

# *The* **ART** *of* **MAKING**

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*Rediscovering the  
Blackfoot Legacy*



**JARED TAILFEATHERS**

*Foreword by Rebecca Many Grey Horses*

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*The ART of*  
**MAKING**





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# *The* **ART** *of* **MAKING**

REDISCOVERING THE BLACKFOOT LEGACY  
VOLUME ONE

**JARED TAILFEATHERS**

*Foreword: Rebecca Many Grey Horses*



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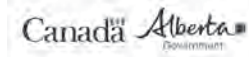
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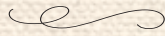


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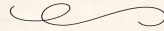
I dedicate this book to my wife, Jess  
— my true support —  
and to the adventure team:  
my kids, Jo and Sinopaki,  
along with our dogs, Dotty, Chucky, and Monty,  
and our beloved Sootaa May,  
who we will never forget.





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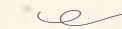
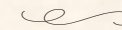
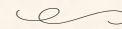
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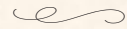
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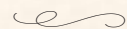
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## *Acknowledgements*



*T*he Elders, Ceremonialists, Knowledge Keepers, Community Leaders, and members of the Blackfoot-speaking People, as well as the Treaty 7 community and the peer support from the arts and culture community, have been immeasurably influential in my work.

I also extend my gratitude to Rebecca Many Grey Horses, Francis Melting Tallow, Clarence Wolf Leg Sr., Adrian Wolf Leg, Kelli Morning Bull, Souta Calling Last, Adrian Stimson, Mike Bruised Head, Treffrey Deerfoot, Karl Crow, Sheldon First Rider, Darcy Turning Robe, Frank Turning Robe, Richard Duck Chief-Running Rabbit, Lauren Monroe Jr., Bruce Starlight, Maurice Goutier, Rodney Big Bull, Terry Quinn, Irene Kerr, Wendy Unfreed, Autumn Whiteway, Alayna Many Guns, Randy Bottle, Jessie Fiddler-Kiss, Jason Eaglespeaker, Gerald Tailfeathers, Crystal Many Fingers, and Holy Bear Woman.

I also acknowledge the municipalities of Cochrane, High River, and Calgary; the museums and cultural/information centres in the territory; Silver Springs Golf & Country Club (for the cottonwood tree); ACAD (AU Arts); Ride The Sky; the Cultural Instigators; Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth; The Esker Foundation; Arts Commons; the Service Design team (past and present); and the Elders Guidance Circle at the Calgary Public

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To my extended Tailfeathers, Many Fingers, Fox, Rock, Draper, and Bracko family members, and especially the late Dr. Darcy Tailfeathers (my dad) for his legacy; Lorie Tailfeathers-Bracko for her guidance in sharing and honoring my heritage; Bill Bracko for patiently seeking to understand his artist step-son; Scooter Tailfeathers for his partnership at a difficult time; my late sister Tara Tailfeathers, whose life helped motivate the journey; my niece Bella (Tailfeathers) Bracko for being her mom's legacy and humor; Sean Bracko for his reliability and looking up to me; Maria and Martyn Grant for the moose leg; and Dan, Nathan, and Maranda Bracko (and their partners and children) for supporting my art pursuits.

I would especially like to acknowledge Dr. Lorene Shyba, publisher at Durville & UpRoute Books; proofreader Brianna Haydu; and Calgary Arts Development's Original Peoples Investment Program for funding support. None of this would have been published or possible without their participation.



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## *Foreword*

**Rebecca Many Grey Horses**

### Identity and Connection



I AM HONOURED to be asked by Sikohmh'Kokomii (Calling Crane), Jared Tailfeathers, to write a foreword for his book, *The Art of Making: Rediscovering the Blackfoot Legacy*. The intensive work of reclaiming and seeking protection of our sacred sites is a daunting task. I have worked at the Galt Museum and Archives in Lethbridge, Alberta for several years, during which time I developed an Indigenous History Program, videos, and co-curated exhibits of Nitsitapii Landscapes. I realize how important this work is and have advocated to government officials to provide the much-needed protection and preservation for these sites. *The Art of Making* may help with this cause.

