



**PRAIRIE INTERLACE: WEAVING, MODERNISMS,
AND THE EXPANDED FRAME, 1960-2000**

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Margaret Harrison, *Margaret's Rug*, c. 2005 (cat. 22)

Métis Stories and Women's Artistic Labour in Margaret Pelletier Harrison's *Margaret's Rug*

by Cheryl Troupe

Margaret Harrison is an accomplished seamstress and traditional art practitioner. She practices Métis-style floral embroidery and is one of a few remaining Métis women who continue to make hooked rugs. She grew up in the Katepwa Lake road allowance community in Southern Saskatchewan's Qu'Appelle Valley and is a member of the extended Racette, Pelletier, and Cardinal families. These families descend from buffalo hunters in the Qu'Appelle Valley region in the mid-to-late 1800s. By the early 20th century, many of these families lived on land they did not own, having been displaced by the failure of the Federal Government's scrip system and Dominion Lands Act to secure Métis land title. These families relocated to land owned by settler farmers with whom they found seasonal labour opportunities and unoccupied Crown land, next to First Nations reserves, or on the land set aside for the creation of roads in the Dominion Land Survey. These spaces formed across the Prairies and have since become known as road allowance communities. Margaret's mother, Adeline Pelletier dit Racette, and her mother's sisters, Florence, Agnes, and Louise, were well-recognized in the Qu'Appelle Valley for their sewing work and hooked rugs. They passed their cultural teachings, sewing knowledge, and rug-making expertise on to her: these teachings and the legacy of Métis women's artistic labour guide Margaret's contemporary art practice.

While rug making in the Qu'Appelle Valley is no longer performed at the scale it once was, Margaret continues to practice the art form and pass on these teachings, often through community art workshops. In 2013 she gifted me one of her hooked rugs that I have titled *Margaret's Rug* (cat. 22). It is not in the typical floral pattern taught to her by her mother, grandmother, and aunts but is a pictorial rendering of their family home on the road allowance along the shores of Katepwa Lake. It is an exceptional example of historical and contemporary art practice, a map of Margaret's experience that ties her to the Qu'Appelle



Margaret Pelletier Harrison with *Margaret's Rug*, 2013. Photo courtesy of Cheryl Troupe.

Valley, and a mnemonic device that allows her to remember and share. With each element depicted on the rug, she shared stories about her experiences growing up in the Valley, specific places, women's work, and the foods they grew, harvested, and prepared. Margaret's community was tight-knit, and all families were closely related. They shared resources and spent time working and socializing together. Although her home is the only one depicted on the rug, she shared many stories about her grandparents, Josue Pelletier and Vitaline Cardinal, who lived next to Margaret and her parents, and stories about her aunts, uncles, and cousins, who also lived along the lake.

The scene on her rug depicts where they lived "snuggled in close along the lakeshore" at the end of Katewpa Lake.¹ Margaret's childhood home is in the foreground of the rug, complete with a clothesline strung with blankets and clothes hanging to dry. Next to the house are flowers, trees, and vegetable gardens that were planted and harvested by women. Margaret has also included the garden tools that the family used to work the land. In the background are the Valley roads and coulees, lined with plants and trees, including chokecherry and saskatoon berry bushes they harvested annually. Bordering the rug are two white crosses, symbolic of the importance of the Catholic Church in Margaret's life, and in the life of the Qu'Appelle Métis community. Also present are two floral designs, like those that her mother, aunts, and grandmothers used to decorate their own rugs. Lastly, if you look closely, you will see an infinity symbol, an important marker of Métis identity and symbol of nationhood.



Vitaline Cardinal and Josue Pelletier, circa 1950. Photo courtesy of Margaret Harrison.

