead of having a whole design, I started drawing one flower separately, like our ancestors used to do. That helped me in the design process to be able to design faster. – Artist-in-residence*

*We learned an old style [from the collections] that wasn't taught on the reservation because all the basket makers have passed on. – Artist-in-residence*

## *Sharing learning*

All artists wanted to ensure that their art form continues and grows, and credited NAAIR with giving them the opportunity to build their knowledge and skills and to support them to then teach and share with others. One artist said, “Passing this knowledge onto Native American people is the most important legacy I want to leave.” Three of the five artists interviewed had apprentices throughout their residency, which is one way that they shared learning. There were other ways that artists shared their learning or plan to share their learning, such as teaching audiences at MNHS events about their art forms, sharing the patterns for their work with others, publishing books about their art form, and developing and maintaining online or electronic resources of their art form.

*I have a goal of sharing the knowledge that I gained and objects with people that wouldn't be able to see a particular object from a museum or learn what I learned. I'm slowly working on, if I can ever find funding, on a beadwork database. – Artist-in-residence*

*We shared patterns we made with 20 plus Ojibwe tribes and 6 or so allies and others. There's 40 patterns in each packet and what they do with those patterns is up to them. To go and do that for another person and make sure it's not lost, there's something great in that. – Artist-in-residence*

*I worked with three apprentices; now they can tell and teach others. That's the most important part of trying to meet that goal I had of making more people aware of this Dakota art form. – Artist-in-residence*

## Connections and networking

As a result of participating in NAAIR, artists-in-residence made connections with other artists, with their community and other Native American communities, and with the general public. This section of the report describes how artists' participation in NAAIR contributed to these connections. The three major connections and networking themes that emerged from artist interviews are: connections to other artists, connections to artists' community and other Native American communities, and expanding artists' audience.

### *Connections to other artists*

By participating in NAAIR as an artist-in-residence, artists formed relationships with the other artists in that cohort as well as with other artists who practice their art form and others. The main impact of these connections is increased ideas and knowledge about artists' cultural art form.

*I met a lot of other artists like Pat Kruse, and they give me other ideas. Pat takes me out to the woods to gather bark, so I learn a lot from him. – Artist-in-residence*

*I've made contact with a master birch bark biter, she's up in Winnipeg, so we're planning another trip up there to visit with her. She has some different techniques that I want to learn. She mentioned that there's a 12 step process that she does and I can't imagine that. – Artist-in-residence*

## ***Connections to artists' community and to other Native American communities***

Three of five artists interviewed had an apprentice or multiple apprentices during their time with NAAIR. This was one way in which artists fulfilled the requirement of the program to share their learning and skills with their community. Artists who had apprentices saw their mentorship work as a way to promote the cultural continuance of their art forms.

*One of my goals was intergenerational transfer of knowledge and working with apprentices so that they can teach other people. – Artist-in-residence*

*Being an artist-in-residence had a significant impact because I wanted to work with a small group of apprentices and the grant allowed me to bring my apprentices from Pine Ridge and Sisseton and Vermillion to my house and pay them gas money to get there and back, to feed them, and to buy them materials. Being able to bring them there and not have it be a hardship for them financially was important to me. – Artist-in-residence*

Artists with apprentices and those without also shared their learning and their work with their community and other Native American communities through MNHS events. This too was talked about by artists as a strategy to ensure cultural continuance of their art forms. In some cases, artists' residencies were a way for artists to remind their communities that the art form they practiced was part of their cultural patrimony.

*I've never seen my art in our community. It's really awesome to educate my own community that this is one of our traditional crafts. It's just been tucked away for so long that nobody realizes it's ours. – Artist-in-residence*

*Passing onto Native people is my most important legacy I want to leave, especially Turtle Mountain people, because we used to do this art at home and I didn't know that until I started doing the biting. – Artist-in-residence*

## ***Expanding artists' audience***

All artists mentioned their expanded audience as an impact of participating in NAAIR. They all attributed this growth to their association with MNHS, with one artist saying, "I think the fellowship helped give me a better reputation as an artist." Artists talked about expanding their audience as way to spread knowledge about their cultural art form and contribute to their art form's cultural continuance.

*The program helped with getting my name and work out there [which is important because] nobody knows about birch bark biting, Native or non-Native. – Artist-in-residence*

Expanding and diversifying artists' audience often occurred through showcasing their work and learning at events organized and sponsored by MNHS. One artist said they most appreciated the events like American Indian Family Day at the Minnesota History Center because this event was

not focused solely on their art. Because events like this attracted a wide audience base, in this artist's opinion they did the best job of expanding and diversifying their audience.

