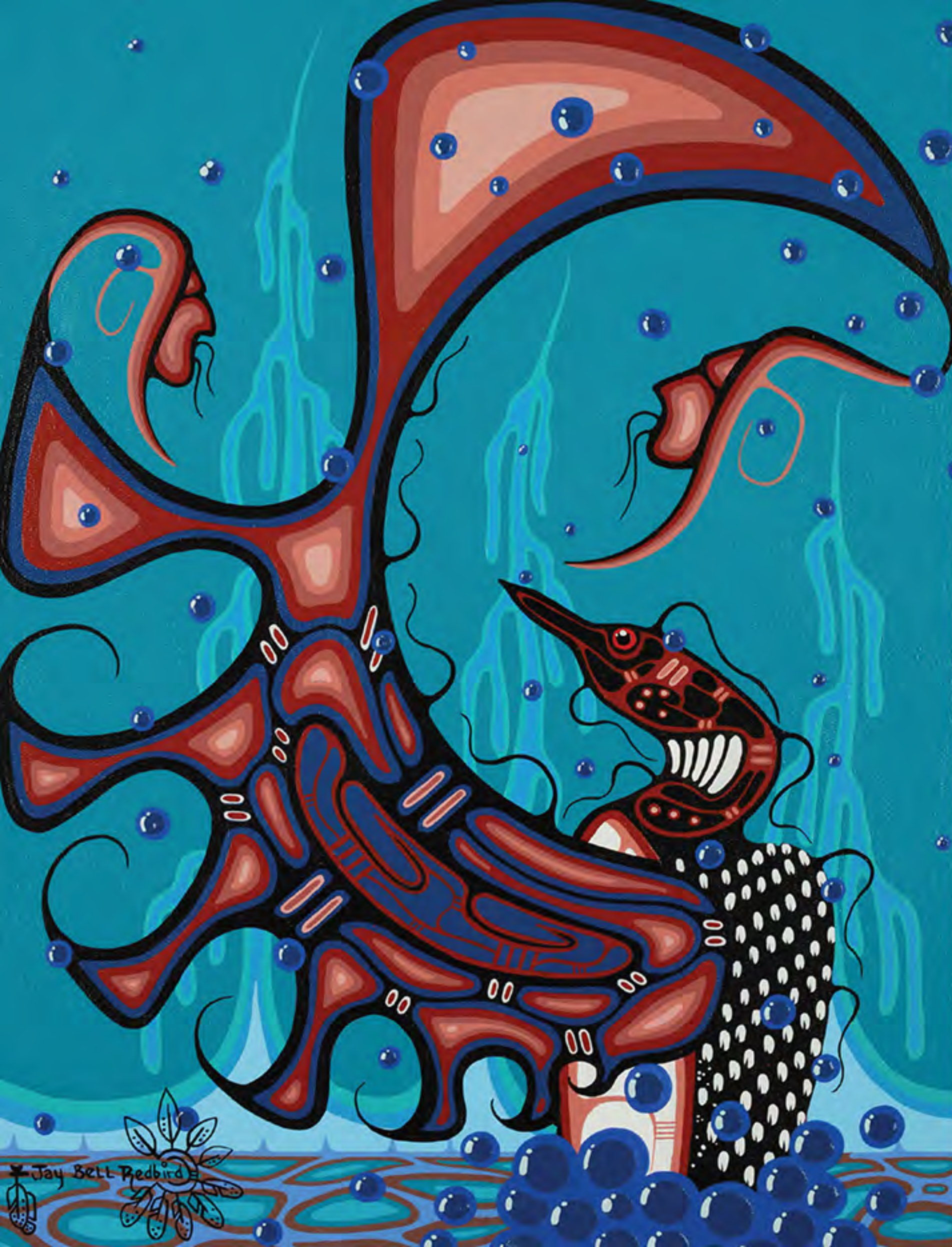


Jay Bell Redbird



Jay Bell Redbird



Previous Page, *Loving our Seven Grandfathers Teaching*, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 30"
This Page, left, *Loyalty is Sacred*, acrylic on canvas, 16" x 20"

Feel the spirit

written by Lorie Lee Steiner

'Let the spirit move you' is the unspoken, yet powerful, mantra beautifully portrayed in the works of Jay Bell Redbird. A self-taught visionary, Jay was born in Canada's capital city of Ottawa, Ontario in 1966 and, today, resides in Cape Breton, New Brunswick in the former home of singer Rita McNeil which he shares with his partner and fellow artist, Halina Stopyra. Jay is a proud member of the Wikwemikong First Nation Manitoulin Island and has made it his life's work to pass along the teachings of his native heritage. Extolling peace, love and storytelling through art.

