

American Masterpieces  
Artistic Legacy of  
California Indian Basketry



March 2009 - February 2010

Exhibition Program





GOVERNOR ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER

March 14, 2009

*American Masterpieces: Artistic Legacy of California Indian Basketry*

It is a pleasure to extend my greetings to all those visiting this fantastic exhibit here at The California Museum.

Our Golden State is home to people from a wide variety of backgrounds, and these baskets celebrate the culture of California's Indian tribes. From cooking and water storage to ceremonial events, these baskets have many uses and are an important part of California Indian heritage. Many of them are being shown for the first time, and I have no doubt that you will enjoy this beautiful display.

I thank all those who had a hand in this project, including the National Endowment for the Arts's American Masterpieces program, the California Arts Council and the California Indian Heritage Center at the California Department of Parks and Recreation. Their hard work has allowed many to appreciate this great collection and the traditions of California's Indians.

Please accept my very best wishes for a wonderful visit future success.

Sincerely,

Arnold Schwarzenegger

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STATE OF CALIFORNIA

**NATIVE AMERICAN HERITAGE COMMISSION**

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Arnold Schwarzenegger, Governor



March 11, 2009

The American Masterpieces exhibit, *Artistic Legacy of California Indian Basketry*, represents an important first for California State Parks and the development of the California Indian Heritage Center which will replace the current State Indian Museum in Sacramento. It is the first time that this many baskets, under the stewardship of California State Parks, will be available for public viewing at one location. Because of space limitations, only a small percentage of these tribal treasures can now be seen at the State Indian Museum. Upon the completion of the California Indian Heritage Center, now projected to be 2016, the overall square footage will grow from the current 3400 to around 125,000 square feet.

You will see that beginning in the distant past California Indian basketry had a roll in virtually every aspect of traditional California cultures: hunting, gathering, processing and cooking food, personal adornment, and spiritual practice. Contemporary baskets will provide tangible examples that California Indian cultures continue to evolve and find new ways to express themselves. I hope you will enjoy this opportunity to share in this rich tradition that is both very old and very new.

Sincerely,

Larry Myers  
Chair, California Indian Heritage Center Foundation  
Executive Secretary, California Native American Heritage Commission





CALIFORNIA ARTS COUNCIL  
CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE IN THE ARTS SINCE 1976

ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER, GOVERNOR  
MURIEL JOHNSON, DIRECTOR

March 5, 2009

**Welcome to the wonderful world of Indian basketry!**

These seldom-seen baskets are part of California's history and the exhibit is funded by a National Endowment for the Arts *American Masterpieces* grant.

There are more than three thousand baskets in the state's collection. For more than two years, the California Arts Council, California Parks Department and members of the California Indian Basket Association and the Native American community have collaborated closely to bring this exhibition to the public. Fortunately, The California Museum for History, Women and the Arts offered to show the collection in this handsome space.

We hope this exhibition, or a portion of it, will tour California in museums, libraries and parks throughout California following its showing here in Sacramento.

It has been a great opportunity and pleasure to work with so many agencies, organizations and talented people to bring you these *American Masterpieces: Artistic Legacy of California Indian Basketry*.

Enjoy.

Muriel Johnson  
Director, California Arts Council

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State of California • The Resources Agency  
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

Arnold Schwarzenegger, Governor  
Ruth Coleman, Director

March 6, 2009

It is with great pleasure that California State Parks, in conjunction with the California Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts, is able to present *American Masterpieces: Artistic Legacy of California Indian Basketry*. This collaboration of public agencies, along with the participation of our premiere location: The California Museum, made this exhibit possible.

These beautiful treasures, which will soon form a core exhibit in the new California Indian Heritage Center, are stunning examples of the artistry and innovation of California Native weavers. It is rare to have this amount of baskets on display representing so many California tribes. California State Parks is honored to be able to present these baskets for everyone to enjoy!

Sincerely,

Ruth Coleman  
Director, California State Parks



California Indian basketry is one of the great textile traditions of the world, extending some 5,000 years into the past.

Encompassing remarkably diverse biological environments, nearly every Native community within the state excelled at basketry, creating a marvelous palette of distinctive, regional weaving traditions – from the rainy redwood

forests of the North Coast to the arid expanse of Death Valley.

Admired for their aesthetic merits, the role and development of basketry was born of necessity, rooted in a way of life that relied on baskets to collect, transport, process and store diverse food resources. Strong, durable, lightweight, and often watertight, Native baskets were perfected to suit local food collecting economies. They were cooked in and eaten out of. Winnowing seeds, sifting acorn flour, storing water, serving guests, cradling infants – all were done with baskets.

## What makes a Masterpiece?

Though beauty may be in the eyes of the beholder, and though many baskets exhibit wonderful qualities, there are certain factors that contribute to exceptional pieces of basket art.

