



Biiskawaagan (Jacket) for Maungwudaus (2020) 68.6 x 123.2 cm ,handmade Lokta paper, calico fabric, capacitors, resistors, light-emitting diodes and glass beads. Collection of the Artist.

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist

EXHIBITED

MacLaren Art Center, Barrie, Ontario, Labours of Love, February 16 - May 19, 2024

An important historical figure who has a recurring presence in Barry Ace's work is that of Maungwudaus, meaning Great Hero. Born in 1811, in what was then Upper Canada, he was also known by his Christian name of George Henry and was an advocate, educator and translator. As well, he was a performer who travelled abroad, throughout the United Kingdom and parts of Europe, entertaining royalty, aristocracy and artistic luminaries in George Catlin's Indian Gallery. The performances were in the tableaux vivants style popular at the time. Translated from the French as "living pictures" the practice was to construct staged historical and "exotic" sets where people enacted scenes for the audiences.

Maungwudaus toured with several other Anishinaabe performers, including his wife. His children also accompanied them abroad. He self-published his travel journals under the title *An Account of the Chippewa Indians, Who Have Been Travelling Among the Whites in the United States, England, Ireland, Scotland, France and Belgium*. Such documentation was a rare phenomenon in its time, a reversal of the colonial gaze, written in the language of the colonizer and disseminated using the communication technologies that were available. The account records the death of his wife, some of his younger children as well as other performers, who contracted smallpox and did not make it home. In 2010 Ace was invited by Anishinaabe artist Robert Houle, as part of Houle's exhibition *Paris/Ojibwa* at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris, France, to perform an honouring for Maungwudaus's troupe and for those who did not return. During the performance, titled *A Reparative Act*, Ace visited four locations in Paris to perform a traditional dance, calling out Maungwudaus's name along with Noodinokay,

Mishshemong and Saysaygon. A powwow dancer, in the Southern Straight style, Ace wore his own regalia for the performances; the regalia is now included in the work - Mino Bimaadiziwin.

In Anishinaabe culture it is customary to bestow gifts to honour. With the Biiskwaagan (Jacket) for Maungwudaus, Ace has created another honouring for Maungwudaus, a gift for his legacy and his spirit. In the iconic archival photographic images of Maungwudaus he is seen wearing his own regalia, a coat fashioned in the style of the day yet embellished with Indigenous patterning and worn along with a bear claw necklace and headdress. This biiskwaagan is embellished in Ace's signature style using electronic components (capacitors, resistors and light-emitting diodes) to reference the medicinal floral motifs of Great Lakes material culture. Ace's choice of wildcrafted Lokta paper, used in Nepal for thousands of years for sacred texts, is a visual likeness to tanned animal hide. Although a frontal rendering of a coat, the fringes rise from the background, filling out the space in the deep-set walnut frame, providing more depth of form. Calico fabric, a material often used in dancer's regalia, lines the inside of the jacket.

Spirit Mjikaawanak are a pair of gauntlets that can be considered as a companion piece to Biiskwaagan (Jacket) for Maungwudaus. As with the biiskwaagan, the mjikaawanak are made of the Lokta paper with similar electronic component ornamentation, including unique blue ceramic capacitors that resemble wild blueberries; the work is also set within a matching walnut frame. On the edge of the cuffs, Ace has added the fur of a nigig (otter), an animal important to the Anishinaabeg as a dodem (clan) as well as an integral animal in their migration and origin stories.

For Ace, the paper works are studies of material culture, an extension of his paper regalia and bandolier bags. The inherent fragility of paper and the care required to work with its delicate quality are also an important component. As with all aspects of culture, and its continuance, the same level of care and attentiveness must be taken. The pieces symbolically demonstrate this ethos, the jacket and gauntlets created "to keep the ancestors, both named and unnamed, warm in their journey."

Essay courtesy of Leah Snyder of The L.Project. Snyder writes about culture, technology and contemporary art, and is a contributor to the National Gallery of Canada's Gallery magazine and other Canadian art and architecture publications.