



Containers of Belief:

*Selected Native American Works
from the Yager Museum*



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Containers of Belief:

Selected Native American Works

from the Yager Museum

Curated by Richard W. Hill, Jr. with Dr. David Anthony,
Curator of Anthropology and Gary Norman,
Collections Manager

THE YAGER MUSEUM OF ART & CULTURE

Hartwick College, Oneonta, New York USA

The Mission of the Yager Museum of Art & Culture

The Yager Museum of Art & Culture is a multidisciplinary teaching museum that enhances the education of students and community members by collecting, preserving, and researching our artistic, archeological, ethnographic, and historical heritage. Through its collections and exhibitions the museum presents works that interpret stories of human creativity and activity, as seen through study of material culture. Students from all disciplines are encouraged to work with the museum, using our collections and resources, to develop new projects for the museum's diverse audiences. The museum connects Hartwick's classrooms to the world and the world to Hartwick's community.

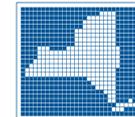


Foreword and Acknowledgments

This exhibition is part of The Yager Museum of Art & Culture's plans to include native voices in the museum's interpretation of its substantial North and South American Indian collections. Guest curator Rick Hill (Tuscarora) was invited to visit the museum to survey our collections and create an exhibition that would add a new perspective on the artifacts. He developed the central concept of "Containers of Belief—Selected Native American Works from the Yager Museum," focusing on the spiritual meaning of the artifacts as seen by the American Indians who created and used these extraordinary objects. His work was supplemented by the museum's collections manager, Gary Norman, and curator of Hartwick's anthropology collections, Professor of Anthropology David Anthony, who refined the checklist and added interpretive information drawn from the museum's cataloging data and archival sources. The museum staff was often able to draw information directly from the field records and ledgers of Willard Yager, the archeologist, writer, and collector of many of the objects, who obtained the artifacts during his extensive travels in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In many cases, Yager was able to speak with the artists and community members from native communities, verifying provenance and adding personal details about the creators. Together, the exhibition curators have captured the spirit, intentions, and human stories that form a part of each object's history, one that is marked by tradition, adaptation, survival, and endurance.

The museum wishes to thank the following people for their support of the museum and its programs: Hartwick College President Richard P. Miller, Jr; Executive Vice President and Provost John Anderson; College Librarian and Director of Information Resources Elizabeth Orgeron; Archivist Rebekah Ambrose-Dalton; the museum's advisory committee; former museum director Professor of Art History Fiona Dejaridin; and other members of the museum staff who worked on various aspects of the exhibition. Additional assistance was provided by Ted Anderson, design director at The Exhibition Alliance. Richard Walker also was helpful in providing additional photography for the catalog.

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Heron Effigy Pipe. Late Woodland period, Susquehanna County, Pa. (1929.01.4226)

The Seneca of the Genesee Valley have a story of how the Heron taught the people to spear fish and use it as fertilizer in their garden mounds where they grew the Three Sisters—Corn, Beans, and Squash. The Heron was likely among the water birds that aided Sky Mother in her descent to earth in the Iroquois creation story. The Heron is one of the eight family clans of the Seneca. By using this pipe, the smoker would maintain a relationship with the spirit of the Heron.

On the Front Cover: *Olla. San Ildefonso, N.Mex., 1830–50 (1929.02.055)*

This spectacular olla, or large water jar, was made in the Tewa pueblo of San Ildefonso, N. Mex., probably about 1830–50. It was made in a style that is today called Powhoge Polychrome. Powhoge was the Tewa name for San Ildefonso. The neck of this large jar was cracked, chipped, and held together by a rawhide thong, but it was still quite beautiful and useful when Willard Yager bought it in 1913 at San Ildefonso. Pottery making revived the fading fortunes of San Ildefonso around the time of Yager's visit. Between 1912 and 1920 Maria Martinez, a woman of San Ildefonso, became the most famous potter in the United States. Her fame brought prosperity to her pueblo. Maria might well have studied this olla, one of the oldest and largest in her pueblo, when she was a girl learning how to make pots from her aunt Nicolasa. In these ancient craft traditions of her people she found a source of renewed hope and belief.

