



Art
ToGo

The Cleveland
Museum of Art

Native North
American Art

A Survey by Geography,
from Ancient Times to
the Modern Age



By Alicia Hudson Garr

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Front Cover:
Bear, 1965. James
Ward (American).
Relief print. The Harold
T. Clark Educational
Extension Fund
1965.219

This document accompanies an *Art To Go* lesson. Art to Go shares genuine art objects from the Cleveland Museum of Art's distinctive Education Collection to schools, libraries, community centers, adult facilities and other sites around northeastern Ohio, inspiring and teaching children and adults of all ages.

With supervision and wearing gloves, participants are able to handle actual art objects while engaging in exciting exploration and lively discussion about diverse cultures, time periods, materials and techniques represented in the works of art comprising varied media including ceramics, textiles, prints, carved wood and stone and cast metal.

From ancient culture in Egypt, Greece or Rome, to the technology of Medieval Armor, China or Japan, to the traditions of Native American peoples, customs of Early American settlers, and the elements of art, *Art to Go* offers different suitcase topics that can be adapted for most age groups. Museum staff and trained volunteers specifically select art objects from the suitcases to create individualized presentations.

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Introduction

The history books tell us that Christopher Columbus discovered the New World, as if there was nothing happening in the Americas before that moment. Native people would beg to differ. The art of Native North Americans helps to tell their story, one of creativity and adaptation to new materials and ideas, all while bravely maintaining their identity in the face of total cultural upheaval. Here, a quick survey of major Native North American cultural groups—organized in a geographic survey—touches on many of these themes.

Eskimo with Fish, 1900s.
Sub-Arctic, Canada.
Soapstone. Bequest of
Helen Hubbell 1990.1007



Ancient Northeast and Modern Southeast

Evidence of pre-contact peoples abounds in central and southern Ohio, particularly in the form of large earthworks. Some were filled with interments and grave gifts, others never contained anything. Objects found in burial mounds, dating as far back as 1500 BC, are often simplistic yet elegant, such as this birdstone (1917.848).



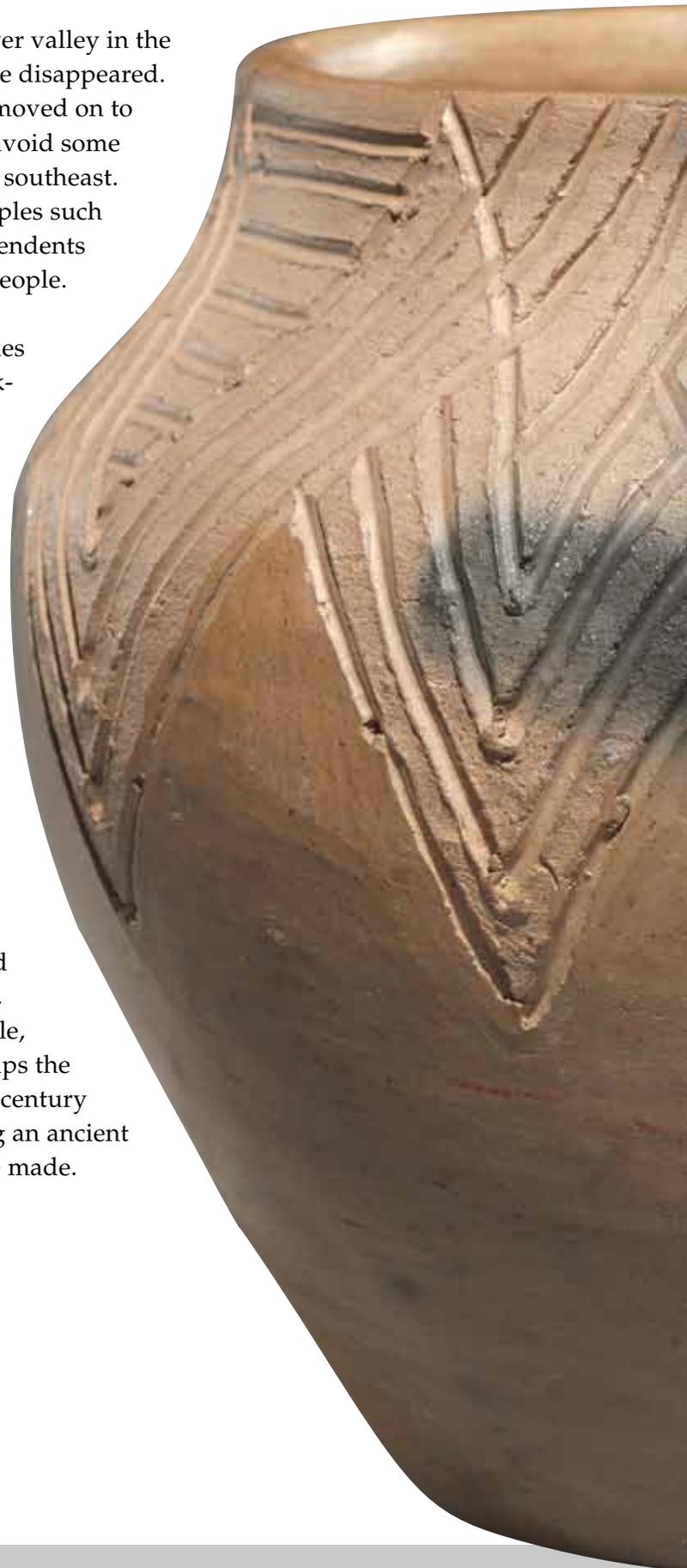
Birdstone, 100 BC–AD 500. Northeast Woodlands, Ohio. Gift of Mr. Nathan D. Chapman 1917.848

