

The Spirit of My Quilts

BY ALICE WILLIAMS

The work in my quilts and quilted wall-hangings depicts my double heritage. My mother, who is Anishinaabe, gave me the core of my Being, my Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) culture, while my father, who was born in Norway, gave me the traditions of the White culture which would make it possible for me to live more easily in the milieu of the dominant society.

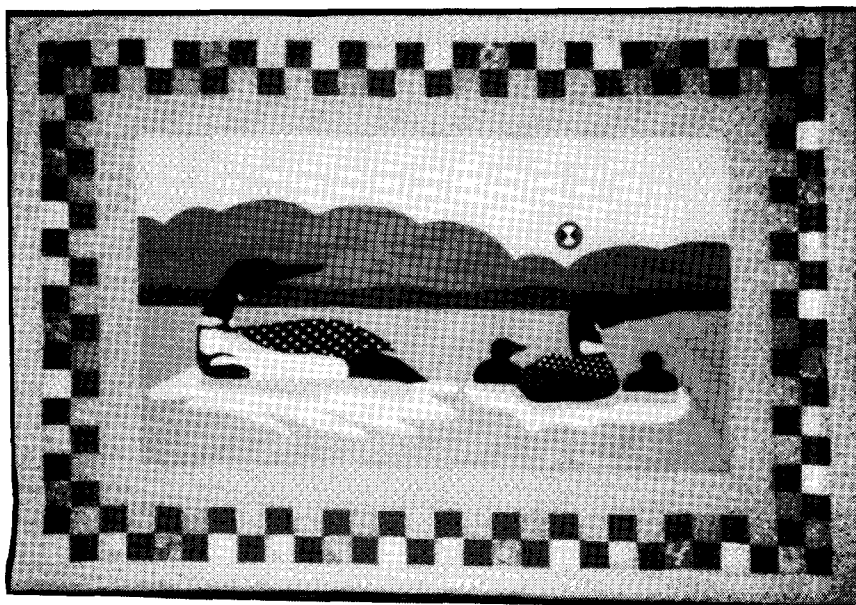
Traditionally, women rearing their daughters and sons cultivate a more intimate relationship with their children than do men. Thus, women are the transmitters of cultural norms and values. Because it was my Anishinaabe mother who raised me during the formative years of my life, the essence of my Being is experienced in terms of the Anishinaabe, the Ojibwe people. I represent this part of my heritage in my work by portraying, in the centre of my quilts, birds or animals which figure heavily in the Anishinaabe way of Life. Since it was not given me to draw, Curve Lake artist Norman Knott makes me sketches using the pictographic style of the Anishinaabe art form. These I transfer onto fabric.

Because I would one day have to go to school and live outside of the Anishinaabe culture, which was in those days essentially communal and non-competitive, my parents realized they had to prepare me to live in the culture of a competitive capitalist society. My White father taught me the norms and values which I should adopt and adapt to in order that it would be easier for White people to accept me. These non-Indian cultural traits I perceive as clothing to cover up my Ojibwe self so I can "succeed" or "make it." The heritage my father gave me is represented in the quilting blocks I use which either surround the central theme, or decorate the Anishinaabe-inspired picture. The quilting blocks are traditional and contemporary White North American designs.

