



Butler Palmer and students in the First Peoples House. PHOTO: NIK WEST

THE BIGGEST BUTTON BLANKET IN THE WORLD

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A button blanket is important to Indigenous peoples of the Pacific North West for many reasons. Like a totem pole, it tells stories of people, places and events; it represents power and prestige; demonstrates extraordinary skill and sophisticated artistry, and creates a unique way of learning and knowing.

That's why Dr. Carolyn Butler Palmer, associate professor of History in Art at the University of Victoria, in collaboration with Tahltan Nation artist, curator, and consultant Peter Morin, decided to create a project to make the biggest button blanket in the world.

"We were looking for a project where students could learn in both western and Indigenous ways, one where there are many teachers and one that would have a big impact," says Butler Palmer, who is also UVic's Williams Legacy Chair in Modern and Contemporary Arts of the Pacific Northwest.

The Big Button Blanket Project springs from

Butler Palmer's interest in Pacific Northwest arts from 1860 to the present, and Morin's artistic and curatorial work on issues of Indigenous identity. "We know that textile artists like those working on button blankets have often been unrecognized," says Butler Palmer. "So we wanted to create a button blanket that couldn't be missed."

The project is underway this fall, as students in Butler Palmer's Special Topics in History in Art class learn about the history of buttons, blankets, and button blankets while honing their sewing and design skills on the monumental blanket.

"The work takes place in the Ceremonial Hall of UVic's First Peoples House," says Morin. "It is an inspirational space for students, and we are fortunate to have elders and expert button blanket makers who are able to come to share their stories and knowledge."

Morin says that it is a big project for several reasons: the blanket itself is huge—it will be eight metres by six metres when it is complete

—the stories elders have to share are important, and the impact the work has on students and on the community is also significant.

Butler Palmer and Morin emphasize that the project is one that everyone in the community can be involved with. "We will need more than 4,000 buttons to decorate this Big Blanket," says Butler Palmer. "And we're hoping people will donate them during our Big Blanket Button Drive planned for this fall."

In January, Morin, who is also a performance artist, will celebrate the completion of the Big Button Blanket in a dance with Rebecca Belmore of Dance Victoria, recent winner of the Governor General's Award in Visual Arts. The Big Blanket will then be displayed in UVic's Legacy Art Gallery.

"This is a real community effort," says Morin. "We couldn't do it without support from partners in the Tahltan Nation and in the community of Victoria. This Big Blanket will have a very big story to tell."

IF YOU HAVE BUTTONS...

The Big Button Blanket Project needs buttons! If you have a stash, why not donate a few to this extraordinary effort? Preferred buttons are those with holes through the body of the button, rather than plastic or metal shanks on the back of the button. Buttons can be dropped off now at the Legacy Art Gallery, at 630 Yates St. The gallery is open Wednesday to Saturday, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. For further information, call 250-721-6562.

As Williams Legacy Chair in Modern and Contemporary Arts of the Pacific Northwest, Carolyn Butler Palmer conducts research with First Nations people and communities, research on and about the University of Victoria's Williams Collection, and community-based research.

Peter Morin is a member of the Tahltan Nation. He works to support indigenous ways of knowing and create spaces for learning in both western and Indigenous knowledge systems.

Community partners include the Tahltan People, First Peoples House director Ruth Young, Legacy Art Gallery director Mary Jo Hughes, and Dance Victoria producer Stephen White.

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