Like other Late Archaic objects, the pattern of the grain of the stone has been highlighted to maximum effect; smooth surfaces belie what must have been hours of careful polishing. While their particular function remains unknown, their placement in a grave says something about their former owners; they must have been people of high status to have been honored with such gifts. Other Late Archaic artworks are made of materials that came from far and wide—copper from northern Michigan, shark’s teeth from the Gulf Coast of Mexico, banded agate from Tennessee. These Late Adena people must have had a very sophisticated network of trade to be able to secure these exotic materials.

There are many cultural and artistic connections between the Late Archaic and the Adena, Hopewell, and Mississippian peoples of the Ohio River valley; for instance, earthworks such as Serpent Mound were made in southern Ohio as late as around the year 1000. Yet by the time European explorers like

Champlain reached the Ohio River valley in the 1600s, these peoples seem to have disappeared. What is more likely is that they moved on to secure better food sources or to avoid some source of conflict, perhaps to the southeast. Modern southeastern native peoples such as the Cherokee claim to be descendents of these ancient moundbuilder people. (Penney, 52.)

Ancient moundbuilder peoples such as the Hopewell made thick-walled ceramic vessels too, and in the 20th century Cherokee artists such as Maude Welch and Elda Smith made ceramic vessels that reside within CMA's Education collection. The pieces that were added in 1938 were probably created right around that time, maybe even spurred by the Works Project Administration which supported artists during the Great Depression. Pottery production had actually fallen out of favor with many Eastern Woodlands native people after contact with Europeans provided access to copper cooking vessels, which were easier to heat, durable, and relatively lightweight. Perhaps the Cherokee artists, like many 20th century native artists, were rediscovering an ancient art at the time these vessels were made.



Miniature Jar, 1930–38.
Maude Welch (Cherokee).
Educational Purchase
Fund 1938.444





Northeast and Great Lakes Region (Woodlands)

The first European visitors to the Northeastern parts of the New World were the French, who sought furs. Since their aim was not to colonize, their relationship with Native peoples was relatively harmonious. French traders quickly learned what type of goods appealed to the native people of the woodlands: finished cloth, glass beads, and silver ornaments. All materials were refashioned at the hands of women into garments that often resembled European styles, but with native sensibilities. For instance, men for centuries had worn bags made from deer hides that had been smoked dark and embroidered with dyed porcupine quills in motifs that often referred to cosmology. With the introduction of European finished cloth, those bags were made with velvet and glass beads, but the dark-colored ground and the motifs were often the same.

