

Interview with Maxine Matilpi: Transcript

University of Victoria Legacy Art Galleries

Maxine Matilpi: Hello, ladies and gentlemen, my name is _____, which translates into “the person who loves to give a feast”. And I come from the Ma’āmtagila, that’s my father’s tribe, Ma’āmtagila means growling bear, or stubborn people. And my mother is from the Ławit’sis nation, which translates into angry people, or powerful people. So that is where I am from, from the Kwakwāka’wakw nation.

When I was six years old, we had moved to Alert Bay and people were slowly starting to bring their regalia back because of the Potlatch ban. And my mother brought me to my grandmother and my great aunt on a Sunday, and I became the threader, I sorted out the buttons, and I cut out the designs for them. So, this was the beginnings of my learning textile work at the age of six in Alert Bay. And then from there, I watched my grandmother, my mother’s mother, I watched her make regalia for us because my grandfather was a hereditary chief of the Ławit’sis nation, and his name was Chief Henry Speck, and his Chief’s name was U’dzistalis, which means “the greatest”. So, with watching that, I didn’t realize I was learning when my mother would bring me on a Sunday because at six years old, I would rather be playing out with my relatives, wondering what they were playing and where they were, and here I am with these elderly ladies, right?

And I’m really grateful for that teaching because when I started doing this, my mother passed away, it was 30 years ago that she passed away. And this is how I got fully engaged with working with textiles. We had discussed putting a set of regalia for each of her children, and me being one of them, and there was 10 of us left, so when she passed into the spirit world, I told John “I’m going to take over, I’m going to do exactly what mom and I had planned.” So, we started buying material, and we worked with Melton, because Melton was the trade material when the ships came in the 1800s to trade with our people. John had it in his mind that we should stick to Melton because that’s what our people used. So, we did that, and then we really searched around for shell buttons, mother of pearl, abalone, for my family. So, John became the main designer of everything that we have created over the years. He made templates, which made it easier for me. So, there were times where John knew that I would be behind on certain things, and John would stop his carving, and he would come out and help me cut out designs. And when I got to that stage of sewing the designs down, there were times he would come back in when I got to the button stage, and he would line up the buttons for me. And if you look at any of my blankets, I have no knots in the back, I put the knots underneath the button, and it really amazed people, because, like “How did she do this? Where are the knots?” like they never even thought to think it’s under the button.

John figured this out for us. We really weren't sure of the dimensions of what the blanket size should be. So, he got up late one night and went into our treasure box and we had an old blanket that was probably from the early 1900s, then my mother's blanket, and my grandmother's blanket. He laid them all out and measured it, and then he had that aha moment, now I know the shortcut that we could do.

So, to construct the blanket, you're literally wearing the longhouse, and the crest that you see on the back, people can tell where you're from, like when you see a butterfly on mine, they know I'm from the Ławit'sis. So, people can tell which tribe you're from by the crest that you wear. And if I wear my Kulus, they know I'm from the Ma'amtagila and that's for my father. So, we really protect our crests because there are some people that they think they can use it but don't really have the rights to. So, you know, there are a lot of rules within our Potlatch world of being- keeping things alive and protecting what should be protected. With the button blanket, like I said, you wear the longhouse. The border, that represents the planks of the construction of the longhouse. So, when you go into a longhouse and you see those long planks around the longhouse, and of course, you've got the fire, and if you see any kind of plaid or solid material up here on your blanket, that represents the smokehole. What my grandmother told me about the smokehole, is for your emcee and your singers, the people that have to work on the floor, the smoke should go through the smokehole so that they could continue to do their business. And the body of the blanket, some people call it the door or the longhouse itself. So, I really think that's quite ingenious of our people to think that.

And my other thought, looking at one of the blankets I got from my grandmother years ago, it made me think of my grandmother's youth of how they worked in the longhouse, sat on the floor, and started working on their blankets, whatever regalia that they needed to do, you know, in the dark. And once I started, going forward to this generation, we have the sewing machine, we have Xacto blades, we have the roller blades, and we sew the design down by machine instead of by hand like what she had done. And when I started, I wanted to do something like that because it reminded me of Granny. So, with my father's blanket, that I had asked for him- from him so that I could put a design on it, and this was right after our mother passed away, our tradition is to burn so that when they go into the spirit world they're not going naked and they have what they need on their next journey. So, when that blanket came out, I asked dad, you know "Could I please keep these blankets, and I'll put designs on them?" So, I made one for him, and one for the youngest brother, because I just thought it was befitting that it went from dad to youngest. So, that's when I started to learn to bead, and it's called couching because it's so close to the design and I use size 10 and I use Czechoslovakian beads.

I couldn't figure out how to do it, because I didn't see Granny work with it, but I had that aha moment late one night I looked at that blanket and I said "Gran, you gotta help me here", and I'm going to say it in our language, ____ [speaking in Kwakwala] ____ I said "Gran, I need your

help, could you show me how you did this?" and that's when I had that aha moment and it was really touching. And you know, this was like midnight, and I sat down and she worked with two threads, this is your bead line, you put all your beads on this line, and then this is your sewing needle. Pick up two, go down, come up. Pick up two, go down, come up, and every once in a while, the further that you go along you pull on this a little bit and it straightens it out. And I was like a little kid! I was so excited, like "Thank you Granny! Thank you ada!" She was still with me, you know, she still guides me.

So, John has been a big factor of all of this. I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for us working together and the drive that he had for me. He really opened up my eyes, of the quality that you should put in your piece. So, I would always be so happy for him, and you know I had so much pride in everything that John had done. And he really didn't like the recognition he said, "No, no, there's no need for that." So, it'll always be with me, you know. It's such an honorable thing what you guys are doing for him, lifting him up, and the sense of pride that we all have with what's happening. I know he would say it's really not necessary, but I'm really happy about it, you know it's so enlightening for me. Life is really interesting, you know, what John and I had done in the 34 years that we were together, and I wouldn't trade it for anything. We were very compatible, not just in the artistic world, but in everything that we – like we could finish off each other's sentences, or we would say "let's go out for dinner" at the same time. That's how connected we were. I think that's really important in a relationship when you can get to that level of being as one. Not too many people can reach that, I think. But you know, it's all about just working together and just being honest with each other.

We all have a gift of what we do to keep our culture alive and mine is textiles. Mine's working with my hands. And that's something that I learned from my mother at a young age. When I look back, ada, she was already teaching me, you know, the values of life and what is ahead of me. And you know, working with my hands a lot with sewing, you know it never stops, it never stops. In my studio, I'll look around and I know what I would like to get accomplished this week. Like okay this weekend, I am going to work on borders on two blankets, at least get the buttons on. What you choose to do with your life is really important, and you gotta enjoy what you do. So I'm very grateful to my parents and my grandmother for teaching, speaking that language to me. _____[Speaking in Kwakwala]_____ I'm really grateful that you have invited me here to say a few words of what John and I have done together. _____[Speaking in Kwakwala]_____ My heart is very grateful for that. _____[Speaking in Kwakwala]_____ We're going to continue to do this, we're going to continue to do this. _____[Speaking Kwakwala]_____ So that everything is kept alive. And that's the language that we need to put out there, not just sharing and caring, but to teach it, to be humble, and do it with dignity.