SKILLED HANDS

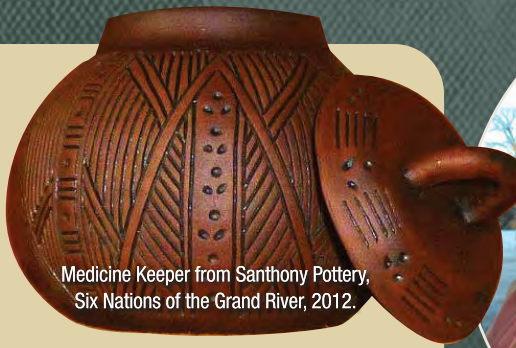
We don't always know who made the creative objects that are still with us from Canada's past. These items were crafted to meet a need, often by a person on their own. Businesses did spring up, employing people to produce more things. Many crafters continued to work away at home, combining practical purpose and a special flair. Here are just a few people, past and present, keeping craft traditions alive.

Craft-y Training

A tinsmithing workshop at the New Brunswick College of Craft and Design, 1960.

There are many schools in Canada, big and small, where people can learn traditional crafts. Fredericton's New Brunswick College of Craft and Design grew out of a government program in the 1930s to encourage handicrafts from leatherwork and tinsmithing to weaving and woodworking. Husband and wife potters Erica and Kjeld Deichmann used their own success to support the college's creation.

Six Nations Pottery



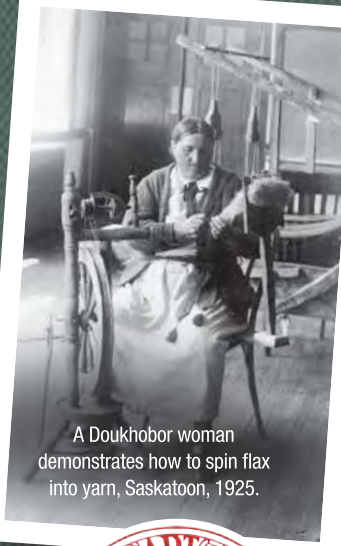
Medicine Keeper from Santhony Pottery, Six Nations of the Grand River, 2012.

New Brunswick College of Craft and Design. Courtesy Santhony Pottery

For thousands of years, the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) in what is now the Six Nations of the Grand River territory in southwestern Ontario made clay pipes, pots and containers. When settlers brought metal bowls, cups and more, traditional methods almost disappeared. But there were still bits of broken pottery all over Six Nations land. A woman named Elda "Bun" Smith started picking them up. She and several other women decided to bring back this special craft. They dug up their own clay and created pots, jugs and more under the name Mohawk Pottery. By the 1960s, their work was very highly prized. She passed on her knowledge to her son Steve, who started when he was 12. He and members of his family operated Talking Earth Pottery, one of several Six Nations ceramics studios.

Shining a Spotlight

The Women's Art Association of Canada started in Toronto in 1887. Eventually members of its branch in Montreal decided they should include crafts, just like similar groups in the United States and United Kingdom that were working to keep traditional skills alive. In 1906, Alice Peck and Martha Phillips formed the Canadian Handicrafts Guild. (A guild is a group of craftspeople. The organization has changed many times. It is now known as the Canadian Crafts Federation.) They organized conferences, competitions and training classes, and helped bring higher prices for ordinary people's crafts. Their efforts helped many crafts survive and allowed many craftspeople to make a living. The well-off women of the Guild supported and promoted the work of newcomers like the Doukhobors in western Canada. Unusually for the time, they also recognized the beauty and skill of Indigenous artists and craftspeople. They may have seen this support as part of their duty to help people who had less money. While they valued the talent of immigrants and Indigenous people, they weren't necessarily interested in learning about Indigenous ways of understanding and living.



A Doukhobor woman demonstrates how to spin flax into yarn, Saskatoon, 1925.

Library and Archives Canada, Carol James, Public Domain

Winnipeg's Carol James is one of the world's best-known finger weavers. A sash she created hangs in the St. Boniface Hospital as a special welcome for those who are French Canadian, Métis and First Nations.

Special Sashes

There are different patterns of woven sashes in different places. The distinctly North American arrowhead and lightning designs in woven sashes likely started around the Great Lakes in the 1700s. The technique is known as finger weaving, although it's really more like a kind of flat braiding. The ceinture fléchée is an important symbol of Métis culture. It was a very useful tool in the fur trade. It could be used as rope or like a pocket to hold things. Maybe most important, it provided support to people carrying heavy loads. It also has a long history in Quebec — just ask Bonhomme Carnaval!

New Life

As items made in factories became cheaper, many people came to see handmade things as old-fashioned or a mark of being poor. When a lot of identical things are made in a factory, it's known as mass production. And after the Second World War, it seemed like being modern meant having lots of mass-produced things made from plastic and vinyl. By the 1970s, some people had started to turn back to natural materials and uniquely crafted items for their homes. From quilts to carvings, hand-crafted things have never completely gone away.

Workers in an Eaton's sewing room, early 1900s.

Heritage Newfoundland and Labrador tracks crafts that are in danger of disappearing and finds people to pass on their skills to eager apprentices through its Craft at Risk program. In this photo, a participant scrapes or "rinds" bark.

CARVING STORIES

Text and illustrations by Saelym Degrandpre

As a young teenager, I wanted to connect with my culture more. I found that through art. I've seen my grandmother do beautiful sewing work, making kamiiks and parkas with intricate embroidery, and she spoke of the bone needles used traditionally to make these, which sparked my desire to try carving.

Alamy, courtesy of Susan Purneaux

In a studio I watched Elders and other youth work on carving, with the smell of soapstone in the air, the grimy feel of the dust coming off the rocks, and the beautiful carving in multiple stages.

After speaking with the Elder, I took the time to examine the bucket of soapstone. I spent my time looking at the different coloured rocks. I found one particular rock, which was a bluish-green, and it looked almost like ice that had frozen over.

As I started to carve, at first it didn't look like much. It was a big rectangle, but as I began to chip away at the stone with the files, chisels and the mallet, I could see the curved shape of the oil lamp begin to appear.

The process reminded me of the Elder reminding me to pay attention to details. The wide basin was to hold the oil; the flat edge was a gradual slope so that it could hold the Arctic cotton. Once I had the general shape completed, I used a power tool and a sander to refine it to a smooth finish. My design was finished. It reminded me of the beautiful embroidery my grandmother sewed on our parkas. Even though it served a purpose to keep us warm and protected, it was still beautiful, and I felt this way about my design of the qulliq.

I saw how the craft connected us to our survival and each other. Carving gave me a way to understand how our ancestors made the necessary things beautiful.

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She has a special interest in Inuit storytelling, culture and history.