



# MONTANA CIRCLE OF AMERICAN MASTERS

2024

The Montana Circle of American Masters (MCAM) recognizes Montana folk and traditional artists for artistic excellence in their work, along with their role in preserving and passing on their knowledge.

By Taylor Burby

This year, the Montana Arts Council welcomed three new additions to the Circle:

Dakota bead artist and star quilter **Ramey Growing Thunder** of the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation; boot maker **Mike Ryan** of Helena, and Crow bead artist and fashion designer **Olivia "Rose" Williamson** of the

Crow Reservation. Growing Thunder, Ryan, and Williamson join 49 previous honorees in an illustrious group that represents some of the most skilled and respected tradition bearers in Montana. MCAM shines a light on Montanans who are among the best in the world in their artform and who are a vital part of Montana's heritage and cultural landscape.

The folk and traditional arts are rooted in a community (ethnic, geographic, linguistic, religious, occupational) or family. They reflect the aesthetics and values of the community in which they arise and are often symbols of

a group's identity. The skills of producing the artwork are often taught person-to-person, and a practitioner's craft exists as part of a lineage and tradition which extends well beyond their own career. As such, MCAM honorees are expected to not only display artistic mastery but also show a commitment to passing on their knowledge.

**Join us in welcoming Ramey Growing Thunder, Mike Ryan, and Olivia "Rose" Williamson to the Montana Circle of American Masters.**



## Ramey Growing Thunder, Ph.D

Ramey Growing Thunder, is an award-winning traditional Dakota and Diné bead artist and star quilter, as well as an educator and Director of the Language & Culture Department for Fort Peck Assiniboine & Sioux Tribes. Through her mastery of traditional beadwork and quilt making, coupled with her role in educating individuals at local, state, and national levels, Ramey has dedicated her life to safeguarding her culture. Through her artistry, she aims to honor the legacy and teachings of her ancestors and ensure that their traditions thrive for generations to come.

In 1982, as a young girl, Ramey sat beside her mother as she crafted beaded belt buckles, pouches, and moccasins to support their family's income, absorbing the intricate process. With her mother's guidance, she began her own journey into beadwork, starting with friendship bracelets for her brothers. As she grew, so did her skills, from assisting her mother with royalty crowns and moccasins to adorning friends with beaded hair barrettes during her high school years. In 2000, while attending college in Poplar, MT, Ramey enrolled in a star quilt making class, discovering her natural talent for quilt-making, which evolved from baby quilts to intricate king-size creations. Marrying in 2003, Ramey has also collaborated with her husband and renowned ledger artist, Darryl Growing Thunder, combining her beadwork expertise with his artistic background to create larger-scale projects, including fully beaded cradleboards and competition bags. Together, they honed their entrepreneurial skills, marking a fruitful 21-year journey of artistic collaboration and personal growth.

While her expansive repertoire includes cradleboards, bags, moccasins, beaded jewelry, and ribbon skirts, Ramey's niche in the art world is her beaded late 1800s antique doctor bags. When beading, she replaces the bag's leather with brain-tanned hides from deer, elk, or moose, while utilizing the original hardware. When selecting her beads, Ramey occasionally travels out of state just to locate antique beads and supplies. Her craft pays homage to a historical cultural artistic statement whereby Dakota women adorned doctor bags with beads as a sign of gratitude for Western medicine doctors who helped their community.

### MONTANA CIRCLE OF AMERICAN MASTERS

## Ramey Growing Thunder 2024

Making the doctor bags not only allows her to keep a tradition practiced by few alive but also honors her efforts to become a doctor herself; on May 13, 2023, Ramey achieved her Ph.D. in interdisciplinary studies with an emphasis on cultural and linguistic anthropology, Native American studies, and educational leadership.

Throughout her career, Ramey has garnered numerous accolades. From winning her first Southwestern Association for Indian Arts award in 2003 for her cradle board to securing first-place honors in the beadwork division in 2022 and 2023 at the Heard Art Show in Phoenix, AZ, her journey has been marked by a string of successes.

Notable achievements include winning Best of Show at the Fort Peck Community College art show in 2005 and earning top honors in beadwork competitions such as the Northern Plains Indian Art Market and the Heard Art Show. Ramey's consistent recognition underscores her mastery of beadwork techniques, such as the Sioux two-lane stitch, and her ability to create intricately crafted pieces that captivate audiences and judges alike.