The circular symbol in the sky of the quilts is

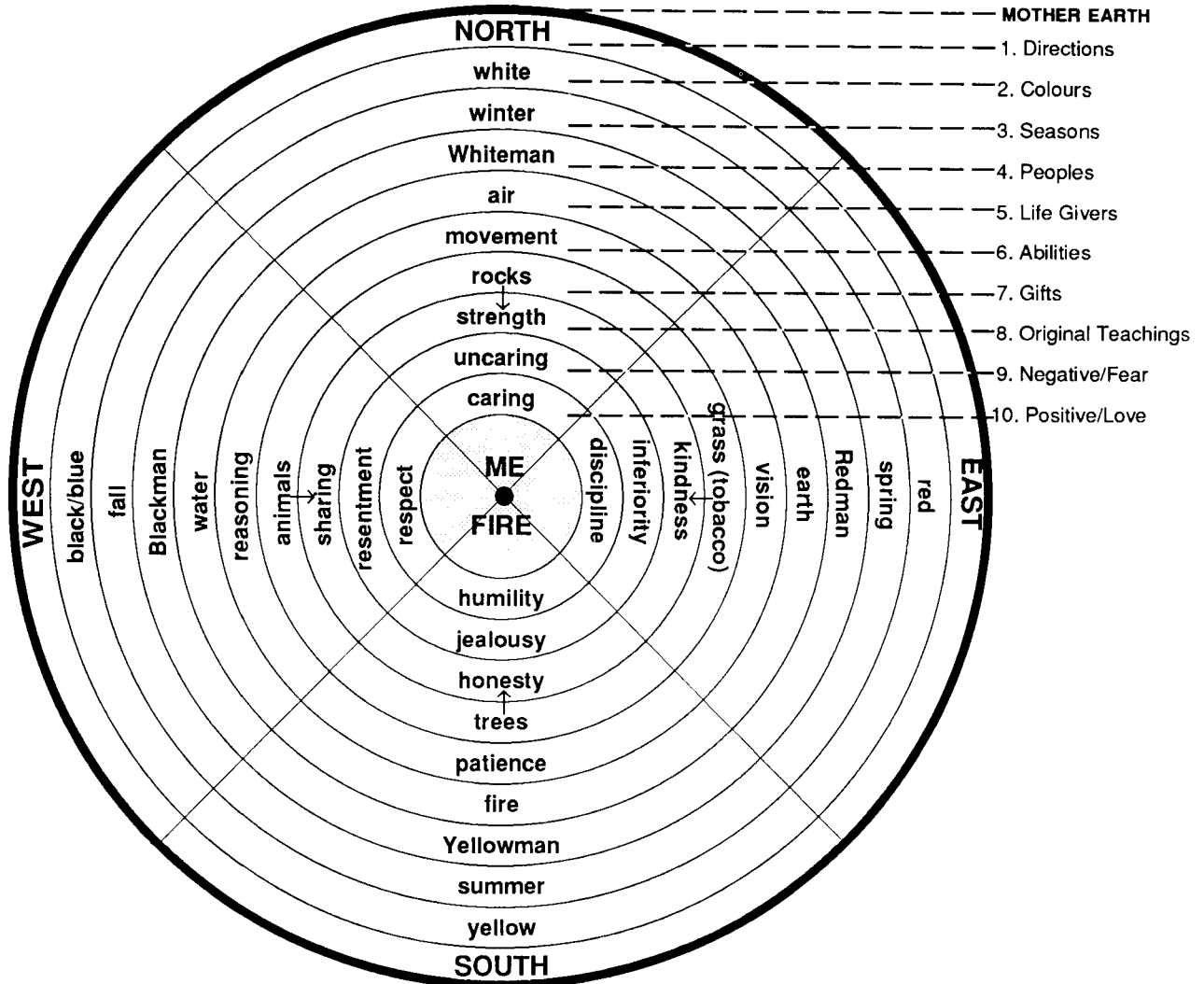
my personal symbol which I now use in all the quilts I make. This symbol helps me to recognize and be thankful for the gifts of Life which have been given to me. It represents the teachings of respect which are embedded in our Anishinaabe culture. Sometimes these sets of teachings are called "The Medicine Wheel" or "The Wheel of Life." I prefer to call it "The Search for Pimaatsiwin." Pimaatsiwin is the aim and hope of living a Good Life on this Earth. The four directions, North, East, South and West, are represented respectively by the colours white, red, yellow and blue. Within these colours are the four races of Man: the Whiteman, the Red Man, the Yellow Race, and the Black Race; the four Life-givers: air, food, sun, and water; the four seasons: winter, spring, summer, and fall; the four vices: greed, apathy, jealousy, and resentment; the four moral principles: caring, vision, patience, and reasoning. The North gives us the rocks, which speak to us of strength. The East gives us the animals, which talk to us about sharing. From the South we get the trees, which teach us about honesty, and from the West we are given the grasses, which teach us about kindness. All things in this Life were, and are, given to us by the Mother of us all, Our Mother, the Earth. She is represented by the green (sometimes brown) circle, which encompasses the four colours and all that we experience.

