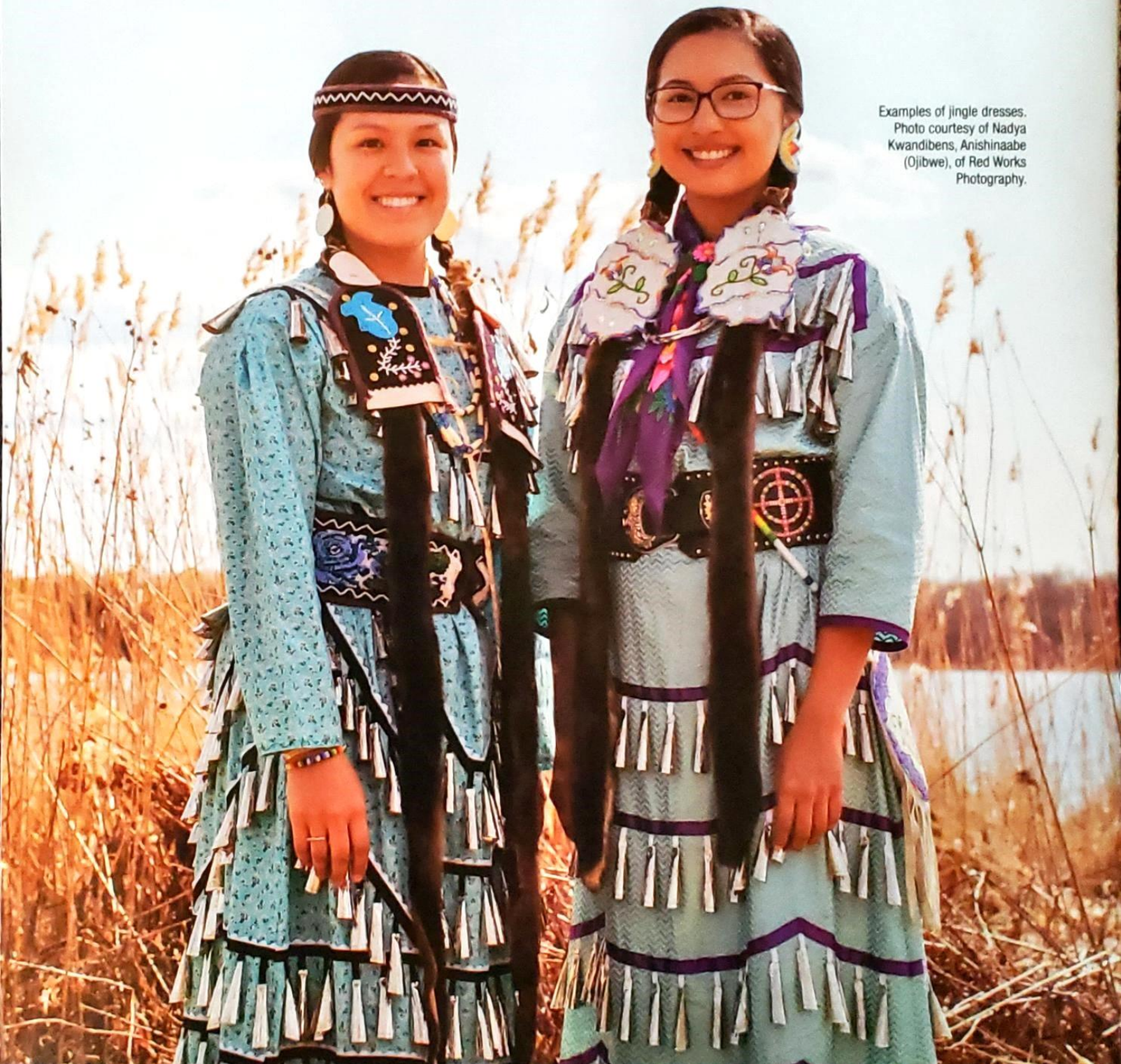
THE POWER OF THE NEEDLE

By Sarah B. Hood



Examples of jingle dresses. Photo courtesy of Nadya Kwandibens, Anishinaabe (Ojibwe), of Red Works Photography.

Textile projects bring together Indigenous women in a push to heal through clothing and craftwork

Sewing circles have been part of many cultures, offering opportunities for women to share their stories and find healing together. Today, Indigenous women across Canada are tapping into this and other textile-related artistic traditions to help bring healing to their communities in response to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG).