The French King Henri IV had a “cabinet of curiosities” like many distinguished 16th century Europeans full of items from the natural world (like minerals) and items made by foreign peoples (like those made by woodlands peoples). Right up until the late 1700s, military personnel stationed in Canada of French and British descent would also collect native-made

*Lidded Round Birchbox
with Quills, 1900s.
Northeast Woodlands,
Anishinabe (Ojibwa).
Birch bark, porcupine
quills. Gift of Phyllis
Reinhardt 1939.275.a,b.*

“curiosities” to send back home. Embroidered moccasins were a favorite, and were in such demand that the local Ursuline nuns of Quebec who had taught native women European embroidery techniques learned how to make Native-style moccasins to sell to European collectors.

The motifs found on native-made art of the woodlands several hundred years after European contact changed to become more floral than cosmographic. Some art historians have postulated that the general creeping in of floral motifs in woodlands art comes from the patterns Europeans would have used in teaching woodlands women various needle arts. Or, potentially the motifs crept in through the preponderance of floral chintz. The reasons are an ongoing debate.

In the 20th century native peoples living on reservations in Canada continued to make “curiosities” that tourists of European descent loved to collect. Here is an item often made by the Odawa (formerly called Ojibwa), a lidded container made of birch bark and embroidered with porcupine quills. In a moment of extreme patriotism, perhaps, the artist choose the symbolic Canadian maple leaf as the motif for the top of the box.

Lidded Round Birchbox with Quills, 1900s.
Northeast Woodlands,
Anishinabe (Ojibwa).
Birch bark, porcupine
quills. Gift of Phyllis
Reinhardt 1939.275.a,b.



In the 1960s when this box was made, there were more artists alive who were familiar with this ancient embroidery technique. Today, very few still practice it, which has caused the price of a similar box, but of a much smaller size, to sell for hundreds of dollars.

Small Bowl, 1930s.
Maria Martinez
(American, about
1887-1980). Ceramic.
Gift of Mrs. Edd A.
Ruggles 1933.262



Southwest (Pueblo)

Another early point of contact between peoples of the New World and Europeans occurred between the Pueblo and Spanish peoples in the Southwest. The Spanish referred to the relatively settled native peoples they encountered as Pueblo, meaning roughly “city-dwellers,” as their mud brick settlements were tidy, neat, and organized. Like other moments of interaction between Native people and Europeans there was an exchange of finished goods and eventually technologies; for instance Pueblo peoples often found cooking containers made of copper and other metals were lighter to carry and heated more quickly than those made of pottery, and so widely adapted their use. Still, the ancient art of pottery production was never completely given up, although it did experience a conscientious revival in the early 20th century.

Archaeologists associated with the Lab of Anthropology in New Mexico discovered shards of ancient pottery which they subsequently wished to have recreated for museum purposes. Julian Martinez, of San Ildefonso pueblo, had worked on the digs, and suggested his wife Maria as a potter who might be able to recreate the wares. Not only was Maria Martinez able to recreate the ancient wares, she perfected a black-on-black ware of her own invention for which she ultimately became quite famous. As her renown grew, she taught other members of her family and pueblo the skills needed to create a variety of wares. Maria lived decades beyond her husband Julian, who was, while he was alive, her favored painter; signatures on the bottoms of vessels show that she collaborated with many others.

While the production of pottery for market consumption in Maria's case originally started from a specific commission, it was, like in other Native communities, originally fueled by demand from tourists. The Santa Fe railroad brought many tourists to the picturesque towns of the Southwest in the late 19th and early 20th century. As the 20th century progressed, however, dealers were selling Maria's work, and by the late 20th century her work was included in major museum collections, elevating it to the realm of fine art. While 20th century collectors of Native American art often wanted to collect "old" art, which they associated with "authentic," 21st-century native people struggle to get new generations of collectors to appreciate how "authentic" Native American art can also be "new."

