



An Interview with Gregory Scofield

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Introduction

A visit with Gregory Scofield means inspirational stories, glorious artwork, and a few good pieces of advice. A master beadwork artist and poet, Gregory has been working on his very first collection that he intends to hold on to. Being kind enough to show me this growing collection of ancestral pieces alongside the octopus bag featured here, Gregory shared about the role the grandmother pieces have played in shaping his craft and what he hopes will continue to inspire the contemporary artwork of the flower beadwork people. Keep reading below to hear from Gregory about his artist's journey up until now and his hopes for youth artists into the future.

Interview with Gregory Scofield

Steph: We have the beautiful, beautiful work with us here, which feels really wonderful to look at while we visit. So we'll start with the octopus bag here. Can you share a bit about what inspired you to make this?

Gregory: I've worked for well over 20 years with grandmother pieces and with our historic material art. I've mainly worked with historic collections. My artwork and artistic practice is largely based upon heritage arts. I largely work to create new heritage pieces with appropriate materials, especially antique beads. The old designs really inspire all my work.



Figure 1 Black wool stroud, blue cotton twill binding tape, antique Venetian seed beads, antique metal faceted beads, wool yarn tassels, wool yarn cord, antique glass pony beads, lined with muslin-cotton fabric. Creation: 2025; Gregory Scofield.

Steph: Can you tell us a bit about the traditional use for an octopus bag?

Gregory: Octopus bags and panel or fire bags were created by women for their husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, grandfather. These items were traditionally intended for men. These bags served to carry things like smoking pipes and tobacco, fire making materials, and medicines. They were incredible works of love created by Métis women. Métis women used everything as a canvas. This included family members, the house, dog teams, horses, the church, and anything that could be decorated. So, the octopus bag and fire bags were incredibly special pieces. They were often created as wedding presents.

There's an amazing example of a very early octopus bag housed at the Royal British Columbia Museum. It had been on display for well over 50 years. However, there was absolutely no provenance attached to it. It wasn't until a couple of years ago that a curatorial assistant found the provenance of that bag in the archives of the museum. This octopus bag, which is very early, dating to 1846, was created by a young Métis woman named Susanna Bernie Grahame. She was born in 1828 at Fort Vancouver. A lot of Métis families from Red River came to Fort Vancouver. It was very much a hub for the Hudson's Bay Company. Anyway, Susanna created this incredible bag for her husband likely as a wedding gift. His name was James Grahame, and he also worked for the Hudson's Bay Company. She created this bag for him when she was probably 18 or 19. Sadly, she passed away when she was only 24. When her husband transferred to Fort Victoria, Susanna's beautiful bag came with him. At some point, he remarried. The second wife probably saw this beautiful bag, and somehow it ended up leaving his possession.

The bag was acquired by the museum, and I believe it was donated by the wife of the 1st magistrate in British Columbia. The point of the story, of course, is that Susanna created this exquisite octopus bag for her husband as a wedding gift. As I mentioned, she created it when she was 18 or 19. Her bag travelled and ended up at the museum without a name or without a story attached to it. When the curatorial assistant found Susanna's name and the provenance attached to her bag, both Sherry Farell-Racette and I set to work finding more information about her. Her story was so incredible. Her early life and family history at Fort Vancouver was so incredible. To think the museum had this octopus bag she created, and that finally, after 50 years of being displayed, her name was finally reattached to it. I had the chance to visit her bag. I brought a tobacco offering for her, which now lives with her bag. I wanted to honour her, to say, "we know who you are. We know your story."

When we talk about repatriation and repatriation this is a great story that illustrates the importance of these pieces and the importance of the lives and histories that belong with these pieces. So back to your original question. Yes, these bags were extremely important. Métis women poured their absolute spirits into their creativity. Their skill is evident in everything they created.

Steph: Wow. What an incredible story. Thank you for sharing. I also wanted to ask you about your process of choosing materials. You've shared a bit about trying to be as accurate as possible to the appropriate materials of the grandmother pieces. What goes into your process to choose and identify and source the right materials for this kind of work?

Gregory: I've been fortunate because in the work I've been doing, especially the repatriation work and working with our historic grandmother pieces. I've been doing this work for well over

20 years. I've had access to sitting with the grandmother pieces. I've been able to study them. And, above all, I've been able to visit with them as I did with Susanna's bag. My ongoing work is to identify our grandmother pieces within institutional holdings. Because of this, I have a very intimate relationship with the historic Grandmother pieces. I've had access to learning about the historic materials that were used, the beads that were being imported by the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company, the silk ribbons, the trade beads, the wool, and so on. I've been very fortunate to study the historic pieces. When I'm working on a personal project, I'm very aware of the historic materials. I've searched far and wide to acquire those materials, specifically the old beads, which were being produced in places like Venice and in Murano, specifically, the island of Murano. A lot of the early seed beads that the Hudson's Bay Company and Northwest Company were carrying were glass beads that were being imported from Venice.

