

Didactic and Wall Text for We Remain Certain

On view January 9 to March 22, 2024 at McMaster Museum of Art.

All exhibition text is courtesy of Protect the Tract.

Sherman Gallery - Floating wall

Main Title and Welcome Didactic

It does not matter what continually changes, our understanding remains certain

Awęhęgyeh shęh hodę' dewahde:nihs, ha'gadagye'shō' shęh n'agwanigōha:do:gę:

Arenhátýen tsi ní:tsi teyottenyonhátýe' kwató:ken tsi nī:tsi yonkwa'nikonhrayén:ta'

Shé:kon, sgé:nō',

We Remain Certain is curated by a group of Haudenosaunee artists, community members, and academics. This collaborative work is a contemporary telling of our traditional narratives, how we see the world, and our lives at the Grand River Territory. This exhibit offers a glimpse into the unique worldview of the Haudenosaunee and how it has been maintained in this region for over a thousand years.

We are upholding our responsibilities and celebrating our existence in the 21st century through the perpetuation of ways of knowing that have been passed down to us from our ancestors. We have remained certain of who we are despite having experienced centuries of colonial violence. We have resisted. We have survived. We do this in order to ensure the wellbeing of future generations of Haudenosaunee, or "the coming faces".

Sherman Gallery – Right to Left

Didactic on Worldview

The Haudenosaunee have a distinct understanding of how we came to exist in this world and our responsibilities upon it.

We have an understanding of the world around us that holds fundamental truths: that everything needed to live a good life exists completely within Creation; that people should respect and be thankful for Creation; and that our enjoyment of this good life takes place with the coming generations in mind. These tenets are known as our "Original Instructions" which form the foundation of the Haudenosaunee worldview.

We have continually expressed our understanding of the world in our thoughts, words, and actions. Our stories and teachings have become the philosophies and laws which have sustained our people across the generations, and they are a gift from our ancestors.

Beginning with Sky Woman and Creation, through the Kanonhweratonhtshera (Thanksgiving Address), on to the Kayeri Niyorihwa:ke (Four Ceremonies), the Kayanerenkó:wa: (Great Law of Peace) and Karihwiyo (Good Message of Handsome Lake), the Haudenosaunee are citizens of a living culture and distinct political identity, sharing a collective consciousness found in the experiences of our ancestors.

From our earliest understandings of humanity, the Haudenosaunee have had our minds directed towards the future: we are focused on forever.

Didactic on Governance

The Haudenosaunee worldview, at its core, understands the power of women to create life, the debt of gratitude owed to animals in making human life possible, and the deep connection to plants like strawberries and tobacco.

Over time, the people forgot these original instructions. In the period before the formation of the Confederacy, the people were in a violent and bloody civil war that persisted for decades. Disputes between families and conflict over resources led to intense suffering with no end in sight.

The original five nations, Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Oneida nations were brought together by The Peacemaker, and his idea to bring about peace, even under the direst of circumstances, so these warring nations could live in balance with each other as human beings of a collective territory. After a long period of negotiation, all the nations eventually agreed to the terms of what became known as the Kayanerenkó:wa:, or Great Law of Peace.

This system, governed by fifty chiefs across the Five Nations is based upon the already established clan families. It positions the Clan Mother as the one responsible to choose the leader from each family. Formed by the 49 Clan families of the collective Nations, the governance structure is charged with the responsibility for decision making and upholding peace between our Nations and the wellbeing of each family.

By establishing the Haudenosaunee Confederacy Chiefs Council in peace, the five nations ensure the resources found within Creation are consumed from one common dish and in order to enjoy these gifts, we are intended to share the resources with future generations and our non-human relations.

This form of government, often described as North America's oldest democracy, continues to meet in council, and govern the affairs of the Haudenosaunee today.

The Haudenosaunee's Great Law of Peace, is a political philosophy that led to subsequent treaty and nation to nation relationships, with other Native nations and later with European nations. The philosophy of these original instructions are found repeatedly in each nation-to-nation relationship, agreement, negotiation, and treaty the Haudenosaunee entered into, and are continually asserted by the Council.