My journey has directed me to the path of the ancestors, to the spiritual connection, to the land and places of the Nitsitapii sacred sites. Working at the Galt Museum has led me to the path of reclaiming and reunification with those most sacred places held by the ancestors. At each place, my spirit feels the connection and a profound sense of purpose is renewed. As I look behind me, I see generations taking up the torch to protect and preserve these sites, and my heart is lifted. Many young Nitsitapii have awakened to reconnect with the sacred sites, to speak the Blackfoot language, and to learn the Blackfoot teachings. A renewed sense of pride is sparked and courage to learn is welcoming.

I recognize Jared as one of the inspiring young Blackfoot to embark on the path of a Knowledge Seeker. *The Art of Making* sheds light on the spiritual narratives of the Blackfoot sacred places, captures the essence

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*The Art of Making: Rediscovering the Blackfoot Legacy*

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of our Creation stories, and accurately describes the Blackfoot ancestors' methods to survive and protect their territory. These traditional arts and methods of making are described through a contemporary lens, and bravely used in music and art as Jared has demonstrated. The author has undertaken extensive research and writing on Blackfoot history, culture, and sacred sites, which have profoundly shaped the worldview, teachings, culture, and language of the people. His documentation of Blackfoot locations—sites, areas, places of importance, and ceremonial sites—is extensive. He places himself in relation to the geographical landscapes and the teachings, incorporating the knowledge into his lifestyle and worldview.

*The Art of Making* will have an immeasurable impact for readers seeking knowledge of Blackfoot places, history, and the teachings of the ancestors. It is an instrument that will provide the education to our young Blackfoot members and those generations to come. The oral stories that are passed from generation to generation hold complete knowledge—but today, with advanced written tools, they also capture the spirit.

Just as an Elder's story described four Calling Cranes blessing a transfer ceremony by bugling their call and flying to the four directions, so too will Jared's message be carried to the four directions. It is possible to relearn the art of making from traditional sources, shed light on the spiritual narratives of Blackfoot places, and use these strategies to reclaim Blackfoot identity and connection.

—*Itisnohtis piyaki (Dances with All Medicine Bundles)*  
*Rebecca Many Grey Horses, Lethbridge, 2024*

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*Rebecca Many Grey Horses*

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ITISNOHTIS PIYAKI  
(DANCES WITH ALL MEDICINE BUNDLES)  
REBECCA MANY GREY HORSES

Itsinohhtis piyaki, Rebecca Many Grey Horses is from the Kainai Nation, part of the Blackfoot Confederacy, and based in Southern Alberta. Raised with traditional Blackfoot ways and traditions, Rebecca continues to practice and live her Blackfoot ways. Not only has her family been keepers of medicine pipe bundles, but she has also always been the keeper of the stories from their ancestors. Currently, Rebecca is the co-curator of the Nitsitapii Landscapes exhibits at the Galt Museum in Lethbridge, Alberta.



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Inside tipi, Blackfoot Crossing

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## *Preface*

### IMITÁÁ OHTÁÓHSOKOYI A'PÓÓHSIN

#### Dog Journey Leaves a Trail



*M*Y NAME is Jared Tailfeathers, also known as Sikohmh'Kokomii (Calling Crane). As a biracial Blackfoot Nitsitapii, English and Scottish Caucasian, I embrace a rich heritage that fuels my work as a multidisciplinary artist, musician, author, inventor, and curator.

The main topic of this book is about traditional methods and art of making, as assessed through a contemporary lens. My aim has been to shed light on the spiritual narratives of geography, Creation stories, resources, and skills that are vital for rediscovering my identity as a Blackfoot person. The enduring impact of these artistic practices defines my legacy.

This journey led to the creation of mural art and a distinctive collection of musical instruments. These works were designed to evoke traditional ways of knowing and to honour the land and its gifts to my family and me. For the musical instruments, I utilized materials found and harvested from Blackfoot territory, including the bones of

moose and elk, as well as wood from cottonwood trees. These instruments became the foundation for the music I composed and performed.

In my mural art, I draw inspiration from the land, its specific locales, the animals and

plants, Blackfoot traditions, and my personal recollections. It has been a profound experience to learn about the traditions that shaped both the mural art and the music. I explored the origins of artistic elements and songs, the exchanges between nations, and

the place of traditional design and music in our contemporary reality beyond pow wows and special ceremonies. This exploration delves into the regalia, relics, tools, stories, and ceremonies connected to art and song, weaving a tapestry of cultural heritage and modern expression.

