

## *Substance of Stars*

### **Haudenosaunee labels & extended texts**



#### ***She Holds the Stars*, 2016**

Orlando Dugi (Diné), Benjamin Harjo, Jr. (Seminole/Shawnee) and Kenneth Williams, Jr. (Arapaho/Seneca)

Silk, crystals, acrylic paint, beads

Heard Museum Collection, Gift of the William S. and Ellen Taubman Foundation, 4877-1, 2

This dress and its accompanying handbag are a collaboration between three contemporary Indigenous makers who utilized the Haudenosaunee Creation story as inspiration.

The garment includes key figures in the Sky Woman narrative. *Awe(n)ha'i'* (Mature Blossoms, aka Sky Woman) is seen holding a star. In the narrative, she falls through a hole in the clouds left by the fall of the sacred Celestial Tree of Light. As she falls, she holds in her hand some of the seeds from this tree. These artists render this element of the story as a luminous star, just as the Celestial Tree provides light to the Sky World above. Also depicted are the characters *Ga'ha'syendiet'ha*, the Fire Dragon, in the form of a flying panther, who is the first being to encounter Sky Woman. On the back of the dress we see *Hanyadengona*, the Great Turtle, upon whose back she lands, and which grows to form Turtle Island, the homeland of North America.

The artists have freely interpreted the story visually, using the entire dress to depict the night sky, with an impressively dense cluster of deep blue beads suggesting the infinite celestial bodies of the universe. They have played with the traditional form of Haudenosaunee women's garments, which usually represent the Sky Dome symbolically only at the top collar of the dress. The handbag, too, follows the heavily beaded forms of traditional Seneca women's bags, even incorporating nineteenth-century metal hardware in the clasp.

[The following two images and texts are incorporated into text panels describing the beaded purse and silver brooches below. The actual works are not on view.]



**Portrait of Caroline G. Parker** (*Jiconsaseh*; Seneca, Wolf clan, 1826–1892), 1849  
Hand-colored daguerreotype, approx. 5 x 3 in.  
Rochester Museum of Science and Culture

Caroline Parker was a descendent of the great orator and Seneca chief, Sagoyewatha (Red Jacket), and from a prominent family of the Tonawanda Seneca. She was given the honorary name *Jiconsaseh* (Mother of Nations) after the historic ancestor who accompanied the Peacemaker in enacting the Great Law of Peace. Parker was renowned for maintaining traditional Haudenosaunee beadwork and its accompanying symbolism. In the portrait, she is wearing a traditional Seneca outfit of her own making, which incorporates the Celestial Tree of Light motif at the hem of the skirt and Heavenly Ladder and Sky Dome imagery. These garments are preserved at the New York State Museum in Albany, NY.

The 1852 painting by Thomas Jacobs also demonstrates traditional Seneca women's costumes, replete with symbolic imagery. The Earth Dome is represented in the hem of the skirt, the Heavenly Ladder is seen in the silver brooches decorating the front, and the Sky Dome is part of the collar.



*Portrait of Three Seneca Women*, 1852  
Thomas Jacobs (Seneca)  
Watercolor on paper, 14 1/8 x 11 3/4 in.  
Rock Foundation Collection