Métis women, like those from the Qu'Appelle Valley, have a long history dating to the early years of the fur trade, of producing clothing and material goods for sale or trade to fur company posts, settlers, and newcomers.² Indigenous scholar and artist Sherry Farrell Racette argues that Indigenous women adapted their work during the fur trade to emerging rural economies, finding avenues to continue producing and selling hand-crafted and often decorative items.³ First Nations and Métis women commonly marketed their handmade goods to local fur posts, traders, and later settlers. Métis buffalo hunter and trader Norbert Welsh recalled that in the late 1880s he regularly bought products, particularly moccasins, made by local Métis and First Nations women to sell in his store at File Hills, located just north of the Qu'Appelle Valley.⁴

Women's artistic production and traditional sewing and handwork skills were essential to supporting Métis families well into the early 20th century. The practice continues today, often with the help of social media and the internet. As settlement across the Prairie provinces increased in the early 20th century, so did Métis' involvement in the developing agrarian economy. Displaced by the failure of Canadian government policies to secure Métis land tenure, many struggled to hold on to the plots of land on which they lived. They faced racism in everyday interactions with settlers and challenges in the evolving new social order that privileged the settler economy and Euro-Canadian laws and institutions. Within road allowance communities there was little economic opportunity. For a time, men found work as seasonal or day labourers for settler farmers,

picking rocks, clearing fields, and planting and harvesting crops.

In contrast, women worked as domestics in settler homes or sometimes alongside their husbands, helping with farm work. They also netted fish, harvested berries, and dug seneca root that they sold or traded to bring income into the family. In many instances, Métis women marketed their traditional artistic and sewing skills, taught to them by their mothers and grandmothers, to bring additional income and necessary food and supplies into the home. This artistic labour provided stability and cultural continuity during a period of increasingly rapid economic, social, and political transition. Women's artistic labour was a critical component of the family economy. Margaret's mother, Adeline, echoed the importance of women's artistic and economic activity, remarking, "you didn't have to worry about anything once you have a rug like that."⁵ Many Valley women, including Margaret's mother and aunties, used their sewing, beading, embroidery, and other decorative art skills passed on to them by their mothers and grandmothers to make and sell items of clothing and decorative household objects into the 1930s and 1940s. Celine Amyotte Poitras recalled that during this period, and increasingly during the Depression, "there wasn't a speck of work for men" in the Qu'Appelle Valley. So, it was often women's labour that supported the family.⁶ She recalled doing a lot of sewing for people and that it was the "one thing [she] had to fall back on." Sewing was often done by the light of a coal oil lamp late at night once she had finished her work for the day and put the children to bed. Sewing work was generally



Adeline Pelletier dit Racette with one of her rugs, May 2002.
Photo courtesy of ©Gabriel Dumont Institute, GDI.RS.0990.

done by hand, as few had access to sewing machines until after the Second World War.

Adeline worked and sewed for several farm families. Her brothers also worked for farmers on the north side of the Valley around the town of Abernethy. When harvest time came, Margaret's family and grandparents would join her uncles, taking field work where they could. The women sometimes helped in the fields, but more often they would help butcher cattle and pigs. Margaret remembers her mother and grandmother bringing home the leftover meat and innards to clean, cook, and make blood sausage. She also recalls that her uncle Raoul would often say a good word to farmers and their wives about how hard his sister Adeline worked, so word got around about Adeline's sewing skills and work ethic. In return for her sewing work, she often received boxes of old clothes and fabric that she would

take apart, making clothing and blankets for the family. She would also save the fabric for making hooked rugs.

Adeline's sisters Florence, Agnes, and Louise were also recognized for their sewing skills. Agnes lived in nearby Indian Head and worked mending uniforms for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Louise lived in South Qu'Appelle and worked at the hospital as a seamstress and in the laundry, while Florence, like Adeline, took on sewing work for neighbouring farm families. Florence's son, Bob Desjarlais, recalled his mother sitting at her sewing machine from when she got up in the morning until well after dark, making all the family's clothing and blankets. She regularly sewed for settler families and even sewed wedding gowns and bridesmaid dresses.⁷ Both Margaret and Bob recalled that their mothers worked in exchange for food, including meat that farmers had butchered. Their labour helped support the family and reduced what they needed to hunt, fish, or purchase, which was important because working for farmers often took them away from their food-harvesting activities. Bob Desjarlais echoed the importance of women's work to the family economy, remarking that his "Mother made it all with the needle."⁸

These women recycled almost every piece of clothing they could. They got old clothes from farmers they worked for and re-made clothes into new pieces. They mended, darned, and patched, and when clothing was no longer wearable, they took pieces apart, sorted, saved, and cut them into strips for rug making.