**Technique.** A weaver's technique – her mastery of the various weaving techniques practiced by her people. This entails her use of even tension while weaving, and control of the foundation, which results in a gradual and elegant shaping of the basket, as well as a smooth surface.

**Materials.** A basket is only as fine and beautiful as the material that goes into it. The great weavers were extremely diligent in the selection and preparation (splitting, trimming, sizing) of their weaving materials. This also meant persistent tending of the plants and their environments, which fosters growth of fine quality material.



**Execution of Design.** The conceptualization and execution of designs, whether restrained and conservative, or complicated over-all patterns, great weavers have the ability to evenly space and render their designs with great crispness and clarity. One might say their designs appear “painterly” – so well defined, they look as though they were painted on afterwards.

Eliza Coon, a Pomo weaver, poses with her nearly completed basket. Her ability to manipulate some 250 sticks, and maintain even tension throughout, has resulted in a smooth, graceful growing and receding of the basket's circumference.



Baskets were inseparable from daily life. Homes were well stocked with baskets of more than a dozen different types – they hung from ceilings, were stacked inside one another, and lined the walls. In addition to their essential role in the food economy, baskets fulfilled a broad spectrum of roles in Native societies. The origin of basketry is often found in tribal mythology – as the basket prefigures the arrival of human beings.



Presentation basket for serving acorn soup. Belle Luluk (Wintun) c.1910

Baskets represented valuable property, often beautified beyond any functional need, serving as important symbols of reciprocal relationships among families and communities. They were also expressions of family wealth and status. In sponsoring a ceremonial gathering, a village headman and his family served plentiful amounts of acorn soup in especially fine and decorative serving baskets – at times so large it took four men to carry – in a grand display of prosperity.

Baskets have always been instrumental in ceremonial contexts: holding water for the ritual washing of mourners at a funeral; as a container for medicine used in healing ceremonies; inverted and tapped as a drum to accompany singers praying for a good acorn crop. A fine basket might cover the face of the deceased for burial. At memorial observances, baskets were displayed on long poles and ritually destroyed as chief indicators of valued property, and thus respect for the family of the dead.

A woman spent much of her time involved in the various stages of basket making. As baskets needed to be replaced on a regular basis, weaving was not a hobby, but a necessary activity the family depended on. Socially, the skill of a weaver was a measure of her success – as a valued provider to her family and community, and an artist with abilities worthy of admiration.



The sewing strands in this Timbisha Shoshone cap are made from willow shoots. Split to the size of threads, they average 44 to an inch.



Feast baskets filled with acorn soup near Bidwell Bar. Photo by John Hudson, 1902. Courtesy the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago.



Pomo burden basket, c.1900.

Yokuts seed beater, c.1920



Pomo feather basket, c.1910

## Seed Gathering

Though acorns have been widely recognized as a staple of Native cultures throughout much of California, the development of the tightly woven burden basket is linked to seed gathering. The use of seeds – about three dozen varieties – as an important food resource extends back several thousand years, and probably pre-dates acorn usage. Seeds were collected from shrubs, flowering plants, and native grasses that were once abundant. The conical shape of the basket, with its wide mouth, facilitated the gathering of seeds as they were whisked into the basket by a seed beater held in the other hand. Seeds were placed in a shallow tray, rubbed to loosen the husks, then winnowed by gently tossing them into the air to separate seeds from chaff. The seeds were then parched by adding a few hot coals, and moving them about in the winnowing tray. This process amazed French explorer Jean Francois de La Perouse near Monterey in 1776, who observed:

*“They turn these vessels with such dexterity and rapidity that they succeed in causing grain to swell and burst without burning the basket, though made of combustible material.”*

Once parched, the seeds were ground into fine flour and prepared as a thin soup. Seeds could also be added to acorn bread (i.e. seeded bread). Seeds with high oil content were pounded into a paste, rolled into small balls, and eaten dry. Because of its continually expanding shape, a thousand sticks might be necessary for the foundation of a close-twined burden basket.

Western Mono woman carrying a burden basket. Photo by George Wharton James, c.1900. Courtesy Autry National Center, Southwest Museum, Los Angeles.



## Social and Ceremonial Life

Native communities recognized forms of basketry that transcended utilitarian needs. Among the Pomo of Lake, Sonoma, and Mendocino Counties, while a variety of twined basketry served the tasks of food collecting and processing, the entire class of coiled basketry was reserved for gift and ceremonial wares. Among the most valuable and prestigious was a basket woven so that its surface was completely covered with feathers: brilliant red from the acorn woodpecker, green from the mallard duck, yellow of the oriole, and/or blue from the western bluebird. The tiny feathers were meticulously interwoven into the basket. For further embellishment, the “feather basket” was trimmed with clamshell disc beads (Pomo money), and abalone shell pendants.

