



CAHUILLA BASKETRY:

# A Weaving of Culture and Beauty

*The Cahuilla people wove intimate relationships with the baskets that infused their daily lives. After a brief period of the art being left behind, the tradition of basketry is being revived, along with the Cahuilla history embedded in its very threads.*

BY MARISSA WILLMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ETHAN KAMINSKY



**T**HERE IS PERHAPS nothing as intimately interwoven with the historical day-to-day life of Cahuillas as the basket.

Parents carried their babies in basket-hooded cradleboards. Tribal members ate their food on woven plates. Elders presented both boys and girls, once they reached a certain age, their very own baskets as a rite of passage. When it came time to propose marriage, families used baskets as offerings. Even in death, baskets carried meaning: Upon a person's passing, their right-of-passage basket (the same one received when they were young) was burned during the mourning ceremony.

Indeed, the basket was a ubiquitous element of Cahuilla life up until the early 20th century, serving both functional and ceremonial purposes. Not only did baskets hold the daily meals of summer mesquite or winter acorn mash, but they also held the stories of the Cahuilla people.

### An Art Form

Throughout time, Cahuilla people used various plants and grasses to weave their baskets, depending on what was native to their specific region. Cahuilla baskets were primarily woven from deer grass, sumac, and juncus. From collecting, preparing, and dyeing the plants to the actual weaving, a single basket could take anywhere from several months to several years to finish.

The Cahuilla used a weaving process known as coiling. Bundles of deer grass were wrapped with sumac or juncus and sewn together to fabricate the Cahuilla's coiled baskets. Juncus could also be dyed to create patterns against the lighter sumac.

*Through it all, these baskets remain a reflection of the prominence of Cahuilla culture.*

For centuries, the Cahuilla worked with these materials to create geometric patterns that distinguished their baskets as some of the most masterful in California. Many of these patterns incorporated elements from the Cahuilla's natural world, such as lightning bolts, stars, eagles, and snakes. The results were baskets that not only served specific purposes for the Tribe, but also told stories through their designs.

The artistry of the baskets shifted, however, as visitors emerged on the Cahuilla's horizon during the mid-to-late 1880s, creating a market hungry for collectable baskets. Traditional Cahuilla patterns were replaced by new, Western-inspired elements such as floral patterns or English words as weavers worked to keep up with demand. Such accommodations in design provided Cahuilla women a new means through which they could help support their families. "Agua Caliente's finest basket weavers — including Dolores Patencio, Dolores Lubo, and Guadalupe Arenas — were allowed to demonstrate weaving and sell their baskets at the Indian Trading Post located in Palm Canyon, which increased cultural tourism for the Tribe," says Tribal Member Moraino Patencio.

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### LEARN HOW TO WEAVE A BASKET

Over two consecutive Saturdays — Feb. 20 and 27, 2016 — at the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, Lori Sisquoc (Fort Sill Apache) and her daughter, Blossom Hathaway (Cahuilla/Apache), will share their basket-making skills with participants in a two-part class. In addition to learning about gathering basket materials and preparing the materials for use in basket weaving, each participant will construct a basket. Advance registration is required. From 10:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. 219 South Palm Canyon Drive, Palm Springs. 760-778-1079; [www.accmuseum.org](http://www.accmuseum.org)



Olla-shaped mission basket decorated with floral and animal motifs by Marie Jesus Hyde, circa 1920.



Cahuilla basket made of grass, sumac, juncus, and mud-dyed juncus with two black rattlesnakes. Artist and year unknown.



Flat-bottomed Cahuilla basket with a five-petaled floral motif and 10 diamonds, circa 1890. Artist unknown.



Cahuilla Soboba basketry bowl decorated with diamonds in black-dyed juncus. Artist and year unknown (possibly by Nina Apapas Cassero, Mountain Cahuilla).



Cahuilla basket made of sumac, juncus, and mud-dyed juncus decorated with a black lizard. Artist and year unknown.



## A CRAFT PASSED DOWN GENERATIONS



AGUA CALIENTE CULTURAL MUSEUM



Cahuilla basket with needlepoint-style designs including flowers, deer, and a rooster by Dolores Patencio.

### DOLORES PATENCIO

Dolores Patencio is known by many as the wife of Francisco Patencio, who served as Tribal net (chief) in the early 20th century and later as a political leader. But Dolores was also recognized for her beautiful, handcrafted Cahuilla baskets. She would often instruct younger Tribal members on the art of basketry.



Cahuilla basket tray by Ramona Lubo, 1878. She is seen at right holding the basket.



Cahuilla pictorial basketry bowl with four arrows radiating from the central floral point, dividing the basket into quadrants, each of which contains a black eagle, by Ramona Lubo, 1911.



Cahuilla basket tray with "field of stars" and 5-pointed star in center by Ramona Lubo.



COURTESY OF THE BRAUN RESEARCH LIBRARY COLLECTION, AUTRY NATIONAL CENTER, LOS ANGELES. PHOTO P. 1804

### RAMONA LUBO

Some believe that Ramona Lubo, of Cahuilla ancestry, was the inspiration for the main character in the 1884 novel *Ramona*, written by Helen Hunt Jackson. While the author never confirmed this as fact, what we do know about Ramona is that she was born around 1853. Shown above, Ramona holds a basket tray (also shown top left) she wove after her husband's death. A large star appears in the center, with small crosses on the top three points and a field of smaller stars in the background. According to some accounts, Ramona wanted to join her husband in heaven and prayed to the basket to take her to him. In 1920, the Smithsonian Institution tried to purchase the basket for \$1,800. Today it is priceless.