Small Bowl, 1930s.
Maria Martinez
(American, about
1887-1980). Ceramic.
Gift of Mrs. Edd A.
Ruggles 1933.262





California (Mission)

Not too long after the Spanish settled in New Mexico they spread a little farther north and west until they reached the coast of California. By the 18th century religious missions supported settlement in the region, first populated by Jesuits, then Franciscans. Their presence was to provide organized religion for Spanish settlers and conversion for native peoples. Mass conversion was considered to be in the best interest of the Spanish crown—it would spread Christianity, Spanish culture, and language, and ultimately create more tax-paying citizens. The darker side of the missionary efforts was that native people often did not understand the relationship they were entering into, and worse, they were sometimes forcibly conscripted into laboring for the missions.

Native men were taught wood carving to decorate church architectural elements and create sculptural retablos and religious effigies, many of which survive today and are greatly desired by collectors of Spanish colonial art. However, the prime art medium for native peoples in California was the creation of finely woven baskets. Women controlled this art, which required specialized knowledge of where and how to gather and process raw materials, as well as how to create a finished product. California “Mission” basketry often features European imagery. Spain closed the California missions by 1830, so technically Mission basketry predates 1830.

In the late 19th century women’s needle arts were particularly collected by female patrons, and basketry was often placed in this category. Tourism was not yet an industry in California to feed with art, but it was an age of the illustrated mail-order catalog, a venue through which basketry was often sold. Weavers still made baskets for ritual purposes, but introduced new forms that were clearly meant to appeal to European collectors, particularly those that had a whimsical element, such as a footed cup (clearly not for beverage consumption) or a basket so tiny it would fit on your fingertip.

20th and 21st century Californian native people still make baskets for sale on the market, although one of the biggest threats to the continuation of this art form are environmental concerns and damage to habitats that produce the raw materials for basketry.

Footed Cup, about 1900.
California, Miwok. Coiled
with redbud and sedge.
Presented by William
Albert Price in memory
of Mrs. William Albert
Price 1917.458





Plains

One could argue that native peoples of the Western Plains and prairies were among the least affected by European settlement of the New World in the first few centuries, so when the West opened up for settlement in the mid to late 1800s, the clashes of culture between natives and settlers were among the most dramatic, with often drastic and tragic results.

A nomadic people whose way of life depended on following herds of bison, which was more efficiently accomplished with the introduction of the horse after European contact, led to the iconic image of a warrior on horseback, alone and surrounded by prairies. European settler-descendants adopted this image as “the” symbol of native peoples in America. Tragically the proud warrior was subdued through a series of conflicts that eventually confined him and his people to reservations, while their traditional lands were given away by the American government to hasten settlement of these “badlands.”

Beaded Child's Vest,
about 1900. Plains,
Tsitsistas (Cheyenne).
Beaded leather. Gift
of Amelia Elizabeth
White 1937.726

Like Native peoples on the West coast, the roles of providing for the family soon changed once men were no longer able to provide for their families through hunting and natives were forced to convert to a cash economy. The skills of women were called upon to create items that were greatly desired by Americans and Europeans alike, who saw that the traditional life way of the Native American of the Plains was dying out. A desire to see historic events of the "Wild West" was supported by the extremely popular Buffalo Bill Wild West show, which toured the U.S. and Europe. Buffalo Bill, a former military man, and his sidekick Wild Bill Hickok re-enacted historical events and employed natives such as Sitting Bull to participate in the shows. Like major events today, these shows sold souvenirs of native-made items such as beaded knife scabbards, weapons, and clothing which the public consumed in great quantities. The opportunity to create items for sale in these shows kept the beading traditions of Plains native peoples going, and made women the providers for their families.

In addition to creating works that could be sold at the Wild West shows, native women in the early 20th century were commissioned to make works for mail-order centers, which were largely out of New York; the two vests featured here were likely made for the mail-order trade. These items feature beads used after 1910 (particularly reds and blues) and traditional design elements with additional radiating elements which were thought to have been adapted from Chinese carpet designs. (Personal correspondence with Billy Maxwell, independent scholar, 1/31/2011.)

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries native Plains women continue to make beaded items for sale, but also continue the production of items for personal ritual use, for give-aways, and to create items for pow-wow dancers. When items are created for sale, they are priced in a range that most of the public can not afford, thereby removing them from the realm of a "curiosity" or "trinket."

