

Lines in the Sand – Land

The “Land” installation includes 3 major categories: baskets, pottery, paintings/photography. Many of the exhibits in this installation were created by Cahuilla artists of the Coachella Valley. This summary will limit the discussion of baskets and pottery to Cahuilla produced art.

Cahuilla Indians

- Name means “masters” or “powerful one”.
- Originally inhabited an area of about 2400 square miles, including the Coachella Valley. Have resided in this area for more than 2,000 years.
- Hunters and gathers.
- Master basket makers. Women wove baskets. Men wove large storage bins.

Baskets

- Baskets predated pottery. The Cahuilla have woven baskets for over 2000 years.
- The Indians believe the Moon Maiden taught early tribal peoples how to weave baskets.
- Early baskets were strictly utilitarian. They were woven so tightly they held water, could be used for cooking and serving food as well as for gathering nuts and berries etc.
- Basket making began disappearing in the 1800’s when farm fencing and cattle destroyed native grasses. However, a basket-collecting craze swept the US in the early 1900’s bringing cash and changing basket-making to a work of art.
- Today, basket-making is again a dying art because materials are hard to find and young people don’t want to spend the time required to create baskets.
- Cahuilla baskets are coiled baskets. They come in three shapes: flat round baskets (hold food and gamble), round baskets (burden baskets and to hold water, cook food, etc.) and spherical baskets (mostly gift or ceremonial). They carry various designs: obvious (snakes, people, etc.), symbolic (swastika or whirling log design connoting good luck), and no interpretation (geometric designs that are just attractive).
- Gerald Clarke, Jr., (Cahuilla) was commissioned to create “Continuum Basket”, a large installation using a satellite dish and beer and cola cans. The installation was inspired by the baskets of master Cahuilla weavers. It addresses the disengagement with and destruction of our native habitat and confronts the high rates of alcoholism and diabetes in Native communities.

Pottery

- The Cahuilla began producing fired clay bowls around 1,500 AD.
- Vessels were utilitarian and used for the storage of food and water and for cooking.
- Most of the vessels made in Southern California (including the Coachella Valley) were not decorated. By contrast, Pueblo and other southwest cultures have a long history of employing elaborate, multi-color pottery designs.
- Due to the nature of shallow pit firing, pottery of Southern California is characterized by rich colors and distinctive “fire clouds”, which are valued for their aesthetic quality.

- Tony Soares (Metis/Portuguese) is reviving the Southern California method of bowl production by creating pottery and teaching local Native people the methods of their ancestors.

Photography, Paintings

- Cara Romero (Chemehuevi) – Photographic work addresses Native American social issues and tries to change the way people perceive Native Americans, especially women. “Naomi” is part of the First American Girl series depicting indigenous women as high fashion supermodels in traditional regalia. Naomi is surrounded by the art of her Chumash tribe, including baskets.
- Eva Slater – Known for California hard-edge style of painting (clean lines, broad areas of color, simplified forms with well-defined edges). She added delicate triangles which flow throughout her paintings. Her family often visited Palm Springs and she was inspired by the geometry of the desert. “San Jacinto Mountains” reflects subtle color changes to create a sense of atmosphere and depth.
- Agnes Pelton – Painter whose works were divided between the surreal abstract and representational desert paintings. After time in New York and New Mexico, she moved, in 1931, to Cathedral City, CA and lived and painted there until her death.
- James Swinnerton – Considered the dean of desert artists, Swinnerton started as a ground breaking cartoonist. In New York, he acquired TB. He returned to California in an attempt to save his life and lived in Palm Springs and Cathedral City. As his health improved, he explored the deserts of California, Arizona, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico until his death at age 99.