Within Pomoan society, feather baskets constituted significant wealth, representing an apex of value and beauty. In the old days, the basket was often



*The Dowry.* Painting by Grace Hudson, 1902. Courtesy the Grace Hudson Museum, Ukiah.

suspended from the ceiling of the house. They served no practical purpose, but instead functioned as supreme gifts that might accompany a dowry, document a birth or wedding, or serve as payment to a healer. The weaver of a feather basket might abstain from food while weaving as part of a formal ritual observance.



Luiseno basket



Pomo beaded basket.



## Regional Traditions

California's diverse regional environments – ranging from rainforest to arid desert – are reflected in the basketry and cultures of Native Californians. Weaving materials, techniques, design traditions, and basket forms often exhibit a regional-cultural style – aesthetics shared by multiple tribal communities.

In the north, twined basketry generally incorporates the overlay of bear grass to provide a light-white field for design work in dark tones of maidenhair and woodwardia ferns, or redbud. Plain twining with overlay of bear grass on conifer root is emblematic of basketry from this region.



Atsugewi basket with bear grass and redbud.

In contrast, basketry from the Southern and Central Coast often includes Juncus as a primary sewing material. Color variations (yellow to red-brown) appear within each stem, creating a variegated appearance to the basket's background.

In Owens Valley, on the edge of the Great Basin, entire baskets were often made entirely of willow, with the only color variation resulting from either sun drying the willow shoots with their remaining layer of inner bark – which turns brown – or by painting willow strands with a dark dye from ephedra root.



Paiute basket entirely of willow

## Change and Innovation

Native basketry has never been static. Throughout the entire history of Native basketry in the region, change has been a constant phenomena. New techniques and food collecting/processing strategies, influences from neighbors, and ever evolving standards of style and aesthetics, have been a normal aspect of Native life for thousands of years. With the arrival of Europeans, and later Americans, Native weavers were introduced to an array of new materials – and ideas.

Glass beads were quickly incorporated into basketry. Whereas native beads of shell had traditionally been woven onto baskets, providing a white design relief against a field of red feathers, the multi-colored glass beads provided weavers with an opportunity to create patterns exclusively of beads. However, as the hole in glass beads are much smaller than those made of shell, extremely fine sewing strands are required to pass through the bead and secure it to the surface.

Red worsted (yarn) has another popular new material. Yokuts weavers wove it into certain baskets, using it as a handy replacement for the bright red feathers of woodpecker. Weavers emulated European and American forms, including fruit compotes, lidded sugar bowls, tea cups and saucers.



Yokuts Treasure basket with yarn fringe.

Mary Benson (Pomo).  
Photo by Charles Carpenter, 1904.  
Courtesy the Field Museum of  
Natural History, Chicago.



## Virtuosity

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, California Indian basketry had become one of the most sought after art forms in America. Weavers responded with innovations, often modifying traditional forms, and refining techniques to superfine levels – exploring the limits of their abilities and imaginations. Between approximately 1890 and 1930, an era of unprecedented production and artistic innovation characterized Native weaving.

The “art basket” was made primarily for export, as an object of art, destined for the parlor shelves of wealthy Americans. For “professional” weavers, the art basket became part of a new economic strategy. Some weavers received national reputations, such as Washoe weaver Louisa Keyser [Dat-so-la-lee]. Degikup by Lena Dick (Washoe)



Mary Benson, Lena Dick, and Mabel McKay were exemplary basket weaving artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their works became distinctive, masterful examples of a traditional art form. Through their refined and uncompromising technique, personal artistic vision, and imagination, they created new baskets – anchored in tribal tradition – but carried to another level. Their virtuosity was a testament to their great skill as weavers, but also their desire to excel.



Mabel McKay (Wintun/Pomo)  
Photo by Spence Billington,  
1972. Courtesy Pacific  
Western Traders

## Into The 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Following a steady decline over the course of the past century and a half, the fate of Native basketry began to turn around in the late 1950's. One early effort to resuscitate basket making was led by Vivien Hailstone (Yurok/Karuk). Hailstone organized workshops pairing master weavers with students. She advocated widely the Native basketry was indeed worth saving.

By 1992, the California Indian Basketweavers Association had formed to “preserve, promote, and perpetuate California Indian basket weaving.” Through annual gatherings and workshops, CIBA has linked elder weavers with a new generation eager to learn the art. CIBA has challenged federal and state agencies that control public lands, regarding weaver's rights of access to materials, and the use of pesticides by forest service agencies, citing the inherent health risks to weavers.

In Native communities – where the link to a cultural heritage has often been damaged – re-learning this masterful textile tradition has found great relevance. Here, in the early stages of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this ancient art continues to resonate among a new generation of Native weavers as a source of great pride and a meaningful, inspirational connection to culture, family, and land.

