

M Exhibits

“Four Mollys: Women of the Dawn”— transforming a literary work into an exhibit at the Abbe Museum

by Marilyn Norcini

As a former Maine resident and a long-time member of the Abbe Museum, a private anthropology museum within the boundaries of Maine’s Acadia National Park, I was keenly interested in the museum’s plans to enlarge its operations. With funding from a \$6-million capital campaign, the Abbe Museum converted the former YMCA building in downtown Bar Harbor into exhibition and education galleries, a performance and education space named the “Circle of Four Directions,” an archaeology research laboratory, a collection storage area, an exhibit preparation room, a research library, a museum shop, and staff offices. The new facility opened to the public in fall 2001.

My first opportunity to see the new museum was during the winter, which would not have been possible in its seasonal park facility. The original Abbe Museum, a 2,000-square-foot octagonal, Mediterranean-style structure built in 1927 in the quiet of the woods, is open from May to October. The new downtown facility—an 1893 shingle-style building on Mount Desert Street in the bustle of downtown Bar Harbor—adds 17,000 square feet and is open year-round.

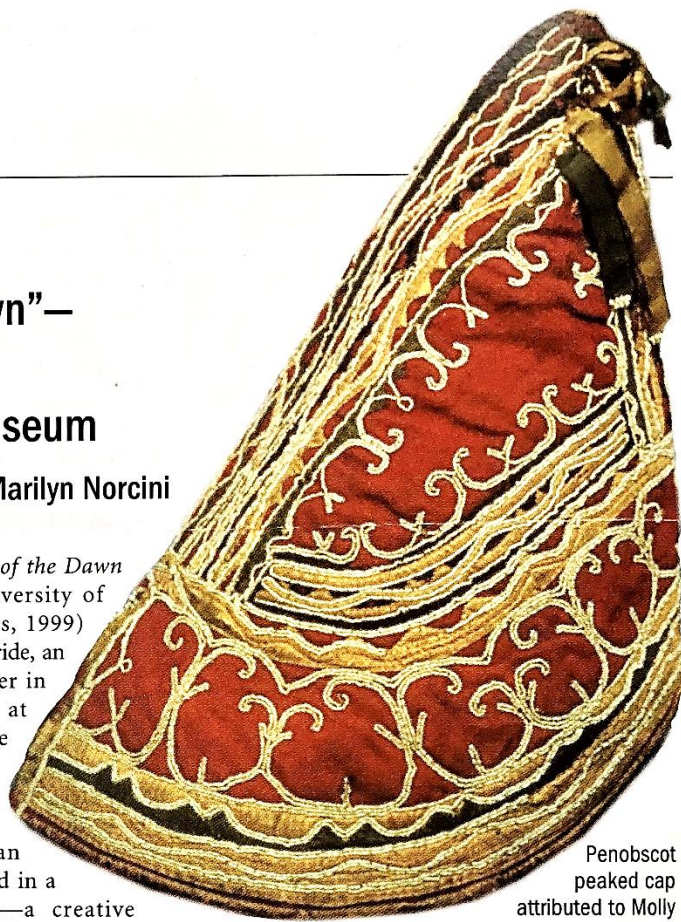
I came to see one of the opening exhibitions, “Four Mollys: Women of the Dawn,” (on display through Dec. 29), which interprets the biographies of four Maine Indian women whose lives spanned the 17th through the 20th centuries. The inspiration and structure of the “Four Mollys” exhibit is a 152-page

book, *Women of the Dawn* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999)

by Bunny McBride, an adjunct lecturer in anthropology at Kansas State University.

McBride’s research on Maine Indian women resulted in a literary work—a creative blending of fact and imagination. The author, who served as guest curator of the exhibit, was determined to present a more complete history of the Wabanaki people, despite gaps in the data, by illuminating the hidden lives of these four women named Molly. She chose to reconstruct plausible events to give voice to Native American women as active participants in their own history. At one point, McBride explains her reason for writing her book which she terms “creative nonfiction”: “If we limit ourselves to documented records alone, the life histories of Native American women—especially those who lived prior to this century—will remain largely unwritten.”