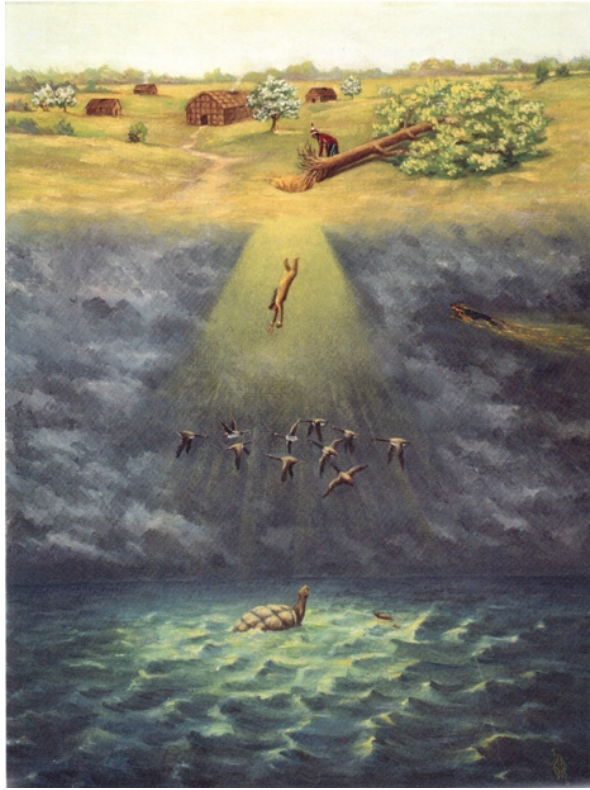
**Beaded purse**, 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Haudenosaunee  
Silk, trade beads  
Heard Museum Collection, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Byron Harvey III, NA-NE-IR-Q-6



**Brooches, 19<sup>th</sup> century**  
Seneca  
Silver  
Rock Foundation Collection



## Sky Woman



### **Sky Woman**, 1936

Ernest Smith (Tonawanda Seneca, Heron Clan, 1907–1975)

Oil on canvas

Rochester Museum of Science and Culture, WPA Indian Arts Project Collection, 36.331.1/MR 545

This painting illustrates the “Sky Woman” legend, the foundational Creation story for Haudenosaunee peoples. In one of many variations of the story, Sky Woman’s husband, *De’haon hwendjiawa’khon* (He-Earthholder), dreams that the Celestial Tree, which provides light to the Sky World, is uprooted. Sky Woman, called *Awe(n)ha’i’* (Mature Blossoms), falls through the hole created by the uprooted tree. As she falls, the first being she encounters is *Ga’ha’syendiet’ha* (the Fire Dragon, also known as the Comet), in the form of a flying panther, who comes to aid her, and brings the first gift of a mortar and pestle. The panther instructs the water birds to catch her, and bring her gently down to rest on *Hanyadengona* (the Great Turtle). Through the efforts of *Awe(n)ha’i’*, whose dancing spreads dirt gathered by the *Hanoghye* (Muskrat) on his back, *Hanyadengona* grows to become Turtle Island, now generally referred to as North America.



**Shell gorget with perforations representing the Seven Dancers constellation, 1650–65**

Seneca

Ocean shell

Rock Foundation Collection, 6000/211

Among the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee, there are various Creation stories describing the Seven Dancers, or Seven Sisters, known in English as the Pleiades. The constellation is referred to as *Ogé:nya:* (The Seven Dancers, Onondaga), or *Haditgwa:da:’* (The Seven Sisters, Seneca), and *Ratinekwatara:* (Mohawk).

An Onondaga version of the story published in 1900 describes a group of children who were among a hunting party that settled near a lake. As the adults labored, the young boys took to dancing among themselves every day. An old man came to them and chided the boys, saying they must stop dancing or evil things would happen to them. The children ignored the elder, who repeatedly warned them to stop. One day, the boys decided they should have a feast along with their dancing, so they asked their parents to give them food to take with them. The parents insisted they eat at home with the family and refused to give them any food to take. With empty stomachs, the children returned to dancing anyway. After dancing a long while, and feeling light-headed from not eating, the boys realized that they had begun floating up into the air. A woman noticed and called to them, and their parents ran out with food to give the children, hoping they would return to the ground. They continued ascending into the sky, but the youngest boy looked back. He became a falling star, while the others remained in the sky as the constellation *Ogé:nya:* (“there they dwell in peace”).



**Turtle amulet with solar inscription, ca.1650–65**  
Seneca  
Stone  
Rock Foundation Collection, 11011/235



**Twin panther effigy comb, ca.1650–65**  
Seneca  
Carved antler  
Rock Foundation Collection, 13094/28



**Panther effigy pipe**, ca.1650–65  
Seneca  
Clay with traces of copper inlays  
Rock Foundation Collection, 5042/99

In the Haudenosaunee creation story, the first entity *Awe(n)ha'i'* (Sky Woman) encounters is a panther, *Ga'ha'syendiet'ha* (Fire Dragon), who takes the form of a comet that encircles her as she falls. The pipe once had copper inlays to portray the panther's gleaming, reflective eyes.