Lines that radiate from the "Pimaatsiwin Wheel" tell us that each Being in the creation affects all that comes into contact with



her/him. The centre, where all the colours touch, is the soul. The belief is that all Beings, all animate objects, have a Soul or Spirit. The Mother Earth circle represents the physical existence of all things. The lines radiating from the physical circle show that we have a physical effect on our surroundings, while lines from the centre, the Soul, show that our Souls also have just as great an effect on all things that touch our lives.

The Pimaatsiwin Circle



The Creator has given all people knowledge and wisdom, each in her/his own way; no one is forgotten. To our Indian peoples, and to others who live close to our Mother Earth, we are given knowledge and wisdom through dreams, visions, fasting and prayer: we are blessed with the gift of seeing the many lessons that have been put in Nature and in the world around us.

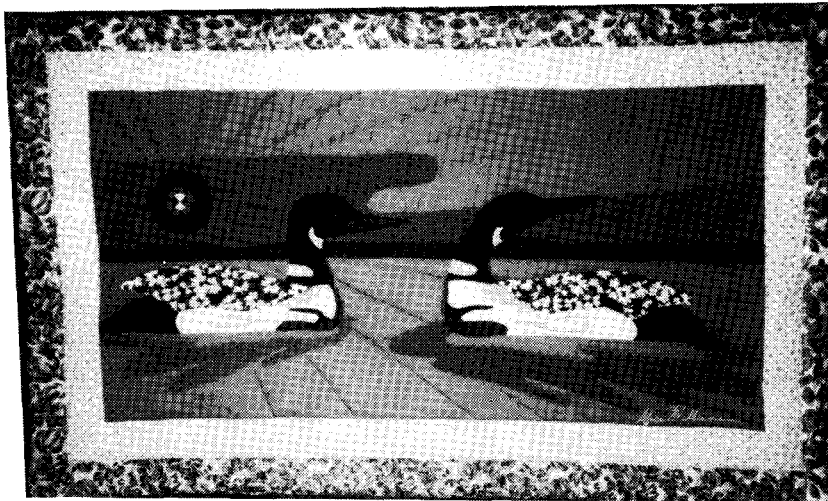
The loons (or geese) in this quilt represent patience and devotion to working together for Pimaatisiwin, that is, trying to live a Good Life. The loons show us that they can float and swim and dive superbly. They speak to us of caring and sharing and faith. They say to us:

My feet and my wings are perfectly balanced. I am like the Peoples of the Earth. Time and Nature is all around me and I listen and wait patiently to know when and where my next move shall be.

My wings work in harmony and balance. One wing is Man, and the other is Woman. When both Woman and Man have equal power and they are balanced, then the people of the world will live to their highest limits.

The next time we see loons they will tell us even more.

The water in this quilt represents humility, strength, and perseverance. Look at the wisdom that the Creator has put into the Water. Feel the Water. See how gently and lovingly it touches your hands. Water gives Life to all living things and yet always seeks the lowest spot to show how humble She is. And no matter what we do to Her, She always remains Herself and never turns Her back on anyone. Although She is humble, She has great strength, patience and faith.



For even if a mountain or an island were to stand in a little stream's path, the Water would keep moving until, finally, she would find a path to continue on her journey. She would never give up...

