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What the Ribbon Skirt Means to Agnes Woodward, Creator of Deb Haaland's Swearing In Ceremony Ensemble

by Clark Tate | Apr 20, 2021



Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland, wore a handmade ribbon skirt by Agnes Woodward (Plains Cree) to her swearing-in ceremony.

Photo by Tami Heilemann, Department of Interior

The moment was historic by so many standards. The first female Vice President, and the first of African and South Asian descent, [swearing in](#) the first Indigenous American Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland, only the third woman to hold the office. Yet, all anyone could talk about was Secretary Haaland's skirt — a royal blue number, wrapped in a rainbow of satin ribbons overlayed with an artful cornstalk, deep blue butterflies, and stars. It's a typical scenario for women, having the focus turn from their accomplishments to their attire. It can be annoying, but when that attention is harnessed by intention, it can also convey a powerful message.

According to Agnes Woodward, the garment's creator, a ribbon skirt is meant to demand that kind of scene-stealing regard.

“When a woman walks into a room wearing a ribbon skirt, everyone takes notice,” Woodward says. “She’s like a walking story.”

Woodward is Nehiyaw Iskwew and originally from Kawacatoose First Nation in Saskatchewan, Canada. She makes and sells ribbon skirts through her side business [ReeCreeations](#). “The skirt is mostly about representation, and how Indigenous women choose to represent ourselves,” Woodward says. “That’s why they’re so important today,” she says, “because their voice has been taken away.” So when the first Indigenous Cabinet Secretary of the United States is wearing one of those skirts, it’s a moment.



Woodward holds the ribbon skirt made with satin ribbon and appliques.

Photo courtesy of Agnes Woodward.

“It meant the world to me. It really did,” says Woodward. “From what I’ve experienced and from what my parents experienced, I don’t know that we could have believed that we would have this representation. I know so many of us just felt overwhelmed with emotion.”

Skirt construction

A ribbon shirt is simple in its essence, “an a-line skirt that has layers of ribbons, usually satin,” says Woodward. After that, the only boundaries are the limits of your imagination. There are no prescriptions and no rules. “Every person who makes a ribbon skirt is an artist in their own way,” she explains. “It can represent whatever the Indigenous person who is wearing it wants it to represent.”

“Today, with our ribbon skirts, we kinda blend contemporary designs. We fall into the fashion mindset when it comes to putting ribbon skirts together,” Woodward says. “Over time, everything changes, and everything evolves, and it’s the same with our culture. And that’s what I see with ribbon skirts.” Some people have come to her asking for a skirt that represents their name, or their tribe, others want a Yoda-themed skirt. “This has been done for generations and generations,” she says. “Maybe we’re doing it with a sewing machine instead of by hand, but the love and the art form are still there.”

Woodward started sewing ribbon skirts about a decade ago. "My husband bought me a sewing machine because I wanted my children to dance pow wow." Women must wear long skirts to attend, but the unique, handmade outfits are expensive. So Woodward started making them for herself and her daughter. Others soon requested commissions. "It would constantly challenge me to be more creative. People would say, this is my life story," she says. "It makes me sit and think, 'How can I put that in an applique design?' So the challenge has been, you know, beautiful."

She always uses satin ribbons and a cotton fabric for the base, often a calico with a pretty floral design. From there, she lets her creativity roam.

"My favorite is when I have artistic freedom. I feel like that's when I do my best work," says Woodward.

The full arch of Woodward's journey to her craft reaches back much further. "I wore ribbon skirts when I was a child," says Woodward. Her aunt took her to ceremonies and gatherings, encouraging her to wear the skirts to instill pride in her heritage and respect for traditional protocols. "I used to hate it," she says, "because of all the racism I experienced as a First Nation child."

The meaning of ribbon skirts

She has a different perspective now. “The ribbon skirt today reminds me that I have a power and that I carry a responsibility, to teach the future generations that they belong here and that they have the right to take up space however they choose,” she says. “It’s about taking back the shame that I carried as a young girl.”

“When I wear a ribbon skirt, I am asking people to notice that I am confident in who I am as an Indigenous person, and I am asking them to respect that,” Woodward says. “Really that’s what they mean to me, the shedding of that shame.”

Woodward studied psychology and works full time at [The Three Affiliated Tribes Victim Services](#) as an advocate. She also works with [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Womxn and Girls, and Two Spirit](#) (MMIWG2S), making ribbon skirts for family members of victims. “I’ve been at this job since August and am using art to represent families of the missing and murdered in a respectful way,” she says.

These are hard, heavy tasks, but ones she is passionate about. “Really it’s my own experience as an Indigenous person. I have experienced all of the hardships that are really common in our community,” she says. “As a survivor of childhood trauma, I know how difficult it can be just to make it in the world.” She feels it’s especially hard for Indigenous people living in a wider society that doesn’t listen for or hear your voice.

“My passion is really to empower Indigenous people and whether that is through my job as an advocate or expressing myself artistically and creating ribbon skirts that empower Indigenous people,” Woodward says.

“There are all kinds of ways that you can help and one for me is sewing. I’ve said that sewing is my love language. That’s how I express my love for my people.”

“I come from parents and grandparents who weren’t allowed to express themselves,” she explains. “They weren’t allowed to be themselves unapologetically the way we can today.” Woodward’s father is a residential school survivor, her mother survived the “60s scoop” when thousands of Native children were taken from their families in Canada and left in foster care, and one of her aunts is among the many missing and murdered Indigenous women. “Seeing the same issues in the Indigenous community that I grew up with is really what pushed me to do my part to empower my people,” says Woodward.



Clark Tate

Clark Tate is a freelance writer and lifelong knitter. After graduating from never-ending scarves to more complex projects, Clark also graduated with a Master’s in Environmental Science. She then worked as a restoration ecologist for six years, before moving on to an obsession with braided hats and writing articles about people and the environments they live in. She’s written for Hakai Magazine, Summit Daily News, Salt Lake City Weekly, and GearLab.com. You can find further examples of her work at lclarktate.com.

6 Comments



Claudia JnBaptiste on April 21, 2021 at 11:53 am

This is an interesting story. I am a crafter. This creation to my mind shows loyalty, respect and commitment,

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Nena on June 22, 2022 at 11:49 am



With much respect thank you very much for being a strong devout Indigenous Woman may creator bless you 10 fold.

[Reply](#)



Beth on April 21, 2021 at 1:14 pm

Great article, thank you. Not directly about crafts but in the spirit of this article, I highly recommend *_Braiding Sweetgrass_* by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2016). It's a moving blend of the poetic and scientific in service to indigenous teachings of humans as "the younger brother of creation" and the celebration of a reciprocal relationship with the Earth.

[Reply](#)



Kristie Hubler on April 21, 2021 at 2:03 pm

I love this! I love finding out about other cultures, all kinds. We need to know about other cultures, and through another's art, is usually a great start to do so.

[Reply](#)



Linda S. Dallas on April 25, 2021 at 2:50 pm

What is the meaning of Deb Haaland's beautiful ribbon skirt?

[Reply](#)



Emillie Sha on March 10, 2022 at 9:47 pm

Your skirts are absolutely beautiful and such meaning. The Creator has blessed you with beautiful artistic designs.

I am asking for a friend. She wants a ribbon skirt with 4 or 5 layers like flounces, ribbon sewn on each gathered flounce. I am not sure if this

design aligns with the traditional meaning of the skirts. What are your thoughts? Thanks.

[Reply](#)

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