

*The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, It Started with Willows, an exhibition with contemporary art by the Great Basin Native Artists collective and historic working baskets from the Lloyd Chichester Collection. The show is at the Western Nevada College Bristlecone Gallery from September 20 – December 21, 2023. CCAI extends its sincere appreciation to the artists, guest curator Melissa Melero-Moose, Lloyd Chichester, Western Nevada College, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Terri McBride, who provided the following essay.*



## IT STARTED WITH WILLOWS



Willows, widespread throughout the Great Basin's wetlands, remain ubiquitous today. The creation of basketry with willows was a necessary invention for life in the high deserts of the Great Basin. The environment necessitated mobility for families and groups to move with agility to be near the rare water sources, so they needed tools and vessels that were portable, light, and relatively easy to replicate in different locations. Great Basin baskets are some of the oldest and best-dated ones in North America, dating back to roughly 9,000 b.p.e.<sup>1</sup> The oldest weaving tradition, known as twining, is the earliest method used in Nevada, going back to the earliest dates, 11,000 years ago. Twining was used to make mats, sandals, bags, and early baskets.<sup>2</sup>

Not only are Great Basin baskets some of the oldest in North America, but they are also some of the most finely made. Recognition of the ancient and traditional occupants of the region must be made here: the Nevada section of the Great Basin is the traditional homelands of the *Numu* (Northern Paiute), *Nuwu* (Southern Paiute), *Wašiw* (Washoe), and *Newe* (Western Shoshone). Every one of these traditional groups excelled at creating basketry in all sorts of forms. Because weaving is malleable and can take many shapes, baskets were created for a wide variety of uses, mainly food processing and collection, but also clothing, water storage, eating utensils, fish traps, duck decoys, boats, cradles for babies, and gifts for friends and family. Fowler, 1995, lists specific tools and items such as winnowing trays, parching mats, cone-shaped burden baskets for hauling pine cones during the pinyon harvest, and in general, household belongings when moving; in addition, seed baskets (also cone-shaped) seed beaters, hats, lidded baskets, and baskets coated with pine pitch to hold water.<sup>3</sup>



(Top basket) Maggie George (Washoe) *Seed Gathering Basket*. (Middle & bottom baskets) Ernie Cornbread (Washoe) *Winnowing Trays*, all three baskets from Lloyd Chichester Collection.



Unnamed Washoe Basketmaker, ca. 1915. Special Collections, University of Reno, RenLLibrary. Lorenzo D. Creel Collection #82-10.



*Women on Church Steps*, Pyramid Lake, 1918. Special Collections, University of Reno, Reno Library. Lorenzo D. Creel Collection #82-10



Lloyd Chichester has collected basketry since he was a child growing up in the Coleville-Walker, CA area, where he still lives. He knew some of the weavers and their names are shared here.

Many of these items that Lloyd loaned for this exhibit were created by Washoe weaver, Enie Cornbread, including the close-weave winnowing trays with design elements (the dark brown patterns are made with “sun-burnt” willow) that show use as acorn-leaching trays. Acorns, along with pine nuts, were a traditional food that Washoes relied on. Maggie James is Enie’s daughter, and she created the tight-weave seed basket with star designs and another cone-shaped seed basket with both dark brown and black design elements. The black weaving material is made by dyeing willow strands with bracken fern roots.

The large unlidded holding basket with linear designs just below the rim was created by Mono Lake Paiute, Carrie Bethel.

The cradleboards exhibited here are two different sizes: one for a mother to carry a baby, and one for a child to carry a doll; note the appliqued colored threads to adorn the cap over the head in a geometric pattern similar to woven designs. The weaving artists added design elements to express their own styles.

The water jugs coated in pine pitch are ingenious forms developed by Northern Paiutes. The “jugs” do not have flat bottoms to place squarely on the ground, the diamond shape with a wide “waist” allows users to lay the jugs on their sides so water does not spill out of the neck.<sup>4</sup> These three water jugs are excellent samples that date to the early 20th century.

Great Basin basketry is a solid bridge between the past and the present in indigenous lives. The art works included in this exhibit alongside traditional, utilitarian baskets from the ethnohistoric era, show those connections between the traditional past and these contemporary artists’ expressions. According to their website (<https://www.greatbasinnativeartists.com/>) the Great Basin Native Artists (GBNA) “is a collective of Indigenous artists living in/or originally from the Great Basin





areas of Nevada, California, Southern Oregon, Southern Idaho, and Utah.” Excerpts in this essay about individual artists were found in Artist Biographies on the GBNA website.