A Rich Journey

In the decades between past and present, Jay's life has taken him on a journey filled with rich cultural history, priceless relationships, and the blessings

of four children. All he has learned along the way, he shares with others in a myriad of ways, and the world is a better place for it. Jay gives a tremendous amount of credit to his mother, Elaine Bell, and father, Duke Redbird, for buying him paints and crayons, papers and canvas, and nurturing his exploration of creative freedom. His Mom always encouraged him to be an artist, like her younger brother, Leland Bell — 'Uncle Leland'. She went to the spirit world when Jay was only 24 years old, and when he paints and thinks of her, he still gets emotional.

Jay's Dad was friends with Canadian aboriginal artist Norval Morrisseau, also known as Copper Thunderbird and "Picasso of the North." Morrisseau's works depicted the legends of his people, the cultural and political tensions between native Canadian and European traditions, and his deep spirituality and



above left, *Grandfathers Teachings*, acrylic on canvas, 18" x 30"



above right, *Sharing Your Love*, acrylic on canvas, 14" x 14"

mysticism. He founded the Woodlands School of Canadian art and was a prominent member of the "Indian Group of Seven."

At the age of 14, Jay recalls Morrisseau asking if he could touch one of Jay's paintings in progress. Norval ran his fingers around the circles on it and explained the meanings of the images. Jay still has that painting. These lessons from Morrisseau were reinforced later when Jay entered a world-renowned medicinal healing centre — The Three Fires Midewiwin Lodge in Wisconsin. There he was taught teachings from 20,000-year-old Rock Paintings; stories told in drawings, not words, on

birch bark scrolls and rocks. Norval Morrisseau's Grandfather brought Norval to this same lodge, where he learned the Midewiwin teachings that Jay now shares in his paintings.

Awakening his Culture

Jay didn't become aware of his culture, his history and language until he was a teenager. That's when he started reading about and attending ceremonies and delving into the teachings and thinking about the peaceful old ways of his people. A major turning point came in the mid-1980s, when Jay was 19 and attending George Brown College in Toronto. He had

several different teachers, and the other students were surprised that he was only getting an A or A- but never an A+. Later, teachers told him "Jay you would get an A+, but you are putting too much aboriginal art in the projects, could you cut down on that?" Jay felt offended and decided to quit. At that point, the Dean of the art department approached him and said, "We'd like you to stay in school and represent the indigenous/aboriginal kids, we would send you across Canada on tour." But the bridge had been burned. Jay replied, "I am an Aboriginal person and I want to share my culture with the world, and you guys, the teachers are telling me that I'm doing

it too much." So, Jay quit and to this day uses that as positive motivation to explore and share his native teachings. And he gives thanks to those teachers.

Impressions and Inspirations

Indeed, Jay's upbringing was far from mainstream. His father was painter / poet / actor / writer, and when Jay was quite young he did a film with his father called "The Forest Rangers". After that came bit parts as an extra, typically "native rolls" like jumping out of the woods and threatening the soldiers. From there, Jay went behind the scenes, working in films with Russell Crowe, Renee Zellweger,



left, *New Beginning of Love*, acrylic on canvas, 20" x 24"

Halle Barry, Sylvester Stallone, Robin Williams and Danny Devito. He sold his paintings to the actors, particularly Devito and Crowe, who told Jay to get out in the world and show his artwork. He earned recognition among the Hollywood crowd and began getting commissions for paintings, which led to his opening a gallery and his career taking off. He thanks those people, along with Canadian actress Tantoo Cardinal, who Jay is pleased to call his friend.