Hooked rugs are historically utilitarian and domestic objects with roots dating back

to the mid-18th century in North America.⁹ While rug hooking was a widespread art practice among Métis women in the early 20th century, it is unclear how or who introduced this art form in the Qu'Appelle Valley region. Likely, it was carried with the Métis as they moved across the Prairies. Rug hooking was a common practice in the Red River parishes in the mid-to-late 19th century and was most likely taught to young women by the nuns in the convent schools. There is a rug in Le Musée de Saint-Boniface in Winnipeg, Manitoba, made by Marie Rose Breland for one of her sons in the 1880s. Marie Rose was the daughter of Cuthbert Grant and Marie Desmarais, and in 1836, at age fifteen, she married Pascal Breland. In 1869–70, the Brelands wintered north of the Qu'Appelle Valley to hunt buffalo and regularly opened their home to extended family and community members throughout the winter.¹⁰ Marie Rose had two siblings, James and Julie, who were already married into the large extended Desjarlais, Blondeau, and Fisher kinship networks in the Valley. Measuring 185 x 200 cm, *Le Tapis Breland* would have been a considerable undertaking to make as well as transport. While the Museum indicates that Breland is the rug's maker, it was likely a collaborative effort between Marie Rose and other women in her family.

These hooked rugs, like the one made by Breland, became popular in Métis and settler homes in the early 20th century. Also popular were braided rugs made from strips of fabric braided and then sewn together into a circular or oval form. As hooked rugs increased in popularity, burlap embossed with rug patterns became available through



Marie Breland (nee Grant), *Le Tapis Breland*, c. 1890, hooked rug; wool, jute, cotton, 185 x 200 cm. Collection of le Musée de Saint-Boniface Museum, Manitoba, DA-330.

mail order catalogues. However, Métis rug makers continued to create their own rug designs because the pre-made patterns were out of their price range.

According to Margaret, her mother and aunts, “The Racette girls,” as she called them, were the rug hookers who, like several Métis women, made and sold hooked rugs throughout the Valley.¹¹ Scraps of old clothes were saved, sorted, and then dyed in different colours, in preparation for them to be cut into about 2.5 cm strips. A piece of burlap recycled from a potato sack was stretched on a wooden frame and then decorated with the rug design, drawn with a piece of charcoal. A hook was made from a filed-down nail head embedded in a round wooden handle that fitted securely in the palm of the maker’s hand. The fabric was pulled from behind,



Margaret Harrison, *Margaret's Rug* (detail), c. 2005 (cat. 22)

through the holes of the burlap, forming small, consistent loops. Hooked rugs were made in all different sizes and most often were square or rectangular because making a round or oval rug on a square frame would waste burlap.

Métis floral beadwork and silk embroidery patterns influenced rug designs. Margaret and her cousin Bob recalled their mothers using a distinctive rose pattern. Adeline often created a large floral pattern in shades of pink and red with large green leaves and vines. She would plan out her design and then try to save fabric in those colours. If she did not have the colour she wanted or needed, she would dye her fabric using crepe paper, used in box socials and at Church, that was readily available. Adeline mixed the crepe paper with boiling water and soaked the cloth in the mixture, adding salt at the end to set the colour; otherwise, the fabric's colour would run when the rugs were washed. Margaret also remembered her mother using fabric dye to colour her fabric strips, but only when customers ordered rugs in specific designs and colours and provided her with the scrap fabric and fabric dye to complete the project.

Métis women sold their rugs to neighbours and local farm families, often for three or four dollars each, or traded them for food items like butter, eggs, or meat that Métis families did not produce for themselves.¹² These sales provided much-needed income and food to feed hungry families. The three or four dollars a rug brought in was a lot of money; according to Desjarlais, "at that time, five dollars was enough to feed a family of four for at least a week."¹³ Joseph Moran, also from the Qu'Appelle Valley,

recalled that his mother's handmade rugs enabled her to bring income into the family, often its sole support.¹⁴ He describes her entrepreneurial spirit and tenaciousness in selling her rugs. For many years she took the train from Lebret to Regina (a distance of about 80 kilometres / 50 miles), where she marketed her rugs in exchange for clothes or money. She conducted quite a prosperous trade, eventually attracting the interest of the local police. This attention was perhaps because she was selling her goods without the required license or formal business establishment, or because she was Indigenous. The attention she received, Moran suggests, forced her to sneak around in conducting her business and avoid the watchful eye of the authorities. Evident is Mrs. Moran's drive to support her family despite challenges she may have faced, even potential confrontation with the law. Mrs. Moran was acting out of necessity, filling an economic role not filled by her blind husband. As the sole or primary breadwinner in their families, women like Mrs. Moran are examples of the efforts of Métis women in devising strategies to do what was necessary to support their families.

In Margaret's family, her mother Adeline and auntie Florence were not the only rug makers. These skills were practiced across extended families and passed on to younger women within their kinship networks. Margaret's paternal grandmother, Vitaline Cardinal, made hooked rugs, as did Vitaline's sisters La Rose and Octavie. In an oral history interview held by the Gabriel Dumont Institute, Josephine Tarr recalled that Emma Amyotte, Octavie Cardinal's daughter-in-law, worked hard to provide for her family by making and selling hooked

and braided rugs and by picking and selling berries.¹⁵ She was even able to save enough money from these sales to buy herself a milk cow. Women on both sides of Margaret's family were rug makers and were part of an interrelated network of Métis women who did this work. Most likely, many other women, even within this family, also produced and sold hooked rugs.

The extended family system in which these women made their rugs translated into informal sales territories. Margaret's paternal grandfather, Josue Pelletier, sold his wife Vitaline Cardinal's rugs. Josue, Margaret recalled, was a fish peddler, selling fish, berries, and rugs throughout the Valley. He spoke little English, using mostly Cree or Michif, but he knew which farm families were likely to purchase his wares. He would peddle Vitaline's rugs from the Katepwa road allowance community to the south side of the Valley and then out of the Valley to Indian Head, where he and Vitaline did their business. The family considered this his territory, while the north side of the Valley towards Abernethy was where Margaret's parents Alfred and Adeline and her uncle Michel and Aunt Cora did their business, generally selling Adeline's rugs. Being on opposite sides of the Valley ensured that the family could cover a large territory and that their sales did not overlap. Similarly, Florence sold her rugs starting at the top of the hill on the north side and moving down into the Valley, careful not to cover the same territory as Adeline. This strategy of disseminating Métis hooked rugs across

the Qu'Appelle Valley region "so their patterns or their rugs never met," as Margaret remarks, helped reduce potential competition between makers and maintained family cohesion.¹⁶

From the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, Métis increasingly integrated into the settler economy across the Prairies. Often living on the road allowance, their integration was not as landowners but as temporary or seasonal farm labourers. Identifying opportunities within the settler economy, they also sold berries, fish, and other products harvested from the natural environment. They lived within a complex barter economy where they traded their labour for the goods, supplies, and many of the foods they relied upon.

Women's labour as domestics or selling the products of their labour helped families maintain their economic independence. In the Qu'Appelle Valley, many Métis women like Margaret's mother, aunts, and grandmothers marketed the traditional artistic and sewing skills taught to them by their mothers and grandmothers to bring additional income and necessary food and supplies into the home. They took advantage of the economic opportunities that presented themselves and, in doing so, adapted to the growing settler agrarian economy in ways that recognized Métis family systems and art forms. It is the legacy of these women that Margaret carries with her as she continues to practice, preserve, and promote this distinctly Métis art form.



