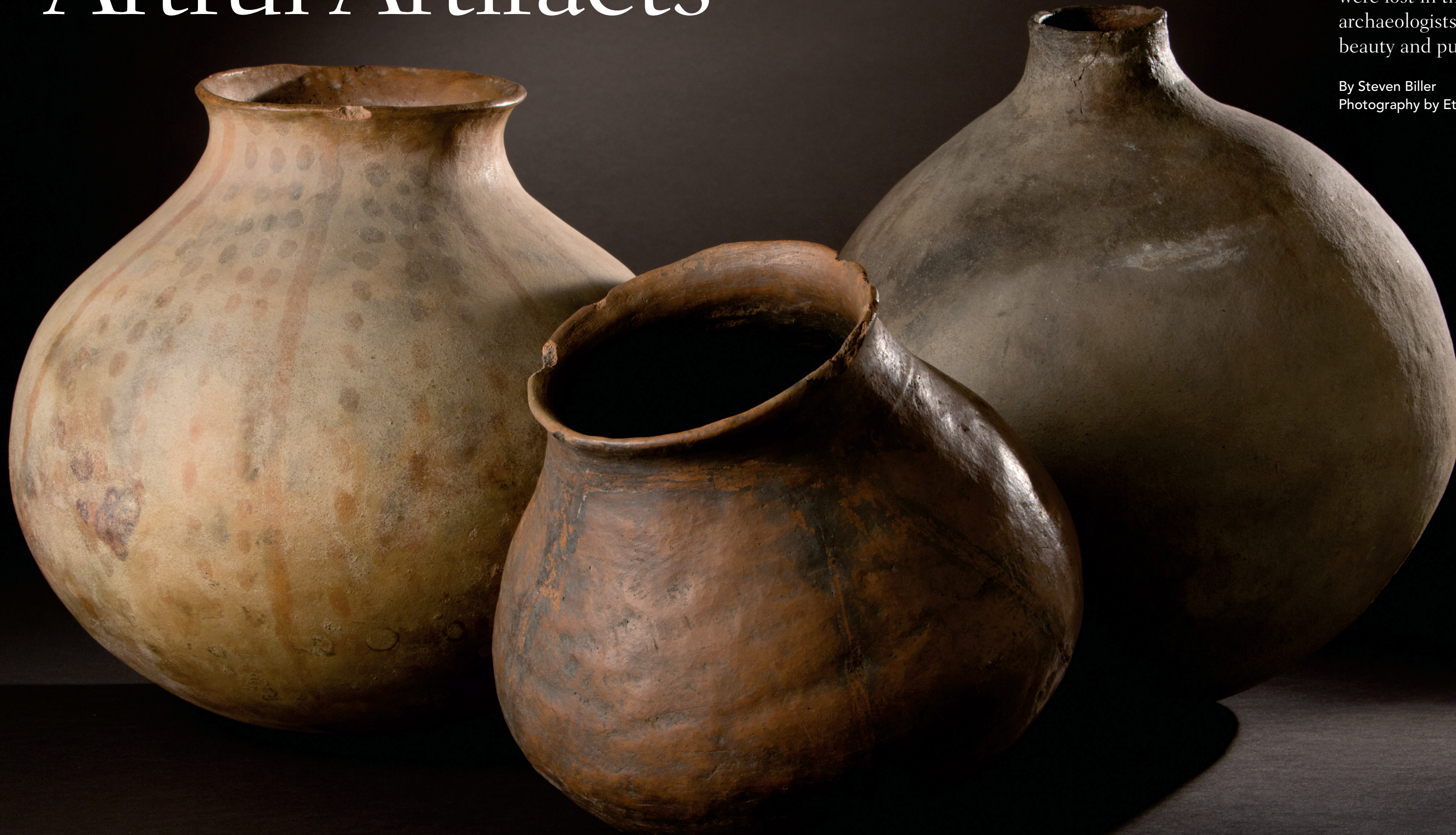


# Artful Artifacts

Hundreds of years after Cahuilla ollas were lost in the landscape, artists and archaeologists are rediscovering their beauty and purpose.

By Steven Biller  
Photography by Ethan Kaminsky





Cahuilla ollas were not only functional but also distinctly decorated, with upside-down handprints, dots, diamonds, zigzags, and other patterns.

Beautiful and bulbous, ollas — clay vessels that the ancient Cahuilla Indians used to store seeds, food, and water — were once a staple of everyday living in Indian Country in Southern California. After picking elderberries and wolfberries, for example, the Cahuilla would either eat them fresh or dry them in clusters and store them in ollas for later. Sometimes they boiled the fruit into a sweet, rich sauce. You can easily identify ollas that were used for cooking, because their earthy surface turned black.

The Cahuilla and other Native American tribes mastered the materials and innovated techniques to mold large rounded-bottom vessels. Five hundred years later, archaeologists continue finding shards and fragments that help piece together the story of these artful objects.

“They were making some incredible pots back in the day,” says Tony Soares, one of precious few artists who continue to make ollas and teach others about the almost forgotten craft. “They made them from superfine clay, and some look like balloons. It’s amazing that

from a little hut under a tree in the middle of the desert came these marvelous pieces of art.”

Ollas were not only functional but also distinctively decorated. “The designs are very similar to petroglyphs,” he says. While Cahuilla baskets have a geometric design — everything fits together — ollas have upside-down handprints, dots, diamonds, zigzags, and a cross with an outline all the way around it, he says. “I’ve also seen a double cross and a flower pattern, but mostly a lot of diamonds and zigzags.”

