

Vanessa Paukeigope Jennings and the Legacy of Cradleboard Making

Sarah Hemm

When I think of traditional American makers, the first thing that comes to mind is the rich history of Native American craft that has been passed down generation to generation. Beading, weaving, basket-making, carving, pottery – the tangible objects that tell the stories of a people and embody the beliefs of the First Nations. Craft was important not only because of its function, but also appreciated as a beautiful object. Balance is inherent in Native American culture, and their craft represents the balance between the spiritual and the physical.

I am a fiber artist that uses traditional embroidery techniques to explore contemporary issues of identity, domesticity, and motherhood. I am highly influenced by the diverse array of crafts produced by our indigenous peoples, particularly beading and textiles. One such maker that I would appreciate the opportunity of sharing a meal with would be Vanessa Jennings.

Mrs. Vanessa Paukeigope Jennings is recognized as a “living American treasure” by the National Endowment for the Arts, who awarded her a National Heritage Fellowship in 1989. She is the granddaughter of Stephen Mopope, who was part of the Kiowa Five, a group of artists who received national acclaim for their traditional art and craft work. Jennings now continues the Kiowa craft tradition and is renowned for her bead-work, most notably her cradleboards which are traditionally made to celebrate and honor a birth. Jennings claims that she is only doing her “grandmother's work...my great-grandmother's work” and would ask us to honor her ancestors, not herself. She learned her craft from her grandmother, who believed that every time she finished a piece it was “a miracle”.

Cradleboards are hand crafted out of wood and rawhide and then meticulously covered with beads and keepsakes. Each one is a labor of love that links families together for generations. As the mother of three children, I understand the power and joy of bringing new life into this world. Jennings states that “the cradleboards are the most exquisite piece of sculpture, but beyond that they represent the tremendous love that our people had for each child”. Jennings contributes to the Kiowa culture and our American history by providing future generations with an “unbreakable link” to their heritage.

If I were to visit Mrs. Jennings' home in Red Stone, Oklahoma, we would talk about our families, and hopefully share about the love and struggle of being a mother. I would ask about the babies that she created her cradleboards for, and I would be delighted if she shared some of her techniques and process of making with me. Undoubtedly, I would gain invaluable insight into her Native traditions and world view. Most importantly, I would simply listen. To absorb her words and stories would be an honor, and I would gratefully pass this wisdom on to my own children.