

Giniigaaniimenaaning (Looking Ahead)



By Christi Belcourt
Description of the Design



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Summary

"The story begins in the bottom left corner of the glass, with your eye moving upwards in the left panel to the top window, and flowing down the right window to the bottom right corner. The glass design tells a story. It is a story of Aboriginal people, with our ceremonies, languages, and cultural knowledge intact; through the darkness of the residential school era; to an awakening sounded by a drum; an apology that spoke to the heart; hope for reconciliation; transformation and healing through dance, ceremony, language; and resilience into the present day.

The title of the piece is "Giniigaaniimenaaning" translated into English means, "Looking Ahead". The title is in Anishinaabemowin (Ojibway) and includes, within the deeper meaning of the word, the idea that everyone is included and we are all looking ahead for the ones "unborn".



Left Glass Panel

Top

In 1990, Phil Fontaine, then Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, and later National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, became one of the first Aboriginal leaders to speak publicly about the abuses he suffered as a child at residential school. The shattered glass represents the breaking of the silence in the 1980s as survivors from all over Canada began to speak openly about what happened to them at the schools. The broken glass also represents the shattered lives, shattered families and shattered communities that resulted from the government policy of forced assimilation. The drum dancer sounds the beginning of the healing. The circles moving up and out from behind the drum represent the transformation that governments and churches made, from taking initial positions of denial, to acceptance, and finally to acknowledgement and admission, paving the way for an apology. The snow falls and the moon glows from a northern sky. The dove with the olive branch brings an offering of hope for the beginning of reconciliation and the renewal of the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the rest of Canada.

Middle

This section of the window represents the “sad chapter” of the residential schools era, where more than 150,000 children were forcibly removed from their homes and often subjected to unimaginable and horrific abuses. As Prime Minister Stephen Harper stated in the Statement of Apology on June 11, 2008, the objective of the residential schools was to “remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures.” The children shown here are taken from historical photographs, with artist renditions of other children. The building, rendered from a photograph of the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School, is included because often these buildings represented the institutionalized system of abuse and assimilation. Children were not permitted to leave and, therefore, the buildings became their prisons. The lines that cross over the children represent the silencing of the children who were unable to speak about the abuses they were enduring.

Bottom

The ancestor smokes in the sacred lodge. From the west (represented by the button blanket motif) to the east (represented by the sky dome motif), our ceremonies, languages, and traditional knowledge were intact. This section represents the time before residential schools existed. Important ceremonies marking the transition from childhood to adulthood, such as the strawberry fast, were taught and practiced. Harvesting blueberries, learning about medicines and knowledge of plants and animals were passed from one generation to the next. Beadwork and beautiful artwork, reflecting our pride, adorned our clothing and sacred items. The roots represent connection to the earth and to our ancestors. It is expected that, when rendered in glasswork, the colours and white/clear glass circles, or crystals, will give the bottom section an ethereal feel as they will glow from the darkness.