*We had an event at All My Relations gallery. Almost 50 people were there. It's just making all those contacts and sharing with that many people. I brought enough pieces that everyone in the audience could try biting. – Artist-in-residence*

*At the American Indian Family Day I talked to a total of 78 people, and they ranged in age from 10 to 90 years old. That was a group of people I wouldn't have had access to if I hadn't participated that day. – Artist-in-residence*

Some artists also called out social media as a powerful tool for building their audience, and that their online presence greatly increased while they were an artist-in-residence with NAAIR. One artist offered a suggestion on how to capitalize on MNHS's social media presence for the artists' benefit, saying that MNHS's social media posts about NAAIR artists should focus more on the work of artists and their journey in the program, rather than on MNHS's collections. However, it should be noted that NAAIR's primary goal is to promote sharing and learning between MNHS, artists-in-residence and their communities, and MNHS's traditional audience. As such, this recommendation and its intent of promoting individual artists' work must be carefully considered.

*Once the fellowship started and I started posting it myself on social media, things exploded... – Artist-in-residence*

*In regards to social media if the MNHS social media posts anything about me, I get a flood of friend requests and messages, questions about what I'm doing. I've noticed a few people from out of the country, but mostly from within the U.S. – Artist-in-residence*

## Opportunities from the residency

For artists-in-residence, their participation in NAAIR resulted in opportunities for further career development and stability. The three major themes related to such opportunities that emerged from the interviews are: showcasing work, sharing expertise, and selling work.

### ***Showcasing work***

Most artists mentioned that, during or after their residency had ended, their participation in NAAIR resulted in opportunities to showcase their work at other museums or events – both in Minnesota and in other places.

*One of the NAAIR events helped me get into the Minneapolis Art Institute because a curator saw my work and invited me to put something up on exhibit. The residency helped me [make connections] in the whole art circle with museums. – Artist-in-residence*

*I was able to get my work in the History Center store, what a great opportunity. You guys have so many people who go there. – Artist-in-residence*

*The regional art shows I went to when I talked about being an artist in residence opened some doors to other places, such as the Great Plains Art Museum at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln and the Red Cloud Heritage Center and their artist in residency program at the Crazy Horse Memorial. – Artist-in-residence*

### ***Sharing expertise***

Some artists-in-residence are seen as expert practitioners of their cultural art form, due in part to their residency with NAAIR. These artists have been approached to create a book of their work, to teach cultural education related to their art form, and for consultation or lecture opportunities by universities.

*One of the publishers from the North Dakota State University Press came to me because she heard of my birch bark biting and asked me if I would be interested in doing a chapbook of birch bark poems. – Artist-in-residence*

*I did a lecture at Haskell University because of my fellowship. They found out about me through social media, but they paid attention because I was in the fellowship. – Artist-in-residence*

*We did a show recently and taught teachers who teach teachers how to be teachers. They needed to learn a cultural experience. If it hadn't been for MNHS, we wouldn't have been any of them places. – Artist-in-residence*

### ***Selling work***

Many artists attributed the increased sales of their art to their participation in NAAIR, with one artist saying, “It increased business with me.” Another attributed it to their skill increase from being in the program, saying, “We were already good, but we were missing things that the old teachers had.”

*I've sold artwork because I have been an artist in residence at MNHS, and so those connections were important. –Artist-in-residence*

*I now get to do 100 baskets for the Mille Lacs band of Ojibwe, for their inaugural address. I was raised elsewhere and it took a long time for them to warm up to me. Because of NAAIR they bought a hundred baskets last year and want a hundred more this year. They stood up and applauded when they got my baskets. Do you know how good that feels? – Artist-in-residence*

*Being affiliated with your organization has made people think that I'm very serious about my craft. People are willing to pay for my work at a higher price than they would prior to receiving the residency. – Artist-in-residence*

## Summary

The goal of these interviews was to learn the impact on artists of participating in the NAAIR program. It is clear that, from the artists' perspectives, the overall impact was their increased capability to shepherd the cultural continuance of their art form. It is also clear that it was deeply important to artists to interact with their cultural patrimony in MNHS collections as part of their residency. This connection to their ancestors and their history was the springboard from which artists increased their knowledge and skill about their art form, deepened their connection with their ancestors, and expanded their professional networks. This resulted in more opportunities to share their work and their expertise. These interviews illustrate the significance of the NAAIR program for helping the artists ensure the continuance of the art forms they practice.

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