
Angelique Merasty

Birch Bark Artist

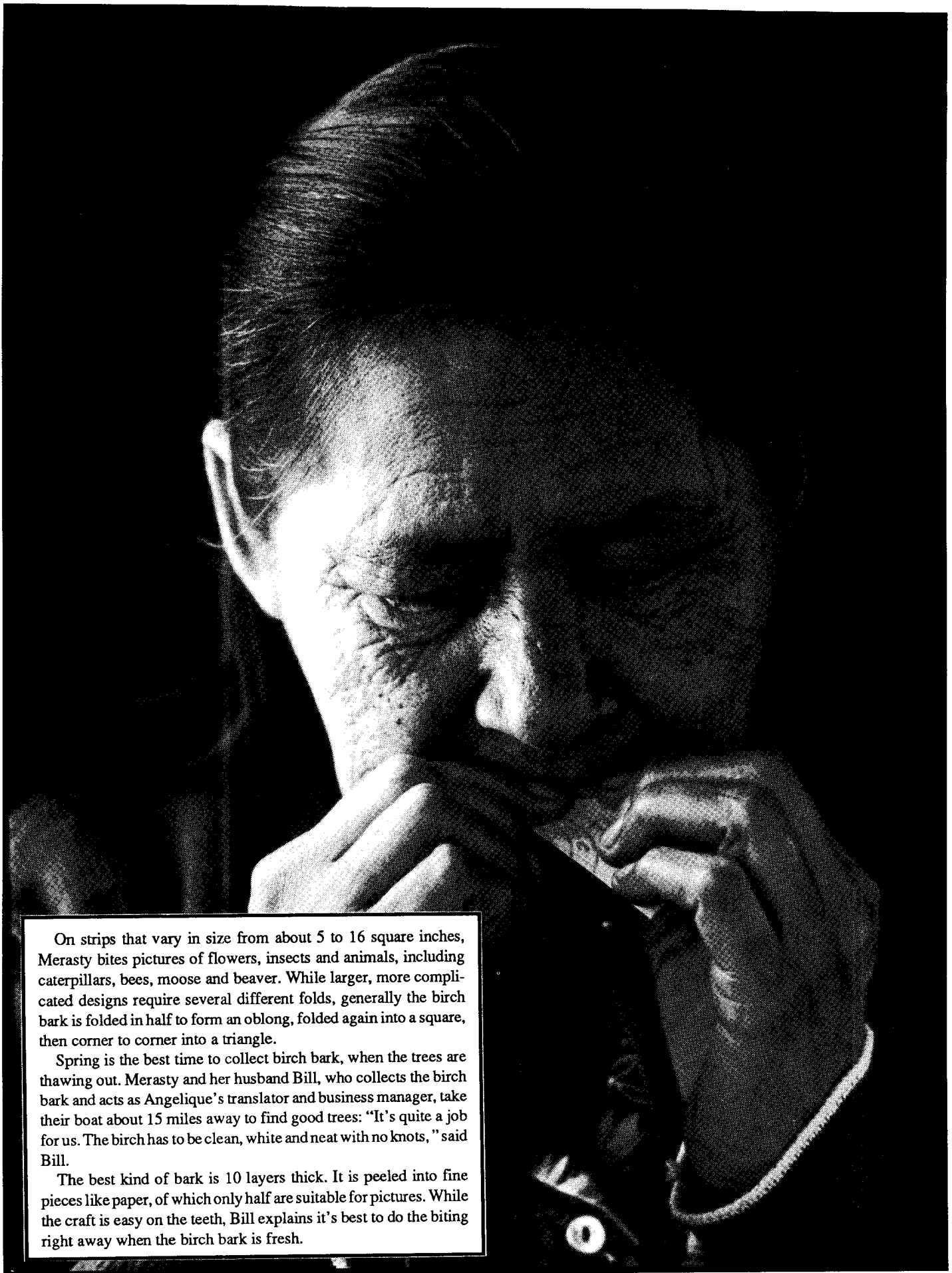
BY SUE LEBRECHT

Angelique Merasty, 61, is the last known person in Canada to carry on the old Indian craft of birch bark biting. She performs this little-known art of the Woodland Indians, with three real and two false teeth.

Birch bark biting is the art of biting designs and pictures into thin strips of birch bark. Done in the same way children cut snowflakes with paper, birch bark is folded before being bitten into symmetrical perforations; it is then delicately unfolded.

Living on an island in Beaver Lake in northern Saskatchewan, Merasty learned the traditional craft from her mother about 50 years ago when it was just a pastime. Her mother, Susan Ballantyne was considered to make the best birch bark designs in the area.