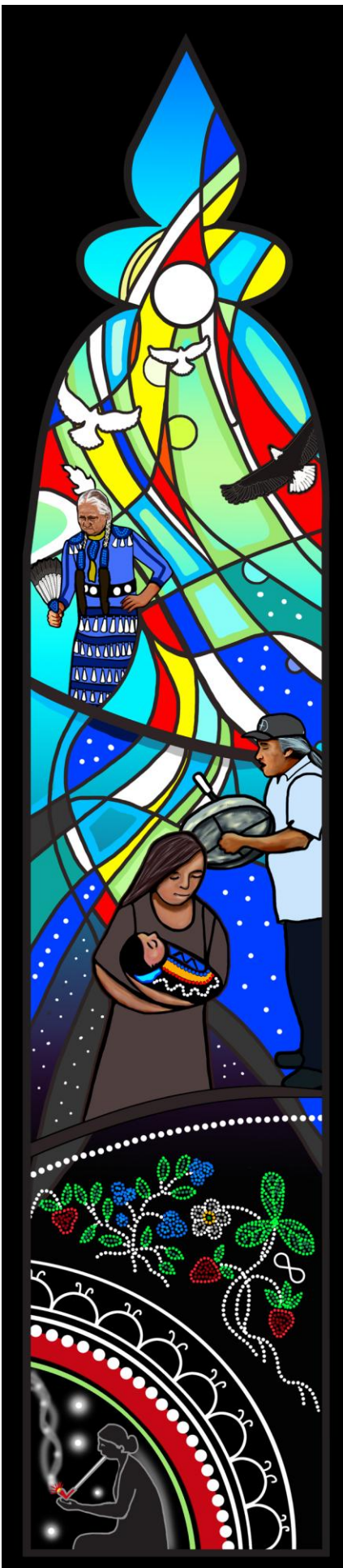
Top Glass Panel

This section commemorates the official Statement of Apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools on June 11, 2008, by Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

On that day from coast to coast to coast, Aboriginal people gathered in community centres and homes to watch the Prime Minister give the statement, and to watch as their own leaders made their historic responses on the floor of the House of Commons.

Reaction to the Apology ranged from skepticism to gratefulness, marked by tears of relief, that finally the hurt that individuals carried was being acknowledged and an apology was being made. Regardless of how individuals reacted to the Apology, mostly everyone was moved emotionally, as Prime Minister Harper spoke the words, "The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly."

In this panel, symbols representing Inuit, First Nations and the Métis Nation are featured alongside the iconic maple leaf. Canada, as represented by the maple leaf, is shown among the Aboriginal icons as a way to symbolize the hope expressed on that day by the Aboriginal leaders in their official response on the floor of the House of Commons. On behalf of all Aboriginal people, Indigenous leaders graciously accepted the apology from the Prime Minister.



Right Glass Panel

Top

As in the left panel, circles emerge and transform into a fully visible sun. The sun rises and represents not only transformation, but more importantly, as Mary Simon, then President of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK); said in her official reaction on the floor of the House of Commons, "I am filled with optimism...a new day has dawned, a new day heralded by a commitment to reconciliation and building a new relationship with Inuit, Métis and First Nations."

The lines flowing from the sun are meant to convey the concept of moving from the present into the future. The colours embody the colours used within different medicine wheels, sundance and Midewin lodges and the Métis sash (yellow, black, red, white, green, and blue). Together with the left panel, sun and moon represent the cycle of life, seasons, and change.

The jingle dress is a sacred healing dress that is now common throughout North America. In this panel, the jingle dress dancer is an Elder who is a survivor of the residential school. She is dancing for the healing of all the people and for future generations.

Middle

In this section, the colours and lines move us soundly into the present day and thinking about the future. The young mother embraces her baby in a traditional moss bag. The child is back with her mother, as she should be, representing children being raised by their parents and the breaking of the cycle of abuse. Her grandfather sings a traditional song signifying the restoration of songs, dance, ceremonies, and languages.

Within this panel are the following words: Kisakihitin ("I love you" in Cree), Gizhawenamin Niichaanis ("I love you my child" in Anishnaabemowin), Nagligivagit ("I love you" in Inuktitut), Kesalul ("I love you" in Mi'kmaq). Many victims of residential schools were unable to tell their own children they loved them, and many children never heard those words from their parents. Embedding these words within the glass solidifies the existence and use of Aboriginal languages.

Bottom

The circle is complete. Presently, traditional ceremonies take place throughout the year. The grandmother sits in the lodge smoking her pipe for her grandchildren. Potlach ceremonies take place and Salmon and Sturgeon ceremonies are on-going. The sundance lodges are erected and the Midewin lodges are no longer whispered about but are now out in the open. Puberty ceremonies are being practiced. Traditional knowledge about medicines is being taught. From east to west, the foundations of our cultures are being brought back and made whole. There is hope; there is a new respect for Aboriginal cultures within the rest of Canada as we are witness to our own strength and resilience.



Artist's website: www.christibelcourt.com

Design within the Design

Mother Earth

The land is integral to our being. We consider the land sacred. Although it is not obvious, Mother Earth is the foundation of the stained glass design represented by the shape of a woman.

So many of our traditions, culture and ceremonies, and indeed our very way of life, is based on connection with the land and interconnection with the spirit of the Earth, that it would be remiss to design something concerning our people, without including the earth in some form."