

ABORIGINAL RENAISSANCE

Aboriginal artists in Canada are showing a renewed cultural confidence that is resonating around the world.

Aboriginal culture has long been known for carvings, prints and traditional garments depicting nature and Native folklore. But now, Aboriginal artists are more likely to be designing leather jackets, cutting CDs, acting in blockbuster productions or arranging avant-garde installation art.

Without losing touch with its history, Aboriginal culture has increasingly become contemporary, international and mainstream, says Gerald McMaster, an artist from the Siksika Nation in south-central Alberta and chief curator of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, which has just opened in Washington, D.C.

"Indians all across the Americas are achieving a sense of renaissance," McMaster says. "We are taking greater control of our own cultural history and greater authority to speak on our own behalf."

Angela De Montigny, a Six Nations fashion designer whose handbags, jackets, coats and other clothing draw upon her heritage and sell briskly abroad, agrees. "The time is right for a

focused effort for Aboriginal people to get into the international market."

Indeed, with burgeoning interest in Aboriginal art, music, performance, sculpture and culture, there is a sense that a widening contingent of Aboriginal artists and performers in Canada can express themselves on the world stage.

"A lot of talent is starting to come out of Aboriginal communities all across the country," says actor-musician George Leach, a member of the Sta'atl'imx Nation of southern British Columbia, who released his first CD of blues music in 2000 and has just landed a leading role in Steven Spielberg's "Into the West" series of television movies for the TNT Network.

One field where Aboriginal people are finding success is the highly competitive and rarefied niche of high fashion design. Last spring, several Canadian Aboriginal designers, including De Montigny, D'Arcy Moses, Pam Baker and Tammy Beauvais, presented at Toronto Fashion Week, a major international show that brings designers from around the world to launch new collections.

Indigenous artists worldwide are taking a place on the cutting edge. An event called Planet IndigenUs at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre last August featured more than 300 performance, music and visual artists from Aboriginal and Indigenous cultures around the world, drawing more than 150,000 visitors over 10 days. "It was an opportunity

Contemporary statement: Aboriginal performance and installation artist Rebecca Belmore's work *White Thread*.



Haute fashion: Angela De Montigny's designs draw upon her First Nations heritage and sell briskly abroad.

photo: Lenore C. Farrell

photo: courtesy of Rebecca Belmore



to push some thinking about what Indigenous art, identity and culture are," says organizer Denise Bolduc.

Rebecca Belmore, an Aboriginal performance and installation artist in Vancouver, will represent Canada next year at the Venice Biennale, the pinnacle of the international contemporary arts scene.

"I'm working on an exhibit that will be strong and reflect Canadian art and Canadian society as they are in the world today," says Belmore, a member of the Anishinabekwe Nation from Northern Ontario, who is known for work that connects with audiences and provokes thought. One of her exhibits combines video, sound, performance and installation art in a powerful statement about the murders of women from the streets of Vancouver.

"I want to depict everyday life," she says, "to show our society in the present." 🍁

Link to *Spirit Magazine*, Canada's Native arts, culture and current affairs publication, at www.spiritmag.ca.