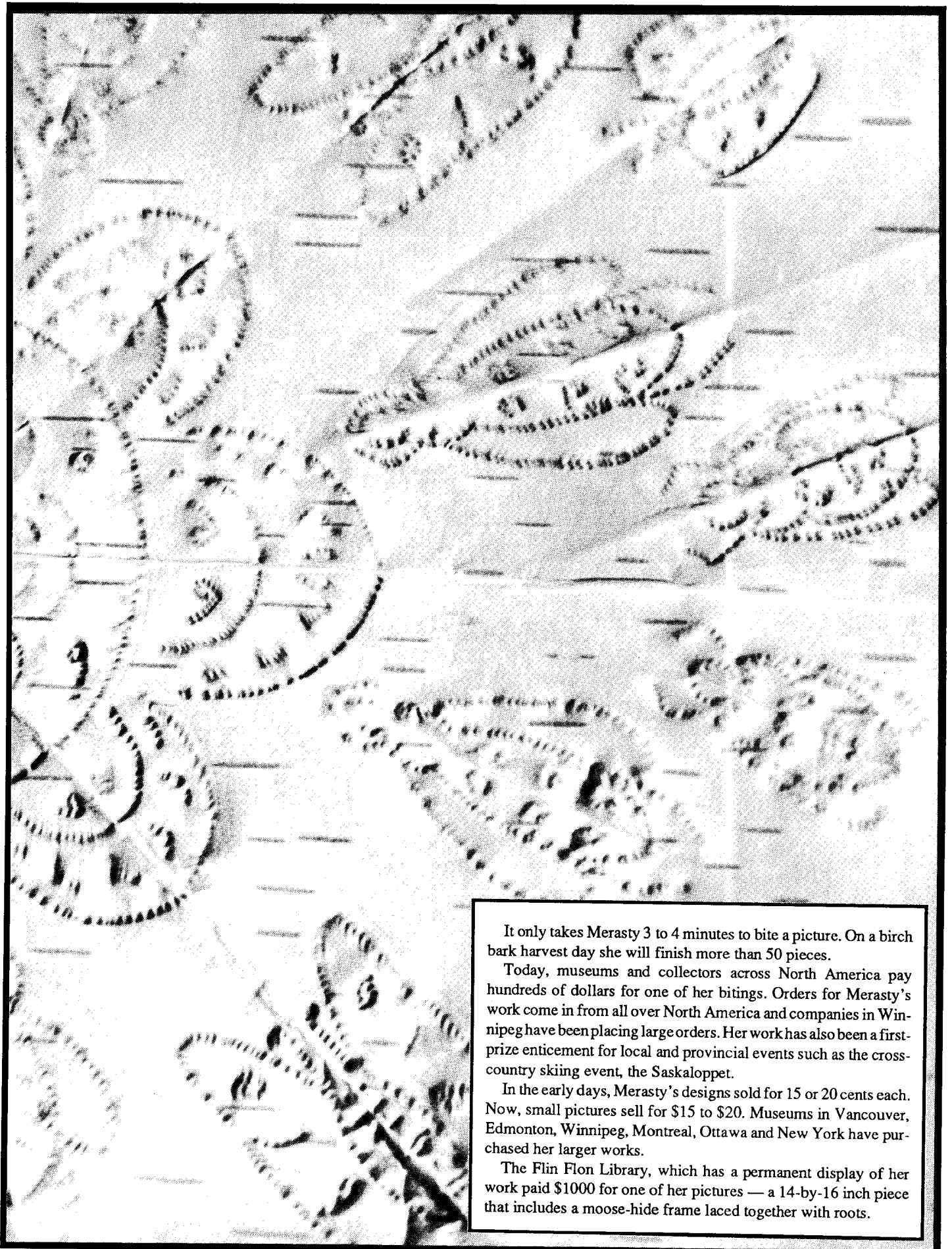




On strips that vary in size from about 5 to 16 square inches, Merasty bites pictures of flowers, insects and animals, including caterpillars, bees, moose and beaver. While larger, more complicated designs require several different folds, generally the birch bark is folded in half to form an oblong, folded again into a square, then corner to corner into a triangle.

Spring is the best time to collect birch bark, when the trees are thawing out. Merasty and her husband Bill, who collects the birch bark and acts as Angelique's translator and business manager, take their boat about 15 miles away to find good trees: "It's quite a job for us. The birch has to be clean, white and neat with no knots," said Bill.

The best kind of bark is 10 layers thick. It is peeled into fine pieces like paper, of which only half are suitable for pictures. While the craft is easy on the teeth, Bill explains it's best to do the biting right away when the birch bark is fresh.

