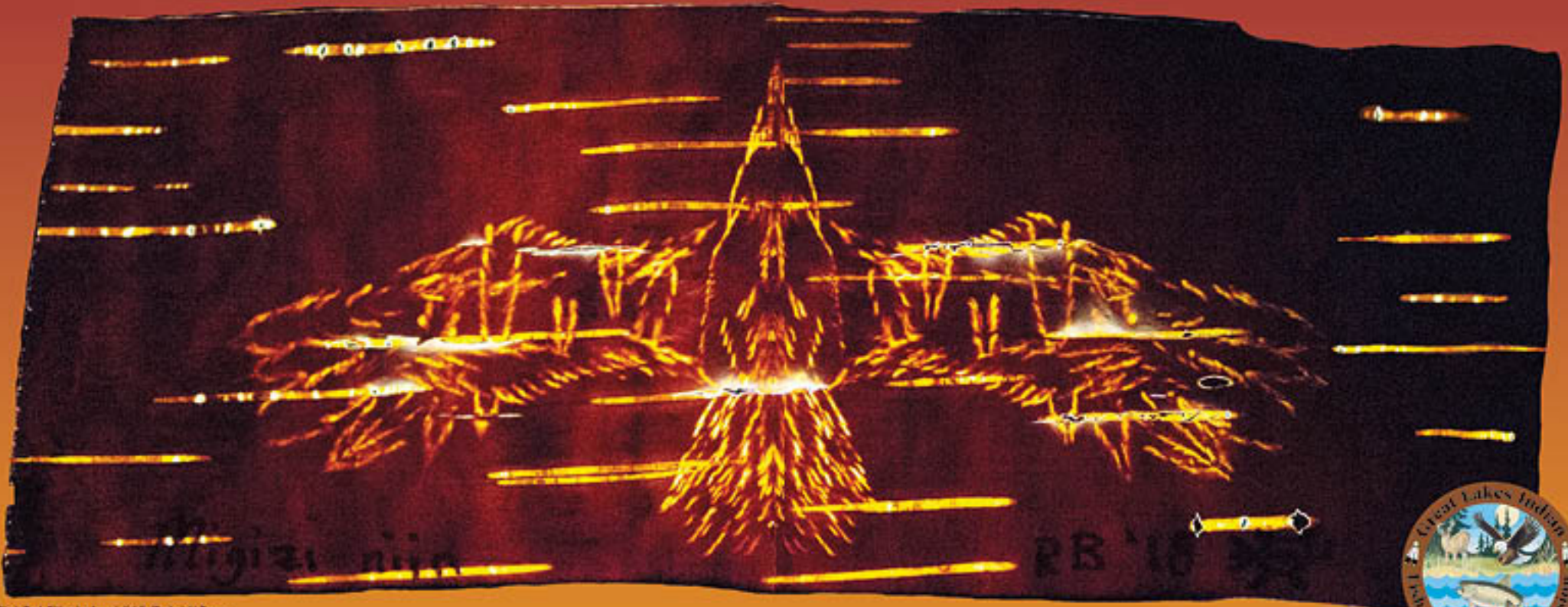


# Mazinibaganjigan

dental pictograph on birch bark



Birch Bark Etching by Awanigichik (Roderick) Bruce  
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# Mazinibaganjigan

Mazinibaganjigan is the art of making pictures or patterns on birch bark using careful bites of the teeth. The best bark for doing this is harvested in the spring and peeled apart into thin layers. One of the layers is folded—usually two or three, but sometimes up to 16 times—so that it can fit in the mouth. The artist then bites delicately to create a design that has been visualized in the mind.

The eyetooth (canine tooth of the upper jaw) is the primary tooth used to create imprints. This seems appropriate since the tooth has to “see” the image while it’s being created. Artists who have developed their skill can complete a birch bark biting in one sitting and without looking at their progress.



Some birch bark biters use different teeth to create different effects. One tooth might be used to make lines, while others are used for detailing. Varying the intensity of the bite is another way artists make their creations unique, changing how much light comes through in certain areas. Generally, only very light pressure can be used overall, or the bark will tear.

Birch bark biting is a pre-contact Ojibwe art form. In an oral history story shared by birch bark biter Awanigiizhik (Roderick) Bruce (pictured above) of the Turtle Mountain Ojibwe, he says he was told that birch bark biting was taught by the babies. “Small teething toys were made of paper birch and were filled with maple sugar. If the baby was sick, other medicines were added. When the babies would bite the toys, small indentations from their developing teeth were imparted onto the birch bark surface. The parents saw this and the art of birch bark biting was born.”

Bitings may have been used to create hunting and fishing maps, or to pass on cultural and ceremonial knowledge between generations. Other sources describe the art as being used similar to wampum belts to commemorate exchanges between different groups. Bruce says that bitings were used as designs for quillwork, where the bitings were laid on top of birch bark (e.g. basket) or leather (e.g. moccasins) and then embroidered using quills. It may have been used similarly as patterns for bead work.

As birch trees struggle with the onset of unfavorable environmental factors, the bark of our ancestors is still being bitten today. This ancient art form, a sheer glimmer of past generations, sending beauty forward.

Birch bark artist Awanigiizhik (Roderick) Bruce was taught the practice and oral history of birch bark biting by Denise Lajimodiere, Turtle Mountain Ojibwe. The biting depicted on the front of this poster was created in Lac Courte Oreilles on June 12, 2018 and took approximately 10 minutes to finish. The Ojibwe words on the bottom left translate to “I am eagle.”

*Actual size of the biting (quarter used for comparison).*

