

5-2022

## Through Their Eyes: A California Indian Art Exhibit

Michael Chavez

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd>



Part of the [Museum Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Chavez, Michael, "Through Their Eyes: A California Indian Art Exhibit" (2022). *Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations*. 1495.

<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd/1495>

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Graduate Studies at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@csusb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@csusb.edu).

THROUGH THEIR EYES: A CALIFORNIA INDIAN ART EXHIBIT

---

A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
History

---

by  
Michael Vincent Chavez  
May 2022

THROUGH THEIR EYES: A CALIFORNIA INDIAN ART EXHIBIT

---

A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

---

by

Michael Chavez

May 2022

Approved by:

Dr. Jeremy Murray, Committee Chair, History

Dr. Thomas Long, Committee Member

Dr. Daisy Ocampo, Committee Member

© 2022 Michael Vincent Chavez

## ABSTRACT

In this project I have demonstrated my professional proficiency by curating an exhibit from conception to completion. During the duration of this project I was required to use diverse museum sciences skillset including collections management, curation, development and design of the exhibit. Curated and built inside the Great Hall at the Dorothy Ramon Learning Center in downtown Banning, ancestral lands of the Serrano, this project displays not only my career skillset but also my proud connection to the California Landscape. As Tongva of the Los Angeles River Basin, I also had the opportunity to showcase the artwork of other California Native Americans as an educational exhibit working to raise awareness of the cultural connections between nature and Native peoples.

## DEDICATION

To my mentors, Dr. Long and Dr. Ocampo, thank you for the guidance along this road.

To my family, especially you Dad, thank you all for the support and love you have shown me along this road.

To my wife, thank you for walking this road with me.

To my son, this one's for you.

Aweeshk'one xaa

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iii
CHAPTER ONE: PROJECT OVERVIEW	
Introduction .....	1
Purpose of the project .....	1
Scope of the Project .....	2
Significance of the Project.....	3
Limitations of the Project .....	3
Definitions .....	4
Review of Related Literature .....	5
CHAPTER TWO: BUILDING THE	
EXHIBIT.....	6
Methodology .....	6
CHAPTER THREE:	
CONCLUSION .....	8
Summary .....	8
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	9

## CHAPTER ONE:

### PROJECT OVERVIEW

#### Introduction

This project is a multimedia art exhibit, designed from conception to completion focusing on the work of California Native American artists. Constructed and curated inside of the Gathering Hall at the Dorothy Ramon Learning Center on the ancestral lands of the Serrano in downtown Banning, all of the pieces that were used were made available as holdings of the center. These holdings are the personal collection of Morongo Elder Ernest Siva and his wife June Siva. In addition to the exhibit itself, there will also be an accompanying booklet replete with photographs of each individual piece and a brief description of said piece. This booklet will be produced by the publishing arm of the Dorothy Ramon Learning Center, the Ushkana Press.

#### Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project is to illustrate the specific and strong connection California Native peoples hold with the land around them. Native peoples, especially those in California believed their respective creator had made the land they inhabited for them specifically with all of the animals, plants and resources they needed to survive. This intentional design creates a mindset finding utility intrinsic in nature as well as creating a heightened sense

of respect for life in all of its forms. Animals in creation stories are often imbued with other-worldly powers but can also signify great strength or stability over time which is highlighted in the exhibit as well. Lastly, art pieces are presented in a multitude of media however the exhibit includes a number of pieces which were created using naturally occurring materials such as rattles, baskets and pottery, demonstrating the resourcefulness of California Natives living in their ancestral lands.

### Scope of the Project

This project is a collective exhibition with the pieces being generated by a number of Native American artists both living and dead. The art in the exhibit cover a wide array of media including oil on canvas, acrylic on canvas, and photography. Objects such as baskets and rattles are woven and constructed with plant material. There is a woven quilt, clay pottery and pieces of mixed media incorporating paint, canvas and re-purposed CDs. The common uniting factor besides all of the artists included being California Native Americans, is the demonstrated connection to flora and fauna deeply ingrained in Native culture. Given that the exhibit has been installed in the Dorothy Ramon Learning Center inside of the Gathering Hall, which at this time has not yet re-opened to the public, the audience for this exhibit will heavily consist of students on educational field trips and historically inclined tourism. Additionally the exhibit subject matter, artists and location are all centered around California Native Americans and will certainly attract a large number of natives

visitors not just those from the state. The exhibit itself is designed to be educational as well as celebrating the art of Native California Indians. It is expected that this exhibit will enhance pre-existing knowledge visitors had about California Native Americans or provide them with an accurate and succinct base of knowledge if this would be their first exposure. With future plans to move this exhibit to the Robert and Frances Fullerton Museum of Art on the California State University of San Bernardino campus the hope is the diversity of the visitors to the exhibit will expand greatly. It is also expected this exhibit will demonstrate my level of proficiency in the professional skills I have acquired in my Master's Degree pursuits. My ability to conceptualize, curate and construct the exhibit as well as factoring in the physical location of the exhibit, lighting, placing of the pieces and crowd flow in order to maximize all of the aforementioned.

