

# From the Ground Up

By LAURA GRANDE

In 2006, Lauralee K. Harris spent weeks in her art studio in Meaford, Ont., creating *Messages Between Blue and Red*. Though abstract at first glance, to Harris the image was clear.

"(It) has elders leading a grand entry to the powwow," she said. "It reminded me of this connection we need to have from the earth to the spirit world."

The piece was split in two: *Red Roads Protection* and *Blue Roads Answering Prayers*. The latter work is on a 19x24 inch piece of fir. At first, *Blue Roads* appears to resemble two colourful eyes. It is only when the viewer looks closer that the eyes become the tops of elders' heads and the nearby circles, their footprints.

"I use the wood grains and the im-

agery of the wood," she explained. "I work together with the tree and I use whatever the tree grew. It's like nature gives us these messages."

Harris, 54, is a Toronto-born wood artist of Sioux, Cree, Assiniboine, Chipewyan, Ojibwa and Montagnais heritage. By 1994, she had grown tired of mainstream modern art and dedicated her work to revealing the stories of aboriginal ancestors using wood. It's through her art that she connects with land and history.

Whether it's a random piece of wood she discovers on a walking trail or a 2x4 beam sold in a hardware store, Harris works with it to uncover its secrets.

"(My work) is not like the European way, where if you are taught one way of doing it, you have to keep doing it the proper way," she

said. "In the indigenous way ... each tree is different and each one of us is different."

According to Krystyna Sieciechowicz, a professor of anthropology at the University of Toronto, Harris's ability to reveal the past of her people through grains in the wood is intrinsically linked to First Nations' connection to land and history.

"(First Nations people) walk lightly on the land and watch, observe and see the changes," she said. "Their art discerns those qualities of watchfulness and respect," she continued. "Their work teaches without overtly teaching. (First Nations' artists) have a continuity

with the land and understand the importance of how you treat it."

For Harris, mainstream art forms did not allow her to properly acknowledge her artistic gift of revealing the past.

"I use layers of acrylic paint," she said. "The wood is a fibrous being and the paint sinks in at different levels. The more it sinks into the wood, the more images come through."

Cheryl L'Hirondelle has incorporated those themes of history and land within her own work – although in a very different way.

A Vancouver-based Métis-Cree artist and activist, L'Hirondelle created Prison Songs Project, a five-

*"Blue Roads Answering Prayers"*  
from Lauralee K.  
Harris' *"Messages  
Between Blue and  
Red"* (2006).



day workshop that helps inmates write songs together to put them back in touch with oral traditions.

L'Hirondelle created it from a Cree worldview that promotes a relationship with land and tradition.

She recalled one recent experience in a Saskatchewan prison that made an impact.

Two women had recently completed the workshop and were returned to their cells for the night. There was a buzz among other inmates around the prison.

Encouraged by fellow inmates, the two women soon began to sing.

"They sang the song over and over and over until all the women fell asleep," L'Hirondelle said. "I'm so grateful that I could contribute to someone's life in that way and just be a part of a lullaby."

L'Hirondelle's lullaby was similar to a revelation Harris experienced four years ago, that created her work *Messages Between Blue and Red*.

"I prayed for our youth and that they would find culture and come back (to it)," Harris said.

"We don't have enough spirituality in our world right now. We are sort of confined to the physical and



Photo Courtesy of Lauralee K. Harris

the intellectual and we've ignored the other parts of our being."

The challenge, Harris noted, is the patience to wait for the story within the wood grains to reveal itself.

"I always have to search deep," she said. "(*Blue Roads*) is about the ceremony of creation. I was taking what God grew and what I saw and recreated it and honoured it."

For Harris, that natural connection she shares with the wood allows her to break away from mainstream art and connect on another level to land and history.

"The (tree) roots is what I use to find meaning in my life," she said. "So, it has been my ancestors, really, that I'm growing from."



Photos Courtesy of Lauralee K. Harris

*"Red Roads Protection" from "Messages Between Blue and Red"  
by Lauralee K. Harris (2006). Both "Red Roads Protection" and "Blue Roads  
Answering Prayers" are created from acrylic paint on pieces of fir.*