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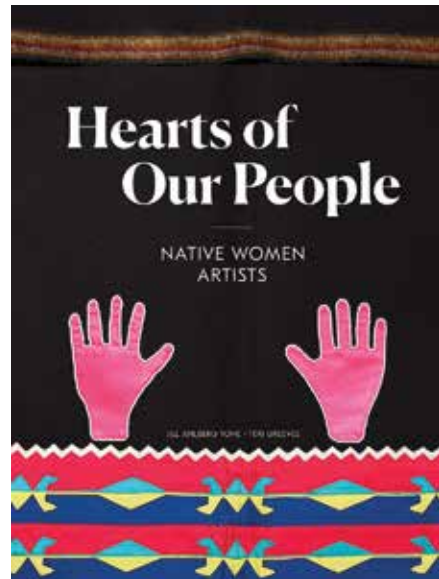
# Ojibway Author, Educator, and Knowledge-Keeper Eli Baxter

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

## Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists

Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves, eds.

University of Washington Press and Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2019



**I**N A RECENT INTERVIEW, Guerilla Girl artist “Frida Kahlo” said, “Unless all the voices of our culture are in the history of art, it’s not a history of art, it’s a history of power.”<sup>1</sup> The statement was in response to grim statistics about New York City’s major art museums that, like most major art museums, privilege white men’s work in their exhibitions. Cementing this practice, exhibition catalogues contribute to the historical record. In other words, with their roots in colonialism—a practice that aims for political control over others—museums often reinforce the history of power described by Kahlo.

*Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* provides an antidote for this history of power. The exhibition planning phase began in 2014, and in 2015 co-curators Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves (Kiowa) gathered a 21-member advisory committee comprised of Native artists,

curators, and scholars and non-Native art historians to begin developing the show. For the next four years, these women discussed and planned the exhibition. The recently published catalogue for *Hearts of Our People* maps this process for readers through 342 pages of essays, images, and interviews, and expands beyond the museum walls.

“Why do Native women create?” is the foundational question for the show, which centers the catalogue and breaks away from the conventional approach of art publications. Instead of one scholar writing about art objects, more than 40 intergenerational authors, both artists and academics, contribute from their individual perspectives and writing styles. Divided into three themes—legacy, relationships, and power—*Hearts of Our People* further breaks from the established practices of chronological, taxonomic, or biographical modes of organization.

A foundational text in art history programs for decades, *Basic History of Art* by art historian H. W. Janson illustrates the mainstream approach. Envisioned and created by one white man in the 1960s, the textbook follows a chronological approach starting with “prehistoric art” in Europe and ending with “the postmodern era: art since 1980.” The National Museum of Women in the Arts states of his book, “Only 27 women (out of 318 artists) are represented in the 9th edition of H. W. Janson’s survey, *Basic History of Western Art*—up from zero in the 1980s.”<sup>2</sup> None of the female artists represented are Native American.

In contrast, Yohe states the main purpose of *Hearts of Our People* is that it “highlights the artistic vision, ingenuity, and experimentation of Native women artists who have embraced new media to innovate in every period, who have sustained or revived customary practices, and who are frequently overlooked and undervalued in art historical and anthropological discourse.” According to Greeves, “Women not only made the art that helped our people understand

who they were; they were guided by long-standing protocols and norms that made art production by women commonplace.”

This catalogue compellingly documents the most comprehensive anthology on record of work by Native women artists. In addition to 400 color illustrations, including stunning photographs of all 117 objects exhibited at the first installation in Minneapolis, 67 brilliant essays (some with additional imagery) fill the catalogue. These focus on artworks from what is now the United States and Canada and include photography, beadwork, and textiles from the 19th and 20th centuries to present, and pottery from the 11th century to today.

The strengths of this publication overwhelm any survey of art history in my experience. To begin, it successfully moves outside of colonial methods of museums and opens the field for artists, curators, and scholars. The range of essays from a variety of perspectives provide readers with an in-depth understanding of the art while the extensive catalogue of images creates a visual canon of art by Native women.

The greatest challenge of *Hearts of Our People* has more to do with the state of the field than with the publication itself. Because the contribution of Native women artists—the first mothers and artists of this land—has been largely left out of the mainstream historical record, this publication scratches the surface of all the works still to be shared. That said, the authors far surpassed their stated intention.

Truly a history of art and not a history of power, this catalogue brings hope with its collaborative and inclusive approach. Please note the cost of the publication rates far lower than standard art history books. Treat yourself to a personal copy and encourage educators everywhere to adopt *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* as a textbook for their classrooms. —Jean Merz-Edwards

## Ojibway Author, Educator, and Knowledge-Keeper

# ELI BAXTER

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

**E**LI BAXTER WAS BORN IN 1954 on Marten Falls First Nation Reserve, an Ojibway community 500 kilometers northeast of Thunder Bay, Ontario. A member of the Caribou clan, Baxter was raised in the Anishibaabe cultural way on the trapline along the Albany River and learned Ojibway as his first language. He is a survivor of the Pelican Lake and Shingwauk residential schools in Northern Ontario.

