

Being Iconic:

An Exhibit Review of Kent Monkman's *Being Legendary* at the Royal Ontario Museum

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of Natural History

“Look at this serrated edge.” I stand in the palaeontology department of the Royal Ontario Museum with curator, David Evans, as he shows us a real T.rex tooth. He hands it to me and I run my finger across the razored line. “What else has sharp teeth like this?” *Artists*, I think.



Outside the Royal Ontario Museum, February 10th, 2023. Photograph taken by Mikayla Barney. Property of Quinte Museum of Natural History.

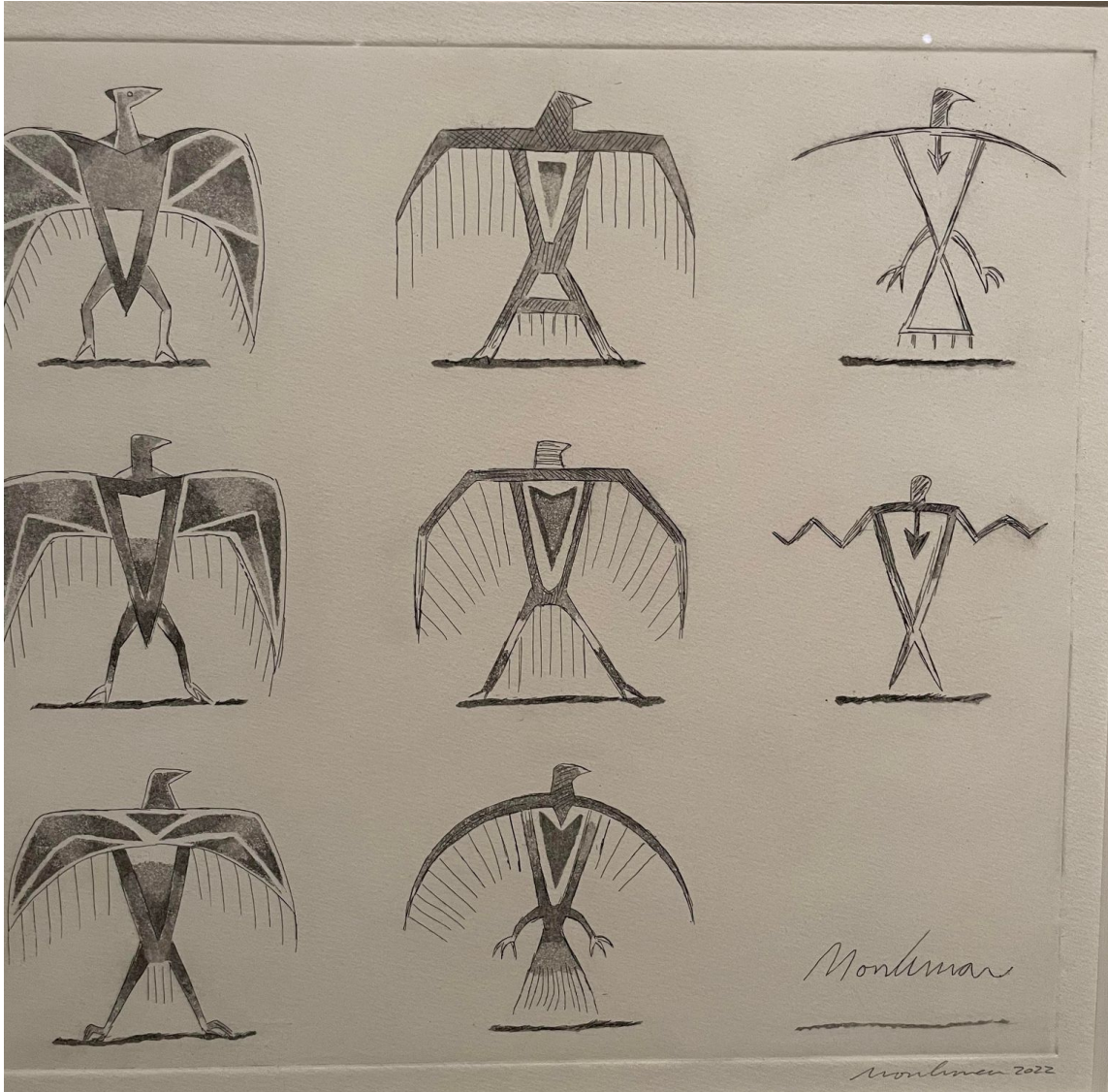
In today's competitive world, artists must keep their teeth sharp. We are here on business, to collaborate with the ROM on an upcoming exhibit. An essential partnership in the making. It is a mouth-watering opportunity to be in the dinosaur-labs of the ROM, but selfishly, I came for one reason. To see the Kent Monkman exhibit on the 3rd floor. So off we go. The elevator jaws clamp shut. We walk down the long, narrow hallway. We enter a room exploding with colour.