Ramey, drawing on the inspiration from the leadership and discipline instilled by her late father, embodies his enduring motto, "aim higher." Infused with this guiding ethos, she channels her efforts towards uplifting her community, leveraging her expertise and resources to empower others to enhance their incomes and bolster the local economy. Following her father's passing in 2022, Ramey took on the role of teaching her mother the art of crafting star quilts. Equipped with these newfound skills, her mother was able to supplement her income in the wake of her husband's passing. Furthermore, Ramey has taught her three sons, one of whom now supplies the community with star quilts for cultural events such as birthdays, funerals, and star quilt ceremonies. Beyond her immediate family, Ramey extends her reach by offering cultural arts classes to K-12 and GED students, teachers, and college students across several towns, including Fort Kipp, Brockton, Poplar, Wolf Point, Frontier, Oswego, and Frazer. These educational initiatives encompass a variety of traditional crafts, including moccasin making, beaded jewelry making, and ribbon skirt making, and have helped students to support their families and preserve their cultural traditions for future generations. For these efforts, Ramey received the Montana Ambassador Educator of the Year award in 2023.

## Mike Ryan

Over the course of his 45-year career in crafting Western and working boots and shoes, Mike Ryan has meticulously crafted over 5,000 pairs of custom boots for clients spanning from Montana to the broader Western region. With an unwavering dedication to preserving the heritage and enduring legacy of Western leatherwork, Mike has painstakingly crafted each pair, ensuring that his craftsmanship embodies the essence of tradition, durability, and timeless style.

In Montana's vast and rugged landscape, Western boots have long served as essential attire within the ranching, rodeo, and outdoor work culture, symbolizing both practical necessity and iconic Western heritage, with roots dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. The demand for quality work footwear, essential for ranching, logging, mining, and other outdoor occupations, has endured and is closely entwined with the development of civic and cultural communities. Mike's work not only meets this demand but embodies a connection to Montana's cultural heritage and values, and it reflects the enduring tradition of boot making, which has remained essentially unchanged for over 160 years.

Growing up outside Brusett, Montana, Mike developed an interest in boot and shoemaking, inspired by a local shoe repair shop in Jordan that served area ranching communities. After his service in the Navy, Mike returned to Montana and gained foundational skills at Al's Bootery in Billings before delving into custom boot making under the guidance of Mike Ives. Working at Boyce Tack & Western store for six years further honed his expertise before he eventually opened his own shop in Helena in 1986. Here, he not only provided shoe repair services but also built a loyal following for his custom boots. Many of these clients have become repeat customers, a testament to the quality and style of his work. Over the years, Mike has continued to refine his craft through collaborations with other boot and saddle makers. He has even traveled out of state to learn custom shoe making, ensuring he could cater to a diverse clientele in his community.

Mike's boots stand as a testament to the rich tradition of Western leatherwork, offering a diverse range of styles from functional work boots to intricately designed rodeo and dress boots, each crafted

### MONTANA CIRCLE OF AMERICAN MASTERS

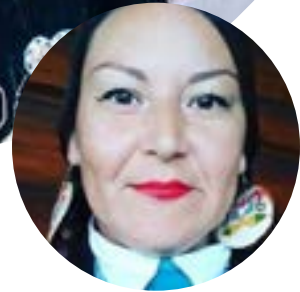
Mike Ryan  
2024

with precision and passion. According to Mike Korn, friend and client of four decades, "Each of Mike's boots are hand-made, literally constructed from the ground up, from measuring a customer's feet, crafting a personal last (the form on which the boot is built), cutting and sewing the various elements together made from a wide variety of leathers from bull hide to exotics, along with adding any kind of decorative stitching that a customer may desire." As stated by Korn, these customers range from working cowboys and foresters, to gentlemen ranchers, and all those "who ride the concrete canyons of towns and urban areas."

Today, Mike serves as a tradition bearer, an inspiration for the next generation of boot makers, and the owner of a cultural institution, Ryan's Boot & Shoe Repair. Korn refers to Mike's shop as a "cultural experience," a space where members of the Western community congregate around Mike's work bench, sharing coffee and current events between customers. Korn describes this space as "a maze of stitching equipment, sewing machines and tools, each dedicated to particular purpose and process." It is within this maze, and around this boot-piled work bench, that Mike has imparted traditional handcrafting techniques and methods to employee over the years, including his daughter, with some of his protégées venturing out to start businesses of their own.