Basket by Marlene  
Montgomery  
(A'isuge), 2006



Lois Conner (Chukchansi/  
Mono/Miwuk)  
Photo by Dugan Aguilar, 2006.





Mollie Duncan (Pomo)  
holding gift basket, c.1900.



It has always  
amazed  
me...the first  
person that  
walked into  
the forest,  
and come  
out with  
a basket.

—Vivien Hailstone  
(Yurok/Karuk/  
Hoopa Valley tribe)

## National Endowment for the Arts and the American Masterpieces Program

*American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Artistic Genius* is a major initiative to acquaint Americans with the best of their cultural and artistic legacy. Through American Masterpieces, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) sponsors performances, exhibitions, tours, and educational programs across different art forms that reach large and small communities in all 50 states. The California Arts Council, as the state arts agency, coordinated with the NEA for the American Masterpieces: *Artistic Legacy of California Indian Basketry* project to present this exquisite collection from California State Parks at The California Museum for History, Women and the Arts in 2009.

The visual arts component of *American Masterpieces* celebrates the extraordinary and rich evolution of the visual arts in the United States. Visual arts genres range from American Impressionism to modern design, and include Native American arts, folk arts, and arts of the American West. Through the creation and touring of major exhibitions, art of the highest quality will be experienced by Americans in communities across the nation.

Former National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Dana Gioia said, “On the occasion of the Arts Endowment’s 40th anniversary, I’m delighted that we can celebrate our country’s artistic achievements with an exemplary American Masterpieces program. More than 2 million people are expected to attend American Masterpieces events and activities in communities ranging from Issaquah, Washington to New York City, from Crossville, Tennessee to Los Angeles.”

## About the California Arts Council

The California Arts Council’s mission is to advance California through the arts and creativity, with an emphasis on children and artistically underserved communities. California has more creative businesses and employees than any other state, and arts education is crucial for our K-12 students and community programs. California Arts Council programs and initiatives reach all regions of the state, and almost two-thirds of the agency’s funding is provided for grants, initiatives and technical assistance for local organizations and programs.

*American Masterpieces: Artistic Legacy of California Indian Basketry* is the third American Masterpieces project that the California Arts Council has sponsored and coordinated. The previous two were *American Tap Masterpieces: The Hollywood Journey* and *Música Festiva de las Misiones (Festive Music of the Missions)*, music from California’s Hispano-Mexican era in 2007 and 2008.

The *American Masterpieces* initiative presents arts that inform us of our cultural heritage based on the place where we live. They remind us that places of state – and national – historical significance are located where we walk every day. The *American Masterpieces* program in the Golden State recognize that Californians have been artistically creative for centuries – even before the official state of California came into existence, and since it was founded over a century and a half ago. Along with California State Parks and The California Museum, the California Arts Council is proud to present *American Masterpieces: Artistic Legacy of California Indian Basketry*.



## California State Parks

California State Parks, stewards of California's cultural legacy, has operated the California State Indian Museum since 1947. Visited by students, local residents and tourists the State Indian Museum is honored to exhibit a collection basketry, beadwork, ceremonial regalia, hunting and fishing artifacts associated with daily life of many of California's tribes.

The State Indian Museum will transition to the new California Indian Heritage Center (CIHC) to be built on a 43-acre site in West Sacramento at the confluence of the Sacramento and American Rivers. This facility promises to be world class in content and design honoring the diversity and history of California's tribes by presenting traditional as well as contemporary culture. Featuring formal exhibit galleries, a research center, shop, restaurant and grounds restored to their native state, the Center will be home to the extensive basketry collection featured in the American Masterpiece: Artistic Legacy of California Basketry exhibit. The CIHC is guided in its development by the Native Indian Heritage Commission and the CIHC Task Force.

## The California Museum

The California Museum's mission is to engage, educate and enlighten people about California's rich history and its unique contribution through ideas, innovation, art and culture. Through interactive and innovative experiences, the Museum seeks to inspire people to dream the California dream and dare to make their mark on history. The exhibit premieres at The California Museum and will run from March 2009 to February 2010. For other traveling exhibition locations, visit [www.cihc.parks.ca.gov](http://www.cihc.parks.ca.gov)





**Special Thanks to:**

**Ileana Maestas, Project Manager and Curator, State Indian Museum**

**Brian Bibby, Guest Curator**

**Renato Consolini, Exhibit Designer-Coordinator**

**Bruce Stiny, Chief Curator, State Museum Resource Center**

**Theresa D'Onofrio, Graphic Designer, California Arts Council**

**Josie S. Talamantez, Chief of Programs, California Arts Council**

**Catherine A. Taylor, District Superintendent, Capital District State Museums and Historic Parks**

**And the many other staff of California State Parks Capital District,**

**the California Arts Council, and The California Museum  
who contributed to the development of this exhibition.**