

Kindred Spirits

Saskatchewan meets Alaska



Some days you just know were meant to be. On one particular day, I met someone who would be a friend, an email version of the old fashioned "pen pal." I was drawn to this lady through an article by Women Outdoor News about "Alaskan Women Making the Most of their Game" which began with the line, "Alaskan women are known for their self sufficiency." I was hooked. As I read the article one woman stood out to me, a lone hunter and fur designer by trade. Her seal and otter purses, teddy bears, and mitts were breathtaking to me, a likeminded (albeit an amateur) fur product creator. Perhaps I was drawn to her creativity, perhaps her self sufficiency, or perhaps it was the lure of her Alaska home and way of life. But I truly think it was the shared passion for the simple life we each lead, although different lives in different regions of the north. And once I was able to message her online, I knew there was a friendship and shared kinship not just in a way of life and creativity, but in humour and personality as well! I soon

found that she had a sense of humour and endearing sarcastic streak that had me in stitches through the many conversations that followed. Let me introduce you to my fun-loving friend (unless she is trying to write a story for me...then she gets serious!), Alaskan Native Christy Ruby of C.Ruby Designs.

Yes, the Alaskan sea otter is her "bread and butter." She is both wildlife manager and seamstress, creating beauty that endures forever in products uniquely designed and crafted to showcase the pelt of one of the "cutest" creatures in the world. To my curiosity and need to learn, Christy responds, "Mr. Sea Otter loves all kinds of seafood. His favourites are crab, abalone, clams, sea urchins, octopus and any other munchies he can get his 'whittle' paws on. He eats 20% of his body weight every day to stay warm. That means when he weighs 70-100 lbs he eats up to 20 lbs/day of Native Indian foods." Yes, we are talking about a "protected" species that you and I cannot trap or hunt, but

Alaskan Natives like Christy can, making handcrafted items that they can then sell to non-natives. She hunts seals and sea otter as her ancestors have done for centuries. She says, "These days, seals, walrus, sea otter, whale and polar bear are still hunted for their meat and fur. Our native subsistence animals are still an important food resource for many who do not want to pay \$30 for raw beef steak in the bush." As an Alaskan Native, Christy's family originated in Haines, Alaska and she is a descendent of the Tlinglit tribe, (Keet Gooshi Hit House, Killer Whale Dorsal Fin). Carrying on cultural traditions, Christy is a steward of the animal, not taking more than she needs, and taking great care in what she acquires to create her fur masterpieces. Her great grandmother was one of those "self sufficient Alaskan women" who would harvest a moose every year, but would also bottle-feed an abandoned moose calf until it could fend for itself. In the same tradition of respect and care for the animals, Christy has great

appreciation for the environment and the traditional practices she hopes to carry on.

“From pelt to purse” is not an easy process, but it is a worthwhile creative outlet for Christy. When she’s done hunting on the cold open ocean, then comes the fleshing, drying, and tanning of the hides which can take a year until the first cut is made for that beautiful soft purse. Lately she’s been adding a modern twist to her traditional clothing products, with great success (in 2015 she was awarded 1st place and Best of Division at the Santa Fe Indian Market for a Sea Otter vest). Good furs are getting hard to find as U.S. furs are trapped, go to auction, are sold to other countries, tanned and then generally sold back to the U.S. as finished products. Plus, it is increasingly difficult to find a fur sewer/seamstress willing to teach in the U.S. (or to find an old school fur designer for a fast-fading, traditional industry). Buying quality fur products from a local Native artisan really is a far more practical and cost effective deal for buyer and seller.

Even more than an investment in quality and craftsmanship, Christy offers an investment in an almost forgotten culture and way of life.

I have seen photos of Christy’s creations online (see links at end of article) and hope to one day visit my new friend on her home turf and appreciate and feel those products in person. Her patterns are NOT just a “repeat of decorative design”, but are artistry that arises through the fire of trial and error. “Too bad one can’t get paid for trial and error,” she says. She has over 30 patterns that come mostly in dreams or inspiration, but she says it is her wonderful customers that really help when it comes to developing new ideas. She’s always open to critique and that valuable criticism for any of her patterns has escalated her little business to artistic standards. That one-of-a-kind work of art could begin as a pair of seal mittens with added unique applique, beads or select fur colours.

Having spent an accumulation of hours messaging Christy, I know that her

heart is for the remote and peaceful way of life that few places other than Alaska can claim. The auroras, the stars, the remoteness, the northern adventure, the wildlife, the sea food, the native roots, cabin life, vast open country, few roads, the hunting, fishing and trapping way of life, fresh ocean air, glistening snow, the last frontier, and the land of the midnight sun - these draw many the thrill seeker to Alaskan adventure. But for my friend Christy? She simply wants to pay the bills, enjoy her garden and landscaping ...and raise her chickens. Seems pretty normal to me...but hey, I only know her from chatting online. I do know that if we ever get the chance to meet in person, she’ll have a twinkle in her eye and an infectious laugh as we sit around a fire and watch the stars from the top of the world together while dreaming of fur patterns that pay the bills...

“Saskalaska” friends,

Tara-Lynn Barbs
with Christy Ruby



Did we say Sea Otter? Yes. We did. In 1972 the Marine Mammal Protection Act was put into place due to the depletion of sea otters from the Russian fur industry in the early 1900's. Today in Alaska, there is no shortage and populations are exploding. "Mr. Sea Otter" otherwise known as "the brown sea pig" does have his purpose in the ocean and is considered a "keystone" species. They eat urchins that eat kelp. Kelp provides a home for many creatures including baitfish. Bait fishes are ravished by everything. Only in Alaska are we, the Alaskan Natives, given the opportunity to hunt our traditional marine mammals.

Christy Ruby

Links to find C. Ruby Creations online: <http://crubydesigns.com/>
<https://www.facebook.com/C-Ruby-Designs-Christy-Ruby-142329715825109/?fref=ts>
<https://www.etsy.com/shop/CRubyDesigns>
<http://ketchikanartliveshere.org/artists/chistryruby/>
<http://www.womensoutdoornews.com/2016/04/alaskan-women-making-the-most-of-game/>