Through his participation in cultural events and collaborations, Mike's impact also extends beyond his shop. During the mid-1980s, he began collaborating with the staff of the Montana Folklife Project, which resulted in interviews and photographs of his work being included in their collection, available to the public through the Montana Historical Society's archives. Additionally, Mike has participated in the Montana Folk Festival as a folk arts demonstrator, sharing not only his own story but also the rich heritage of Montana with thousands of festival-goers. Mike's story has been featured in numerous articles in Montana newspapers and magazines, including *Rural Montana* (the Montana Electric Cooperative Magazine), the *Helena Independent Record*, and the *Butte Standard*, sharing his work with the public.





## Olivia "Rose" Williamson

Raised within the rich cultural tapestry of the Crow Indian Reservation in southeast Montana, Olivia "Rose" Williamson is not only a talented bead artist and fashion designer but a proud ambassador of her heritage. With a deep reverence for the traditions passed down by her ancestors, Rose carries the flame of her culture into the future, ensuring its continued vibrancy through exquisite beadwork and clothing designs that bridge tradition and modernity. According to Rose, her art is "made for the hundreds of future Crow kids yet to be born."

As the owner and operator of Lady Pompadour Beadwork and Design, Rose has garnered widespread recognition within the Apsáalooke community and across the Northern Plains. Renowned for her unparalleled expertise in traditional beadwork, Rose is affectionately referred to by friend Carrie Moran McCleary as a "certified bead florist," further stating that Rose's old-school Apsáalooke florals stand out as unmatched in their community. Rose's mastery extends beyond these florals to encompass a diverse range of traditional and modern Apsáalooke clothing, intricate horse gear, moccasins, fully beaded outfits, and powwow attire, a testament to her years as a powwow dancer. Each piece she creates pays homage to the enduring traditions that have shaped her community's way of life and reflects her decades of beading and sewing. Furthermore, they embody the techniques she has mastered since learning to bead and sew from her mother at the age of seven, as well as the knowledge she gained from numerous mentors in the years that followed.

Throughout her career, Rose has achieved numerous notable milestones and accolades. In 2005, her talent was honored with the prestigious "Best in Show" award for a beaded Crow-style cradleboard at the American Indian Higher Education Consortium. In 2021, Rose was recognized when she received first place for her contemporary work at the Native Days Art Show in Crow Agency. Rose's artistic prowess has continued to earn her acceptance into esteemed events such as the Native Peoples Market in Rapid City, South Dakota, and the renowned Heard Indian Art Market in both 2022 and 2023, further establishing her as a prominent figure within her community.

Rose's work has graced both runways and cultural centers alike.

MONTANA CIRCLE  
OF AMERICAN  
MASTERS

Olivia "Rose"  
Williamson

2024

Her jewelry has adorned the showcases of esteemed Crow fashion designers, including Designs by Della and Plains Soul models. On the runway, Rose's original designs have captivated audiences at events such as the Montana Folk Festival's First Peoples' Fashion Show and the Uplifting Artists Fashion Show and Art Gala at the Seattle Art Museum. Through these platforms, she has not only showcased her talent but also shared the rich heritage of Crow culture with a wider audience. Additionally, the Western Heritage Center of Billings has recognized Rose's artistic prowess by featuring her crafted Apsáalooke-designed, acrylic-painted rawhide necklace and earring set, further solidifying her status as a respected artist and cultural ambassador.

Rose also donates and uses her work to raise awareness on critical issues faced by the Native community. The Billings Urban Indian Health and Wellness Center commissioned Rose to complete a beaded wall hanging, which was used as a billboard and handbill across the state of Montana. This piece featured an image that would encourage community members to screen for colorectal cancer—an image of an Apsáalooke family in front of the Apsáalooke mountains, featuring the sky, trees, and grasslands. Further, Rose is a strong advocate for Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP). She has participated in art shows, walks, and other activities that raise awareness of MMIP, such as her textile, acrylic, and mixed-media submissions to the Emerson Center for the Arts and Culture's exhibit "We Are Still Here And This is Our Story: Revisited."

According to Charlene Johnson, Founder and Executive Director for Plenty Doors, Rose was instrumental in aiding the nonprofit in starting the annual Apsáalooke Community Market, assisted businesses in applying for the annual Indian Equity Fund, and completed a brochure highlighting local businesses and events on the reservation. Furthermore, Rose's initiative in founding the Facebook page "All Native Nations Entrepreneurs" has provided a vital platform for promoting Native artists and businesses while disseminating valuable information on grants and entrepreneurship. Her efforts have established a foundation for Indigenous entrepreneurs to connect with a wider audience, reflecting her dedication to her community. Rose envisions Indigenous entrepreneurship as the key for Tribal communities to overcome challenges and prosper, both economically and spiritually.