NOTES

- 1 Margaret Harrison, interview with the author, February 12, 2010.
- 2 Sherry Farrell Racette, “‘Sewing Ourselves Together’: Clothing, Decorative Arts and the Expression of Métis and Halfbreed Identity” (PhD diss., University of Manitoba, 2014).
- 3 Sherry Farrell Racette, “Nimble Fingers and Strong Backs: First Nations and Métis Women in Fur Trade and Rural Economies,” in *Indigenous Women and Work, From Labor to Activism*, ed. Carol Williams (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 148–162; Sherry Farrell Racette, “Sewing for a Living: The Commodification of Métis Women’s Artistic Production,” in *Contact Zones: Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada’s Colonial Past*, ed. Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 17–46.
- 4 Mary Weekes, *The Last Buffalo Hunter* (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1994), 172–73.
- 5 Adeline Pelletier dit Racette, interview by Leah Dorion-Paquin and Anna Flaminio with Adeline Pelletier dit Racette and Margaret Harrison, May 23–24, 2002, transcript, Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture, Gabriel Dumont Institute, <https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/05849.Adeline%20Racette.pdf>.
- 6 Celina Amyotte Poitras, interview by Sharon Gaddie and Margaret Jefferson with Agnes Amyotte Fisher and Celina Amyotte Poitras, August 3, 1982, transcript, Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture, Gabriel Dumont Institute, [https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/01010.Fisher,%20Agnes%20\(S.%20Gladie%20\)10.05.2021.pdf](https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/01010.Fisher,%20Agnes%20(S.%20Gladie%20)10.05.2021.pdf).
- 7 Bob Desjarlais, interview by Leah Dorion-Paquin and Cheryl Troupe, July 3, 2002, transcript, Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture, Gabriel Dumont Institute, <https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/05848.Bob%20Desjarlais%20two.pdf>.
- 8 Desjarlais, interview.
- 9 For a comprehensive article regarding the origins of rug hooking refer to Sharon M. H. MacDonald, “As the Locusts in Egypt Gathered Crops’: Hooked Mat Mania and Cross-Border Shopping in the Early 20th Century,” in *Material History Review* 54, no. 3 (2001): 58–70.
- 10 Isaac Cowie, *The Company of Adventurers: A Narrative of Seven Years in the Service of the Hudson’s Bay Company During 1867–1874* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 381.
- 11 Joseph Moran, interview by Sharon Gaddie, August 22, 1983, transcript, Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture, Gabriel Dumont Institute, [https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/00992.Moran,%20Joe%20\(Sharon%20Gaddie\).pdf](https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/00992.Moran,%20Joe%20(Sharon%20Gaddie).pdf); Bob Desjarlais, interview, December 6–7, 2003; Bob Desjarlais, interview by Cheryl Troupe and Calvin Racette, May 15, 2002, transcript, Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture, Gabriel Dumont Institute, <https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/05847.Bob%20Desjarlais.pdf>; Bob Desjarlais, interview, July 3, 2002; Margaret Harrison and Adeline Pelletier dit Racette, interview, May 23–24, 2002; Margaret Harrison, interview, February 24, 2014; Margaret Harrison, interview, July 9, 2014.
- 12 Margaret Harrison and Adeline Pelletier dit Racette interview, 23–24 May 2002; Margaret Harrison, interview, February 24, 2014.
- 13 Desjarlais, interview, May 15, 2002.
- 14 Moran, interview, August 22, 1983.
- 15 Josephine Tarr, interview by Victoria Racette, February 27, 1984, transcript, Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture, Gabriel Dumont Institute, [https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/01025.Tarr,%20Josephine%20M.%20\(V.%20Racette\).pdf](https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/01025.Tarr,%20Josephine%20M.%20(V.%20Racette).pdf).
- 16 Margaret Harrison, interview, July 9, 2014.; Margaret Harrison and Adeline Pelletier dit Racette, interview, May 23–24, 2002.