### Significance of the Project

I have not introduced any new techniques into this exhibit but have worked to create an intuitively navigable space that allows visitors to focus on the pieces and information placed in front of them rather than where they will need to move to next. In terms of behavioral objectives visitors will leave the exhibit with knowledge regarding the connection California Native Americans have to the natural world around them as expressed by the Native artists themselves.

### Limitations of the Project

At this current time the Dorothy Ramon Learning Center does not have a functioning catalog system nor are pieces kept in optimal storage conditions. Without a catalog system the selected pieces had to be visually inspected by Ernest and June Siva in order for my co-curator, Master's candidate, Maria Munoz and I to determine the provenance of each piece. Some pieces also could not be considered due to their condition. There also was no budget for this project which hampered our ability to construct any temporary walls to hang pieces on or place in front of which would also serve to break up the space. Covid-19 also impacted our ability to meet with the Siva's in order to view the pieces in their collection. While appreciation for allowing access cannot be overstated, using only their collection from the center also functioned as a limitation. The Great Hall where the exhibit physically sits already had both a long counter built in as well as a baby grand piano that could not be removed. The back wall of the exhibit was also the entrance area for the restrooms and on the other side of the building, the freight elevator. Ideally neither would be in the exhibit space.

### Definition of Terms

DRLC will function as the abbreviated form of Dorothy Ramon Learning Center.

### Review of Related Literature

For this project I did not utilize a large amount of text as source material however, as a guidebook Jan Lornec, Lee Skolnick and Carig Berger's *What is Exhibition Design?*, provided a number of examples of lighting, display, installation and conceptual techniques. For this project the theme came after carefully considering which pieces to include while looking over the collection. My only instruction was to create an exhibit from concept to completion to demonstrate my ability with the knowledge acquired over my undergrad and graduate career. The knowledge I have regarding California Native Americans also comes firsthand as passed down to me by grandmother and great aunt. My family traces our lineage back to the Tongva of the Los Angeles River basin, a people who have inhabited the region for at least the last six thousand years. Understanding how natives view nature around them and how the relationship with nature isn't just a symbiotic one, it is almost reverence. Local flora and fauna are the lifeblood of us natives and there is still a concerted effort culturally to be connected to nature and to food sources. Recognizing that without modern convenience these would be all that fed, clothed, and housed us reminds us of the bounty close by if we know where to look.

CHAPTER TWO:  
BUILDING THE EXHIBIT

Methodology

I had the permission of the Sivas to go through the holdings of the DRLC so with my partner Maria we went through the center to see what we could find that was in presentable condition. The DRLC is currently also undergoing construction in efforts to have the storage space to re-catalog and store the pieces correctly but at this time they are stacked away in bunches through the center. Once we had a sufficient number of usable pieces we began to sort them further looking for a theme among the pieces selected rather than forcing a theme upon what we found. Like-items such as a painting of a woman weaving a basket with long grass strands would be displayed alongside woven baskets found in the center in an effort to drive home the message these pieces were built by natives to be utilitarian and made with what was at hand. Due to the insufficient budget we could not build proposed temporary walls in the exhibit to hang paintings on in an effort to avoid being stuck to the outer perimeter of the space. We were able to work around this limitation by purchasing relatively inexpensive easels. Using these easels we were able to break up the exhibit like we would have with the temporary walls but with a much smaller footprint which served us well in the limited space.

There was also a baby grand piano in the Great Hall that we could not remove and just had to wheel it into a corner to get it out of the way as much as possible. Using small pedestals and the previously mentioned easels we grouped liked items as much as we could essentially creating mini stories in each section. Descriptions of the pieces were acquired verbally from Ernest and June and then we had these transcribed and engraved onto small metal description tags with the name of the piece if available, artist name if available and media type. That same description was also copied down and professional photo attached for each piece to be included in the accompanying handbook. As with the temporary walls, we did not have the budget to install any new lighting in the Great Hall and instead used the already installed recessed lighting and the two existing multi-bulb fixtures running north to south at opposite sides of the hall. Without being able to remove the curved built-in counter we reached the decision to place a new, custom-made welcome sign in English, Cahuilla and Serrano in front of it to distract visitors from its placement. Our accompanying handbooks were placed at the other end of the counter for visitors to grab as they came to the end of the exhibit. This exhibit displayed native American art created by California natives, however because none of these fall under the category of "artifacts" they are not subject the Native American Graves Repatriation Act, N.A.G.P.R.A., or the California Native American Graves Repatriation Act, C.A.N.A.G.P.R.A.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### CONCLUSION

#### Summary

In an effort to showcase my professional skillset achieved through my graduate education and to celebrate California Native American artists this exhibit was completed from conception to opening night. Limitations such as budget and the collection itself were mitigated with the final product being an effective, informative and educational exhibit. By securing a future, short-term exhibit showing at the Robert and Frances Fullerton Museum of Art on the California State University San Bernardino campus I will also be able to expand the audience exponentially. In this project I was able to demonstrate my ability to conceptualize, design and execute an exhibit, curate the exhibit by managing the collection. Proficiency in these skills is considered a necessity for museum professionals and this project demonstrates my ability as a Master's candidate.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Lorenc, Jan, Lee Skolnick, and Craig Berger. *What Is Exhibition Design?* Mies: RotoVision SA, 2010.