

CREATOR'S GAME



On a sunny fall day a month into my goal of exploring new parks throughout the city, I found myself in Ravina Gardens admiring a magnificent 90-foot mural called *Creator's Game*.

This L-shaped park — nestled between the Junction and High Park neighbourhoods — receives lots of foot traffic due to the baseball clubs who use the two diamonds within the park, and its proximity to a community recreational centre and schools.

Creator's Game, along with additional public art panels in Ravina Gardens, was supported and funded by StreetARToronto's (StART) Police Services Partnership Program. Under this program, recurring graffiti vandalism in specific locations is addressed by engaging with the local community to beautify and revitalize the area.

"We wanted to highlight sports, as this area is predominately a sports field," says Jodi Callan, project manager of Toronto's graffiti management plan. StART drew inspiration from Toronto's motto — "Diversity our Strength" — and extended it to sports. "It's diversity *in* sports not just diversity *of* sports," says Randy McLean, manager of Toronto's Beautiful Streets program.

"So we wanted to ensure there was an Indigenous theme to this as well, and an Indigenous sport." Callan adds. "We gave them the opportunity to interpret diversity in sport as they saw fit, which is what led to the beautiful design of *Creator's Game*."

Creator's Game stands out among the city's murals as a celebration of Indigenous culture and traditions. It was designed and completed (in one day!) by an "art family" consisting of Monique Bedard (Aura), Jay Soule (Chippewar), and Nancy King (Chief

Ravina Gardens' mural celebrates Indigenous culture



Lady Bird). Evan Lovett, a resident of Philadelphia, was a guest artist. Chief Lady Bird and Aura met in March of 2015 through collaborations within 7th Generation Image Makers at the Native Youth Resource Centre. That same summer, while painting a mural at the Aboriginal Pavilion for the Pan Am Games, they met Chippewar, who had a booth selling his paintings, t-shirts, and prints. They have been collaborating on several projects since the beginning of 2016. "An art family is so important while navigating the art world," says Aura. "There's more support and encouragement working together."

At the heart of the piece are spiritual depictions (brightly painted in hues of

neon yellow, purple, and turquoise) of individuals playing lacrosse — also known as the Creator's game — a traditional Haudenosaunee team sport that originated centuries ago.

"Its origins are rooted in enjoyment and it was often played to show our gratitude," says Chief Lady Bird.

"When we play lacrosse today, we still have Smoke Dancers do an opening ceremony before the game begins," adds Aura. Lacrosse also became a medicine game where "the medicine people would prepare the medicines (*mushkikii*) and then the people would play the game afterwards as a celebration," says Chief Lady Bird, "and to show that joyfulness

that comes from living out our teachings. Laughter and joy is also good medicine."

Accompanying the four lacrosse players is a larger-than-life beady-eyed owl (traditionally a symbol of death in some Indigenous communities), and a woodland-style depiction of a thunderbird (one of the many spirits or Manitous whose purpose is "cleansing the land through lightning, rain and thunder"). Traditional Ojibwa (blue) and Haudenosaunee (red) florals frame the mural, enveloped by the mystical midnight forest with dancing electrical skies (northern lights) led by a beaming full moon.

Street art not only beautifies public space, but it can also lead to informative and educational purposes. "That's what we do with StART," says McLean, "it's not just a pretty picture of a bowl of fruit or flowers, but most of what we try to do is art with some type of message in it as well." *Creator's Game* reveals aspects of Indigenous culture and wisdom. "To whoever views our mural," says Chief Lady Bird, "I hope our art makes you feel the interconnectedness that exists throughout First Nations' worldviews." By informing ourselves of the meaning of these symbols and the value of these stories, we are enriching our understanding of this land.

Having Indigenous voices represented in public spaces is vital. They are the fastest-growing segment of the Canadian population, of whom close to 34% live in urban settings (according to Statistics Canada). StART has given a platform for Indigenous voices to be heard, and now it is up to us — the public — to interact with this space and help these stories be passed on. †

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