Enduring Beliefs

All objects exist in context. There is no such thing as an object out of context. But contexts differ greatly in their ability to help us understand the artifact at question. In some contexts, objects beam deep meanings from other human beings. In other contexts, we find the reflections of our own tired faces. —Henry Glassie (1999)

The objects in this exhibition exist in the context of a collection—some collected a century ago and some added within the past decade. They reflect the diversity of the Native American holdings of the Yager Museum of Art & Culture and represent indigenous cultures from North America. Yet in the context of a museum, our study and interpretation of these objects is more likely to reflect our own faces than impart any deep meaning from the context in which they were created.

Exhibit curator Richard W. Hill, Jr. (Tuscarora) has selected objects he believes to be rare or exceptional examples of how humans manifest spiritual meaning through visual art—how cultural beliefs shape materials, styles, and aesthetics. For some objects Hill provides clues to help us appreciate their “meaning” in their original cultural context. For others he prefers to let us “read” our own meaning.

The pieces in the exhibition are not simply relics. Instead, they link us to ancient ideas, values, and beliefs that can retain meaning for us today. The people who made these objects were raised within cultures that have changed drastically through the years or have disappeared completely. Yet in these tangible products of their activity—these “containers of belief”—their intangible cultures live on.



Gourd Vessel. Salts Cave, Ky. ca. 1600–1800. (1929.02.031)

While one usually relates the use of gourds to water dippers and water bottles, Woodland peoples grew gourds like this for dry storage as well, particularly for seeds, nuts and roots. Once the gourd hardened and could be cut, they hollowed it out, sometimes engraving or painting the outer surface. There is a tradition among Native Americans that when dipping for water one should always dip with the flow of the water, so as not to go contrary to nature.

Oneganos

Life-Giving Waters of Mother Earth

We give thanks to all the Water of the world for quenching our thirst and providing us with strength. Water is life. We know its power in many forms—waterfalls and rain, mists and streams, rivers and oceans. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to the spirit of Water.

Excerpt from Ohenten Kariwatekwa (Words Before All Else), the Mohawk Thanksgiving Address.

Oneganos (O-ne-gan-os) is the Haudenosaunee (People of the Longhouse) word for water. It represents all forms of water that help to sustain our lives. The Haudenosaunee creation story acknowledges that life on Earth began in water, and it tells how many water creatures gave their lives to create dry land and provide a home for Sky Woman. Every time the Haudenosaunee gather, they acknowledge and give thanks to the waters and all other forces of nature.

It is not surprising that one finds so much reverence for water and its creatures expressed in the works of Native Americans. The items in this portion of the exhibition reflect that important relationship between the Haudenosaunee and water.



Stone ornament or medallion. Zeninga Site, Castle Creek, Broome County, N.Y. (1929.01.3957)

A mysterious item in ornament and use, this carved stone is perforated as if it might have hung from a cord or necklace. Some experts suggest it may be a copy in stone of a coin or religious medal made after contact with Europeans. Found at Zeninga, a Native American village site on Castle Creek near Binghamton, this stone ornament might reflect the influence of Moravian missionaries who visited the village in the 1760s. When we look at this object, do we see Sky Mother whose face became the sun? Do we see the face of the Virgin Mary complete with radiant halo?

Gus-tah-ote

Spirit of the Rock

Since the beginning of the earth, when the Sky Woman descended to the back of the Turtle, the strong rock had overhung the valley, and since that beginning, Gus-tah-ote, the Spirit, had been imprisoned within its silent majesty.

Gus-tah-ote had seen all the creations of the earth grow and set themselves in place. He had seen each spirit of the animals assigned to its duty and power and had waited with patience until, by the law of transmigration, he too had been given his choice of change—to river, sea, land, forest, or sky. He could enter them, and whichever he might choose as his future abode would be his.

The Spirit of the Rock ventured abroad trying the mighty river, the sea, and the open sky, but while momentarily exhilarating, these proved to be treacherous and overwhelming, requiring the intervention of the Rescuer. The earth and forest were already filled with spirits who did not welcome GUA-tah-ote, not caring to share their lives with him.