I know a lot of our artists, especially our young artists, are also working with historic materials. We have an incredible group of young artists that are working in both traditional and contemporary mediums. There are incredible young artists like David Heinrichs, Claire Johnson, Vi Houssin, Coral Madge, Carly Nabess, to name a few. And we have matriarchs like Jennine Kauchi, who've been instrumental in mentoring many of the younger artists. I hope I've also been able to serve as a patriarch. I've also worked with many of our artists.

Steph: You're mentioning the younger artists who are trying to learn what they can and revive traditional artforms. You've also done a series of books about teaching métis beadwork and different garment sewing to share some of your knowledge. Can you share a bit about who you learned from in your early artistic work?

Gregory: I was very, very fortunate because I grew up with my late auntie, who was a fluent Cree speaker. She was also an incredible storyteller and beadwork artist. So, for me, nêhiyawewin, the Cree language, stories and beadwork, and the tactile act of creation, became synonymous with one another. My writing and poetry has always been very connected to my artistic practice. Of course, language is a huge part of that. History. I was fortunate that I started to learn to sew, specifically beadwork, when I was about 8 or 9 years old. I've been doing beadwork for a very long time. I'm so grateful I had the opportunity to learn from my auntie because she worked in a traditional medium. Through her, I got to learn about traditional materials, the way in which materials were created such as tanning hides. I realize I was fortunate to gain that knowledge from a young age.

Throughout the years I've also learned from my own research, which informs my personal art practice. I learn a great deal from other as I do the Grandmother pieces. I think a huge part of our creative processes is we're all learning as a community. I see this with our younger artists, which, you know, without sounding like an old man here, it makes me incredibly proud to see the work they're creating. I've been fortunate that I've been able to mentor a lot of younger people as well as established artists in British Columbia, to see their work develop. The work of our young artists is phenomenal. One of the things I always like to impart, whether I'm teaching a workshop or if I'm working with individuals, is that what we are doing now is creating the heirlooms for the future. If we're fortunate, 150 years from now, our little ancestors, our descendants will be looking at our works and studying our works. Our culture, our history, will

carry on through our material art. I've been extremely happy also to see a concentrated effort on our material art and specifically the historic works of our ancestor grandmothers. I love the resurgence and interest in our material art. I love that our community members and artists are visiting the Grandmother pieces, sitting with them, learning from them, visiting with them, and then taking that information, taking that knowledge away with them. Above all, I love that so many are finding inspiration for their own artistic practice. I feel like the continuation of a chain, an unbreakable chain. I might be biased here, but it seems to me one of the fastest growing kinds of contemporary arts is happening within the Métis community. Our young artists that are not only carrying on this tradition, but they're also reinventing it to a large degree.

Steph: You've touched on this already but, what would be your message for those young Métis artists who, who are really putting all of themselves into the resurgence of traditional historic Métis work?

Gregory: My greatest hope for them, and it's something that I'm seeing a lot of already, is that they will have access to the historic works of our ancestor grandmothers. I want them to spend time with the ancestors, to study them, to learn from them. To be inspired by them. I see so many of our young artists going away from those visits and taking the knowledge that they've learned and then applying it to their own artistic practise. One of the incredible things, which is so meaningful, is what our young artists are doing with the works they're creating. They're taking the visual of "The Floral Beadwork People", a name given to us by the Dakota and Cree, and they're breathing contemporary life into it. These new works, many of which are inspired by the old pieces, carry on the significance of that name. We go from being "The Floral Beadwork People" in a historical context to being seen in a very contemporary context. Our young artists are revitalizing that. They're completely breathing new life into the old art forms again. And those art forms are being shared. They're being celebrated. They're being acquired by institutions. They're being acquired by art galleries. Therefore, we ascend from the drawers of museum holdings into a contemporary reality where pieces are being worn and used. People are wearing and celebrating their artwork. People are celebrating our bead work, and it's happening in a very alive and contemporary way. Keep in mind, when I was learning to sew from my auntie at 8 or 9, not a lot of boys were doing bead work. So, it's really moving to see how many of our artists now; artists who transcend the binaries of gender and identities are working in this medium. That's really uplifting and powerful.

Steph: As we were chatting before, you mentioned that you don't typically hang on to much of your artwork. As we're visiting, there's a number of beadwork pieces on the table here including the octopus bag. Can you share a bit about this collection that you're making?

Gregory: Yes, as we were speaking earlier, I've never really held onto my artwork. The work you see in front of you is the first time that I've held onto any of my work. My work has always ended up going to institutions like the Gabriel Dumont Institute in Saskatoon, which has the largest holdings of my work. The Amelia Douglas Institute in Surrey, British Columbia also has many of my pieces. I don't do commission work. Active creation for me is completely about

process. It's completely about me working things out. It's about the act of creation, writing and composing in my head. It's about strategizing. Above all, it's about finding the quiet spirit within myself. That's always been the purpose of my work. Of course, I also love the challenge of creation. I like to be able to give myself a good challenge. Because I'm also so connected with the historic grandmother pieces, I also find it immensely challenging to work within a heritage medium, to create traditionally inspired pieces.