The photo illustrations of the land in this book are also a key element, aiming to open your eyes and mind to the territory before colonialism and its current

This journey led to the creation of mural art and a distinctive collection of musical instruments.

These works were designed to evoke traditional ways of knowing and to honour the land and its gifts to my family and me.

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*The Art of Making: Rediscovering the Blackfoot Legacy*

geography. When I conceived this project, it seemed straightforward: consult with Ceremonialists, Knowledge Keepers, Elders, and cultural historians, participate in ceremonies, and visit museums and cultural sites. This research is my passion, deeply connected with my identity as an urbanized half-Native artist.

Exploring the history and reasons behind how and why the Blackfoot existed as a people involves understanding their use of plants and animals, spirituality, social and political systems, and interactions with other Nations. This book is about more than ancestral skills: it's about the society and community that found purpose and balance in nature. The Blackfoot were advanced conservationists and storytellers, living in harmony, until European colonization.

To understand the traditional arts and methods, I immersed myself in the entirety of the Blackfoot People and our Territory, taking on roles as researcher, archaeologist, anthropologist, cartographer, botanist, remains geologist, astronomer, and artist. My research was based on traditional maps and landmarks confirmed by the Blackfoot Confederacy. Some of my explorations were speculative, based on logic and evidence. Interestingly, while Alberta and Montana's cultural landmarks are well-known, the province of Saskatchewan is under-explored. I believe visiting these sites in the future and consulting with Blackfoot leaders will uncover more about our history.

When looking at the information I learned growing up in the public school system, and what is commonly believed by

non-Indigenous people, I now understand that when seeking authenticity in a convoluted, socially constructed, and colonized realm, it can become hard to discern the barrier between truth, fact, point of view and speculation when applied to history. It was important to seek and confirm information from my Blackfoot leaders, but also to see the information that is out there from non-Blackfoot people about the territory and history. There are a lot of inconsistencies in the non-Blackfoot accounts, and even accounts between the single Nations within the Confederacy. So, I needed to look at everything—read old accounts, see from my bi-cultural perspective, and visit the territory to truly absorb what was there.

## **The Middle of the Cultural Bridge**

To create and design something new from something old, I needed to form my perspective as an observer situated in the middle of a cultural bridge. I wanted to understand the logic of the system in which these methods were developed and adapted, and consider the trade routes, materials, and resources of the Blackfoot Confederacy before the 1800s and in the post-1800 world. This context is crucial to understanding the roots of our current 2000s society and what shaped treaties and the country. Research, consultation, and a hands-on approach with materials were essential for this project. It was important to consider the reasons for living in this specific territory, the landmarks, the plants and animals, the sciences, tools, and arts of the Blackfoot people.



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*Jared Tailfeathers*



WITH DOT THE “DOG TRAIL” DOG

At Belly Buttes, Kainai, Alberta; “A location that I am familiar with seeing throughout my life.”

I aim for this to be a record of truth, though I can only share what I know and have researched. I speak only for myself and the evidence I have gathered, starting with the land. I do not speak on behalf of the Blackfoot Confederacy or any society; I have some transfers but am not part of any society.

I am young in my learning but eager to discover more. This journey has been lifelong, with many ups and downs. I learn best by seeing, touching, feeling, and hearing the world around me, engaging with useful skills and techniques that lead to aesthetic expression. I have always appreciated the arts and culture from my heritage, the landmarks, and being with the land, valuing the hands-on skills and meticulous process. The research in this “volume one” book is from 2019-2020, with

more recent research discoveries planned for upcoming volumes.

Dot, the “Dog” in the Dog Trail name, joined up at the start of this journey. She only knows travelling and posing for pictures. Dottie appears in about three-quarters of the photo documentation I took and was present at probably 98 percent of the locations. Though I tried to keep Dot out of most final shots, she has been a good companion and guide in this adventure. She is curious, so you’ll see her speculating in some of the final shots.