Gus-tah-ote was despairing when the voice of the Rescuer whispered, "Return to your rock where you can defy all the earth. The waters may overflow you but they cannot drown you; the tempests may strike you, but they cannot overthrow you; the sun may glance at you, but it cannot burn you; seas may drift to you and overwhelm you, but they cannot push you into their deep places; old age, who hunts for his victims

all over the earth, cannot wrinkle you; death can neither pain nor claim you; unyielding and staunch, you will outlive all the land, the seas, and the skies!

Now the Rock Spirit dwells there content as overhanging the valley he watches and guards. Rivers flood and shrink, forests turn to dust, the earth folds upon itself in renewal, the skies change, stars grow dim and smaller—yet Gus-tah-ote watches from his stronghold, unchanged and changeless!

Adapted from Harriet Maxwell Converse (Ya-ie-wa-noh), *Myths and Legends of the New York State Iroquois*, New York State Museum Bulletin 125, December 1908.

The oldest craft invented by humans was the shaping of rocks into tools that could kill animals, split wood, and grind down even hard stones to make implements that crushed, cut, and hammered nature into conformation with human needs and desires. Once understood and practiced by every family on earth, stone tool-making was pushed aside by the invention of metal tools. Native Americans acquired metal and stopped listening to their old flint-chipping teachers between about 1650 and 1850. Today our common ignorance of even the basic methods of this ancient craft means that stone tools are among the most enigmatic and misunderstood containers of belief.

A beautiful stone implement freezes forever an almost magical conjunction of conditions at the moment the object was made: an intimate knowledge by its maker of the dynamic internal properties of the stone, or its “spirit”; a state of mental concentration that permitted the crafter to “feel” those properties change as he or she weighed and observed the



Carrying basket, “Panther” design by Sam Brushell, Mohegan, Richfield Springs, N.Y. ca. 1840. (1929.01.4391)

This basket was made more than 160 years ago by a Mohegan man living north of Otsego Lake. Many Mohegans moved from Connecticut and western Massachusetts to the Oneida reservation near Rome, N.Y. in 1783–85, after the Revolutionary War. Basket making became an important source of income among the shattered remnants of the Haudenosaunee after the Revolutionary War. During this time, baskets produced much more income than could be made from farming, and an increasing number of men made baskets, a craft traditionally done by women.

evolving piece; and a physical skill with a stone or antler hammer that resulted in blows of just the right force at just the right angle to detach individual chips of just the right shape and depth. Each scar on the surface of the finished tool is an intimate record of a hammer strike that tried to find sympathy with the “spirit” of the rock. How many hammer blows can you count on the surfaces of these objects?



Basket, Otsego County, N.Y., 1854. (1929.02.305)

This fragile ash splint basket was made by an Oneida woman in 1854. During the Revolutionary War, Haudenosaunee towns were burned and families scattered. After the war, some Oneida families returned to the Susquehanna Valley, settling among white farmers. A hand-written note from an anonymous female writer outlines the history of the basket: “About 1854, Mrs. Thomas Whitwell, who lived about two miles below Cooperstown, gave an Indian woman a mince pie when the woman stopped at her home. In a few weeks, the Indian woman returned bearing a basket . . . as a thank-you gift for the mince pie.”

Weaving Wood

Bark and Wood-Splint Baskets

Basket weaving is one of the oldest human crafts. Archaeologists found a carbonized basket fragment in an abandoned fireplace at Meadowcroft Rock Shelter in western Pennsylvania, dating to about 14,000 years ago. The first people to walk into the Americas from Asia carried their possessions in woven bags and baskets.

The baskets exhibited here were made by Iroquois and Algonquin people, using either bark that was pulled from birch trees or narrow wood splints that were stripped from the core of black ash trees. Making baskets required, first, knowledge of birch and black ash trees and their properties. Preparing the bark or making the ash splints, a laborious and arm-wearing task, was the second step. Then, to construct the basket, the maker opened in her mind a stream of family history, usually a history of women.