The result is an award-winning work of fiction that is informed by history and ethnography. For anthropologists, historians, and others who want to distinguish fact from fiction, the author fully discloses her methodology at the end of the book. There, she identifies which portions were creative reconstructions and which were based on scholarly research.



Penobscot peaked cap attributed to Molly Molasses, c. 1865.

Transforming Literature into an Exhibit

As an ethnographer, I was interested in how the museum would interpret the book. How would staff translate a literary work into an anthropology exhibit?

Museums, like writers, have responsibilities to their audiences. As nonprofit educational institutions, anthropology museums serve as authoritative sources on diverse cultural histories. So what motivated the Abbe Museum to choose an opening exhibit based upon a work of literature? Clearly, a public program that explores the under-represented heritage of Wabanaki women complements the Abbe Museum’s mission “to further the understanding and appreciation of Maine’s Native American cultures, history and archaeology.” As the curatorial team has written, the exhibit interprets women’s vital roles in the biological, cultural, and

Marilyn Norcini, Ph.D., is a senior research scientist in the American Section at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Philadelphia.

Museum News May/June 2002

M Exhibits

economic survival of their tribes. Also, the Abbe had prior success in creating an interdisciplinary exhibit from a literary source. In 1995, Ruth Moore's poem, "The Indian Shell Heap," inspired an archaeology exhibit credited with drawing in a new local audience.

The Abbe decided to take the calculated risk of translating *Women of the Dawn's* literary narrative into a three-dimensional exhibit and secured major funding from The Rockefeller Foundation's Creativity and Culture program. A team led by exhibit developer/designer Betts Swanton, consisted of two designers, two curators, support staff, and an advisory committee. During the exhibit planning process, the team sought ways to balance the interpretations of the book with the reality of physical objects. Designing an educational experience for

visitors meant combining material both real (artifacts) and imagined (stage sets). The biographies of the Wabanaki women began to take shape as the curatorial team brought together historic trade silver, wampum necklaces, beaded moccasins, birch bark baskets, stone and iron tools, photographs and paintings, and a full-scale modern birch bark canoe.

In a spacious gallery with floors of light brown ash (reminiscent of Indian basketry) and pitched white ceilings, the 2000-square-foot, ADA-compliant space in the new Bar Harbor facility was an empty canvas ready for its inaugural exhibition. To orient visitors geographically and culturally, a map of northern New England and the Canadian Maritimes identifies the Wabanaki territories—from the Abenakis in Vermont, New Hampshire, and western Maine, northward

through the lands of the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Mi'kmaq. The four Mollys belonged to diverse Algonquian-speaking communities called Wabanaki or Dawnland People, the collective name for Native Americans living south of the St. Lawrence and east of Lake Champlain, where the first light of the sun touches land.

The introductory panel was crafted by the 12-member Native American Advisory Committee consisting primarily of Wabanaki women. The advisors were active participants throughout the planning of the "Four Mollys" exhibit, reviewing the concept sheet and labels for the exhibit, raising questions, offering help, and serving as links to their communities. Several members of the committee had worked with McBride and with the Abbe Museum previously, so there was conti-

nuity and a smooth working relationship among the advisors. They wanted visitors to be able to imagine the four Mollys within their historical times, down to the details of what the Mollys looked like and what they wore.

hats—there is a lacy French-inspired bonnet, a peaked cap, a beaver top hat, and a fashionable couture of the 1920s and '30s. Cultural encounters are presented as frequent and dynamic exchanges that led to resistance, select accommodations to

the layout of distinct vignettes in the exhibit. Like the book's readers, the museum's visitors move through time to meet each of the four women. The interpretive vignettes in the exhibit are: Molly Mathilde (c. 1665-1717), the daughter of an influential Maliseet-Abenaki family who was wed to strengthen a political alliance with the French baron of St. Castine; Molly Ockett (c. 1740-1816), a Pig-wacket healer from southern Maine who lived part of her youth as a servant for an English family in Boston; Molly Molasses (c. 1775-1867), a shrewd Penobscot trader who inherited her family's spiritual powers (*m'teoulin*); and Molly Dellis (c. 1903-1977), a Penobscot entertainer known as Spotted Elk who traveled widely as a dancer and married a French journalist.