The trees represent helpfulness and thankfulness. If we are to have peace in the world, we must be as the trees. The lilac doesn't order the oak tree to move over; the maple doesn't tell the birch to move over. All of the different trees stand together with their arms upraised in prayer and thanksgiving; they support and protect one another against adversity.

We, the sacred Creation, must remember to gather beneath the Sacred Tree of Life — the Sacred Tree of Hope, with its everlasting branches spreading across and sheltering all the people.

In the quilt, the sky and clouds represent giving. The Sky holds for us the Air

we breath, the Sun that warms us, the Moon that guides us, the stars that give us pleasure and direct our movements, and the Clouds that wet the Earth and all its Creation.

When we offer up the sacred smoke from the pipe we turn —

First to the West, whence comes thunder and lightning and we ask those Powers for help.

Then to the North, whence comes the white snow and we call upon the Powers of that direction to help us.

Then to the East, whence comes the red sunrise, and call upon the Powers of the new mornings.

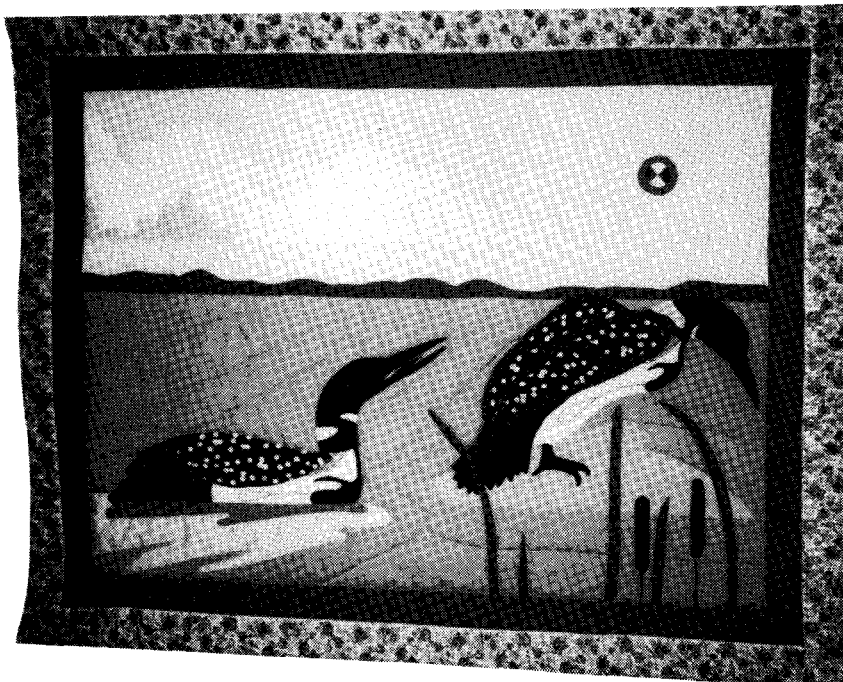
Then to the South, whence comes New Life.

Then we offer the tobacco to our Life Giver, the Sky, in honour of the Great Spirit and all those who have gone on to the Spirit World.

Finally, we offer the gift of sweet-smelling, purifying smoke to our Mother, the Mother of us all, Mother Earth, who brings forth and sustains all Life.

We are thankful for Pimaatisiwin, the purpose in Life, and we remember that the Good Creator speaks to each one of us in our own time and place.

Meanwhile, we share the best we have to help one another find Pimaatisiwin, a balance in giving and receiving a Life of kindness, loving and compassion.



I wish to acknowledge the inspiration I received from *Walking with Grandfather and Great Wolf and Little Mouse*, a curriculum guide by Dick Hastings and Dan Vaillancourt (Kipohtakaw Education Centre, P.O. Box 510, Morinville, Alta. T0G 1P0 (403) 939-3551); with the editorial assistance of the staff of the Four Worlds Development Project, Faculty of Education, University of Lethbridge, Alta.

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