Mountain Cahuilla basket made of mud-dyed juncus on sumac field over grass with images of ollas and palm trees by Arrietta. Year unknown.



Cahuilla basket made of dyed juncus and sumac on coiled grass and decorated with four bands of zigzags. Artist and year unknown.



Basket from the Morongo Reservation with a snake covering the center base, two birds, a star, a butterfly, rain clouds, lightning, and a whirlwind by Martha Rice. Year unknown.

Morongo Reservation basket tray with three black eagles accented with sumac on a juncus field. Artist and year unknown.



Desert Cahuilla basket collected from Borrego Springs, perhaps Torres Martinez, decorated with five baby rattlesnakes. Artist and year unknown.

Olla-style Cahuilla basket made of sumac field, dyed juncus, and natural red juncus with an 8-pointed star on the bottom and connected diamonds on the body, circa 1900. Artist unknown.



Desert or Pass Cahuilla tray negatively woven, circa 1900. Artist unknown.



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Mission Indian tray (possibly Desert, Pass Cahuilla, or Diegueno) made of sumac and natural juncus and designed with a star/flower motif, circa 1895–1905. Artist unknown.



**T**oday, Cahuilla baskets are highly collectable and remain quite scarce, often only seen in museums.

### Fewer and Fewer Baskets

At the dawn of the early 20th century, several circumstances transpired that led to the near-end of Cahuilla basketry.

The first was the decrease in need for traditional baskets. As more tourists and traders made their way through Cahuilla lands, Western influence began to reach the Tribe. Western-style homes replaced traditional Cahuilla homes, while everyday items like baby carriages, cooking pots, and mixing bowls were favored over baskets for their convenience. By the early 1900s, the functional needs for baskets diminished.

Meanwhile, finding the native plants and grasses needed to weave baskets became an issue. As tribes were forcibly moved from their homelands onto reservations, they lost access to the areas where they had traditionally gathered juncus, deer grass, and sumac. Finding these native materials only became increasingly harder as more and more of what used to be their land was developed for housing and commercial purposes.

But even if there remained enough uses and plants for basketry to continue, the Cahuilla were losing perhaps the most important resource of all: women who knew how to weave these intricate baskets.

Traditionally, Cahuilla girls began practicing basketry at a young age, spending decades honing and practicing their craft to be able to produce the masterful baskets for which the Tribe was known.

Time and circumstances removed many talents and trades from Cahuilla traditions — basketry included.

Without a new generation of weavers to take the place of their elders, Cahuilla basketry suffered a sharp decline, especially in the mid-20th century, when those who did know the art began to pass away.

### A Re-emergence

Fortunately, the traditional art of Cahuilla basketry did not disappear and has managed to survive into the 21st century.

Groups like Nex'wetem, the Southern California Indian Basket Weavers Association, have banded basket weavers together to share and strengthen the craft. They've even sparked a new generation of interest in basketry by sharing traditional techniques in a series of basket-weaving classes.

Today, Cahuilla baskets are highly collectable and remain quite scarce, often only seen in museums. The Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians protects a collection of baskets that has been displayed to the public periodically, and the Palm Springs Art Museum's 200-piece collection of Cahuilla pottery and baskets features early 20th-century baskets woven by notable basket weavers, including Dolores Lubo, Dolores Patencio, and Guadalupe Arenas.

"What's really nice about our [basket] collection is that we're able to identify who the basket weaver was," says Palm Springs Art Museum curator Christine Giles. "Often, that information is lost." Through it all, these baskets remain a reflection of the prominence of Cahuilla culture. Once a staple of Cahuilla life, traditional baskets all but disappeared as the Tribe's culture shifted and the landscape changed. A resurgence of Cahuilla tradition and culture has breathed new life into basketry, illustrating that these baskets remain a tightly interwoven reflection of the Cahuilla culture itself. ●

*Editor's note: All the baskets shown in this story are part of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians basket collection.*



A miniature Mission basketry bowl believed to be made of sumac and juncus. Artist and year unknown.

### WHERE TO SEE THE BASKETS

Several museums locally, as well as one nationally, include Cahuilla baskets in their collections. Please call ahead to confirm, as museums often rotate their collections. For hours, scheduled closings, and more information, visit the museums' websites.

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

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

**Riverside Metropolitan Museum**  
They have a "Cahuilla Continuum" exhibition currently on display through August 2017.  
3580 Mission Inn Avenue  
Riverside, CA  
951-826-5273  
[www.riversideca.gov/museum/cahuilla-continuum.asp](http://www.riversideca.gov/museum/cahuilla-continuum.asp)

**Malki Museum**  
11795 Malki Road  
Banning, CA  
951-849-7289  
[www.malkimuseum.org](http://www.malkimuseum.org)

**National Museum of the American Indian**  
Fourth Street at Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, D.C.  
202-633-1000  
[www.nmai.si.edu](http://www.nmai.si.edu)