Interior of *Being Legendary* exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum, February 10th. 2023. Photograph taken by Mikayla Barney. Property of Quinte Museum of Natural History.

The *Being Legendary* exhibit features new original artworks by Cree artist, Kent Monkman, alongside dinosaur bones and moccasins from the ROM's collection. I met Kent once, at his opening exhibit *Four Continents* at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery during my undergrad. As mystified now as I was then, I could write about the masterfully painted acrylic dinosaurs in *Battle of the piyêsiwak and the misipisiwak*. Or the sophisticated etching of *piyêsiw: A Living Legend* inspired by petroglyphs. It would be a shame not to write about the haunting beauty of *Study for The Sparrow*, which meaningfully frames residential schools.

Instead, I'm going to dig up the bones of this exhibit: *Museums*. Yes, the rhinestones and horned dinosaur on display are dazzling, but the real breakthroughs of this exhibit are *Study for the Curious and Incredible Impossibility of Killing Spirit* and *papamihaw asinîy*.



Close up of *piyêsiw: A Living Legend, Being Legendary* exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum, February 10th. 2023. Photograph taken by Mikayla Barney. Property of Quinte Museum of Natural History.

In *Study for the Curious and Incredible Impossibility of Killing Spirit* we see 8 small paintings showing 8 different pairs of moccasins being looked after by the *mîmîkwîsiwak* (little people). The moccasins are touching the earth while plants, berries and flowers bloom around them. These moccasins represent 8 aspects of life: Medicine, Tradition, Language, Hope, Joy, Knowledge, Family, Ceremony.

These paintings are also a reference to the hanging at Battleford. A moment in Saskatchewan history on November 27, 1885, when 8 Indigenous men were executed by a jury of white men. The moccasins sit on display behind glass in the exhibit, as they are from the ROM's collection. Their original makers and owners are not known. The line between 'artefact' and 'artwork' or 'fact' and 'fiction' is impossibly thin and sharp. Kent slices open the museum's belly with precision, but this is just the beginning of his journey inward.



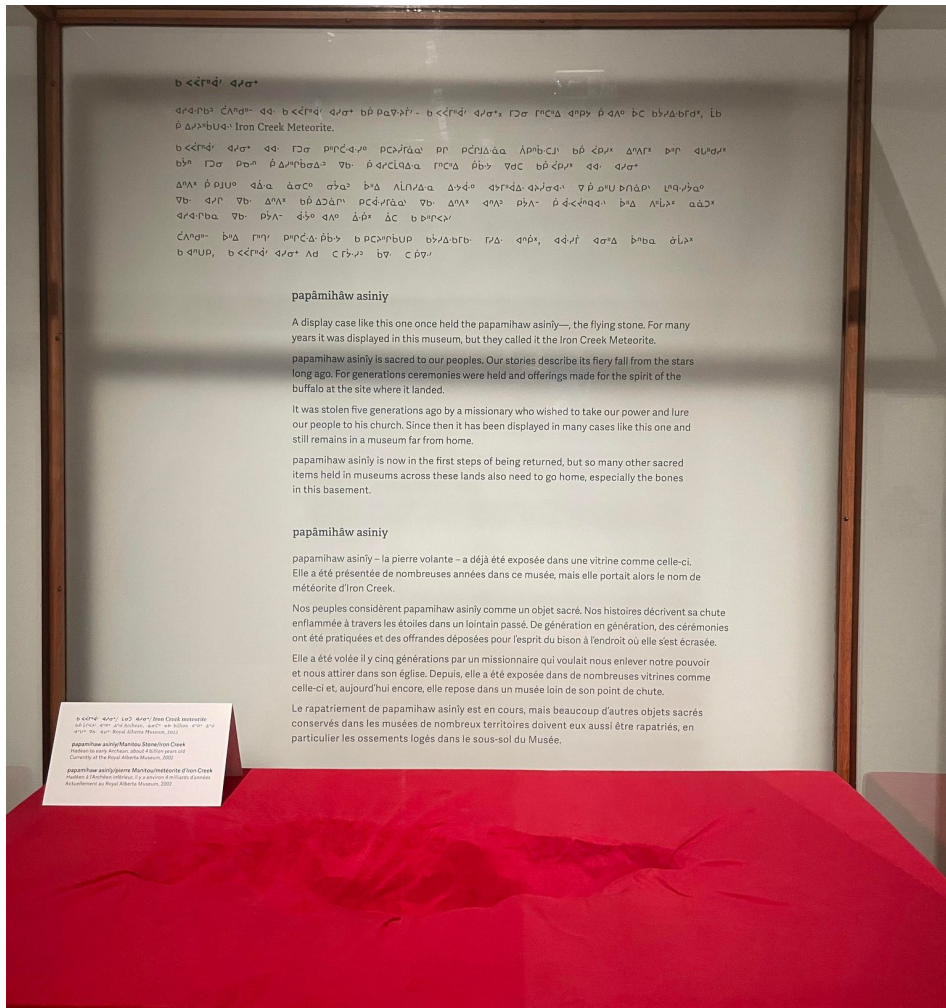
Interior of *Being Legendary* exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum, February 10th. 2023. Photograph taken by Mikayla Barney. Property of Quinte Museum of Natural History.

