

The Guide | HOME

ANTIQUES & COLLECTIBLES

Remember Me

Tomah Joseph etched the stories of his people. | BY CATHERINE RIEDEL



A 19th-century birch-bark container by Tomah Joseph is etched with “picture writing,” telling the story of Passamaquoddy culture and its connection with nature. See more birch-bark works by Joseph and other historic and contemporary objects—including birch-bark canoes—at the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine. The exhibit *A Tree with Eyes* runs from mid-April through late August. 207-288-3519; abbemuseum.org

IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT ART is the signature of a civilization. Like all signatures, it is unique and personal and binding. When a civilization vanishes, it is art that leaves an indelible imprint to tell the story of a people’s existence and their eventual demise. Such is the story of Tomah Joseph, a Passamaquoddy Indian artist who lived in eastern Maine during the mid- to late 19th and early 20th centuries. Like so many other stories of Native Americans, his is one in which cultural survival and economic necessity are inextricably and tragically linked.

Tomah Joseph was born in 1837 and lived for most of his life on the Peter Dana Point Indian reservation near Princeton, Maine. As a boy, he was schooled in the Passamaquoddy cultural traditions of hunting, fishing, birch-bark etching, picture writing, and the telling of stories passed down from generation to generation. In adulthood, Joseph found himself on the precipice of a world seemingly doomed to extinction. With

the encroachment of whites onto Indian lands, he could no longer sustain a life solely through Passamaquoddy ways. If the story stopped here, this would simply be a tale of one culture eclipsing another.

But Joseph, knowing that the ways of old would soon be gone, sought to create a record of Passamaquoddy life while at the same time earning a living. He did so by etching birch-bark artwork to sell as souvenirs to the tourists who summered along the coast of Maine, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. Utilizing traditional methods, he painstakingly re-created in birch bark common household objects found in most Victorian homes of the day: wastepaper baskets, log carriers, coat racks, picture frames, letter holders, handkerchief boxes, umbrella stands, tabletops, and picnic baskets, as well as native forms such as canoes, paddles, *mocucks* (covered buckets), and snowshoes. Elaborately etched, Joseph’s artwork differed from the Passamaquoddy birch-bark art of his ancestors. In addition to using traditional geometric and floral motifs, Joseph also illustrated his pieces with picture writing—a combination of human and animal figures that told the story of Passamaquoddy culture and a life deeply rooted in nature.

Today his work can be found in museums along the East Coast, and occasionally pieces come up at auction, commanding prices from \$500 to \$10,000 and more. Many of his works were signed “Tomah Joseph” and often dated or etched with the native phrase “mikwid hamin.” Roughly translated, it means “remember me.” With a signature such as that, there’s no doubt we will.

Catherine Riedel represents Skinner Auctioneers and Appraisers of Boston. skinnerinc.com

STEPHEN BICKNELL/MARY C. WHEELWRIGHT COLLECTION, ABBE MUSEUM, BAR HARBOR, MAINE; PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM

