

## Archaeological Inspiration

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Every once in a while, the discipline of archaeology gives folks a little something that contributes to the social well-being of members of our Manitoba community. An example was to be found in the 24 June 2017 edition of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, written by award-winning columnist Melissa Martin. Here, in part, is what she wrote:

*"Six thousand years ago, give or take a generation, someone built a fire on the north bank of the Assiniboine River. They cooked a catfish for dinner. Maybe they told stories and lingered, resting in the breeze along the river's edge.*

*Years turned. Sediment covered the remains of the camp, hiding it from view. Until one day, about 27 years ago, a Winnipeg archeologist returned its residue to light. He marvelled over the find, a buried snapshot of ancient daily life."*

Today, there exists near the north bank of the Assiniboine River on Wolseley Avenue a support facility for women. It is called "Villa Rosa," and its beneficiaries include persons of Indigenous descent. It is officially described as a prenatal and postnatal residence offering a wide variety of programs in a safe and nurturing environment.

A few years ago, several of the clients and their art instructor got to talking about that ancient cooking fire and its fish bones, and they discussed how women, like themselves, have been giving birth and raising their babies along that very river for many generations. They remarked that they, in the here and now, were carrying on a tradition that has been ongoing since time out of mind: women living, working, giving birth to and caring for their infants in a community setting.

As archaeologists, we automatically experience this sort of connectedness every time we hold an age-old artifact in our hands. A bond is thereby established between ourselves and those who made and used the artifacts so very long ago; and accordingly we and the Ancients have something in common. By witnessing and handling the found heritage objects, we create a personal link with those long-ago people, even though our respective lifeways are very different and notwithstanding the centuries and millennia that separate us. I think traditional Indigenous people would call this kind of experience *spiritual*.

The Villa Rosa women's reaction to the riverside archaeological discovery didn't end with their discussion of it and what it personally meant to them. Running along the west side of the Villa Rosa property is a concrete retaining wall. The residents came up with an idea: upon this rather sombre, indifferent backdrop they would mount a series of paintings that portray segments of

the natural and cultural history of the river as reminders of the people, and women in particular, who had lived on its banks through the ages right up to the present.

The murals are a commemoration of the nurturing that women have provided to their newborns and young families hereabouts since time immemorial. They are a colourful celebration of life and young motherhood; and as an archaeologist, it's gratifying to me to know that the results of our work can inspire heartfelt, meaningful artistic expression and the pursuit of personal well-being in a modern-day urban environment that always needs plenty of both.



*A panoramic view of the Villa Rosa gallery and its setting. Photo by Rhian Brynjolson.*



***The north half of the Villa Rosa diorama. Photo by Rhian Brynjolson.***

Note that one of the panels includes an image of the Canadian Museum of Human Rights – for many a symbol of hope for better things to come. It brings to mind a somewhat similar initiative at the Museum itself; in 2014, celebrated Anishinaabekwe artist Rebecca Belmore of Sioux Lookout, Ontario was chosen to produce a major work for the Indigenous Perspectives Gallery. The artwork is called *Trace* because it “is about all of us, all of us who live here in Winnipeg, all those who lived here before.” In going about their work in 2008 at the future Museum site, archaeologists sought to trace the Indigenous history of The Forks, and Ms. Belmore pointed out that those archaeological discoveries in part provided the inspiration for her artistic vision. Sound familiar?

The full article by Ms Martin can be found by Googling “Lost Souls, Found Lives.”



***Close-ups of two of the panels. Photo by Rhian Brynjolson.***