After earning a degree and teaching certificate from Lakehead University, he taught elementary grades for seven years in Whitedog, Ontario. He then taught the Ojibway language from junior kindergarten to grade eight for 20 years on the Chippewas of the Thames First Nation. Baxter designed, wrote texts for, and taught the Algonquian Language and Culture course for 17 years at Western University in London, Ontario.

The value of original languages and the survival of Indigenous cultural practices and beliefs drive his critical research and pedagogy. Baxter has the vision for First Nations communities to speak the Anishinaabay language as it was spoken before European contact. Using the Anishinaabay worldview, he remains active in local politics and has presented academic papers on Treaty 9, Indigenous law, and language. His Ojibway language teachings appear in a series on YouTube, and he has contributed to *Anishinabek News*.

In 2018 he translated and voiced colonial poems into Ojibway for Franco-Canadian visual artist Kapwani Kiwanga’s installation, *Clearing*, at Glenhyrst Art Gallery of Brant in Brantford, Ontario. That year, Kiwanga won the Sobey Art Award, Canada’s most prestigious recognition of contemporary art.

I reached out to Eli Baxter to discuss his writing and language advocacy.

**MRS: Thank you for speaking with me, Eli. Could you discuss your early life in Northern Ontario? What was your experience living on the trapline?**

EB: *Meegwaych* for the interview. My brothers, sisters, cousins, and myself were born along the Albany River in Northern Ontario. We call this our traditional ancestral land as our relations owned the land before the concept of a trapline. We are the last generation of the hunting and gathering society of the Anishinaabayg. The Ojibway language is our first language. My experience living out on the land was spiritual; we lived with nature.

The spiritual part came from the moment I was born. In late October the ice was forming on the lakes and rivers. The



ducks and birds had already migrated. On the day that I was born some loons landed on Washi Lake. My parents told me later that the loon is my spirit bird as it helped me in my travel from the spirit world to the physical world. They heard my cry, it was awful, and they left. We were told all Anishinaabayg have spirit birds or animals. They show themselves when an Anishinaabay baby is born.

We learned the Ojibway language by listening to our parents, our older siblings, and all our relations. Every night we begged our parents to *at-soh-kayn*, which means to tell us Anishinaabay stories. The stories were funny, educational, and we all wanted to tell these stories just as good as the best storyteller in our group. It gave us status as storytellers, and it made us want to learn the oral language of our nation. The language has all of our history, our science, our astrology, and all our Anishinaabay curriculum.

We were all taught the language through everyday life experiences. We observed and listened to our parents and to our surroundings in the wilderness. We hunted and fished for our food. We did not have electricity or running water. We experienced the four seasons and we participated in all the activities around our campsites. It was a great way of life.

**MRS: It is helpful to think of language as a vessel that holds everything. As a knowledge-keeper, you have dedicated your life to the prosperity of Indigenous languages, and particularly**

1. “Frida Kahlo,” “Guerrilla Girls Talk the History of Art vs. the History of Power,” video, 6:24, The Art Market, January 14, 2016, web.

2. “Get the Facts,” National Museum of Women in the Arts, accessed November 27, 2019, web.





**the oral history of Anishinaabay. What is your philosophy of language?**

EB: The Anishinaabay language is crucial because it explains our existence. The language is used to communicate with our spiritual entities and used in our ceremonies. The Anishinaabay language holds our *Pah-git-tin-nih-gay-win-nun*, our Laws, that tell us how to protect our nations and our lands. The language holds our Constitution.

**MRS: The expression of Indigenous languages in words and symbols is crucial to cultural strength. Why is Indigenous writing in particular so important right now?**

EB: The word *Ojibway* is the way the Europeans heard and then wrote it down when they asked what our tribe's name was. Their Anishinaabay guides said they are named O-zhi-bee-i-gay-i-ni-ni-wug, which the other Anishinaabay tribes called us. We are referred to as “the people that write.” Other tribes knew we wrote down our history, the present, and the future in our writing system. Our oral language is still used in a few communities in Northern Ontario. Presently we use the phonetic writing system using English letters in the school system. This writing system slows down the oral language. We lose our languages and then we lose our culture.

**MRS: You speak about being a residential school survivor. Did residential school affect your thoughts and beliefs toward Indigenous languages?**

EB: The residential school system did not define how I value Indigenous languages. Our parents and all our relations [taught] us how we value our languages. To me, the residential school system does not have the right or reason on how I value Indigenous languages. We were told not to use our languages, and we were punished when we used it. We are strong enough in our languages and that is how we survived.