Thanksgiving Address

Creator

Handsome Lake

Four Beings

Grandmother Moon

The Stars

Sun

Thunders

Winds

Birds

Animals

Trees

Sustenance

Hanging Fruit

Weeds, Grasses and Medicines

Water and Fish

Earth

People

Didactic on Mapping

During the American Revolution, when soldiers marched across our homelands in 1779, they did so as the corn - our most important food source - was growing. Food stores and crops were destroyed. While many were killed by the soldiers, many more died due to starvation, exposure, and disease in the weeks and months that followed.

Our families had to find a way to survive, including recovering the burned green corn from our destroyed fields. What emerged from this was the development of a new method to preserve corn. Our survival would not have been possible if it weren't for a deepened understanding of corn, a reaffirmation of how our very existence is tied to the natural world. Rather than focusing on devastation, when these stories are shared the emphasis is placed on our ancestors' survival skills, inventiveness, and revitalization.

Despite this act of genocide, Haudenosaunee at Grand River remain deeply connected to a broad territory - and to our relatives in other communities. Haudenosaunee across our vast ancestral territory maintain strong connections to each other through a shared history, languages, intermarriage, ceremonial events, and other social and political occasions.

Quote from Carol Jacobs

"As we leave, the words of Thanksgiving will echo in our ears, reminding us that not only our own future generations, but every living thing, relies on us to fulfill our responsibilities as they fulfill theirs."

Carol Jacobs
Clan Mother, Cayuga Bear

Panabaker Gallery – Right to Left

Didactic on Connection between People, Relationships

While we are here for our time on Earth, we are responsible for the attention we pay to the wellbeing of each other, our own selves and Creation; each of us leave a legacy of action and inaction that will impact future generations.

Colonialism within the watershed and beyond is an extractive system that dehumanizes the Haudenosaunee and exploits and destroys plants, medicines, trees, animals, fish, waters, and lands in order to concentrate wealth and power into the lands of a few for short term profit.

This pattern of exploitation is self perpetuated within our very way of living. We are reliant on so much harm, the natural world and our relationships are suffering and broken to such a degree that we have made future generations vulnerable to the devastations of climate change.

Our contemporary challenges – the ecologically damaging and violent ways of life we have created, the changing climate, how we care, feed and shelter one another, how we mend our broken relationships and reconcile – are so complex, at times they are overwhelming and feel like insurmountable challenges.

While Haudenosaunee territory extends far beyond the Grand River watershed, we must pay particular attention to this river.

Now is the time to open our imaginations to radical new alternatives and ways of doing things. Undoing generations of mistrust and facing the challenge of adapting and surviving climate change along the Grand River.

Didactic on Connection to Creation, Environment, and Climate Change

While we are here for our time on Earth, we are responsible for the attention we pay to the wellbeing of each other, our own selves and Creation.

Our ancestors, upon meeting, looked to the future and envisioned a time where values of mutual respect and non-interference formed the basis of our diplomatic relationships - that each of us would become responsible citizens of our respective governments. Along the way, disputes over land and greed for the wealth that could be extracted from the natural world disrupted these agreements.

The colonialism of today is perpetuated by people who work by capitalist means, weaponizing self-interests to establish wealth from extraction, and from us all. The colonial state still imposes their authority by violence, in both bureaucratic and militant forms.

Our contemporary challenges – the damaging and violent ways of life we have created, the criminalization of Indigenous land and water defenders, the failures of the settler governments to understand and work in partnership with Indigenous people, the economic system that is reliant on inequity, the mending of our broken relationships – are so complex, at times they are overwhelming and feel like insurmountable challenges.

Now is the time to open our imaginations to radical new alternatives and ways of doing things. We can challenge the colonial status quo that relies on our division to maintain power over people, lands, and waters. By undoing generations of mistrust, we can face the challenge of relating to one another and form governance, together.