

Odanak Visit

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As students studying art, the opportunity to come into contact with people who may be more knowledgeable on a particular subject than ourselves is paramount. We can research all we want but to better understand many topics it is important to gain first hand contact with the artists, museums, communities, etc. This was very much the case in this seminar as we relied largely on primary research to inform the decisions we took in regards to the figurehead we designed. Therefore, with the desire to learn more about Abenaki traditions and culture, we ventured to Odanak where we would have the opportunity to tour the museum our figurehead would soon call home, as well as the invaluable opportunity to speak with four elders in the community.

While we spent the better part of one class focused on planning the trip and what we might ask them, it was clear that it was more important to listen to what they had to say to us and that this would largely guide our conversation. The general plan of the day was to gain a better understanding of oral and pictorial traditions and narratives, specific relationships between the Natives and the French, the position and role of women in the tribe during wartimes, as well as a better understanding of the culture as a whole. Given this planning, we hoped that members of the community would be forthcoming and excited to talk with us about this project.

The Odanak museum was a wonderful place for this talk as we were surrounded by contemporary, traditional, and historical artefacts, art works, and information that could help us on this journey. We sat down in a semi circle and were introduced to Raymond Watso, Tom O'Bomsawin, Margie Hoff, and Barbara Watso. They each communicated a little about themselves so we would have a certain context to base our discussions with them around. Both women were survivors of the residential school system and communicated that they really didn't know much about their people's history because it would have been bred out of them as they went to school away from their families and their oral traditions. This disconnect in time and tradition seemed to thwart our lofty goals of gaining overwhelming amounts of information that would be extremely useful in this project however this situation offered us perspective into the real life history of these people and the good things that the museum has done for this community. For example, Margie communicated that her mother did not want her to learn the art of basketry because she would inevitably be used for money by the Europeans. The museum offers a place where the youth of the community can learn about their heritage, where the elders can reaffirm their disconnected histories, and where art practice can be celebrated again.

Tom lamented countless times that the French settlers needed the Native people and that they used them in very different ways and that during war times that the French utilized the skills of the Abenaki and collaborated with the tribe. When the question of the women's role in the war was asked, Margie quickly chimed in that while the men would assist with the war efforts, the women would fight with their husbands when they came back. This discussion continued with

stories from the elders, some pertaining to what we were looking for and some tangents that were equally if not more interesting. After this somewhat formal and rigid setting for the discussion, a few females in the class proceeded to speak more informally with the female elders who communicated more about basic patterns that were common in Abenaki beading and basketry. This proved to be extremely rewarding as this gave the women (who did not speak much during the planned discussion) a chance to tell us more about what they do know about their culture and what they have learned because of the accessibility of the Abenaki Museum in Odanak.

By touring the museum and speaking with the elders it became clear to our class that this was not as simple as we thought. Many effects of colonization and the residential school system were overwhelmingly apparent and this made it difficult to connect with the distant history we were researching. When a culture's history has been erased from an entire generation or more, the ability to retrieve that information is often met with resistance or in this case, a lack thereof. From this experience, we learned that to get people talking and releasing freely whatever information they could, we had to take a step back and really listen and learn from and within this unforgettable opportunity. From here, it was up to us to decipher the information we did receive and use it to create what we believe could have been the figurehead for the French frigate, the *Abénaquise*.