**MRS: You once wrote, “Use your fears as a tool. Know yourself and your traditions. *Keen igoh tootun*.” It reads almost as a manifesto. Can you elaborate on these words?**

EB: I asked my mom once on what I should do with my life. It was kind of strange because I was about 20 years old, and I wasn't married with kids. She told me, “*Keen igoh tootun*,” which means, “It's up to you on what you want to do.” She said it was not up to her to tell me what to do. It was my choice, so I became a teacher. I feared what my future was going to be, so I used this fear to push me into furthering my education. I got to know my fears and my shortcomings on my own, and I figured out on what to do. The tradition on *keen igoh* is a protocol that we received through the teachings from our languages.

**MRS: You live in London, Ontario, and taught at Western University and in communities such as the nearby Chippewas of the Thames First Nation. I would like to hear your thoughts on the difference between teaching Indigenous language in an**

**academic environment (urban) versus a reserve community. Do you encounter different approaches, different challenges?**

EB: Teaching the Ojibway language in both communities is the same in both settings, as it is all academic. All the students in both communities are non-speakers. The Native language teachers teach the language to students, so it's the same. This type of teaching the Native languages will not work, because the language is not coming from the parents. The parents are not being taught the language, so now the children know the vocabulary of the language but not the conversational part of the language. At one time the parents had the power of the Native languages, and the children looked up to their parents because they wanted to speak like their parents. Now the children teach the parents. The languages need to be taught to the adults and parents in their communities and have the languages operating at the same level as they were used in our communities before European contact.

**MRS: Your writing is often a mash-up of different cultural expressions. For this interview, you've contributed haiku poems written in Ojibway. What is the significance of experimenting with Anishinaabemowin and how the language can evolve?**

EB: I was bored one night, so I decided to write poems using the haiku form. It works well as some words have seven syllables and five syllables. I would see the fluent speakers teach their languages in post-secondary institutions and be paid as full professors. I do not have another fluent speaker to speak with today, so I do different things with the language. The Ojibway language is mostly oral, and when we get together and we only speak in the language, there is so much humor in the way we tell our stories that there is not one dry eye. Humor is used as a medicine. We have always told stories in many different ways to make people laugh, so in that way we experienced with the languages. In order to evolve our languages now we need to form fluent language institutions to bring our remaining fluent speakers together to expand our oral and written languages. It would be neat to have this.

**MRS: You may remember the first time we met. It was a cold and snowy day in downtown London, Ontario, and we gathered at Richard Gracious's recording studio. The three of us sipped coffee as the snow fell. You talked about the creation story before you read a colonial poem in Ojibway. Kapwani Kiwanga and I were pairing your voice with Robert R. Whale's romantic landscapes of Southern Ontario for her exhibition at Glenhyrst. The Ojibway language is beautiful, but what resonated was how you spoke it—the care you took to express every word. Can you talk about the relationship between care and language?**

EB: The relationship between care and language is the evidence that we were taught by our parents. Our languages came from our parents, and they had so much Anishinaabay knowledge. It



is up to us to keep the language alive and take care of it as we take care of our parents.

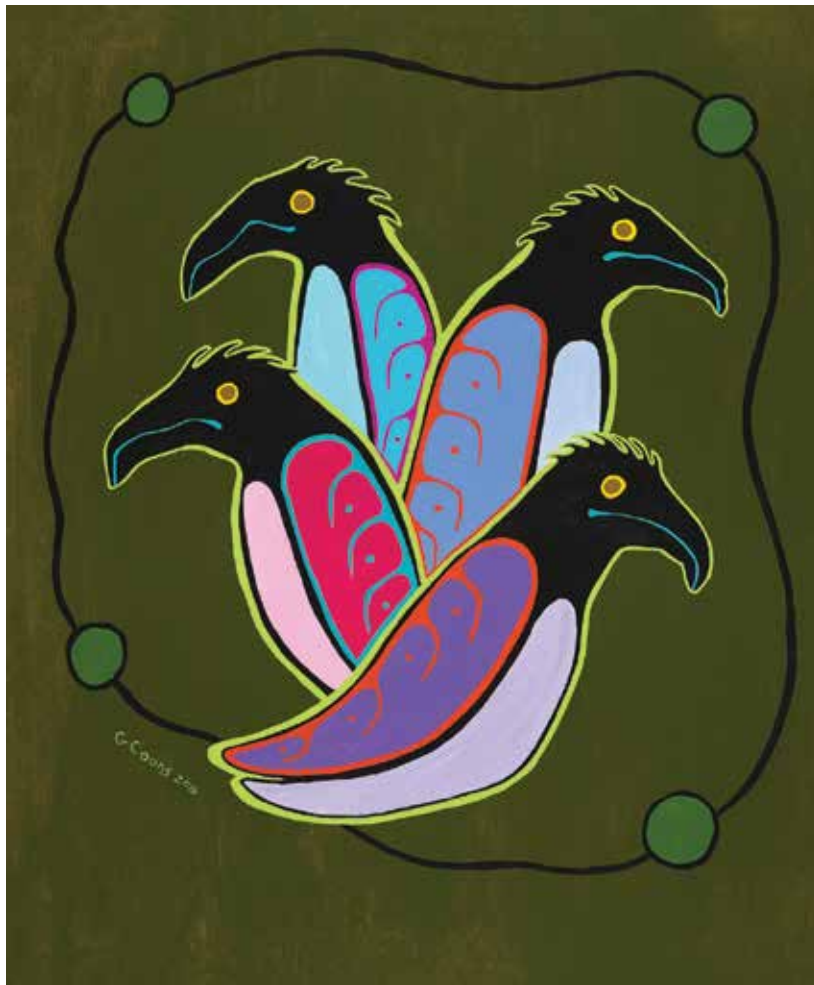
**MRS: Thank you very much for speaking with me, Eli.**