**Miniature mortar & pestle**, late 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Seneca  
Wood  
Rochester Museum of Science & Culture, WPA Indian Arts Project Collection, AE 6425





**Eagle or speckled loon effigy pipe, ca. 1650–65**  
Seneca  
Clay  
Rock Foundation Collection, 13342/28



**Water bird effigy pipe, ca. 1650–65**  
Seneca  
Clay  
Rock Foundation Collection, 6300/103



**Perching bird effigy pipe, ca. 1650–65**  
Seneca  
Clay  
Rock Foundation Collection, 440/100

Bird effigies figure prominently in the forms of traditional Haudenosaunee pipes, as does the panther figure. The panther and birds are clan symbols, as well as symbolic of flight. Traditional tobacco smoking is both ceremonial and personal, and the meditative process of smoking is linked with prayers, which are aided in reaching the heavens by the upwards drifting of the smoke.

## Matrilineal Order



### **Sky Woman**

Joe Greene (Mohawk)

Soapstone

Rock Foundation Collection, 6083/177



### **Mother of Nations pipe, ca. 1650–65**

Seneca

Clay

Rock Foundation Collection, 6112/103



**Clay cooking vessel, ca. 1650–65**  
Seneca  
Earthenware  
Rock Foundation Collection, 11/177



**Pottery patterning tool, ca. 1650–65**  
Seneca  
Antler  
Rock Foundation Collection, 3211/24

Clay pots represent the continuity of tradition and family, and the caretaking of matrilineal knowledge. The locations of Seneca villages largely depended upon the decisions of elder women, who knew from experience if a place contained adequate clays for making pots, as they were responsible for the supply of food. The knowledge of clay, pottery making, which wood would make good fire and the firing itself was passed down through the matrilineal line, communicated only through women. This insured that the entire family was valued, and all members could rely on each other for the communal support required to sustain the village. The humble pottery was central to ceremonial life; it holds ceremonial food heated over fires at the center of the Longhouse. The central fires represent spiritual life and the Nation itself, while the clay pot within the fire represents the life of the people and their enjoyment of the Creator's gifts on Turtle Island.

## The Creator Twins



### **Cradleboards, ca. 1800**

Haudenosaunee

Wood, pigment, fibers

Heard Museum Collection, Gift of Ms. Eleanor C. Lowrey, NA-NE-Hu-Q-1

Heard Museum Collection, NA-NE-Hu-Q-2

These cradleboards exemplify how traditional items used in daily family life can be imbued with the metaphoric values of the creation story. They seem to be a pair, made by the same maker, at the same time. One is beautifully carved and painted, the other more restrained, with somber color and spare decoration.

The cradleboards may represent the Creator twin brothers, *Taöyawa'gö'h* (Earth Grasper, also known as “Good Mind”) and *Sawiskä:'* or *O'ha'a* (Flint, also known as “Bad Mind”). In the Haudenosaunee creation story, they are the grandsons of *Awe(n)ha'i'* (Sky Woman) who bring various qualities of life to Turtle Island. *Taöyawa'gö'h* creates beauty and growth, the elements of spring and summer, while *Sawiskä:'* creates the cold winter winds, earthquakes and other destructive forces. While they eventually fight a great battle, they are equally necessary to life on Turtle Island. This is reflected in these matched cradleboards, perhaps created for twin siblings.



