

TOGETHER

ancestral inspiration

REFLECTIONS FROM INDIGENOUS PATTERN DESIGNERS

STORY BY

joy deneen



Inspiration can be elusive. Where does one find it? When will it strike? There is a profound resonance to designs that tell a story, especially ones that are tied to the creator's identity and ancestry. Across North America, Indigenous nations and tribes each carry rich histories, from teachings and legends to pottery, textiles, tools and the land itself. Many distinctive patterns belong to specific families, and many Indigenous designers are creating exciting new designs, in the spirit of their ancestors.



Revitalizing Ancient Patterns

When seeking home décor pieces for client projects, Anishinaabe interior designer Destiny Seymour had difficulty finding Indigenous representation. She was inspired to design her own fabrics, and her research led her to Indigenous pottery and bone tools in local museums in Winnipeg. "I didn't learn about any of this in school," Destiny says. "I didn't know we had a rich ceramic history in Manitoba. I didn't know that we stored our food in big pots by the river." Over three million pieces of pottery have been unearthed, but they are mostly tucked away in museum archives, organized in small cardboard boxes. The pottery comes from multiple nations, carrying stories and family patterns that Destiny wanted to celebrate and revitalize.

Her first pattern design is aptly named *Bezbig* ("one" in Anishinaabemowin) and came from a 400-year-old elk antler tool that was used by Indigenous families to scrape hides. The delicate lines and dots were carved into the bone tool in horizontal bands. Destiny translated this inspiration into a large pattern, silkscreen printed on earth-toned linen, appealing to her minimalist aesthetic. Her *Niswi* ("three") pattern draws from cooking pots from over 3,000 years ago. Pieces of these vessels were discovered in Southern Manitoba, revealing that the top of the pots were stamped with X marks and dots. Destiny turned this motif into a repeat pattern.

Her signature patterns appear on Indigo Arrows' pillows, napkins, table runners and her Grandmother Moon quilts. "The patterns are like a teaching tool," she says. "My dad really likes that non-Indigenous people are speaking Anishinaabemowin without knowing it." When shipping her products, Destiny includes a card that explains the origins of her patterns and where consumers can go to learn more. "We need these patterns in our homes, provoking thought," Destiny writes. "We need them bridging gaps; and we need them inspiring our loved ones. The Indigo Arrows line picks up where my ancestors left off."



PORTRAIT BY ELLA GREYEVES

Destiny Seymour

Indigo Arrows



indigoarrows.ca



The *Ishkoday* (flint rock) pattern is the first in Indigo Arrows' elemental collection.





From Family Teachings to Wearable Art

For sisters Aunalee Boyd-Good and Sophia Seward-Good, their patterns are intrinsically tied to their Coast Salish culture and Snuneymuxw First Nation in Nanaimo, British Columbia. Their fashion house Ay Lelum (“Good House” in the Hul’q’umi’num language) is a veritable family endeavour. Ideas come from what their mother and mentor Sandra Moorhouse-Good describes as the family’s “collective consciousness,” shaped by the music, teachings and traditional artwork of their father William Good (master carver and cultural historian) and brother Joel Good.

Ay Lelum’s Yuxwule’ Sul’sul’tun (Eagle Spindle Whorl) collection was designed in 2019, which now, in retrospect, one could describe as almost clairvoyant: “According to the teachings of our father, William Good, when the world was in darkness, the Creator answered the peoples’ prayers and sent the Supernatural Eagle to bring the sunlight to the people.” The collection was released virtually in the fall of 2020 and chronicles the journey of the Supernatural Eagle, who brings hope.

Spindle whorls are traditional wooden tools used by Coast Salish women to spin their sacred wool. The circular whorls bear carvings that tell family stories using powerful imagery. “We incorporated [the whorl] to signify women as weavers of life, storytellers and life givers,” says Aunalee. The whorl is also significant in that it is used to make textiles, which are at the heart of fashion design.