EB: *Meegwaych*, Matthew. *Nin-gee-min-wayn-daan chi-too-tah-man* (I enjoyed doing this). *Ka-waa-bah-min* (I'll see you later).

**ABOVE AND OPPOSITE, TOP** Eli Baxter family photographs from the 1970s. Image courtesy of Eli Baxter.

**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM** Gordon Coons (Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa/Ottawa), *Solstice Sunrise*, 2018, fumage block print, cedar smoke, 24-karat gold leaf on Annigoni paper, 26 × 26 in., edition of 15. Image courtesy of the artist.





## ANISHINAABAY HAIKU

1. Tah-been-dih-gay-wug.  
(They will enter)  
Kee-in-naa-goh-nih-  
gay-wug.  
(They ordered)  
Kaa-in-nayn-dah-mung.  
(Into our way of thinking)

2. Kaa-waa-bun-dah-min.  
(We will see)  
A-ki a-nih-a-koh-zih.  
(Earth getting sick)  
Kah-manh-zhi-say-min.  
(We will be in trouble)

3. A-nih-kih-zhi-tay.  
(It is getting hot)  
Kee-sis kih-chi-poh-  
tah-way. (The sun is  
creating-making more  
fire)  
A-zha-nih-tah-bways.  
(I am starting to sweat)

4. Nin-gih-zoh-mih-kom.  
(The ice is melting)  
Ki-chi-chee-man o-zhi-toon.  
(Make a big boat)  
Ween-gay-tah-moosh-kaam.  
(It will really flood)

5. Ah-nih-paang-gohs-kaa.  
(It is getting dry)  
A-ki ah-nih-zah-kih-tay.  
(The earth is on fire)  
Nih-bah-kaa-bah-gway.  
(I am getting thirsty)

—Eli Baxter  
(Anishinaabay Inini)



**RIGHT** Gordon Coons (Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa/Ottawa), *Man Transferring into Healer*, acrylic on canvas, 40 × 30 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

**OPPOSITE, TOP** Gordon Coons (Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa/Ottawa), *Four Ravens*, acrylic on canvas, 24 × 22 in.

**OPPOSITE, BOTTOM** Gordon Coons (Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa/Ottawa), *Cedar Smoke Spirit Dancer*, 2018, cedar smoke on paper, 26 × 26 in. Image courtesy of the artist.



## ABOUT GORDON COONS

**B**ASED IN MINNEAPOLIS, Gordon Coons (Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa/Ottawa) is a painter, printmaker, and fumage artist. Largely self-taught, he paints in the Ojibwa Woodland style and creates fumage, smoke art, by burning cedar. He embellishes his fumage pieces with 24-karat gold leaf. He also prints with linoleum blocks and sculpts in stone and wood.

Coons draws inspiration from his Anishinaabeg heritage, and his bright color palette comes from his natural surrounds in the Great Lakes region. “I also enjoy incorporating playfulness in my images, telling stories of relationships between Western and Native cultures, and the connection we have to our shared historical events,” he says in his artist statement.

Gordon Coons exhibits nationally, and his work is in permanent collections across the country. He regularly shows and wins awards at annual art markets such as SWAIA Santa Fe Indian Market, Native POP Festival in Rapid City, South Dakota; and the Eiteljorg Festival in Indianapolis, Indiana. The Hopkins Center for the Arts in Minnesota hosted a solo exhibition of his work. More of his artwork can be seen online at [gordoncoons.com](http://gordoncoons.com).