The modern-day adoption of the historic Indigenous jingle dress is an especially touching example of this trend. First created as a healing garment, young women today are 'jingle-dress dancing' as their own way to bring healing to the world.

The tradition has deep roots: the original jingle dress was created in the early 20th century for a girl named Maggie White of Naotkamegwanning First Nation in Whitefish Bay, Ontario. "She might have been four to six years old and was very ill," says Sharona Seymour-Crane, cultural coordinator at Waasegiizhig Nanaandawe'iyewigamig Health Access Centre (WNHAC) in Whitefish Bay. "Her grandfather had a dream of a dress that made noise, and if she wore that dress and danced in that dress, she would be healed. And she wore that dress and was healed, and from then on that dress has been known as a 'healing dress.'"

Many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island have adopted the jingle dress, but it has special relevance for the Ojibway of Whitefish Bay. This includes Seymour-Crane, who makes traditional regalia for Indigenous women through her own business, Zazegaakwe. Earlier in her life, Seymour-Crane struggled with severe, debilitating panic attacks. Then she received instruction about the jingle dress in a ceremony. "Once I started to dance in that dress, they told me I would feel better and I absolutely did. I found healing because the sewing actually tamed my anxiety disorder. I no longer have panic attacks," she says.

Recently, Seymour-Crane served on the working group to organize an exhibit of jingle dresses for the Lake of the Woods Museum. First, however, because the dresses are sacred, "[with] some elders, we went to the roundhouse and we feasted the sacred jingle dresses, and they did a very old ceremony that hasn't happened in Lake of the Woods for a very long time. From the direction of the ceremony and the elders, we knew it would be okay to hold the dresses within the museum."

The exhibit, *Shiibaashka'igan: Honouring the Sacred Jingle Dress*, was presented in the fall of 2019 and included exhibits and photographs of 50 dresses. As well, a book dedicated to the exhibit was published with the aim of sharing the story of the jingle dress with

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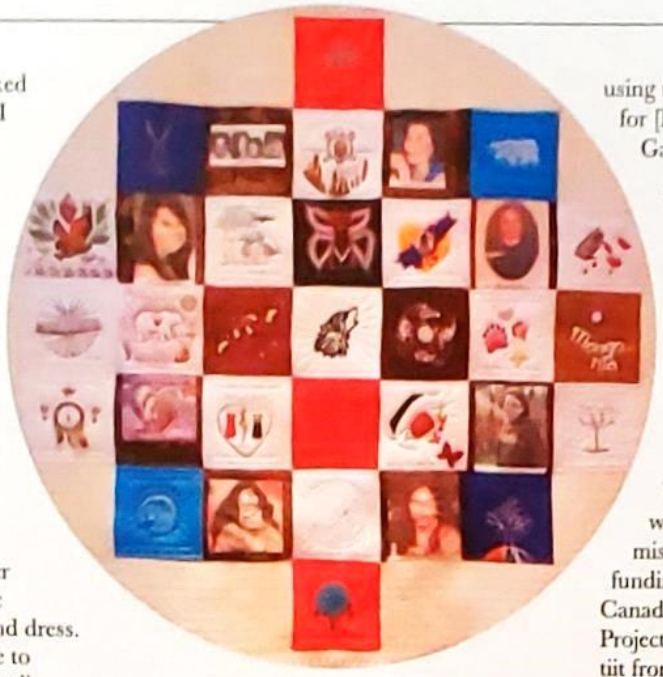
a larger audience. "When they asked me to put my dress in a museum, I initially thought no. But after the ceremony, I thought it would share the knowledge of how healing [these dresses] are and would inspire people who have drifted away from the circle of the pow wow or their families," says Seymour-Crane. "Each and every person who submitted their dress to that exhibit has their own story."

POWER OF CLOTHING

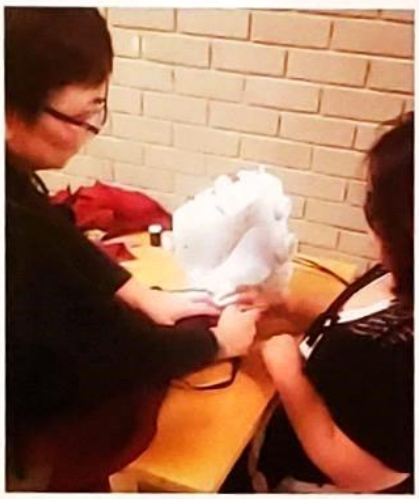
The REDress Project, created by Métis artist Jaime Black, is another initiative showcasing the symbolic power and meaning in clothing and dress. Developed specifically in response to the issue of MMIWG, Black's installation art project assembled some 600 red dresses through community donation to be presented as an exhibit drawing attention to, in Black's words "the staggering number of women who are no longer with us."