Each biographical vignette was
(Please turn to "Exhibits," page 62)

"If we limit ourselves to documented records alone, the life histories of Native American women—especially those who lived prior to this century—will remain largely unwritten."

The first display illustrates how the exhibit planners used objects to establish a chronology and act as a visual device to break cultural stereotypes of static Native American cultures. Four centuries of change are embodied in a display of

European lifeways, and persistence of traditional culture. The visitor is prompted to imagine four Native American women who adapted and endured.

The biographical chapters in McBride's *Women of the Dawn* influenced

M Exhibits

Continued from page 35

designed with multiple layers of interpretation in a single display—stage sets, collections, and “reader rails.” Designer Dru Colbert compares these storytelling tableaux to pages in a pop-up book.

The first design element consists of stage sets that use color to both differentiate the individual Mollys and to evoke historical eras. Using low-cost blue insulation foam called scoreboard, the Abbe

mixture of indigenous and European goods that shows how her marriage to the Baron of St. Castine strengthened a political and economic alliance between the Wabanaki and French. While the exhibit team agreed that constructing these stage sets was the best way to bring museum objects and props together, they also wanted to tell the audience how they put the exhibit together. Like the disclaimer

“The scene in this exhibit is a fanciful recreation of a moment in Molly’s life. Based on historical records, it incorporates props that are intended to reflect rather than reproduce historical objects.”

The exhibit uses seasonal metaphors and other design techniques to allow the visitor to see connections across time and between individual lives.

designers carved sculptural environments to depict a typical moment in each Molly’s life. For example, Molly Mathilde’s stage set is a 17th-century interior with a

on the reconstructions in McBride’s book, each vignette has a label written by the exhibit designers acknowledging:

The second design layer is the interpretation of approximately 100 Native American artifacts from the Abbe Museum collections and on loan from private, tribal, and public collections. Biographical research led McBride “on a treasure hunt” to diverse collections from Maine to Utah. She located rare objects made or used by the four Mollys that form a direct lineage between the women. Visitors can see Molly Ockett’s embroidered purse, Molly Molasses’s peaked cap, and Molly Dellis’s dance costume and memorabilia from her role in the 1930 film, *The Silent Enemy*. Tall glass cases to the left side of

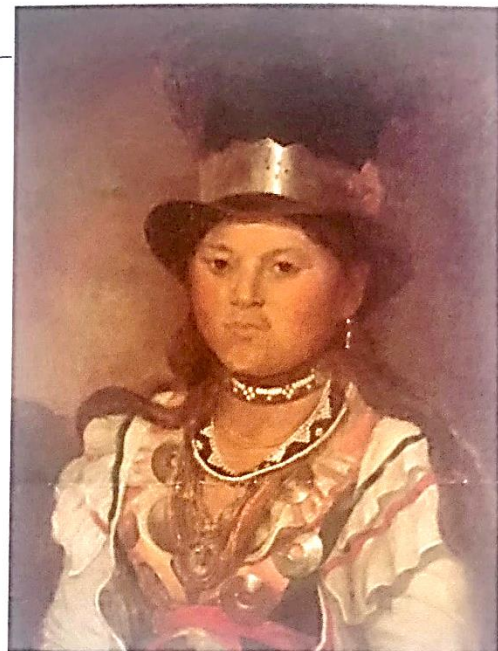
each vignette present related thematic topics, such as a display of containers and fancy baskets made by Wabanaki women.

