

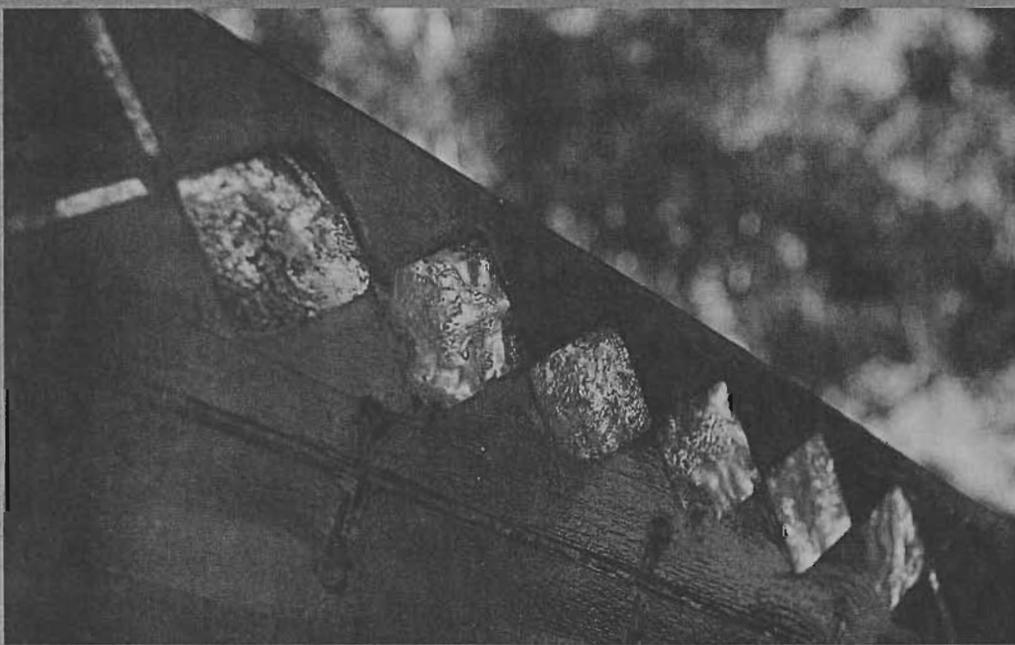
# Into the stream



Native Americans and museums  
moving to mainstream understanding.

By Cindi Moar Alvitre

There was a day when it was next to impossible to coax an Indian into a museum. Some resented the stagnant displays that "make us look like we are all dead!" Others sank into deep frustration at the realization that, historically, Native people have been excluded from participating in the determination and care for objects they regarded as personal, communal, and sacred.



**Previous spread:** *Mo'omat Ahiko* t'at and crew on open water, September 1998.

**Above:** Marcus Lopez (Chumash) repairing the *Mo'omat Ahiko* t'at, 1997.

**Right:** Detail of the *Mo'omat Ahiko* t'at. Abalone inlay by L. Frank Manriquez (Tongva).

Photos by Frank Magallanes and Althea Edwards.

"As my father held my hand, he would curiously read each label.  
'No, that's not right—we weren't mission Indians, and we aren't extinct!'"

Some Indians looked suspiciously and critically upon anyone who collaborated with museums or anthropologists. We have traveled a long road to get past the doors and into the archives of culture and history—our culture and *our* history.

A shared way of seeing among Native Americans is that *all life is sacred*—including artifacts, a category of things Western culture perceives as inanimate. A story that has circulated within the California Indian communities talks about a basket that “jumped” off an archival shelf when a medicine woman came to visit the collections. When asked about the incident, she emphasized the obvious—at least to a Native person: “It is a living relative and needs to be fed!” These *relatives* have been separated from their families for many years. Since the mid-18th century, they have traveled a long and separate road as souvenirs, trophies, and testimonies of the colonial exploitation of California Indians. During that separation, there has been an emphasis on the construction of who we are (the exotic Other) based on anthropological templates that excluded the producers of the objects as well as the objects’ role within the communities from which they were removed. This approach has failed to consider how Southern California Indian people experience their relationship to these “relatives” and to the empirical world.

Like the opening last September of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, D.C., the rededication of *People of California* and *People of the Southwest: Changing Traditions* at the Southwest Museum this January attests to the changing relationships between Native American communities—who have long felt estranged from most museums—and museum institutions. Indian people are now taking advantage of the opportunity to reclaim their stories and tell them their own way.

Artifacts, we believe, are not isolated objects, but tangible expressions that are intimately linked to a specific place and space, a certain community and people. Their voyage does not cease because a community has changed. The acquisition of artifacts is not necessarily the last stage of their career. When communities of origin are involved, their path can continue. At the Southwest’s rededication, Native and non-Native communities will have the opportunity to revisit a museum space that will continue the journeys of some of those objects.

Of special note in the rededicated halls are the contemporary sections, which present visionaries, artists, and community activists who have participated in the creation of the *People of California* and *People of the Southwest: Changing Traditions* exhibitions. Personalities such as Lorene Sisquoc (Cahuilla/Chiricahua Apache), curator at the Sherman Indian High School Museum, provide insight into how tradition stays alive among students who listen to hip-hop—and who also weave intricately patterned, coiled juncus baskets.