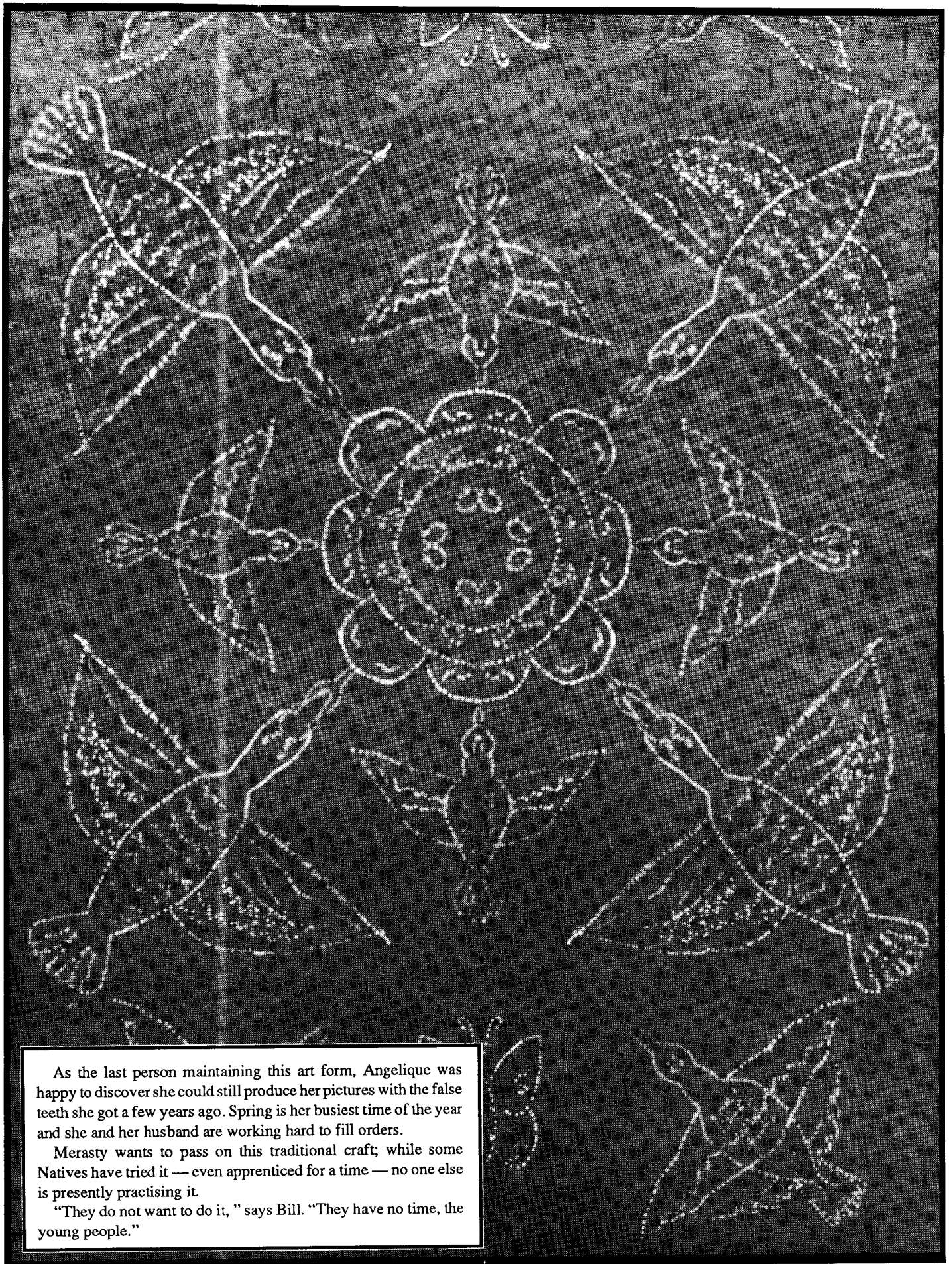


It only takes Merasty 3 to 4 minutes to bite a picture. On a birch bark harvest day she will finish more than 50 pieces.

Today, museums and collectors across North America pay hundreds of dollars for one of her bitings. Orders for Merasty's work come in from all over North America and companies in Winnipeg have been placing large orders. Her work has also been a first-prize enticement for local and provincial events such as the cross-country skiing event, the Saskalopet.

In the early days, Merasty's designs sold for 15 or 20 cents each. Now, small pictures sell for \$15 to \$20. Museums in Vancouver, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Montreal, Ottawa and New York have purchased her larger works.

The Flin Flon Library, which has a permanent display of her work paid \$1000 for one of her pictures — a 14-by-16 inch piece that includes a moose-hide frame laced together with roots.



As the last person maintaining this art form, Angelique was happy to discover she could still produce her pictures with the false teeth she got a few years ago. Spring is her busiest time of the year and she and her husband are working hard to fill orders.

Merasty wants to pass on this traditional craft; while some Natives have tried it — even apprenticed for a time — no one else is presently practising it.

“They do not want to do it,” says Bill. “They have no time, the young people.”