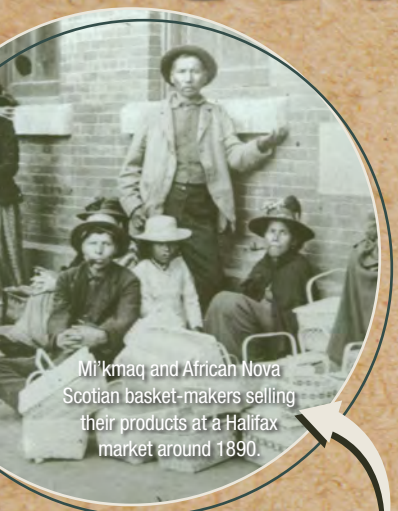
Useful and Special



Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotian basket-makers selling their products at a Halifax market around 1890.

People are pretty creative. If they don't have something, they'll invent it. And for thousands of years, they've been making their inventions attractive as well as practical. Here are just some of the things you'll find throughout our history that have made life a little more beautiful as they serve their purpose.

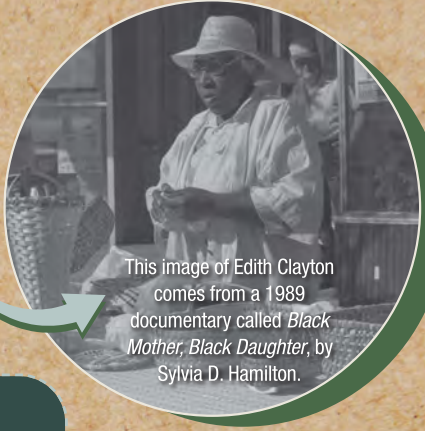
Carry and Store

It's a whole lot easier to move things around and keep them in one place if you have a container of some kind. What people used depended on what materials they had and their creativity. For thousands of years, Indigenous people have woven baskets out of dried grasses, tree roots, thin pieces of wood and more. These talented crafters could weave baskets so tightly they could carry water. (An easier option: Smear them with sticky pitch from trees.) Anywhere there were trees, someone used them to make wooden boxes. These might be rough and simple, with a lid that lifted off, or smooth and intricate, with a hinged lid. It takes amazing skill to cut, steam and shape a single piece of wood into the sides of a special container made by First Nations of the Pacific coast. These bentwood boxes are often left plain but can be painted, carved or decorated with shells, depending on their use.

This beautiful storage item known as a wall pocket dates from about 1820 in the Mackenzie River area of what is now the Yukon. A very skilled Dene craftsperson dyed and sewed porcupine quills onto elk hide.

Nova Scotia Archives, McCord Stewart Museum

The scene on the cover of this issue is inspired by Nova Scotia's Edith Clayton. Born in 1920, she learned her traditional African craft from her mother and often used dyes her Mi'kmaq neighbours taught her to make. She made hundreds of splintwood baskets, platters, cradles and more every year.



This image of Edith Clayton comes from a 1989 documentary called *Black Mother, Black Daughter*, by Sylvia D. Hamilton.

This crock was made in Medicine Hat, Alta., around 1920 by Medalta Stoneware (later Medalta Potteries). It could have been used for storing almost any kind of food or for making pickles.

A Medalta worker carries jugs, sometime between 1938 and 1954.

Settlers' early houses didn't have cupboards or closets. When they needed to store a lot of things, someone made a wooden armoire or sideboard like the one at right or other furniture for storage. The immigrants who created Canada's first Polish settlement — Wilno in eastern Ontario — brought their traditions when making furniture for their homes. Wilno furniture became well-known for its solid craftsmanship and decorative touches like carved arches and fan shapes.

Courtesy of Sylvia D. Hamilton, Friends of Medalta Society, Nancy Payne

Many different Indigenous people created cradleboards, made of cloth attached to wood, to carry their babies. Cradleboards were often decorated with beading, patterned cloth, pieces of metal and other things.

Women from Flying Post First Nation in Ontario with a baby in a cradleboard, 1906.

Macramé (mack-ruh-MAY) is a centuries-old craft where you tie knots in long strands of something. It was most popular in Canada for a short time in the 1960s through the 1980s to make plant holders, curtains and other household items. If you've ever made a friendship bracelet, you've done macramé.