Pacific Northwest Coast (Tlingit/Haida)

European explorers encountered the native inhabitants of the northwest coast of the Pacific in the 18th century and Europeans made a habit of returning to secure fur pelts. Native peoples, in turn, were particularly desirous of European metal-made implements, especially those that would speed up

*Silver Bracelet with
Formline Designs,*
1875-1916. Northwest
Coast, Haida. Hammered,
incised silver. Gift of
Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Wade
1916.169

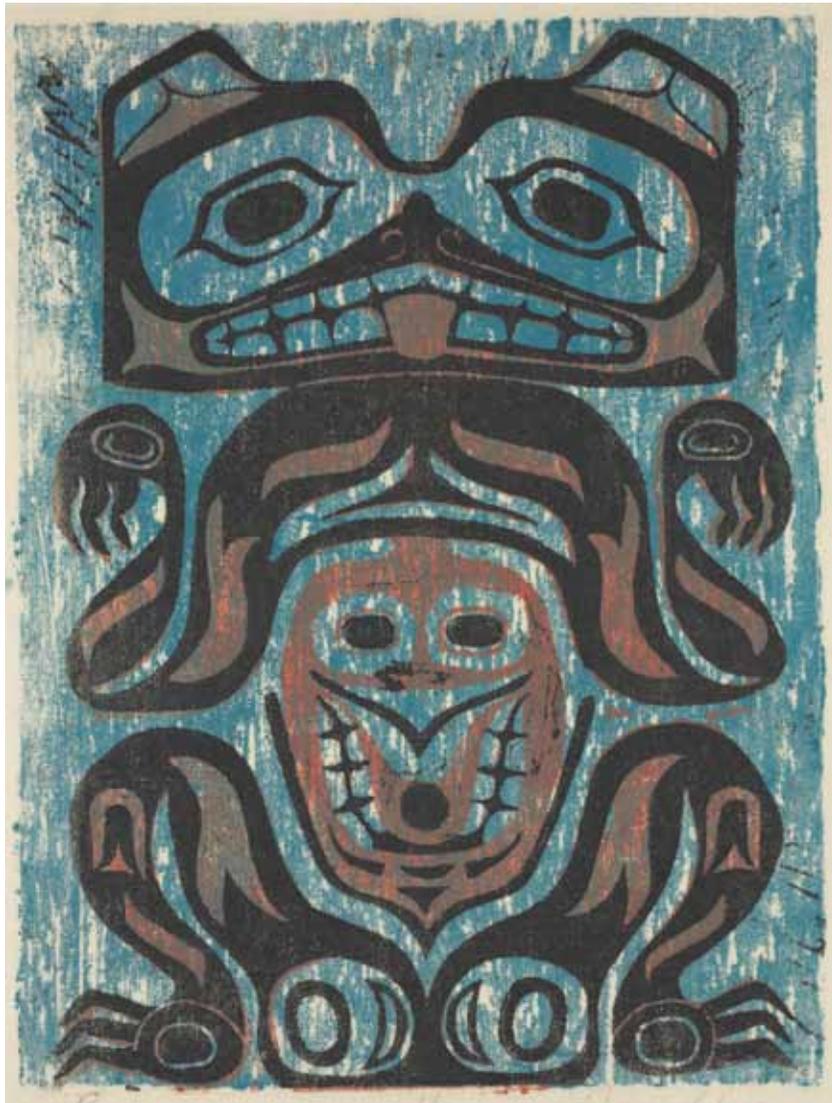


carving or facilitate hunting. Otherwise, native people of the Pacific Northwest could have lived very comfortably and self-sufficiently off their plentiful natural resources, such as salmon and berries for food, redwood trees that could be carved into useful items for food storage or habitat, or mountain goat fur that was spun and woven into warm clothing.

The large carvings that denoted family status among the Tlingit and Haida, commonly called Totem poles, captured the imagination of European descendents. In the 20th century, art historians devoted some attention to “deciphering” the visual language used in their decoration. The visual style of the Tlingit and Haida references elements of the natural world such as killer whales, ravens, wolves, eagles, and humans, but combines views from multiple perspectives in one image. Art historians call this style “formline design.” Some aspects of this can be seen in this early 20th century silver bracelet, probably made for the tourist trade.

