

# Donna Lynn Debassige Brinkworth

## X-Ray Into Ojibwe Art



Donna Lynn Debassige Brinkworth is an Ojibwe artist based in Edmonton, Alberta. She is influenced by Ojibwe artists such as Woodland School of Art founder Norval Morrisseau and Daphne Odjig of Ojibwa-Potawatomi-English heritage. The latter was known as the “driving force behind the Professional Native Indian Artists Association” and the only female of the group (1). It was these influences that guided her to look at nature in a similar way. However, Donna also uses modern methods such as YouTube to document her community’s flora and fauna and reimagine an Indigenous place for

nature in her art. Although she faces obstacles as an Indigenous woman artist, she finds it crucial for today’s times to share her culture and who she is as an artist.

Norval Morrisseau was a self-taught artist from northern Ontario who had a strong understanding of Ojibwe culture and wanted to incorporate it in his art. His Woodland style became a widely recognized form of Native art. It is characterized in two-dimensional form by bold black lines and bright colours. In general, the style depicts side profile X-ray views of the subjects, which are heavily influenced by Native traditions

(2). This style made Ojibwe culture and their oral traditions more visible and accessible, and we can see Donna doing the same in her work.

When Donna first started painting, she was strongly influenced by Morrisseau’s works to develop her own version of the Woodlands style. Not as abstract as Morrisseau, she prefers semi-realistic images with discernible animals such as polar bears, eagles, and ravens. A notable characteristic of Woodland art is the presence of spirit/energy lines (3). For example, Donna uses spirit/energy lines radiating from the sun to show

that the sun emits light. She uses them again to connect an animal's foot to the ground, demonstrating their relationship to the earth. She also uses small lines inside the human and animal body to show their inner workings and functions just like an X-ray.

“The best part of an art career is getting to do what you enjoy and being able to express yourself on canvas.”

Feminist Ojibwe artist Daphne Odjig was another source of inspiration who came from the same island as Donna's father, Manitoulin Island. Odjig was raised in Ontario and used her art to defy stereotypes regarding First Nation culture (4). Odjig's artwork reminds Donna of stained glass because she used softer colours than Morrisseau did. More subdued, they create the effect that light is shining through them.

Ojibwe people have a vast knowledge of forest resources which they used for survival and now use for conservation. Growing up, Donna and her family spent a lot of time in nature and frequently went camping, fishing, and hiking. From a young age, she was fascinated by birds and would often see ravens flying around Thompson, Manitoba. On a trip to Churchill, Manitoba she saw a polar bear, which was a very exciting experience. She likes these creatures because they live in harsh climates, they are endangered, and their white fur makes them unique.

Donna uses bold and striking primary colours. She conveys moods by manipulating subject matter (eagles are her favou-

rite) and lighting. One piece depicted an eagle with coloured lines coming out of its wings, inspired by Indigenous fancy dance outfits used during powwows. Such culturally significant art is difficult to present. In the future, Donna wants to try to incorporate more Ojibwe themes and their meaning into her artwork. Her art will always be an expression of nature that encourages people to appreciate it and take care of it. I have limited knowledge of Ojibwe culture but seeing how Donna promotes it in her art has exposed me to this community and encouraged me to learn more about its people.

***Based on an Interview by Isaac Belland in 2022.***

References:

1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daphne\\_Odjig](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daphne_Odjig)
2. <https://cedarhilllonghouse.ca/blogs/what-is-Wood-land-art/>
3. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/daphne-odjig>
4. <http://www.ojibwe-art.ca/index.html>