Since 2010, the collection has been presented at numerous gallery spaces across the country, including the Canadian Museum of Human Rights. The dresses, with their vibrant colour, symbolize both vitality and violence, and because they are empty, they also evoke the missing women who should be wearing them.

The project went on to inspire Inuit families impacted by WWMIG. After the Winnipeg-based Manitoba Inuit Association (MIA) started a sewing group where family members could talk about their experiences, they determined to launch their own dress-based initiative. "We decided we should think about having some formal project following the REDress Project and using the amauti, which is really special for [Inuit] women," says project manager Gayle Gruben.



A memory quilt created by the Montreal-based Women Are Sisters project



Two women sew a traditional amauti as part of an Inuit initiative to honour MMIWG

The amauti is a parka with a large hood used by Inuit women to carry infants, allowing for skin-to-skin contact and ease of nursing. "It's part of becoming a woman," explains Gruben. "Traditionally, the amauti was created for the ease of the woman to have access to the baby when travelling."

Women in the MIA sewing circle wanted a way to commemorate their missing or murdered loved ones. With funding from Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, they conceived the Red Amautiit Project, which would commission amautiit from 13 communities across Canada, including Gruben's home of Tuktoyaktuk.

"Each community collectively comes up with their own concept of how to put the amauti together and embellish it. If they're not comfortable putting it together themselves, I take it back to Winnipeg and put it together for them to their specifications. The outcome is likely going to be 15 garments. We're most likely going to use the one we used for the initial proposal, and there's also a rainbow-coloured one that's being created for the two-spirited people," says Gruben.

Once the COVID-19 crisis is resolved, an exhibit will be mounted in Winnipeg and the garments will later be repatriated to their home communities. "I was honoured to be the overseer of the sewing circle," Gruben says, "and it's led to this lovely project for people who are trying to find ways to be accepting about what happened to themselves and their families and to understand that the sewing just helps you grieve."

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Nadine St-Louis: "Women around the world have always used quilts to keep their stories" (Photo: Nadya Kwandibens, Redworks Photography)

QUILTING CIRCLE

Further south in Montreal, an initiative called Women Are Sisters is bringing women of many cultures together at the Ashukan Cultural Space to honour the lives of MMIWG through the creation of a memory quilt. Quilts have traditionally reflected the lives and stories of their makers, and this quilting project is no different. It offers a way for silenced women to tell their stories in a safe and accessible way.

"One of the main things that people who have experienced violence face is the silence," says Nadine St-Louis, executive director of Sacred Fire Productions, which operates the Ashukan Cultural Space. The quilting project, stresses St-Louis, is an appropriate vehicle for women to speak out about MMIWG "since women from around the world have always used quilts as a way to keep their stories."

With financial support from the federal government and guidance from facilitator Melanie Morrison, the Ashukan Cultural Space sent out invitations through women's centres and Indigenous communities. "The first week we had four women; the second week we had five. By the end of our project, we had 27 women," says St-Louis. Some came from Indigenous communities, but there were also women from locations as diverse as Korea and Martinique.

In September 2019, the women started gathering weekly with an elder from the Kahnawake Mohawk Territory and a professional embroiderer from the Mohawk community to support them. Each woman created a square. "The squares were all gathered and sent to a master quiltmaker, and she had 12 weeks to produce a quilt," St-Louis says.

The quilt was presented at the National Aboriginal Trust Officers Association's Indigenous Women's Summit, which took place in Montreal from March 9 to 11, and was installed for an exhibit at the Ashukan Cultural Space that opened on March 12. "It was the last exhibition in Montreal before the shutdown for COVID. There was so much love; there was so much awe. There were tears when people read the stories," says St-Louis. "I can't describe the pride and the beauty of the women who attended. No one knew they were the participants."

Eventually, the quilt will be presented in other locations, and perhaps digitized as well. "We realized we want to continue this work, because it's so beneficial," says St-Louis. "Art is the narrative cord to healing on so many levels. I think women can change the world through textile art." ●