

Metis culture emerges in art

BY LUCY FOWLER
THUNDER BAY

NOVEMBER 16 marked the 129th anniversary of the death of Louis Riel. While the Métis, his people, never forgot what he had done and sacrificed, the Canadian government had a very different outlook. For decades after his execution, Riel's life and deeds were vilified, his accomplishments overlooked and his positive influences and leadership entirely ignored.

A recognizable shift happened when, in the early 1990s, Riel was officially recognized as the founder of Manitoba over 100 years previously. And just six years ago, a civic holiday in Manitoba was named after him. It was as if our neighbouring province was coming to terms with its indigenous roots.

This coming to terms is a familiar story for many indigenous youth. For years, it was easier to pretend I wasn't Métis. My sister, in elementary school, let others believe she was Italian instead of asserting her First Nations heritage. At that time, I felt that if I stood up and declared I was Métis, all of the hurtful comments I heard in the community would be directed at me.

We have all heard these comments. Whether at school, on the bus, in the mall or in countless other public places, these comments carry weight to the youth, adults and elders who hear and internalize them. The Internet has opened up another avenue for this pain, forcing the



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avoidance of news media comment sections at all costs.

Even though these comments do not reflect the strong, brilliant, kind people I know, they kept me from identifying openly and proudly as Métis. Slowly as I grew older and braver, this started to change. It was not until I was given teachings around the traditional arts of the Métis that I found the most strength.

As Louis Riel once said, "My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back."

I LEARNED how to create the traditional flower beadwork of the Métis. The style and patterns used by the Métis were so distinctive that they were even named the flower beadwork people by the Cree. With each set of beads affixed to fabric, I feel closer to my ancestors and part of something bigger.

I learned how to finger weave, creating smaller versions of the signature sash that many have seen. While wearing my sash, I am more often mistaken for being from Old Fort William than I am for being

Metis but the sash has been an essential fixture in Métis culture for centuries.

I learned how to make a capot, a jacket crafted out of a wool blanket. I learned embroidery. I crafted moc-casins. With each distinct art, the roots to my history and my family grew stronger. With each stitch and each weave, I somehow became more myself.

Now, through past employment and my volunteer work, I am able to share these skills with others. Sometimes it is with a classroom of elementary students who had not known of the existence of the Métis but were soon creating beautiful bracelets.

On Louis Riel Day, it was with university students who were passing through the Agora and were intrigued by our displays. No matter the audience, it is common for those who learn these skills to return, proud of what they have accomplished and wanting to learn more.

Whether you are a Métis youth, unsure of your heritage, or a community ally who wants to broaden your understanding, these arts offer a way in. It is through these arts, far from lost, that we can all connect to Métis culture. While Riel's people may have slept for 100 years, our fingers certainly kept busy.

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