Men might help in making splints and getting bark, but baskets typically were made by women who learned from their mothers and aunts. To weave a good basket, the maker needed to attain a state of patience and concentration that allowed the memory of her mother’s weaves to flow through her fingertips. Collectors might give artistic names to different weaves and designs, but for the women who made them the styles were family traditions connected with their own mothers.

“Well now,” said Rowena Bradley, a Cherokee basketmaker, “my mother never had no names or no meaning to her designs. She just made them. And that’s the way I do.”¹

She can identify her mother’s work in photographs, and sees in each basket her mother or herself sitting in a kitchen

chair, looking toward the mountains with a dog sleeping at her feet as she follows with her fingers a pattern that lives in her memory.

There is a spiritual force that flows through all things, and if these symbols are true representations of that force, this spirit should be expressed in the designs.²



Bowls, made by Maria Martinez, San Ildefonso, N. Mex., ca. 1912, ca. 1923, ca. 1923-25 (1929.02.199, 1929.02.017, and 1983.01.03—gift of Alice Horton)

These three bowls were made by Maria Martinez, who Willard Yager called “the best potter in the pueblo” in 1913. The seed bowl on the left was done in the traditional paint-on-buff kind of pottery that was traditional at San Ildefonso. The bowl at center is a good example of the black-on-black pottery that was re-invented by Julian and Maria Martinez in 1919–20 based on ancient designs discovered in archeological excavations in the area. The bowl at right was signed “Marie” on the bottom, a signature she used between 1923 and 1925. After that time, she signed her pots “Marie & Julian” because her husband Julian decorated all her pots, including this one and the polychrome seed bowl.



Water Jar, Mogollon culture maker unknown, Ariz., ca.1200 A.D. (1996.05.01)

The modern western Pueblo villages of Hopi and Zuni probably were settled by people whose ancestors made these kinds of water jars in the ancient Mogollon towns of southeastern Arizona and southern New Mexico. A cream-colored slip (watery clay that was brushed over the surface) was used to produce the light-colored background upon which the darker designs were painted. When it was fired the pot became watertight and the painted slip hardened. In Southwestern myths and symbolism, water is tied to the flash of lightning and the motions of a giant feathered serpent. These painted designs may be visual references to those magical movements.



Silver naja necklace and silver wire bracelet, Navajo maker unknown, N. Mex. 1913. (1929.02.248 and 1929.02.219)

Navajo men began to make silver ornaments in the 1850s, largely for use by other Navajo people. After 1880, when the Santa Fe railroad came through the Southwest, they began to make silver for the tourist trade. Yager bought this necklace at Spiegelberg's shop in Santa Fe, N.M. in 1913, a time when relatively few Navajo men were making silver. The crescent pendant on the necklace is called a naja. It was worn by Navajo and Zuni women and symbolized the whole earth. The beads are hollow silver and plain, without the leaf-like projections that could make them look like squash blossoms. It is traditional to call a necklace like this a squash-blossom necklace, but this one, unlike most of the more recent examples, has plain beads. The bracelet is made of silver wire and was bought on the same 1913 trip, perhaps also in Santa Fe.

Po-wa-ha

Water, Wind, Breath

Po-wa-ha is the Pueblo word for the creative energy in the world. It is the essence of life. It reveals a connection between water, wind, and breath—the sacred breath that flows without distinction through all animate and inanimate things. Baskets and pots, like houses, plants, and human bodies, are temporary abodes through which Po-wa-ha flows. They are living entities as they bring the Po-wa-ha to us and let us share in its power to reveal the deeper meaning of life.

The objects in this section of the exhibition exude that animated energy, even after, for some of them, eight or nine hundred years. The designs were made for the Southwest, a world of bright sun, deep shade, and the scent of sage under turquoise skies. Coyote, Raven, Jack-rabbit, and Thunder populated the artists' spirit-world, not the Bear, Turkey, Turtle, and Beaver of the Northeast.

Native American weavers, potters, basketmakers, and silverworkers were surprised to find themselves transformed from symbols of supposed savagery to paragons of authenticity by the arts and crafts movement of 1880–1930. A few white artists, determined to escape the technological prisons of modern cities, moved to Santa Fe and Taos to absorb the natural inspiration that came from these deeply rooted, wondrously beautiful places. They became the influential Taos School, formally recognized and named in 1915, but with origins 20 years earlier. Willard Yager visited the area in 1912-13 during its heyday.