“Reader rails” with graphically rich interpretive labels are the third educational design layer. These labels offer visitors information on objects and historical topics of interest for each vignette. The Abbe staff worked with McBride to rewrite the literary text from *Women of the Dawn* into interpretive labels for the “Four Mollys,” while Collection Curator Rebecca Cole-Will wrote labels for objects from the collections.

Metaphors of Seasonality and Portage

In McBride’s book, two literary devices are used in the narrative structure—seasonality and portage. Each woman’s per-

sonal struggles, losses, and gains were characterized by a season derived from the Penobscot traditional calendar. For example, the “Moon of the Blinding Snow” (winter) was assigned to Molly Molasses as a symbol of the bitter adjustment she had to make following the devastating effects of the timber industry on the land and lives of Penobscot people. The exhibit preserves these seasonal metaphors—and their association with natural cycles of regeneration and the continuity of life—at the beginning of each biographical portrait through the text and the designer’s choice of colors. Other design techniques allow the visitor to see connections across



Portrait of Sarah Polasses, daughter of Molly Molasses, by Jeremiah Pearson Hardy, c. 1827. Collection of the Tarrantine Club, Bangor, Maine.

M Exhibits

time and between individual lives.

The dominant metaphor in both the book and the exhibit is the concept of “portage,” the act of carrying boats or goods overland between navigable waters. In the book, the narration by Molly Dellis is a form of “literary portage” that carries readers between the stories of the three Mollys who came before her. McBride designated this fourth Molly as the writer of the four biographies, part of Dellis’s personal quest to reclaim her Wabanaki heritage. These portages evoked sensory and historical yearnings that set a tone or mood for the each telling; it was a literary device that carried the reader from one woman’s life to the next.

In the exhibit, however, the literary concept of portage is totally redefined. Here, “portage panels” offer ethnohistorical information on the changes in world



Photograph of Molly Molasses, c. 1865, the third of four generations of women whose lives are explored in the Abbe Museum’s new exhibit.

events over four centuries. Positioned at the beginning of each vignette, these text passages provide context in accessible prose, on the political, economic, and social conditions of each Molly’s era.

Native American Advisory Committee

Each advisory member shared her contemporary cultural perspectives on Wabanaki culture to interpret the four historical Mollys. Marge Bruchac, a Missisquoi Akenaki and historical consultant, offered her experience from developing other museum exhibits. Jennifer Neptune, a Penobscot basketmaker/beadworker and student in anthropology at the University of Maine at Orono, sewed the traditional peaked cap for the introductory display. Jean Archambaud Moore, a field

consultant to McBride on her mother’s monograph [*Molly Spotted Elk: A Penobscot in Paris* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995)], shared her family’s memorabilia for the exhibit.

In addition to working with exhibit advisory committees, the Abbe Museum has a track record of consulting and collaborating with Native Americans on diverse programs and museum opera-

raising, and public programs. Native American focus groups on building design first envisioned the “Circle of Four Directions” space for the new facility.

Conclusion

On the threshold of its 75th anniversary, the Abbe seems to be revitalizing itself through expansion of facilities, staff, and programs. After years of long-range plan-

pretive program is complemented by the museum’s Educator’s Guide for teachers and school groups. The timely exhibit complements legislation that mandates the teaching of Maine Indian history and culture in the state’s elementary schools by 2004.

By redefining the book’s use of portages and reconstructions of probable events as documented, ethnohistorical statements, the exhibit provides an authoritative voice on a hard-to-find aspect of Native American history. Four vignettes, each dedicated to one of the Mollys, reflect the structure of the book, but the exhibit also expands into a collective visual experience that can be shared by groups of museum visitors. **M**

The “Four Mollys” exhibit provides an authoritative voice on a hard-to-find aspect of Native American history.

tions. The range of participation of Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Abenaki, and Micmac tribal members encompasses collection research, new acquisitions, fund

raising, institutional self-assessments, and intense fund raising, the museum has successfully established a second, much larger facility. The “Four Mollys” inter-