The collection in front of you is my current work to date. There are two panel bags or fire bags, an octopus bag, an ammunition pouch and a small velvet wall pocket. I also have three pairs of pointed toe moccasins. This is the first time, in my 60 years, I've held on to my own work. They'll likely become pieces that will be handed down in my own family; pieces that will become heritage items for the kids in my family. It'll be a way for them to know who they are and where they come from. I'm always conscious of the fact the pieces acquired by the Gabriel Dumont Institute or the Amilia Douglas Institute remain unsigned. I always chuckle, thinking about, how in the future, if somebody is looking at my work, they'll be like, "wow, you know, this grandmother really created these incredible works of art!" Maybe I need to start signing my pieces. Then in the future they'll be like, "wow, this old Métis grandfather created these works." But that's all a part of a shifting and evolving narrative. We've got these incredible Two-spirit artists. And we've got incredible male artists and female artists. So, this whole idea of gender being attached to the work is really changing. As I mentioned, when I first began to do beadwork, boys weren't doing this very elaborate floral, very delicate, fine bead work. It gives me pause, of course, when I'm looking at the historic works. I always refer to the Grandmothers. I often wonder if there are pieces within those collections created by men or Two-spirited people. Who knows? I'm still at this place, thinking about if I should start signing my pieces. Some of the artists are starting to. They've got labels that identify their pieces, which I think is an incredible idea. Going back to Susanna Bernie Grahame, it's seldom that we have any provenance, names, communities, dates attached to pieces. We're left having to do a lot of guesswork on pieces and having to do a lot of research. So, you know, it's great that artists are beginning to sign their pieces because their art will be the heirloom pieces of the future. Descendants and people in the future, namely those curating and looking after these works, will at least have a name and possible community attached to it.

Steph: I'm so happy to hear you talking about the artwork made by grandfathers. It's a really great question to be asking about the way we story historic practices. Is there anything else that you would like to share either about the octopus bag or métis artwork?

Gergory: There's so much more that can be said about this. I think one of the things I'm most happy to see is that our young and contemporary artists are taking so much inspiration from heritage designs. These designs and regional style are roadmaps back to ourselves, our identity as Métis. They are roadmaps back to our geographies, back to our territories, back to our traditions. It's profoundly moving to see contemporary artists taking inspiration from the earlier designs and replicating them while adding their new interpretations and their own designs. This blending - this beautiful re-imagining - is happening everywhere across the Métis artistic landscape. Inspiration is being taken from the past, and there's an honouring of the old pieces and the

designs. What's bringing the ancestor-pieces to life are the contemporary works that our artists are creating. They are, by virtue of their contemporary practice, bringing the ancestor-pieces to life. Therefore, our art becomes more than just "Métis" items. They become living pieces of who we are. And like the ancestor-pieces there is no infinite cutoff of where our history stops. Our artwork is a continuation of who we are. Our young artists are carrying that forward. Our material art is just as important as our historical documents, historical photographs, and colonial documents. Our material art and the works created by our ancestors are just as important because, as I mentioned, they are roadmaps back to our lands, our homelands, our territories, our languages and culture. They are the roadmaps back to our stories. As long as our art is created, we will always have stories. And as long as we have stories, we will always have a sense of who we are. We are, after all, each stitched from stories.

To learn more about Gregory Scofield's work, see *Kôhkominawak Ocihcîwâwa – Our Grandmothers' Hands: Repatriating Métis Material Art*

<https://gdins.org/product/our-grandmothers-hands/>



Biography

Gregory Scofield is of Red River Métis ancestry whose family roots can be traced to the historic Métis community of Kinosota-Reedy Creek, Manitoba. He has taught Creative Writing and First Nations and Metis Literature at Brandon University, Emily Carr University of Art + Design, the Alberta University of the Arts and was most recently an associate professor in the Department of English at Laurentian University. He has served as writer-in residence at the University of Manitoba, the University of Winnipeg and Memorial University of Newfoundland. Further to writing and teaching, Scofield is also a skilled bead-worker, and he creates in the medium of traditional Metis arts. He continues to assemble a collection of mid to late 19th century Cree-Metis artifacts, which are used as learning and teaching pieces.

Stephanie G. Erickson is of mixed Red River Métis and European ancestry. Her paternal Métis family comes from Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan and has ties to St. Francois Xavier in the Red River settlement. Her family names are Swain, Breland, Dauphinais, and Grant. Born in Winnipeg on Treaty 1 territory, Stephanie grew up mostly in the Okanagan, the unceded territory of the Syilx people. There, she attended the Okanagan College before transferring to UBC (Okanagan campus), where she earned her BA in Creative Writing (2019). Stephanie's passion for social justice then led her to McMaster University, where her thesis focused on reproductive futurism in the Gender and Social Justice MA program (2022). She is now a PhD candidate in the English department at the University of Victoria on the territories of the Lekwungen speaking peoples. Stephanie's research is on Indigenous Futurism literatures as pathways of reconciliation in Canada. Alongside her dissertation research, Stephanie practices decolonial approaches to pedagogy through her work with UVic's Indigenous Storyteller in Residence program.