In 2009, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada asked Coast Salish artist Luke Marston to create this special bentwood box. He carved it with symbols of First Nations, Inuit and Métis. From 2010 to 2014, it travelled all over Canada with commissioners as they listened to people's experiences at residential schools. Guests put items into the Bentwood Box as gestures of reconciliation.

Eugene Arcand and Madeleine Basile place a donation into the Bentwood Box, Saskatoon, 2012.

Library and Archives Canada, istockphoto, Luke Marston, National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation

Most quilts are made of **blocks.** These are sections pieced together from smaller bits of fabric to make patterns. Cut-out pieces of cloth sewn onto a quilt top are known as **appliqué**. If you don't have quilts in your family, look for them at shows, fairs or in museums.

Keep Warm

You don't need us to tell you that it can get cold in Canada. Just imagine what it was like before good insulation and furnaces. When European settlers started arriving here in the 1600s, they soon realized their craft know-how was essential in winter. Without a lot of money or stores around, people used old clothes until they wore out and then cut them up to help keep their families cozy. All over what is now Canada, people — mostly women and girls — used fabric scraps to make quilts. Quilt tops often have a detailed pattern. There's a layer of wool or cotton called the batting in the middle, and a simpler backing with a border around the outside. The name comes from the tiny stitches used to hold the layers in place — that's the "quilting" part. Of course, if you were in a hurry, you could just pull pieces of yarn through the layers and knot them on top to secure the quilt. Bare wood or stone floors in settler homes were cold on the feet. Different kinds of rugs, also called mats, helped provide a little bit of warmth and colour. Old clothes and sheets were cut into strips, which were sewn together. If crafters had the time and tools, they could dye the strips. The long joined strips were wound into balls. They could be braided together into ropes that were then made into big oval rugs by coiling the ropes around and around. Or if there was a weaver nearby, the customer could take the strips to be professionally woven into small carpets. Women could also use much smaller strips cut from worn-out clothes to make patterned rugs. They stretched a piece of burlap — maybe an old feed sack — on a frame. Using a dull metal hook, they pulled a thin strip of fabric up through the holes to make a loop. When the loops were nice and even and tight, they formed a cloth rug in whatever pattern the creator had in mind. Hooked rugs are still made in many parts of Canada.

Holly Clarke, Glenbow Museum

Quilting — the tiny, even stitches going through all three layers — takes a *long* time and you have to be *very* careful. Groups of women would get together to work on one project. These gatherings were called quilting bees (or frolics in New Brunswick). Some quilters today do the quilting part with a special machine.

Killer Whale Rug, about 1929.

Although she's one of Canada's most admired artists now, British Columbia's Emily Carr hooked rugs in the 1920s to earn some extra money.

Read more about Newfoundland's famous mats in this issue's comic, starting on p. 22

Sit or Sleep

The First Peoples in what is now Canada might have moved around to hunt or fish, or might have shared a large living space with many others. It didn't make sense in either case to have heavy furniture. Beds, chairs and tables were too big and expensive to ship from Europe, so settlers had to make their own simple versions out of wood. Gradually, some specialists opened shops where they made more attractive furniture with decorative carvings and patterns made from different kinds of wood, as well as fabric chair seats and fancy knobs and handles on desks.

Furniture makers in Montreal, 1953.

This carefully carved and shaped armchair with a woven leather seat is from the late 1700s. This style, known as "à la capucine", originated in Quebec.

National Gallery, David Ramsay, Canadian Museum of History

You can see this fancy jug known as a harvest ring at the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec. An eastern Ontario potter named John Elliot made it in 1846.