Their father created the Eagle Spindle Whorl artwork, which Aunalee and Sophia translated into patterns for multiple fabrics. One pattern features a whorl with the two-headed Supernatural Eagle and a Killer Whale in the centre. The collection also showcases the Eagle Galaxy pattern of their father’s artwork and an intricate solid black pattern and artwork by their brother, Joel. The latter is a bold design of the Supernatural Eagle, along with the Killer Whale and Serpent. “These are images that bring power, which are really fitting for our time to have strength and power in what you’re wearing,” says Aunalee.



Ay Lelum

**Sophia
Seward-Good**
(LEFT)
&
**Aunalee
Boyd-Good**
(RIGHT)



aylelum.com



© AY LELUM/W. GOOD - PROTECTED BY HUL’Q’UMI’NUM LAW. PHOTOGRAPHY BY HELENA LINES.



Inspired by the Homeland

Knitwear designer Jen Berg grew up on the Navajo reservation in Arizona and also draws inspiration for her designs from her family as well as the land. She designed her Shíyázhí (My Little One) sweater based on the diamond, which is a symbol of Dinétah (the homeland). “Each point of the diamond is a symbol of the four sacred mountains that surround Dinétah,” Jen explains. The design is significant for her as a mother, as she wants to show her children that “no matter where they go, what paths and choices they make, they can always come home and be surrounded by a family that loves, cherishes and supports them.”

Her new Sheep camp sweater design evolved from her desire to create a light sweater with a colour yoke, and from her personal reflections during the pandemic about everyday life. “I often think about when Shimasani (my grandmother) was a sheep herder and how peaceful her life was watching her sheep,” says Jen. “There is so much beauty found in the ins and outs of a more simplistic life. The motif draws inward like a deep inhale and at the same time pulls outward, like a long, slow exhale.”

Jen also found inspiration within her childhood home, creating an Eye Catcher hat based on one of her family’s black-and-white Eye Dazzler rugs. The process of turning a woven textile inspiration into a knit pattern is both a creative and a mathematical undertaking that begins with drawing. Jen then selects colours and yarn, and ultimately writes her design, which consists of descriptive text and a chart made of blocks, calculating stitches per inch.



Native Knits

Jen Berg



nativeknitter.com

Jen’s Sunset Mesa cowl is inspired by the neighbouring Acoma tribe in New Mexico. “The tribe has the Sky City Pueblo that sits beautifully on top of a mesa,” Jen writes. “The orange colour used in my cowl reminds me of the mesa when the sun hits the rock.”





Reconciliation story cape

Brenda Lee Asp is a Yukon fashion designer of the Northern Tutchone and Tahltan First Nations and tells the stories of her ancestors through her story capes. These capes were showcased at Otahpiaaki, the Indigenous fashion week at Mount Royal University, and included “Honouring My Mother’s People” (Crow Clan) and “Honouring My Father’s People” (Wolf Clan). The Reconciliation story cape is a collaborative piece, created during a workshop that Brenda facilitated that week. Made of fabric, buttons, fur and buffalo leather, the cape features arrow motifs that call to the university’s logo (which represents open books and open doors) as well as spiritual aspects, such as stars for ancestors and circles to represent a lodge and the community. These motifs were made using fabrics of contrasting textures and sewn by many hands on a patterned fabric that was available at the time. “That’s one thing that’s really Indigenous,” Brenda explains. “We utilize what’s around us.”

@BrendaLeeAsp



|||

Mindful Consumerism

Jen sells her patterns as digital products, so knitters can reproduce her designs. She works hard to ensure that her patterns are appropriate to share and shies away from directly translating traditional designs into knitwear. She often receives messages from non-Indigenous knitters asking if they are allowed to make her designs. “Yes!” she says. “You’re really appreciating my culture and my ancestors and who I am by respectfully making my designs and not selling them for profit.”

It is a common question, whether or not non-Indigenous people can wear and own Indigenous designs. Destiny of Indigo Arrows speaks of respect and mindful consumerism. “Patterns mean something to someone, and to a family and to a nation,” she says. “We need to ask more questions as consumers. Who are you buying from? The cultural appropriation that’s out there in the marketplace can be very heartbreaking for nations.”

Ay Lelum welcomes everyone to wear their garments, noting that their products are both culturally appropriate and non-ceremonial. “It is essential that non-Indigenous allies support authentic makers and artists. The future of Indigenous cultural and economic systems rely on outside support.” ¹

