



# LAND

# PERSPECTIVES

THE HEARD MUSEUM IN PHOENIX exhibition explores the unique relationship American Indians have with the land and how it's conveyed through their art.

By **BETH DUCKETT**

1. Tony Abeyta (Navajo, b. 1965), *Canyon*, 2004, oil on canvas. Gift of American Indian Art Magazine.

In 1934, San Ildefonso potters Maria and Julian Martinez left their home in New Mexico and headed east. Their plan was to see a tribal exposition in Alabama and visit John Collier, the U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, who had invited the couple to Washington, D.C.

Along the way, the artists gathered samples of clay from each state they visited, placing the earthy material into marked plastic bags, says curator Janet Cantley with the Heard Museum in Phoenix. From this collection, the artists created 18 small bowls and jars designed to evoke the unique landscapes of their trip; Julian decorated each pot to portray his perspective of the state or district where the clay came from.

In *Personal Journeys: American Indian Landscapes*, an exhibition at the Heard Museum that explores the individual relationships Native Americans have with land and how it's expressed through their art, five of the ceramic pots are displayed under glass. The vessels,

gifts of Dr. and Mrs. E. Daniel Albrecht, depict Julian's interpretation of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, Maryland's undulating mountains and valleys, the Potomac River in Washington, and Virginia's mountains and fields. "Kansas, made with humor, is a flat plate with no design. It is just polished in typical San Ildefonso style," Cantley explains.

In the book *We Are Still Here: American Indians Since 1890*, authors Peter Iverson and Wade Davies describe how the Martinezes worked together to produce the black-on-blackware pottery that they became known for. Maria, in particular, was a master among artists at creating the pottery itself, reaching new heights in shape, firing and finish. Julian used his artistic ability to adapt 19<sup>th</sup>-century and pre-contact designs onto the pots.

By the 1930s, Maria was earning more than \$5,000 a year, a prosperous sum at the time. Well known by the time of her death in 1980, Maria passed down







her knowledge and skills to students, family and tribal members. Her success, both artistically and financially, inspired other Native American artists during that time, Iverson and Davies wrote.

“Indian artists in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did more than find ways to make a living; they positively influenced non-Indian perceptions of Native peoples and cultures,” the authors noted. “Since the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, non-Indians had increasingly acknowledged valuable contributions that Native peoples had made, and were still making, to the richness of American culture.”

Many of the artists in *Personal Journeys* produced work in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Like Maria and Julian, they were drawn to the land as subject matter, expressing their unique views through interpretive layers of historical events, cultural teachings, spiritual insights and individual creations.

Land has been, in short, a crucial topic. As described by the Heard Museum, Native landscapes in the visual arts signify a merging of process, physical place and cultural meaning. The loss of land, clearly, has been a universal experience for American Indians, and land itself has been a cause of conflict. Sacred landmarks,



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2. Norman Akers (Osage, b. 1958), *Spring Matrix*, 1999, oil on canvas. Gift of Morton and Estelle Sosland.
3. Pablita Velarde (Santa Clara, 1918-2006), *untitled*, 1966, watercolor on poster board. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Byron Harvey III.
4. Darren Vigil-Gray (Kiowa/Jicarilla, b. 1959), *Motherland of Basketmakers #16*, 2002, acrylic on canvas. Gift of Maxine and Stuart Applebaum.
5. Emmi Whitehorse (Navajo, b. 1956), *#513 Untitled*, 1985, acrylic and mixed media on canvas. Heard Museum purchase.

such as the Four Sacred Mountains, define territories, while origin stories point to locations passed down through generations.

Cantley, who curated the exhibit, says, “I wanted to show the unique relationship that Native Americans have with land and landscape. Looking at our collection, I selected pieces that reflected cultural teachings and mostly personal experiences, spiritual insights, to show the layering of influences that the land and landscapes have for Native artists.”

*Personal Journeys* features about 70 works of art—including textiles, ceramics, baskets and paintings—by roughly 50 different artists. Cantley says she wanted to look beyond flat art to include many mediums, with items such as a buckle and silver seed pots.

“A lot of the process involved finding artist statements that described either cultural teachings, emergent stories or their reflections on the land and the historical events that have occurred on the land,” Cantley continues. “As we know, Native Americans have a strong connection to the land. It has been a really important part of their history and the contested relationship they’ve had with the outsiders fighting for land is a universal one. Showing those kinds of stories





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through the land and landscape is my objective.”

*Havasupai Seed Corn*, by Havasupai/Hopi-Tewa jeweler Starlie Polacca III, was one of more than 240 miniature silver seed pots gifted to the museum by Norman L. Sandfield. On the museum label for the piece, Polacca describes the concept behind the Fabergé-inspired piece.