Another way he distinguishes a Cahuilla olla from others is by the presence of gypsum carbonate, which he traces to the Salton Sea and Mecca Hills. “It bleaches out (the) surface,” he says. “I worked with a lot of clays out there and sampled them for years. It’s Salton Sea buff ware. I looked for that clay for 15 years, and it took another five years to figure out how to fire it.”

The design and clay often indicate which tribe created a particular vessel — which is significant because, Soares says, “they were being traded and bought everywhere. They were also exchanged in marriages and in gambling.” ▶▶

**OPPOSITE:** Native Americans crafted ollas in many shapes and sizes. The vessels, which were used to store water and food among other uses, have markings that indicate their origin. In addition to these, Cahuilla ollas often feature a mineral from the Salton Sea.





## THE VANISHING OLLAS

In the 1800s, ollas became as rare as they once were ubiquitous. Experts offer many reasons for their disappearance. Deborah Dozier, associate professor of American Indian Studies at Palomar College in San Marcos, has written that as illnesses devastated the Cahuilla communities, fewer people remained to make the pottery and teach the craft to others.

In time, they were forgotten, and the art of making ollas was lost. "It died out," Soares deadpans. "Hardly anyone is making them even today — only two or three artists."

Soares says the vessels fell out of favor when metal pots, pans, and buckets became available.

Remaining ollas belong mostly to museums and private collectors, such as the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, Palm Springs Art Museum, and the Campbell collection at Joshua Tree National Park in Twentynine Palms.

The latter is a hidden treasure. William H. and Elizabeth C. Campbell were self-taught archaeologists who found and studied ancient Native American artifacts in the Mojave Desert in the 1920s and '30s. They consulted with the Cahuilla leader Francisco Patencio to understand the use of the objects they found, and Elizabeth documented their expeditions with narrative flair in many writings, including "An Archeological Survey of the

Twenty Nine Palms Region," published by the Southwest Museum of the American Indian of Los Angeles and "Archaeological Problems in Southern California," which appeared in *American Antiquity*.

Joshua Tree National Park has a climate-controlled repository that houses the collection of objects found by the Campbells, including many ollas, some of them of the Cahuilla variety. Curator Melanie Spoo explains, "The collection was created as an offshoot of the Southwest Museum. [The Campbells] moved to Lake Tahoe, [William] died, [Elizabeth] moved to Tucson, and then came back here. Some of the collection was transferred to the park." The rest of the collection went to the Southwest Museum, which in 2003 merged with the Museum of the American West and became part of the Autry National Center of the American West.

Neal V. Hitch, director of the Imperial Valley Desert Museum, tells of a 1977 excavation in Imperial that turned up two large ollas buried in a crevice of a wash. "Shifting rocks crushed one olla, but one was fully intact," he wrote in the *Imperial Valley Press*, noting that a Bureau of Land Management archaeologist removed the vessels because the site was endangered by erosion and off-road vehicles.

"The people who buried the ollas carefully placed them into two divots carved out of the

rock of a sandstone shelf," Hitch wrote. "Then they packed soft sand around the ollas. After being filled with water, each olla was capped with an inverted ceramic bowl. A mud and yucca fiber plaster sealed the opening so that the water would not evaporate."

## A MISSION TO EDUCATE

Soares was 7 years old when his grandmother began teaching him about making pottery. Now he travels the Southwest and teaches workshops and classes on the ancient process of creating traditional ollas. He explains how to make clay and construct the vessels, as well as how to make the paints and traditional designs to decorate them.

Soares, who lives in the Coachella Valley, has experimented for 20 years with clay from throughout the Mojave Desert.

To Soares, making ollas is important work not only for the artistic pursuit but also to help Native tribes understand and preserve this slice of the heritage. "It's part of their culture," Soares says. "My grandmother taught me the basics, but I won't be around forever to be teaching it."

Meanwhile, his work has become highly desirable among collectors and museums. The Agua Caliente Cultural Museum and Palm Springs Art Museum have pieces by Soares in their permanent collections.



Institutions such as the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum in Palm Springs collect, restore, and exhibit ollas while experts say many more remain buried in the landscape. Note, however, that if one finds artifacts on Indian lands, it's important to leave them where they are. All Native American artifacts, including ollas and their shards, are protected as part of the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Beyond legal violations, there are historical implications of separating an item from where it was found. When this happens, information is lost regarding its historical context, its story, and what it could inform experts as to how it was used and valued in the past.



## Where to See Ollas

When you're in the Coachella Valley, there are three options for viewing ollas up close: Joshua Tree National Park Visitor's Center, Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, and Palm Springs Art Museum. Note that the Palm Springs Art Museum rotates pieces of its Native American installation, so the ollas in their collection are not always

on exhibit; check ahead. For specific times of operation and for scheduled closings, visit the museums' websites.

**Joshua Tree National Park Visitor's Center**  
6554 Park Boulevard  
Joshua Tree, CA 92256  
760-366-1855  
[www.nps.gov/jotr/learn/historyculture/museum.htm](http://www.nps.gov/jotr/learn/historyculture/museum.htm)

**Agua Caliente Cultural Museum**  
219 South Palm Canyon Drive  
Palm Springs, CA 92262  
760-778-1079  
[www.accmuseum.org](http://www.accmuseum.org)

**Palm Springs Art Museum**  
101 Museum Drive  
Palm Springs CA 92262  
760-322-4800  
[www.psmuseum.org](http://www.psmuseum.org)

