

Indigenous tradition meets pop culture, 1 bead at a time

Crystal Semaganis designs custom beadwork of popular logos and characters

[Leah Hansen](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jul 29, 2019 4:00 AM ET |

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After teaching herself the craft through a process of trial and error, Crystal Semaganis has now been beading for 28 years. (Leah Hansen/CBC) It's time-consuming, it's intricate, and it's a passion that's intertwined with identity itself.

Crystal Semaganis, from the Little Pine First Nation and Poundmaker Cree Nation in Saskatchewan, has been creating intricate beadwork for 28 years.

Though circumstances forced her to take a roundabout path to learning the craft, she's now known in Ottawa and around Ontario for her work inspired by pop culture and her efforts to reestablish traditional knowledge after decades of disruption.

These days there are wait lists for her most popular medallions, including Toronto Raptors logos. She's also beaded popular cartoon characters — think Pikachu — while still sticking to more traditional designs for powwow regalia.



This custom piece of beadwork, known as a medallion, shows the Toronto Raptors logo blended with the colours of a Jamaican flag. It's worn around the neck and serves as 'a little bit of bling,' Semaganis says.

Semaganis and her siblings were separated from their parents during the Sixties Scoop, a story documented in the CBC podcast *Finding Cleo*, which focused on the case of Semaganis's sister.

They were adopted into non-Indigenous families and raised away from Indigenous traditions. It was only when Semaganis reunited with her birth family — and reclaimed her last name — that she began beading.

"Beadwork is kind of a dying art," she said. "I think it's really important to make sure those cultural traditions are passed on."

Reclaiming traditional knowledge

Beadwork has a long tradition among Indigenous people, with artists creating complex designs on powwow regalia, mittens, moccasins and medallions.

Usually, the how-to knowledge is passed from generation to generation, Semaganis said. But being separated from her family meant she was on her own when it came to beading — so she taught herself.

Through trial and error, Semaganis learned the ins and outs of the craft. Much of her work was lumpy at first, she said, with the beads pulled too tightly together.



Separated from her family during the Sixties Scoop, Crystal Semaganis taught herself how to bead when she reconnected with Indigenous traditions.

It took about five years for her to produce anything she would consider selling, she said. But more than two decades later, she runs a word-of-mouth business, taking custom orders and working over the winter to produce regalia for summer powwows.

Many of those custom designs — at least for medallions — are a mix of modern culture and long-standing tradition, she said, with hockey logos for Toronto Maple Leafs and the Montreal Canadiens both popular requests.

"I think it's really important that we mix traditions with current culture," she said. "We want to stay relevant, we want to stay current, we want to stay visual and still be reminded of where we came from."

And shortly after the Toronto Raptors won their first-ever NBA championship, she began beading the team's logo onto medallions, almost all of them customized in some way.

A medallion for her son features the Raptors logo in the colours of the medicine wheel, while another Raptors design features the shadow of a Jamaican flag.

"I think it's really cool that my clients are coming to me with these special requests," she said. "I'm happy to accommodate those requests and be a part of that person's pride."

A new generation of artists

In a typical year, Semaganis travels around Ontario and Quebec, attending more than 20 powwows and cultural events to sell her work and do emergency repairs on regalia.

She's also taught various workshops on beading and regalia-making, trying to pass on those skills to youth who also find themselves without a generational teacher.

"Some of the teenagers that I first taught in 2006 are parents now, and I see them doing all kinds of beadwork for their kids," she said. "This is the way it should be. This is the way things are supposed to work."

And since mastering the craft herself, she's been able to pass the skill on to her 20-year-old daughter, she said, who now does all the beading on her own powwow regalia.

It involves spending hours bent over a loom or a desk, looping miniscule beads onto a thin needle.



When using a loom, Semaganis says she usually loads an entire line of beads onto one needle before adding them to the pattern. (Leah Hansen/CBC)
The process has become therapeutic, she said, and more than just a job.

"There's so much [more] to beadwork than simply buying beads and slapping them on something," she said. "It takes a lot of patience, a lot of skill.

"I have no shortage of beads and no shortage of patience."