—*Sikohmh’Kokomii (Calling Crane),  
Jared Darcy Tailfeathers, 2024*

*Note: If a photo or writing doesn’t have a citation or credit, it is one of my photos or statements. Jessica and Joni took photos, too.*

# PART ONE

SIKSIKAITSI TAPI  
BLACKFOOT PEOPLE

NITSITAPII  
THE REAL PEOPLE



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## OKOTOKI ROCK ART, PICTOGRAPH

Petroglyphs and pictographs are our oldest forms of painting and writing. Pictographs, often painted with various colors—most notably red ochre, which is the best preserved and longest-lasting—depict important cultural stories or events, vision quest teachings, or war stories. Many rock paintings can be found in southern Alberta. Petroglyphs, akin to the paintings but created with more care and time, are literally carved into the stone. These carvings are widespread throughout the territory, with the largest concentration at Writing-On-Stone. It is likely that there are additional, yet undiscovered, sites scattered and hidden within our Traditional Territory.

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*Chapter 1*

## SIKSIKAITSI TAPI

## NITSITAPII



I HAVE ALWAYS been proud of being a Blackfoot person. It has been an important distinction for my identity my whole life. My feelings always get hurt when someone tries to disown that fact or make me prove the authenticity of my identity to them, especially since I grew up in an urban setting. I know that these feelings are shared by many community members around me. However, it's a good place to look for and ask questions for my own behalf and personal connection. It leaves an opening for introspection and trying to see many points of view when talking about it.

My father, Darcy Tailfeathers, was from the Kainai (Blood, Many-Chiefs, Kgay'nah) Nation, located southwest of Lethbridge, Alberta, near the borders of the St. Mary and Belly Rivers, close to Cardston, Alberta. My mother is from Cardston, and she and my father had known each other since childhood, having attended school together. Their love story, which began in junior high and high school, is one I've heard from countless people. They eventually married and had three children, with me being the youngest. My father was studying medicine at the University of Alberta.

Then, on my father's birthday weekend, he passed away in a car accident. I was 14 months old, and this event has had a ripple effect on the world and lives around me for the rest of my life.

My father left a profound legacy in a short time, one that cast a shadow of sadness whenever it was spoken of. From an early age, I was aware of him, though he was a figure I never got to know personally. For others, the grief was in losing the man they once knew; for me, it was the sorrow of never having known him, only experiencing him through the memories and stories shared by family and friends. His life had a mythic quality within the community, creating a strange sense of belonging and displacement for me.

Seeking a connection with my heritage became a way to understand my father and my place within the broader context of our community, especially in the 21st century. The culture is incredibly rich, and many artifacts that remain hidden from the general public hold the potential to forge deeper connections. I believe unveiling these will open eyes and minds to the true extent of colonial impact and intertribal dynamics.

## Chapter 8

### A GALLERY OF SELECT ART AND MURALS

#### *The Art and Method of Making Art*



**I**NDIGENOUS PEOPLES have been close to nature since time immemorial. Physical landmarks, as well as the plants and animals that live on these lands, are woven throughout the culture of Indigenous Peoples. Misuse and even destruction of these parts of our land, in effect, are destructive to ourselves and our way of life.

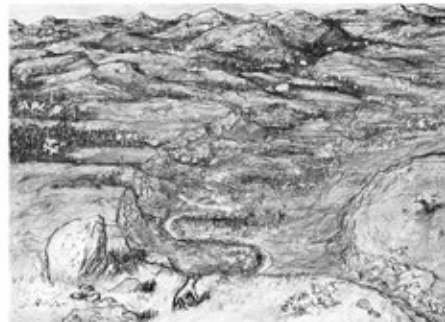
Learning from the ways animals interact became the foundation of Indigenous culture. In particular, Wolf informed the Blackfoot on ways to hunt as a group and is reflected in our origin stories. Similarly, the Buffalo or Bison is the most important animal in all the Plains cultures: losing them is how we lost ourselves, our language, culture, and land.

The disappearance of these two keystone animals, the Buffalo and the Wolf, changed history and the land. The Blackfoot, and other Indigenous Peoples, view the return of these animals and their connection to Indigenous cultures to have major importance toward living in harmony and within the means provided by these lands.



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Jared Tailfeathers



ABOVE: "Community (aaka'itapissko) and Innovate (iksimm)."  
Acrylic paint on canvas.

