

Forbes

A Spectacular Exhibit Of Indigenous Women Artists Counters 500 Years Of Exploitation And Ignorance

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Rose B. Simpson (Santa Clara Pueblo), *Maria*, 2014. 1985 Chevy El Camino. Collection of the Artist. © 2014 Rose B. Simpson. Image: © Kate Russell

At the beginning of the 20th century, a Native American potter named Maria Martinez received an unusual request from an archaeologist excavating a site near her home at the San Ildefonso Pueblo in northern New Mexico. He showed her a potsherd unlike anything made in her village – a remnant of an antiquated style in which patterns were rendered in black on black – and asked if she could replicate it for historical research.

Not only did she recapitulate her ancestors' technique. She also revived it, developing new permutations that were admired by her people and outsiders alike. Her descendants still make it today.

Martinez's distinctive blackware is featured in *Hearts of Our People*, a vital survey of art by Native American women that opened at the Minneapolis Institute of Art last week. Curated with input from a geographically diverse panel of Native artists and Native and non-Native scholars, the exhibition and accompanying catalogue provide an engaging perspective on the artistic practices of Indigenous women representing tribes ranging from Yup'ik to Osage over the past millennium.

Although Martinez was an exceptional artist by any standard, her dynamic balance of tradition and innovation is strikingly pervasive, recurrent throughout the exhibit. Artists past and present have meaningfully addressed their communal heritage through modes of expression uniquely their own. Their

work simultaneously maintains continuity and adds to their culture. In many cases, it also provides a cross-cultural portal for non-Native viewers.

A work by a contemporary Santa Clara Pueblo artist named Rose B. Simpson, created in tribute to Martinez, provides a good basis for appreciating these complex dynamics. Several years ago, while loading crops into the bed of a Chevy El Camino, Simpson realized that the car was a lot like a pot. "In the same way our bodies are vessels, the things we eat out of are vessels—it's a utilitarian object," she explains in the exhibition catalogue. To make the association explicit, she painted the Chevy black on black, using a design evocative of San Ildefonso blackware, and dubbed her artwork *Maria*. The strong visual impact reflects Simpson's motivation to make what she dubs an "empowered vessel". The El Camino becomes a vehicle for affirming her personal strength, and relating it to the power that women hold in her culture as makers of life-sustaining pottery.

As *Hearts of Our People* shows, the interplay of tradition and innovation is not only manifest in ceramics, but can equally be found in long-established media ranging from textiles to beading to carving to painting, as well as newer media such as digital photography and video. Basketry is especially well represented, and serves to illustrate the tensions that Native artists have faced in post-colonial America and how they've confronted existential threats ranging from genocide to assimilation.

Like ceramics, baskets have a long history as utilitarian objects and cultural artifacts, serving day-to-day functions while also holding communities together through practices of gathering and making. Within and beyond tribal boundaries, the most refined examples have been admired as artworks and treated as commodities. In *Hearts of Our People*, early 20th century baskets by Washoe artist Louisa Keyser and Yurok/Hupa/Karuk artist Elizabeth Hickox show the aesthetic splendor of basketry, equal to Maria Martinez's pottery, while their personal stories reveal the ugly circumstances in which they were compelled to work.



Cherish Parrish (Odawa/Pottawatami), Gun Lake Band of Pottawatami, *The Next Generation—Carriers of Culture*, 2018, Black ash and Sweet Grass.

For instance, although Keyser invented a new form of Washoe basket called a *degikup*, the non-Native shop that sold her work instead advertised her 'authenticity', appealing to non-Native buyers' desire for primitivism. She was even given a make-believe name, Dat So La Lee, to tout her exoticism. The marketing paid off in the sense that her large baskets sold for more than \$1,000, a hundred times the price of basketry by nameless female contemporaries. As commodities, these baskets sustained Keyser and her community, much as Maria Martinez and her painter husband Julian helped bring their Pueblo from the brink of starvation to relative affluence. But this imprint of primitivism has remained for nearly a century, at least for non-Native viewers, denigrating the creators by ignoring their inventiveness, imagination and humanity. For that reason, *Hearts of our People* is an essential corrective.

The exhibition is also an important corrective in a second way. At least since the 18th century, when Immanuel Kant wrote his *Critique of Judgment*, the Western elite has viewed utility as antithetical to art. Craft is belittled, with the result that Native art has often not been taken seriously, a problem exacerbated by non-Native ignorance of the multiple valences of utility in Indigenous societies. Although it would be unwise to generalize, given the vast diversity of these cultures, many dimensions of utility are revealed through this exhibit. One of the most significant is the role of craft as a communal activity, weaving collaborations on a daily basis and intergenerationally.

The philosophical implications are profound – as profound as the meaning of any artwork Kant would have appreciated – and they're extremely relevant for all peoples today, as society becomes more fractured and shortsighted amidst xenophobia and environmental destruction. The Native practice of thinking in terms of the next seven generations – and acting accordingly – is one that we all need to adopt, and it can be imbued through encounters with Indigenous art.

No single artwork can possibly contain all of these values, though one contemporary basket comes astonishingly close. The Ottawa/Ojibwe/Pottawatomi artist Cherish Parrish has woven a black ash basket in a shape reminiscent of a pregnant woman, a form she describes as "a universal idea for something beautiful and appreciated, something only women can do". Her vessel, titled *The Next Generation—The Carriers of Culture*, embodies the unity of utility and beauty by relating basket and belly, while simultaneously suggesting that the future of a people is borne through heritage as much as biology.

More than just an illustration of grandiose principles, Parrish's basket is a product of these processes, unifying object and meaning. *The Next Generation* really is a carrier of culture – the living descendant of ancient tribal traditions that may eventually birth meaningful art of its own.