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JUSTIN SAPPYER

*An
End
to
the
Age
of
Waste*

by Timothy 'Bjorn' Jones



JUSTIN SAPIER

Amidst a global pandemic, I have the opportunity to sit down with Wolastoqiyik and Passamaquoddy woodcarver Justin Sappier, ensuring we maintain the physical distancing requirements of this moment in time. Justin brings out six large wooden faces, all of which are too large to be worn as a mask.

Each is carved from butternut wood.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HAILLEY FAYLE

As a woodcarver myself, I appreciate the beauty of butternut wood, but why use it for your carved spirits? What draws you to working with it?

The connection to my people. I always come back to this. It's not so much the wood itself that drew me initially, but the nut of the tree. My people relied on the nut and not many know just how nutrient dense this nut is.

The great Ned Bear realized that the butternut is not only one of the best carving woods we have around, it's also one of the most beautiful we have in Eastern Canada. I would go as far to say that it's one of the most beautiful in the world.

The butternut is in a rough spot, being the only endangered tree in New Brunswick. As I understand it, a specific canker affecting the tree is expected to wipe out 90% of the local butternut trees within a century¹. How has this affected your practice?

The reason I am using butternut alone is because I want the generations that follow to actually be able to see this wood. And sadly, one of the only few ways they'll be able to see this beautiful and precious wood, is through artwork.

With the future of the butternut tree being so grim, why use it at all? Won't harvesting the wood hurt the species' likelihood for survival?

This wood is being cut anyways. The canker is bringing these down—they're dying. Across many municipalities in Atlantic Canada, they're just being chipped up. Made into nothing. I am bringing awareness this does not have to be done. The wood can have another life. We don't have to simply throw things away.



TRADITIONAL CARVING TOOL



JUSTIN SAPIER

NED BEAR (1954-2019)

Ned was a sculptor from the Wolastoqiyik First Nations Community. Inspired by an Elder at a young age to begin carving, he would later become the first Indigenous student to graduate from the New Brunswick College of Craft and Design. He would go on to study at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, the First Nations University of Canada and the University of New Brunswick. Ned had great community impact as an instructor, curator, guest speaker, and juror. He has served as the Director of Education for Saint Mary's First Nation and as a member of the New Brunswick Arts Board. In 2006 he received the first prize at the prestigious Face the Nation: National Juried Mask Competition at UC Davis Design Museum. Ned was a renowned master wood carver who will be remembered for his contributions to the culture of his people and for sparking a passion for traditional knowledge in the next generation.



CARVINGS BY NED BEAR AT GALLERY ON QUEEN, MARCH 2020 MEMORIAL



CARVING TOOLS | JUSTIN SAPIER

The butternut tree, more specifically the large nuts that the tree bears, have had a longstanding importance here on the East Coast. Discovery of these nuts was a significant find at the Norse settlement of L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland². If we look back further, we can see that this tree played an essential role within the Indigenous communities here along the Wolastoq (also known as the Saint John River). How did the Wolastoqiyik and Passamaquoddy Peoples use this tree?

Mainly for sustenance. It's all about the nut: it's the most nutritious one we have in this territory. My people used the fats, the oils—every part of it they could. All of this was very hard to extract, but very worth it. If done correctly, the nut can even remain edible for 25 years.

Butternut was also used predominately by the late Ned Bear, who very recently began his next journey. I've noticed a resemblance between your work and his — apart from using the same species of wood, you both chose to carve with chisels and have shown a great respect for the wood. Neither refer to your work as "masks" but instead as watching spirits or "Pawakan" as Ned would say. How has Ned Bear impacted your journey?

Ned Bear has impacted me more than he'll ever know—more than I'll ever know. Every day I'm seeing more about how he's impacted my journey.

Ned and I first crossed paths about 20 years ago completely separate from carving. We became acquaintances, but I didn't know much about Ned at the time. The more I learn about Ned now, the more I realize that I'm a lot like him. We have a lot of the same thoughts and feelings. I have come to realize now I know why he used butternut and the wood has now mesmerized me, it's made me fall in love with it. . .so I don't want to use any other wood. As for Ned using his chisels and going back to the ways of the old: that's just natural for me.

I call them tree spirits because that's what they are. I don't know about Ned, but it's literally the face of the tree and I'm just uncovering it or chiseling it, off.

I've recently come to learn that Ned enjoyed carving outdoors and I am really learning that as of late — it's something that really makes the energy flow through me easier. It's where I should be.

In the future, the more I can learn about Ned, maybe I'll uncover a little bit more about who I really am too. I wish I asked more questions when I had the chance.



CARVINGS BY JUSTIN SAPIER | ODELL PARK RESIDENCY OPENING AT THE CREATEDHERE/NBCCD STUDIO, SEPTEMBER 2020

How has COVID-19 impacted your practice? As an artist, gallery showings and exhibitions are essential to getting your work out there and seen. How are you using this time?

Everything is on hold. Everything from shows out of province to events I've been invited to. It's all pending. For my time right now, it's all about carving. Mother Earth has put us in our rooms for a time out and this is the perfect time to realize who I am and what I need to concentrate on with my art. I'm using this time to carve more than ever.

You mentioned that Mother Earth is giving us a time out?

The environmental impact our species has had. . . pretty soon people aren't going to be able to get a tree from the woods to create art. There won't be a woods. They will have to go to the beach, the dump, or the side of the road and collect garbage to make something with.

I imagine pretty soon some people are going to realize why their great grandparents washed and kept things that we throw out without thinking. The age of waste is over.

I think it makes sense that Mother Earth is giving us a wake-up call to change our actions and I believe we're about to see a surge of art around the world that reflects this. There was an age of non-waste before contact; we need to look back for our answers on how to change.

It's all about taking care of Mother Earth and not wasting anything.

Definitely words for us all to meditate on—to reflect not only on how we live, but our impact on the world around us. Thank you for taking the time to sit with me today. Woliwon.

Woliwon. ↓

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¹Glynn, T. & Palmer, D. (2019). Butternut. *The Great Trees of New Brunswick* (2nd Ed.) Goose Lane Editions, 78-82

²Wallace, B. (2018). L'Anse aux Meadows. *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historica Canada. Article published November 28, 2006.