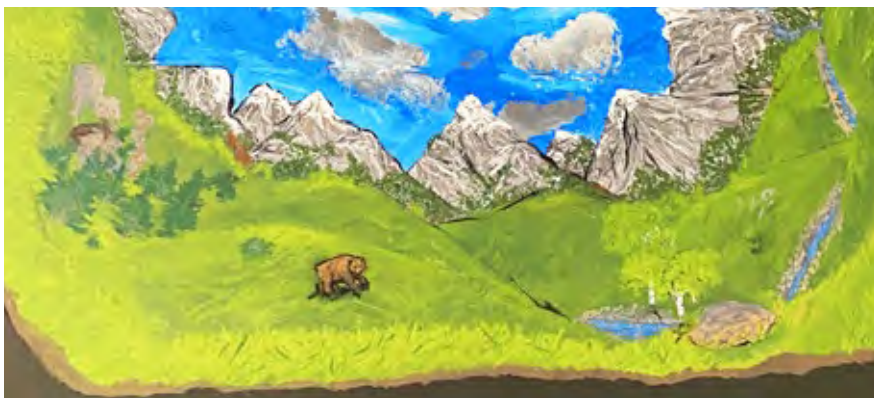
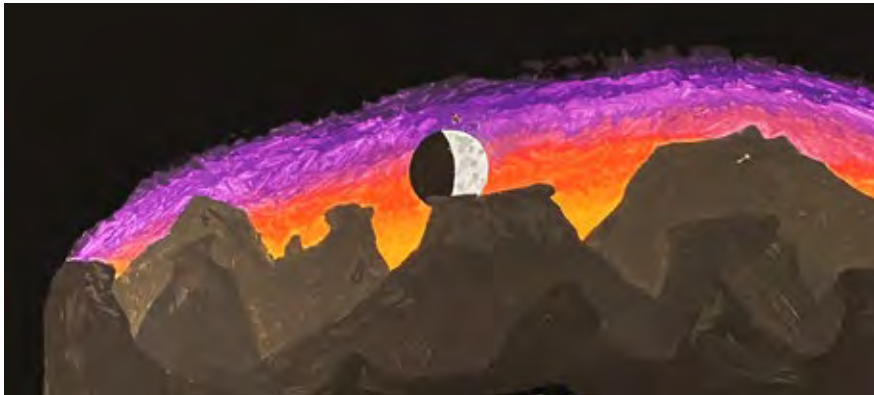
FACING PAGE: Sketches of the Blackfoot Territory: Buffalo Jump, Coulee, and Writing-on-Stone.

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The artwork on this spread and the artist statement and drawings on page 197 are reprinted from the book *Reimagining Fire: The Future of Energy*, Eveline Koliijn, editor. (Calgary, Durvile: 2023).

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FACING PAGE: Cover art to this book is an untitled mural on the ceiling of the garage of my previous home. Size is 6 feet x 10 feet.  
ABOVE: Details from the untitled mural on the facing page.

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*Jared Tailfeathers*





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THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY  
CUMMING SCHOOL OF MEDICINE  
INDIGENOUS MURAL, CENTRAL FEATURE

This circular medicine wheel features herbs and plants that are integral to Indigenous medicine and healing. Mural artists were Sikomh Kokomii Jared Tailfeathers, along with, Kamâmak, Suwatâga-Mu, and bb iskweu.

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## *About the Author*



### **JARED TAILFEATHERS**

#### *Sikohmh'Kokomii (Calling Crane)*

Sikohmh'Kokomii (Calling Crane) Jared Tailfeathers is a distinguished Indigenous multidisciplinary artist whose creative pursuits include art, music, literature, curation, and invention. His work primarily explores the art, history, and sustainability of the Blackfoot Confederacy and other Treaty 7 Nations, safeguarding their rich cultural heritage. A graduate of the Alberta College of Art and Design (now Alberta University of the Arts), Jared has collaborated with numerous prominent cultural institutions and festivals. His commitment to culture and community is further demonstrated through his involvement with the Calgary Arts Development Authority, where he has facilitated a range of performance events and educational programming. Jared lives in High River, Alberta with his wife Jessica Tailfeathers, two daughters Joni and Sage, and three dogs: Dot, Chuckie, and Montana.