Artifacts that have been removed from their communities of origin still reflect the ceremonies, symbolism, gift giving, payment, inheritances, and dowries of Southern California Indian people and their communities. When steatite bowls are reconnected and reclaimed by contemporary artists, they go beyond being just “a trade item from Catalina Island.” L. Frank Manriquez (Tongva) and Ted Garcia (Chumash) exemplify, through their work, the continued diversity and symbolic richness of steatite—as bowls, effigies, and ▶

## People of California and People of the Southwest

Kim Walters Curator

In January 2005, the opening of *People of California* and *People of the Southwest: Changing Traditions* brings a fresh face and Native voices to the exhibition spaces of the Southwest Museum of the American Indian. As the accompanying article by Cindi Alvitre details, the creation of these exhibitions speaks to a new relationship between the museum and Indian communities. Alvitre and other Native advisors have collaborated with curators in the selection of objects and the writing of accompanying texts. Their influence shows particularly in the new emphasis on the persistence and adaptability of Indian traditions.

The theme of continuing traditions is woven throughout the *People of California* exhibition. One entirely new area focuses on the activities of contemporary Native California people. This section highlights the California Indian Basketweavers Association, the California Indian Storytelling Association, Neshkinukat: California Native Artists Network, Title VII, Los Angeles Unified School District Native American Indian Education, and the American Indian Chamber of Commerce of California. It also examines California Indian gaming, revealing gaming as both a tradition and a new economic force in the state.

*People of the Southwest: Changing Traditions*, on display in the Norman F. Sprague Jr. Auditorium, offers a concise look at the cultural history of the Indians of that region. The exhibition highlights the interplay of cultural and environmental influences as they have shaped artistic trends, and details how Indian people in the Southwest adapted the form and function of objects created for their own use to meet both the changing needs of everyday life and the demands of non-Indian consumers. As in the *People of California* exhibition, two cases in *People of the Southwest* explore contemporary innovations stemming from traditional designs. ■

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*Mo'omat Ahiko* ti'at and crew approaching Avalon as part of the September 1998 Ti'at Festival. Photo by Frank Magallanes and Althea Edwards.

functional pieces—in Southern California Indian communities. As objects are reconnected with their communities of origin, memory and cultural confidence emerges, and their/our stories are told. The isolated *ti'at* canoe planks previously displayed in stagnant exhibit cases come to life as dramatic photos are shown alongside them of the *Mo'omat Ahiko*—the first Tongva plank canoe built in over 200 years—recently paddling along the Catalina Island coastline.

Looking at the *ti'at* canoe planks and the photos reminds me of my father, who kindled my interest in our culture and traditions. I recall how, as a child, we frequented the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, which at that time was a modest mission-style building with a small collection of objects under glass. As my father held my hand, he would curiously read each label. "No, that's not right—we weren't mission Indians, and we aren't extinct!" A redwood *ti'at* canoe plank in a display case would jolt his memory of a once-abundant coastline filled with *aapo'*, the abalone that my grandfather and he would gather for an exquisite Tongva meal. My fascination with these objects grew out the relationship I had with each piece, based on the stories my father told me. It was those stories that made the coiled juncus basket, or the eagle feather skirt, whole. Those stories still exist, but like the *aapo'*, they have become rare and need to be gathered with care to make the objects whole—which, in the museums of my childhood, they were not.

I also remember the conversations I heard as a child, conversations filled with the essence of orange blossoms and stories about places such as Puvungna, an Indian village that marked the emergence of Southern California Indian spiritual philosophy. Located within the confines of what is now known as California State University at Long Beach, Puvungna was once a place where you never elevated your voice above a whisper. As a young California Indian child in the 1950s, I spent my days playing out-

doors until I was hungry enough to come inside, and then, as the night settled in, the elders' stories began. Those storytellers are gone, and the landscape of Southern California has changed dramatically. Yet memory lives on, triggered by space and place, stories, and the objects that remain as tangible remnants of times gone by.

Fortunately, museums are no longer facilities that simply house and store questionably collected artifacts from tribes. Museums are now becoming centers of cultural and historical education, art appreciation, research, and publishing, and the caretakers of objects saturated in human history. Indians are no longer the outsiders; we are now consultants and partners within the same walls we were often reluctant—and sometimes forbidden—to enter.

It's important to keep in mind that the world of Native America has also changed. Our tribal communities have reluctantly, yet out of necessity, expanded into contemporary society. In addition, sudden economic opportunities, education, and access to technology and additional resources have changed the way the world looks at California Indian people. We have been pulled out of a sepia-toned romanticism and into a reality that explodes with the colors of realities.

I spend much of my time listening to recordings on old wax cylinders. Into the evening, I listen meticulously to the scratchy echoes of Southern Californian Indian voices recorded decades ago. Previously, these songs were not accessible to our community. Now they are not only accessible but also integrated into exhibitions that allow the Native community to experience a voice in our language—a language that no longer exists—and to be in the spiritual presence of the person who is speaking into those wax cylinders. Non-Natives also have the opportunity to be educated about the history of a land we call home. A new cultural language is being written, one that expresses a partnership between two communities whose prior relationship was testy, at best. So, as the NMAI opens the doors to millions of visitors on the East Coast, we on the West Coast proudly invite the public to share in our world, one that has survived generations of change and will continue to change in unimaginable ways. Now that the doors are open, maybe we can imagine that future together. ■

**Cindi Moar Alvitre** is a descendant of the Gabrielino/Tongva tribe and cofounder of the Ti'at Society. She is a performance artist, folklorist, and activist, and she has represented indigenous issues nationally and internationally. She is currently pursuing her PhD at UCLA in the Department of World Arts and Cultures.