The works of art created by contemporary Great Basin Native artists often feature baskets and basketry designs. Frequently, we see baskets associated with pine nuts, a critical food for all Great Basin indigenous people. Families still enjoy traveling to the pinyon groves to collect the nuts as a special time and reconnecting with the land and ancient traditions. “Pine nuts are like gold,” even today, according to guest curator, Melissa Melero-Moose, although the pine nuts are no longer required as a winter food. Basketry tools used in the pine nut harvest include the large burden baskets for hauling the cones and winnowing trays used to clean the pine nuts of debris before roasting them. At times, winnowing trays were used to roast the nuts directly on a bed of charcoal.

Ben Aleck’s (Pyramid Lake Paiute) subject matter “consists of statements relating to cultural issues and environmental concerns” according to his biography. *Basket with Pinenuts* is literally an image of a basket embellished with traditional designs and filled with beloved pine nuts. Lyn Risling’s (Hupa, Karuk, Yoruk) *Geese Flying* centrally features a basket with a mother and child in a baby basket, woven into the basket itself. Seeds or nuts fill the basket and the landscape on both the central basket and the background that includes flying geese are depicted as abstract basketry-like designs. Risling’s biography states “I combine elements of tribal designs, traditions, and landscapes, to express a place where the present, past, and future come together . . .” like this depiction of figures in the landscape embellished with basket designs.

Other plants are featured in works by Paul Stone (Owens Valley Paiute, Washoe), *Tobacco Came to Us as a Gift*, which shows a woman standing next to the plants reverently, framed by a woven basket. Karma Henry’s (Fort Independence Paiute) *Grandma’s Corn*, features a Folger’s Coffee can with potted young corn plants. The central figure is framed by basket designs around the margin.



Two small baskets: Unknown Artists, *Winnowing Trays*, mid-20th century. Large basket: Irene Dressler Dick (Washoe) *Burden Basket*, 300+ willows and fabric, mid-20th century, all three baskets from Lloyd Chichester Collection.



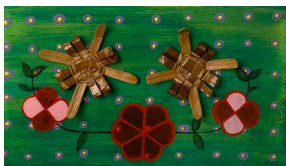
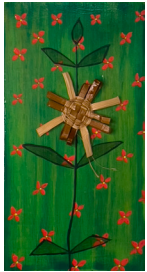
Ben Aleck (Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe), *Basket with Pine Nuts*, GBNA collective.



Karma Henry (Fort Independence Paiute) *Grandma's Corn*, acrylic on canvas, 2020, GBNA collective.



Weshoyot Alvitre (Tongva)  
*The Unfinished Basket*, digital print, 2020,  
GBNA collective.



Topaz Jones  
(Western Shoshone/Lummi, Kalapuyas/Molalla),  
*Woven Bloom* (L) *Woven Floral* (R), acrylic with  
red & white cedar on wood panel, 2019,  
GBNA collective.



Phil Buckheart (Absentee Shawnee/Choctaw)  
*Sacred Arrow Bustle*  
mixed media assemblage, 2016.



Weshoyot Alvitre's (Tongva) *The Unfinished Basket* shows a basket in the process of being woven, held up by a pair of younger hands with an older hand weaving the materials, passing weaving practices down to the next generation.

Topaz Jones' (Western Shoshone, Lummi, Kalapuya, Molalla) *Woven Floral and Woven Bloom* showcase basketry incorporated into plant-themed images. Using the same bright green hue as the background, Jones depicts her version of *Big Foot*, a mythical/supernatural being who is featured in multiple regional oral traditions. Topaz writes in her biography, "I create artworks from my whole being, expressions that reflect my story and my existence as an Indigenous woman in modern times."

Animals native to the Great Basin are seen in several works; specifically, animals who play specific roles in Great Basin storytelling. Hummingbirds, Pinyon Jays, waterfowl, and fishes are all characters in oral stories. Steve Nighthawk's (Shoshone, Washoe, Northern Paiute) *Baskets with Hummingbirds* delight the viewer with two mirroring birds hovering over beautifully patterned baskets. The *Coming Home* print by Maureen Self (Mountain Maidu) features two large trout arcing over a landscape scene, inside an open basket. Mountains are in the background behind the arching fish. Phil Buckheart's (Absentee Shawnee, Choctaw) sculptural works incorporate a lot of natural materials such as wood, stone, feathers, but also modern materials, like the googly eye in *Pigeon*. His work puts a contemporary spin on totem-like works featuring animals, especially birds. Buckheart's creations echo "Native American styles of geometric designs, colors, spiritual beliefs, and representations of the North and South American Indigenous peoples".