Many great artists have made an impression on Jay. He likes the Woodland style of up-and-coming artist, Charles Anishinabie, and, going back, James Simon from the Wikwemikong reserve, as well as Randy Trudeau Sr. and James Jacko. Referencing what he feels is the most important teaching, Jay includes a message on the back of all his paintings, advising "Do not judge other cultures or religions and walk that good life." This belief is thousands of years old in the context of not judging other tribes or languages, but Jay has adapted it universally for today's society.

Publicly, Jay's work is displayed in the Jackman Law building in Toronto, Seneca College and two hospitals. He has spoken at the AGO about his paintings and teachings, as well as at schools and





Previous Page, *Loyalty of our Seven Grandfathers Teaching*, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 40"
This Page, left, *Thunderbird Love*, acrylic on canvas, 20" x 24"

universities. The McMichael Gallery has a juried show each year and Jay has been one of the top ten invitees for the past three years. There is also discussion of Jay doing an artist-in-residence stint at the McMichael, which he would take in heartbeat.

Painting Muse

Music is the muse when Jay paints, from Enya, to the '50s, powwow music, rock. The powwow music takes him to a long-ago place, whereas '70s Rock takes him back to his childhood and meeting icons like John Denver, Glen Campbell, Gordon Lightfoot through his father. It also makes him think of his mother. Jay recalls the first painting he gave her... he was 18 years old. Days later she asked him to come to her workplace, where a co-worker asked him if she could buy the painting. Jay was shocked, he never thought anything like that could happen. She offered him \$250 which he took — and spent at the amusement park in disbelief that someone would give him that amount for his painting. To this day, Jay believes his mom set it up with the co-worker as a way of inspiring him. When asked what that painting might be worth today, he jokes "\$255." Actually, that size sells for \$1500.



above left, *Respect Mother Earth*, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 30"

From idea to completion, Jay calls upon the sacred teachings and visualizes the rock paintings for direction. He wants his paintings to go forth and teach love and peace, truth, humility and honesty, respect and courage — the seven grandfather teachings. When he finishes a piece, he feels he has shared a part of his history, his culture, to the world and it feels good. Jay's partner Halina is from Poland and her specialty is watercolours; amazing old-style figures akin to those of photographer Edward

Curtis's images of indigenous people. Halina and Jay have enjoyed collaborations, where she will do a chief and Jay will add his elements. They discuss the piece and decide whether that person Halina has done is connected to a buffalo or an eagle, and then they'll incorporate that into the painting. These have been very popular.

To date, Jay has done over 100 limited edition prints from his paintings, with editions of 250. The prints are sold to stores and galleries, as well as



above right, *Woman and Man is Loyalty*, acrylic on canvas, 20" x 24"

generating sales at shows and income for this full-time artist. The next round of prints will be larger (24 x 30) on high quality paper with editions of 50. Jay is also planning to do some painting on birch bark and deer hide. The offerings of giftware embellished with artwork sell well on the Redbird Gallery website. Jay belongs to an artist co-op in Cape Breton and is getting shows in the area, but commissions take up the bulk of his time and work. He also gets requests for using Jay's artwork in tattoos.

The Power of His Work

Jay Bell Redbird's art is appreciated by a large following. Some, who have never seen native art, wonder about the meaning of it, then become inspired by the teaching touch and buy it. Some will stare and get lost in it... standing beside them, Jay has witnessed tears coming from their eyes. When that happens, he lets them soak in the feelings, the emotions in his paintings. He explains, "I paint from my heart and soul, viewing Aboriginal people



Previous Page, *Forever Pure Love*, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 48"
This Page, right, *Forever Sacred Love*, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 30"

through their life ways as they once lived, and as they strive to continue to live as loving, caring and peaceful people.

The teaching and stories I have learned flow to the canvas, expressing ideas through my detailed, woodland style of art, a style that I connected with as a part of my history passed down from generation to generation. I paint legends and dreams, bringing to life the animal spirit and the spirit of all creation. My lines do not tell the story of prejudice, they follow the Red Road, Mino Bimaadiziwin, as I do, following the teaching of the Three Fires Midewiwin Society."

To see more of Jay Bell Redbird's work visit him at www.redbird.gallery.com.

Other fine galleries representing the artist are:

Grant Berg Gallery
Grande Prairie, AB
www.grantberggallery.com
587.259.6333