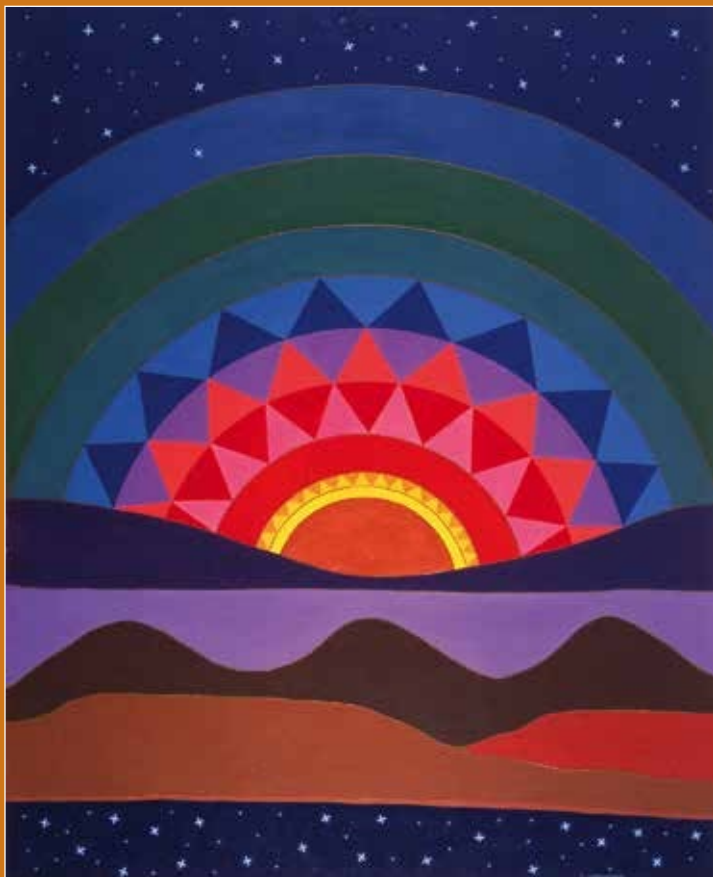
“The design on top is from the Havasupai Tribe,” she explains. “The bighorn sheep represents the Havasupai People. The birds are the spirits of the ancestors; the right hand, the good direction the child should follow. The baby is in a traditional Havasupai cradleboard. The seed corn is seed you’ll be planting next spring. You want to protect it as best you can.”

From a small silver seed pot the show’s collection runs the gamut to grand-scale paintings. In his 1999



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masterpiece *Spring Matrix*, Norman Akers relies on personal symbols to express his Osage heritage in relation to the past and present. Among the items depicted are an elk in deep water, an acorn and a spinning top. The artist also employs “ghostlike imagery, such as the tree trunks and human form,” to make the connection between the past and present, according to the museum. “These symbols evoke stories that are associated with the land, a central theme to Akers’ paintings.”

Akers, whose painting is displayed prominently on a red wall overlooking the exhibition space, says the work uses narrative to reveal his understandings of the world.

“The symbolism is rooted in creation stories overlaid with personal interpretations,” Akers elaborates. “This allows the painting to function as a metaphor for personal feelings. I tend to think of these stories as evolving over time, shifting to express the human condition. My work is about making connections between the present and past, and to define a contemporary experience of being connected to land.”

Celebrated artist Kay WalkingStick’s 1995 oilstick on paper, *The Vortex*, appears in the exhibition.



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6. Linda Lomahaftewa (Hopi/Choctaw, b. 1947), *New Mexico Sunset*, 1978, acrylic on canvas. Heard Museum purchase.
7. Lola S. Cody (Navajo, b. 1956), *The Grand Falls*, 2012, wool. Heard Museum purchase.
8. Maria & Julian Martinez (San Ildefonso, 1887-1980 & 1885-1943), *Colorado Clay Rocky Mountain Design*, 1934, ceramic. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. E. Daniel Albrecht.
9. Maria & Julian Martinez (San Ildefonso, 1887-1980 & 1885-1943), *Clay of District of Columbia Potomac River Design*, 1934, ceramic. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. E. Daniel Albrecht.
10. Dan Namingha (Hopi-Tewa, b. 1950), *Desert Bloom*, 2004, acrylic on canvas. Gift of Stephen and Lynda Nacht.

WalkingStick, a member of the Cherokee nation, says the Heard Museum purchased it from her when she was an artist in residence at the museum. In the diptych, the abstract half represents the continuum of human life. The artist says it was important for the work to not be viewed as a landscape painting; rather, she prefers that her compositions be seen as ideas about landscape and the earth.

"Obviously the vortex means the center—usually a powerful, swirling center, which draws things into it," WalkingStick explains of the piece. "And there is a four directions cross within it, which is the directions that Native people pray to but also represents other things like Gia, the astro sign for earth or a simple plus sign, and it's a Christian symbol, too, so it has a unifying power for me. And of course there is the desert, the land itself, which is a powerful center for all humanity."

Images of mountains, leaves and feathers adorn Navajo painter Emmi Whitehorse's abstract piece, *#513 Untitled*, in the exhibition.

Whitehorse, based in New Mexico, says her work revolves around light, space and color, and has always been about land and "about being aware of our surroundings and appreciating the beauty of nature."

"I am concerned that we are no longer aware of those," Whitehorse remarks. "The calm and beauty that is in my work I hope serves as a reminder of what is underfoot, of the exchange we make with nature."

*Personal Journeys* is on view through September 28, 2016. [u](#)

### *Personal Journeys: American Indian Landscapes*

**Through September 28, 2016**

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