Roger Salas' (Northern Paiute) *Mother and Child* is a portrait of a mother and child in an intricately decorated cradleboard, along with Micqaela Jones' (Te-Moak Tribe of Western Shoshone) *Basket Wearer*, which also features a mother with her back to us so we can admire the cradleboard and her baby. According to her biography, Micqaela's work





Melissa Melero-Moose (Northern Paiute), *Women, Water, and the Gathering*, mixed media on canvas, 2019, GBNA collective.



Jack Malotte (Western Shoshone/Washoe), *Missed Shot*, screen prints, acrylic on canvas, 2016, GBNA collective.



Unknown artist, *Water Jug*, willows and pitch, mid-20th century, Lloyd Chichester Collection. Photo credit: Michael Plyler



mixes her “Shoshone culture along with contemporary expressions.”

Melissa Melero-Moose works in abstract tableaus that feature greens, blues, yellows, and orange and brown tones (the colors of the landscape in her ancestral homeland), with large basket-like geometric designs in the background, frequently with applied willows and pine nuts on the canvas, “Drawing from my connection to my homelands, my work abstracts place, identity, and memory . . . to create visuals in which Indigenous life is told through my perspective as a Native woman, mother, and American artist. *When She is Complete* is a self-portrait displaying a basket design and shape suspended in the air, with water and land of the Great Basin below.”<sup>5</sup>

Jack Malotte’s (Western Shoshone, Washoe) work often features abstracted landscapes, overlain with flashes of images in overlapping layers, including basketry designs. Rich fuchsia, magenta, purple, and orange colors distinguish Malotte’s style.

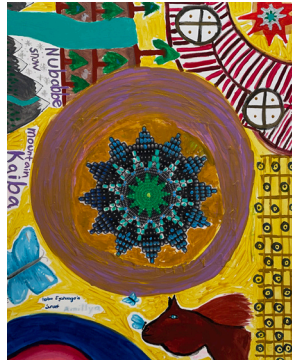
Forms that were (and still are) important to daily activities such as “holding babies, keeping money and important papers, winnowing pine nuts, gathering wild onions, gooseberries, and medicinal plants” continue to be created.<sup>6</sup> While basketry in the Great Basin started with willows, the materials used by weavers and other artists continue to change. Contemporary weaving arts incorporate very modern materials such as plastics, buttons, and fabric.

The artworks, *Embracing Your Story I – IV*, were completed at a youth summit in Fallon at the Gathering of Native Americans Youth Summit in the summer of 2021. Connecting to their tribal art forms, the works focus on the Fallon area known for duck decoys, and petroglyphs, along with the basket design, shapes, and beadwork from their region.

To keep the visual arts vital and healthy, Guest Curator, Melissa Melero-Moose, urges our community to support and collect works by artists who live and work in the Great Basin region.



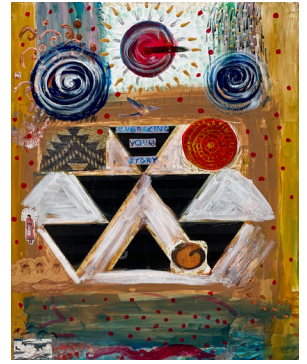
Gathering of Native Americans  
Youth Summit participants  
*Embracing Your Story I*  
mixed media on canvas  
Great Basin Native Artists  
Collection



Gathering of Native Americans  
Youth Summit participants  
*Embracing Your Story II*  
mixed media on canvas  
Great Basin Native Artists  
Collection



Gathering of Native Americans  
Youth Summit participants  
*Embracing Your Story III*  
mixed media on canvas  
Great Basin Native Artists  
Collection



Gathering of Native Americans  
Youth Summit participants  
*Embracing Your Story IV*  
mixed media on canvas  
Great Basin Native Artists  
Collection

## Notes

1. Catherine M. Fowler, "Foreword" in *Weavers of Tradition & Beauty: Basketmakers of the Great Basin*, by Mary Lee Fulkerson and Kathleen Curtis (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1995), ix.
2. Fowler, "Foreword," xi.
3. Fowler, "Foreword," xii.
4. Mary Lee Fulkerson and Kathleen Curtis, *Weavers of Tradition & Beauty: Basketmakers of the Great Basin* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1995), 41.
5. Melissa Melero-Moose, in *Inherent Memory Catalog* (Santa Fe: Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Institute of American Indian Arts, 2023), 30.
6. Fulkerson and Curtis, *Weavers of Tradition & Beauty: Basketmakers of the Great Basin*, 20.

Terri McBride

Carson City, Nevada

September, 2023



Installation view

The Initiative is funded by the John Ben Snow Memorial Trust, Nevada Humanities and the National Endowment for the Humanities, John and Grace Nauman Foundation, Nevada Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts, Kaplan Family Charitable Fund, Southwest Gas Corporation Foundation, Steele & Associates LLC, and CCAI sponsors and members.



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