

Ancestors Rising

By Mary Longman

Ancestors Rising (2006), is a bronze sculptural installation located at the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina. The work was commissioned by the MacKenzie Art Gallery and curated by Patricia Deadman. This site-specific piece researches the Wascana Park area in the context of the shared history of Indigenous peoples and early settlers with the bison. Since the earliest existence of paleo-Indigenous people in this territory (approximately 27,000 years ago), they have coexisted with the bison—first hunting the giant bison alongside the mighty mammoths and, in later years, hunting the bison we know today. The bison provided food for survival and their hides, bones, horns and hooves contributed to many aspects of cultural production, including ceremonial items such as headdresses and sun-dance items, narrative hide paintings and utilitarian items such as tipis, clothing, blankets and implements.



Figure 1. North-West Mounted Police barracks and Wascana Creek, Regina, 1885. Photograph by Oliver B. Buell, no. R-B4525.

the colonists—but for different purposes, such as for sale and export and sports hunting. Bison bones were sold for fertiliser and chinaware, and colonial sport safaris killed off large numbers as they rode through the prairies on the new trains. As well, government policy encouraged the death of all bison



Figure 2. Piles of bison skulls awaiting shipment at Saskatoon, ca. 1890, no. R-B677-2. Saskatchewan Archives.

This history is central to the site of Wascana Park, formerly known as Wascana Creek (Figure 1). The term ‘Wascana’ was a variation of a Cree word that meant ‘pile of bones’, which referred to the piles of bison bones that were viewed by early settlers on this prairie landscape. Historically bison bones were placed there by the local Cree and Saulteaux people, who believed that the bison would return to the bones of their dead ancestors, therefore always bringing subsistence for their people.

When Colonel Palliser arrived in 1857, he named the settlement *Pile-o-Bone*. Shortly thereafter, new piles of bison bones were made by the colonists—but for different purposes, such as for sale and export and sports hunting. Bison bones were sold for fertiliser and chinaware, and colonial sport safaris killed off large numbers as they rode through the prairies on the new trains. As well, government policy encouraged the death of all bison in order to starve Indigenous people, who were viewed as a hindrance to colonial expansion and forced treaties. Several archival photographs reveal early settlers posing beside massive piles of bones ready for manufacturing and export (Figure 2). The combination of the bison industry with sport hunting culminated eventually in the extermination of wild bison from the prairie landscape. This extermination marked a significant change of life for the Indigenous peoples of the plains. Their main food staple was gone, bringing much hardship, and the long history of cultural production of bison materials ceased.

Today, ‘pile of bones’ has a different meaning to the people of Regina; it marks the

annual celebration of colonial settlement. This celebration highlights early 1900s-style costumes and enacts settler stage shows of singing and dancing. Curiously absent for many years were any sign of Indigenous people in these historical re-enactments—until very recently when some Indigenous cultural shows began to appear. Perhaps one day, ‘Pile of Bones Day’ will truly reflect the original history of this land, though for now, many are unaware of this history, with bones from past millennia laying silently beneath the soil.

To address the silence of this submerged history, *Ancestors Rising* (Figures 3 and 4) becomes the symbolic metaphor for the voice of the silenced spirits in traditional territory and calls to their resurrection from the soil so their presence is known. The bison horn, in and of itself, was a powerful symbol for plains Indigenous people. Its symbolism referenced respect, strength and courage. In the old days, bison horns could be seen on prestigious head regalia that attested to the wearer’s status as a respected leader.



Figure 3. *Ancestors Rising*, 2006. Bronze, diameter: 20'; each horn: 54" x 228".

commemorations and memorials. They were used for their practical physical properties and for their spiritual and metaphysical properties. The dense, physical properties of the stone served well for utilitarian purposes such as tipi rings, fire pits, burial sites and caches, and in items used for tools and in warfare. The metaphysical properties of the stone served as a medium of communication with the spiritual realm, which could be seen in the remnants of medicine wheels, pictographs, petroglyphs, petroforms, sacred boulders, amulets and carved figures and pipes.

In conclusion, the sculpture *Ancestors Rising* serves as an urban historical marker that memorialises the Indigenous people and bison that lived off of this very land only 200 years ago. This work is a testimonial to the history and territory of my people. Through this work, I ask the community of Regina to bear witness to this history, to acknowledge it and give this place and its spirits the respect and commemoration it deserves.

The four life-size horns stand in a circle, one each in the position of the exact direction of north, south, east and west, referencing the ultimate power of the balance in life. From each horn’s tip flows a braided rope, all of which meet in the centre of the circle to suspend and cradle a woven net of rocks, which hovers just above the ground. These bronze braided ropes of copper alloy and brass, refer to the ancestors’ power as conduits of energy who combine their energies to help heal the people.

The stones recall early Plains burial sites made of stone mounds and red ochre pigment. The permanence of stones traced the history and cultural practices and documented important places, events,



Figure 4. *Ancestors Rising*, detail.