

ON THE COVER

2nd Fire Prophecy by Mangeshig Pawis-Steckley

Portions of the following are based on an interview with the artist on August 22, 2023.

The Anishinaabeg are an Indigenous people living mainly in the forests and along the shorelines of the upper Great Lakes of North America, but also extending into the subarctic north and prairie west. They share an ancient culture and language, albeit with variations across the region. In Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, they are known as the Chippewa and Potawatomi, whereas the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Algonquin are found in the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec. Together, they treasure a migration story and spiritual teaching called the Seven Fires Prophecy. Each “fire” or prophecy describes key events and predictions in Anishinaabeg lore and history, including forecasts for the future. It was the second fire that inspired Pawis-Steckley to create this month’s cover image.

He explained that at the time of the second fire, the Anishinaabeg were camped beside Lake Michigan during their long migration from the east coast of North America. They were uncertain how to cross this “sweet water sea” and whether to continue the journey. The Second Prophet told them that a young girl would be born and dream of the path leading to an island in the shape of a turtle. This is what Pawis-Steckley chose to depict in his painting. And there she is between the flames, with the lake in the background, pointing to a creature that has special significance for the Anishinaabeg. According to elders, the creation story includes a great flood that washed away evil and cleansed the Earth for a new beginning. The demi-god, hero and trickster Nanabozo, asked which of the surviving animals was willing to carry the weight of the new land. The snapping turtle, Mikinaak, offered its shell. Turtle Island was created on Mikinaak’s back as the future homeland of the Anishinaabeg. In many traditions, it became all of North America, given to them as the first inhabitants. Trials and tribulations, marked by more prophecy fires, followed them in their stories and histories. Signal events included the advent of a light-skinned settler people from the east, offering brotherhood at first but then bringing death, destruction, dislocation, and a new religion and culture.

The cover picture was completed with acrylics on canvas, and the strong colors and use of outline to depict mythic beings and animals show the influence of the “Woodland style.” It was pioneered in the 1950s and 1960s by the great

Anishinaabeg artist Norval Morrisseau. Easel painting on canvas was not part of indigenous artmaking but Morrisseau integrated the technique and media with traditional iconography and color values. Carl Ray, a Cree artist mentored by Morrisseau, Daphne Odjig, another Anishinaabeg painter in the Woodland school, and British artist Adebayo Bolaji who incorporates West African themes, remain favorites and influences on Pawis-Steckley’s own work.

Our cover artist is a member of the Wasauksing First Nation, located on Parry Island in Georgian Bay, the northeastern arm of Lake Huron, and completely within the province of Ontario. Wasauksing means “place that shines brightly in the reflection of the sacred light.” Pawis-Steckley’s early years were divided between this island community and the city of Barrie, further south. Drawing was an activity since childhood and encouraged by his parents. He recalls his mother frequently providing him with art supplies. Pawis-Steckley went on to study graphic design at Nova Scotia Community College and thereafter freelanced, creating illustrations and logos for indigenous clients. A “doodle” produced for Google in celebration of the Jingle Dress Dance, a traditional Anishinaabeg custom featuring elaborate garments and choreography, caught the eye of a literary agent. The upshot was an opportunity to illustrate children’s books, which he has pursued and developed successfully into a career.

Pawis-Steckley now lives part of the time in Vancouver, British Columbia, but returns to Wasauksing. He would like to do more paintings, which are always based on a story. He enjoys abstraction but is drawn to symbolism and layers of meaning, especially those with indigenous themes. Painting *2nd Fire Prophecy* led to a kind of awakening in himself, bringing his roots closer and inspiring greater appreciation of his culture. The teaching says that now is the time of the seventh prophecy, a time of renewal and reclamation for the Anishinaabeg, and a time when the light-skinned settlers must choose between two paths. One is charred and black, and painful to tread, leading to suffering and death. The other is green and lush, leading to peace, brotherhood, and sisterhood for all peoples of the Earth. Which one will be chosen?

 R. Walter Heinrichs
Art Editor