## Water & Water Birds



**Water bird vessel with lid**, ca. 1980s

Darlene Smith (Mohawk)

Ceramic

Heard Museum Collection, Gift of Herbert and Gertrude Neuser, 4061-19 a, b



**String of wampum beads**, ca. 1650–65

Seneca

Quahog shell

Rock Foundation Collection, 5268/24



**String of wampum beads**, ca. early 1600s

Haudenosaunee

Quahog shell

Heard Museum Collection, NA-NE-IR-N-1 & 2

## Contemporary Seneca Art



### *Companion Species (Blazing for Everyone)*, 2021

Marie Watt (Seneca)

Canvas, spray paint, Flashe paint

Heard Museum Collection, Purchased with funds provided by Lilly Endowment Inc., 5028-1a, b

I grew up knowing Turtle Island as a Seneca and Haudenosaunee understanding of place and creation. While the origins of the story might differ, Turtle Island is shared in common with other Woodlands tribes, including the Anishinabe and Lenappe. For some communities, Turtle Island is the continent North America; for others it is the planet Earth. The story of Turtle Island exists in a multitude of forms.

What does it mean to say a pair of words when you don't know their origin? How does it roll around in one's mind or spill off one's tongue? Does it conjure an image or experience as if evoked by poetry?

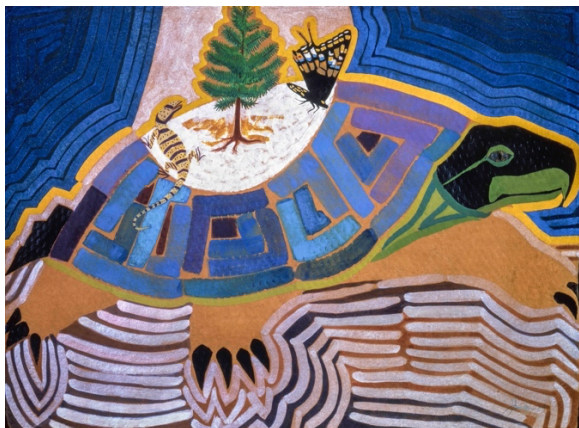
Indigenous people are often expected to translate stories, memories and knowledge to those outside our communities. By boldly “stitching” the words “Turtle Island” and placing them in unexpected sites, I subvert expectation. I hope to catch people off guard and prompt connections that might linger and encourage deeper inquiry and understanding. If names are a construct, then I (and people who use this phrase) deconstruct them, and turn the place name “North America” into “Turtle Island” as an offering and course correction. This phrase, a term of endearment, a story and a title, is ancient and modern, sovereign and instructional. The act of amplifying Turtle Island is an act of resistance. When you say it, even if you don't know what it

means, it affirms an important story. It resets the way we walk, wander, swim and build as though we're experiencing these things through a new lens. If we recognize a place name that precedes colonial names, it can be a step toward acknowledging historical trauma and a legacy of extraction and displacement.

This large-scale study was made to imagine future work fabricated in neon.

Blankets, embroidery and beading are central to my practice. Stitches, integral to these mediums, are drawn throughout my material forms of expression. Like a stitch, I was considering the glass tubing of neon signs as a malleable thread, a cord or a bead that could be cut short. Thus, the dashes of neon gaffer tape become stitches to envision neon tubing coming forward and going back through the canvas. Situated upon a sunrise palette, the fluorescent orange demands attention even as it fades forward and back against the multicolor hues. The wide length of the piece speaks of a horizon line, and reminds us where we stand.

—MARIE WATT



***Balance Between Good and Evil***, 1984  
G. Peter Jemison (Seneca, Snipe clan)  
Mixed media on paper  
Heard Museum Collection, IAC1931

This painting portrays *Hanyadengona* (the Great Turtle), the foundation of the Earth in Haudenosaunee knowledge. Celestial Tree, the source of light in the Sky World, on his back may reflect the concept of *Orenda*, the spiritual force that flows through all things. It is flanked by a lizard and a butterfly, which may symbolize the twin creator brothers, *Taöyawa'gö'h* (Earth Grasper) and *Sawiskä:'* (Flint).

The Creator gave ceremonies that celebrate agriculture, healing and thanksgiving to balance good with evil, and to honor the *Karionake* (Celestial Beings), who inhabit the heavens above the Sky Dome and the waters below *Hanyadengona*. Radiating lines surround him, indicating the presence of spiritual life. Jemison may have used this kind of line, a traditional Seneca design many centuries old, to suggest genealogical harmony.