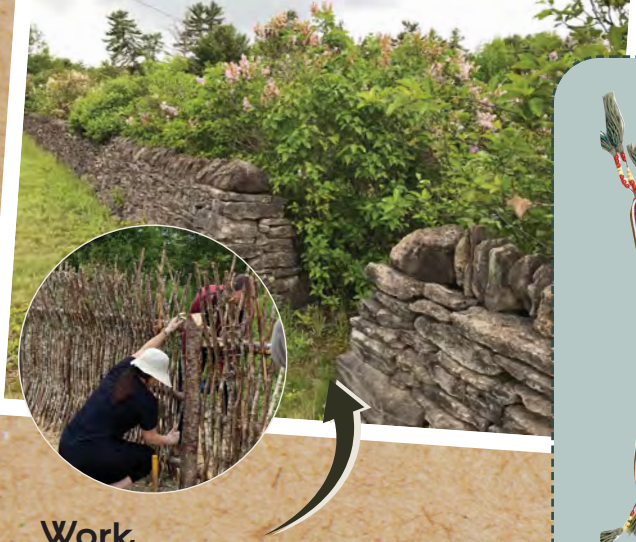
Eat and Drink

Indigenous people had long made what they needed for mealtime from the trees, animal parts, clay and plants that nature provided. The first settlers brought familiar items from back in Europe — things like plates, jugs, cups, cutlery and teapots. Eventually individual artisans started making ceramic, metal and later glass items that were usually fairly plain but could get quite fancy, too. In the 1800s, factories started adding carved and pressed decorative glass items to the mass-produced jars and bottles they'd been making. For a short time in the mid-1900s, workers at companies like Altaglass in Medicine Hat, Alta., crafted things that were both useful and attractive, like glass bowls, platters, lamp bases and ashtrays (containers for cigarette butts) by hand or using a skill called glass-blowing.

Pewter is a mixture of mostly tin with other metals. To make a spoon like these ones, the craftsperson melted pewter and poured it into a wooden mould. After learning the craft in France, Thomas Menut settled in Montreal in 1856. He often marked the items he made with his initials and a decorative stamp.

Although the Prince Edward Island Pottery Company only lasted from 1880 to 1898, many of the pieces its craftspeople made have survived. Guess what this dish was used for?

Canadian Museum of History, Prince Edward Island Museum



Work

Just because you have to do something doesn't mean your tools can't look nice. Take fences, for instance. Farmers have to have them to keep animals out of their crops, but they've often used things from the farm to create something that's a pleasure to look at. There's a true art to making a neatly stacked dry stone fence (above, top) or a traditional Newfoundland and Labrador wriggle fence (above, circle). An ordinary broom becomes a lovely object when it has a carefully shaped and polished wooden handle. Bright woven sashes were more than just a snappy thing to wear. Voyageurs tucked knives and other tools into them, and wrapped them around their middle when they had a sore back. In battle, soldiers could use these long sashes to carry a wounded person to safety.

Saddles are ordinary tools that can get very fancy. People decorate them with silver or pretty stones, and work detailed designs into them. Métis women were known for their skill in making pad saddles — beautifully beaded pads made of hide and stuffed with grasses or horsehair like the one shown above. The one below shows a man named Bill Herron with a fancy saddle in Calgary in 1965.

Nancy Payne, Manitoba Museum, University of Calgary Special Collections, Heritage NL

Dene creators spent a lot of time decorating this moose hide gun case with porcupine quills and beading. It was made around 1974.

Light Up

Before electricity, candles and oil lamps were essential, especially in the dark of winter. Candles stood in holders made from iron, glass or pottery, and like most household items, were usually pretty basic. Some featured fancy curlicues, or painted designs, or were multi-branched creations that were almost like sculptures. The traditional Inuit lamp or qulliq, was carved from stone and had many little flames dancing in a pool of seal oil. Some settlers were able to afford lamps with painted ceramic bases that held the oil. Electric lamps also needed bases to sit on. Sometimes they were carved from wood and polished. Popular ones from the 1930s to the 1970s were made at places like Ontario's Blue Mountain Pottery or Medalta Potteries in Alberta. In the 1950s and 1960s, skilled craftspeople working with glass also made beautiful lamp bases.

Preparing a qulliq (seal oil lamp), Mittimatalik (Pond Inlet), Nunavut, 1950.

Chalet Vintage Art Glass, Alamy, ChanticleerVintage

Trained and gifted Italian glass blowers who came to Canada from Italy in the early 1950s set up shop in Montreal under the name Murano Glass. They moved the operation to Cornwall, Ont., in 1962 and renamed it Chalet Artistic Glass. Although Chalet's individually blown and shaped items, like the bowl at left, were beautiful and hugely popular for a while, eventually people's preferences changed. Cheaper factory-made glass products eventually pushed Chalet out of business in 1975.