Kent isn't only interested in the guts and the meat. He wants to get *to the bone*. In *papamihaw asinîy* we see an empty glass display case with royal red, velvet lining. We see a big, empty hole where an artefact used to sit. On the back wall we see text which reads, first in Cree, then English, then French:

A display case like this one once held the *papamihaw asinîy*, the flying stone. For many years it was displayed in this museum, but they called it Iron Creek Meteorite. *papamihaw asinîy* is sacred to our peoples. Our stories describe its fiery fall from the stars long ago. For generations ceremonies were held and offerings made for the spirit of the buffalo at the site where it landed.

It was stolen five generations ago by a missionary who wished to take our power and lure our people to his church. Since then it has been displayed in many cases like this one and still remains in a museum far from home.

papamihaw asinîy is now in the first steps of being returned, but so many other sacred items held in museums across these lands also need to go home, especially the bones in this basement.



Close up of *papamihaw asinîy*, *Being Legendary* exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum, February 10th, 2023. Photograph taken by Mikayla Barney. Property of Quinte Museum of Natural History.

You see, the flying stone was stolen in the late 1860s by Reverend George McDougall. It then went on a journey, first to the Methodist Mission in (now Pakan, Alberta); then to Red River Mission in Winnipeg; then to Wesleyan Methodist Church's Mission Rooms in Toronto; then to Victoria College in Cobourg; then to University of Toronto; then to the Royal Ontario Museum; then finally to the Royal Alberta Museum in 1972. Repatriation is a fairly new effort by museums, which have a long history of taking things that don't belong to them. Kent knows this better than anyone, when he is not painting he volunteers on the boards of the Glenbow Museum (Alberta) and the Gardiner Museum (Toronto). Change needs to happen from the inside-out. This work is thrilling to me, as an artist myself and a museum worker, because I get it. When young children visit this exhibit and wonder '*why is there an empty box on display?*' it feeds their minds with curiosity and gives them something to chew on. *I love that.*

In *Being Legendary*, you enter thinking that Kent Monkman is diving deep into the belly of colonialism, *and he is*, but he also takes a bite out of the ROM itself. He shows us a darker side, a hypocritical side, and an ironic side. He illuminates how museums are failing to protect, steward and care for *the people* of their community by not letting go of the objects inside their four walls. Artefacts are swallowed whole, taken, flayed, studied in an old scientific way removed from the tenderness, humour, sensitivity and empathy that art can bring. This exhibit is more than legendary, *it is iconic*. In it, the objects on display do more than become famously imprinted in someone's mind with awe-factor, they become something to respect and advocate for.

Being Legendary is on until April 16th 2023 on Level 3, Third Floor Centre Block.
The Quinte Museum of Natural History encourages you to visit this exhibit before it closes.

Resources

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