Treasure Basket, Pomo maker unknown, Calif., ca. 1900. (1929.02.109)

Pomo baskets are recognized as among the finest in the world. The pinnacle of the art is realized in the Treasure basket, the exterior of which is covered in a mass of feathers woven in several lustrous colors. The designs on this basket were made by interweaving feathers from a woodpecker (red), wild canary (yellow), mallard duck (brown and green), and quail topknot feathers as the edge plumes jutting from the rim. A series of round clam beads ornament the rim.

"People frequently ask me what these ceremonial baskets hold. They did not have to hold anything, because the basket itself was all that was needed. The basket contained the prayers and the wonderful, good energy that made it a ceremonial basket."

—Susan Billy, Pomo basketmaker



Cooking basket, Maidu maker unknown, Calif., ca. 1900. (1929.02.097)

Made of redbud and willow, the weave is so tight that it is relatively waterproof. It is called a bamtush-weave. After being filled with water, hot stones would be added to the liquid to cook the food in the basket. For people who did not have a tradition of making ceramic pots, this is truly an ingenious way to cook. The stepped pattern, with the snake-like cross design is unusual.



Basket, Kaya Baker (attributed), Quilcene Twana, Wash., ca.1920. (1929.02.106)

Along the northern Pacific Coast in the United States, we find the Quilcene, Skokomish, and Duhlelap, all Salish people who now inhabit what is known as Washington State. Puget Sound basketry is distinctively different from the Southwestern baskets. This one is a soft twined basket, to give it flexibility and no hard edges. The designs include a series of wolves around the rim, a series of "box" designs, and a central design of a flounder. The wolf was the ancient guardian of the Salish people, and the flounder recalls the use of the fish on the net needles. The same respect for the fish is seen here as the Salish people depended upon the fish for their survival.

Dau

The Spirit Gate

Among the Pomo of California, the artists talk of the dau. This is the spirit door of the design—an intentional break within a pattern, which at times is very subtle. It is a way for any unwanted emotions to leave the basket. At the same time, it is a way for the good spirits to enter into the essence of the basket. In this way the basket is a living entity. Pomo is a name that has been applied to a large group of Native Nations that has joined together and now shares a common basket tradition.

My mother and grandmother worked at basketweaving when I was a child. When I was older I'd gather sedge roots, willows, bulrushes and redbud at the same places they did . . . However my grandmother died in 1924, so not only did I lose her help, but most of her examples of baskets as well because it was customary for an Indian woman to have all her baskets buried with her. . . Mother told me she did not want this to happen with her as she wanted me to have her baskets to help me when I started up basketweaving again.

Elsie Allen, Pomo Basketweaver (Pomo Basketmaking, Elsie Allen)

¹ Rowena Bradley, in *Weaving New Worlds*, by Sarah H. Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1997, p.xvi.

² Gladys Tantaquidgeon, Mohegan, *Artifacts*, The Institute for American Indian Studies, Washington, Conn., Vol. 17, No 4, 1989.



Burden basket, Pomo maker unknown, Calif., ca.1900. (1929.02.039)

The conical-shaped basket is difficult to weave in itself, and it is made more difficult by incorporating designs along the way. Made from sedge root and redbud wrapped around a willow base, this is a relatively small burden basket that is carried on the back, with a forehead strap attached to lessen the weight. It is likely that a basket this size would have been used to gather acorns and tree nuts.

Back Cover: "Shingaba Wassin" (Image Stone). Delaware County, N.Y. (1929.01.5389)

This mysterious carving surfaced in 1898 about two miles from Delhi, N.Y. Willard Yager referred to it as "Shingaba Wassin," a type of stone image revered by several tribes in the northern and northeastern United States. Since most Shingaba Wassin were large boulder-sized sculptures, this piece is too small for this purpose. The intimate posture of this sculpture suggests the Iroquois story of the Stone Giant's Wife who was discovered in a hunting camp nursing her child. She agreed to help the hunter and his wife with their work in exchange for their aid in subduing her abusive husband.