The image here is a frontal view of a grinning animal, with smaller claws indicated on either side. It represents a high-ranking bear, evidenced by the stack of rings at the center of the face (correspondence with Steve Brown, 8/24/11). In this print, you can see the two-dimensionality of the design laid out flat. Artist James Ward may have been working in a native-run co-operative that was encouraging and supporting artists to use traditional imagery in a media used primarily among European descendents. Artists in general have often turned to printmaking as a way to create images that could be somewhat more easily produced and afforded by consumers.

The formline design has become the hallmark of native people of the Pacific Northwest. It is sometimes “borrowed” or “adapted” by non-native peoples, much to the dismay of natives, as the motifs that are borrowed are usually heraldic, and as such, should only be displayed or used for the benefit of those who belong to the clan that is referenced.



Bear, 1965. James Ward (American). Relief print. The Harold T. Clark Educational Extension Fund 1965.219

Arctic

While European explorers encountered the northern peoples of the Arctic a little later than they did their Pacific Coast neighbors to the south, some permanent settlements were made in Alaska, particularly by Russians. Arctic peoples had furs to trade and largely wanted the same things in exchange as did their southern neighbors—finished hand-tools and raw metal, which had ritual significance.

Native Arctic peoples were sometimes employed on Russian whaling ships where it is thought they learned the art of scrimshaw, an art of engraving mammal bones and applying pigment to highlight the details. But this set of engraved bones has a purely Native subject matter and style, suggesting this type of engraving may predate Russian contact.

Hunting Scene, 1800s.
Alaska, Inuit (Eskimo).
Ivory. Lent by Mr. T. L.
Reeder 1370.1921



In this engraved hunting scene fragment, two igloos are indicated with smoke escaping from a hole at the top, and hunters load a sled with caribou carcasses (and the sled itself looks like a caribou). So such detail is packed into a tiny physical space that whatever the fragment's purpose, it was obviously meant to be admired from up close.

In the 20th century demand for Arctic ivory continued to be high, but by mid century Arctic artists were visited by government agents who encouraged them to create in a modified abstract style. Arctic artists started working with a jade-like green serpentine to carve larger works that could be considered pure works of sculpture by the European-descended market, and they were collected as such. Native Arctic artists turned to subjects from daily life or the mystical world for subject matter, which was rendered in a highly abstract style. Works like these were sold in fine art galleries across Canada.



Eskimo with Fish, 1900s.
Sub-Arctic, Canada.
Soapstone. Bequest of
Helen Hubbell 1990.1007

Conclusion

While a tour through the major art-producing regions of Native North America is a daunting task indeed, several themes emerge. Native peoples often made the best of interaction between European cultures, mostly by adapting new materials to traditional art forms. Sometimes cultural motifs were exchanged, borrowed, and modified in both directions. Most importantly for today's Native North American people, art continues to be produced on their terms. While museums and collectors often were keen to collect older items, which they considered more "authentic," native peoples are producing art that stretches the boundaries of what one might think typical of their peoples. In any case, their works show that their art is continually changing and adapting with cultural influences and modern times, just like the people themselves.

List of objects

Birdstone, 100 BC–AD 500. Northeast Woodlands, Ohio. Gift of Mr. Nathan D. Chapman 1917.848

Miniature Jar, 1930–38. Maude Welch (Cherokee). Educational Purchase Fund 1938.444

Lidded Round Birchbox with Quills, 1900s. Northeast Woodlands, Anishinabe (Ojibwa). Birch bark, porcupine quills. Gift of Phyllis Reinhardt 1939.275.a,b.

Small Bowl, 1930s. Maria Martinez (American, about 1887–1980). Ceramic. Gift of Mrs. Edd A. Ruggles 1933.262

Footed Cup, about 1900. California, Miwok. Coiled with redbud and sedge. Presented by William Albert Price in memory of Mrs. William Albert Price 1917.458

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