

# A TRADITION OF MAKING: CALIFORNIA NATIVE BASKETRY AT THE RANDALL MUSEUM

BY BETH SMITH



Lucy Parker is one in a long line of Native American basket makers who—along with her mother, Julia, daughter, Ursula, and granddaughter, Naomi—spent a day at the Randall Museum in San Francisco, California, choosing baskets for the exhibition, *A Tradition of Making: California Native Basketry*. “The Parkers are really the curators of the exhibit,” says Susan Working, curator at the Randall Museum. “They were key to knowing which baskets from the museum’s permanent collection represented the history of California Native Baskets and they generously lent baskets of their own for the exhibition.”



...PHOTOGRAPHY

During the day the Parkers spent at the museum, they talked about the stories and design functions of the baskets. Their conversations were videotaped and their stories became the narrative for the exhibition. "The Parkers are stewards of the land," says Working. "They hold on to the tradition of how materials are used and how basket making is connected to their culture."

The Randall Museum embarked on this exhibition with a grant, part of which was designed to bring the use of California's natural history into public view. Within the tradition of California Native Basketry, different tribes use different materials. The tribe determines the material. "The Parkers could look at a basket and know its history, its story, how and why it was made," says Working.

The exhibition also showcases curio baskets from the museum's permanent collection. Curio baskets came about when Europeans began visiting the United States as tourists. They purchased curio baskets as souvenirs which helped to support tribal families as there were not many ways for Native Americans to make a living. These baskets were not meant to be functional or used in daily life.

The Parker family and other Native Americans continue to make baskets today for functional use. Baskets are made for storage and for cooking. Tightly woven baskets are used for making acorn mush. Acorns are stored in baskets, then ground and cooked in the baskets with heated stones and are a food source for Northern California tribes.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Four generations of Parker family women carry on their family's Native American basket-making legacy. From left: Ursula Min-ne-ah Jones, Naomi Kashaya Jones, Julia and Lucy Parker.

THIS PAGE  
TOP: Randall Museum lobby, San Francisco, California

CENTER: Willow; pattern dyed or sunburned, twining. "We make little baskets for the little kids to play with and to use. This has all the tails inside."

BELOW: Juncas and muhlenbergia; coiling on grass bundles. "You can tell how the ends, they cross it over, that's Southern California style... I learned how they start their baskets from my friend. See how it's flat? Juncas is pretty flat, it's hollow in the middle and you scrape out the middle of the flat fiber."





ABOVE: Randall Museum, San Francisco, California  
 BELOW: Willow; pattern dyed or sunburned, twining.

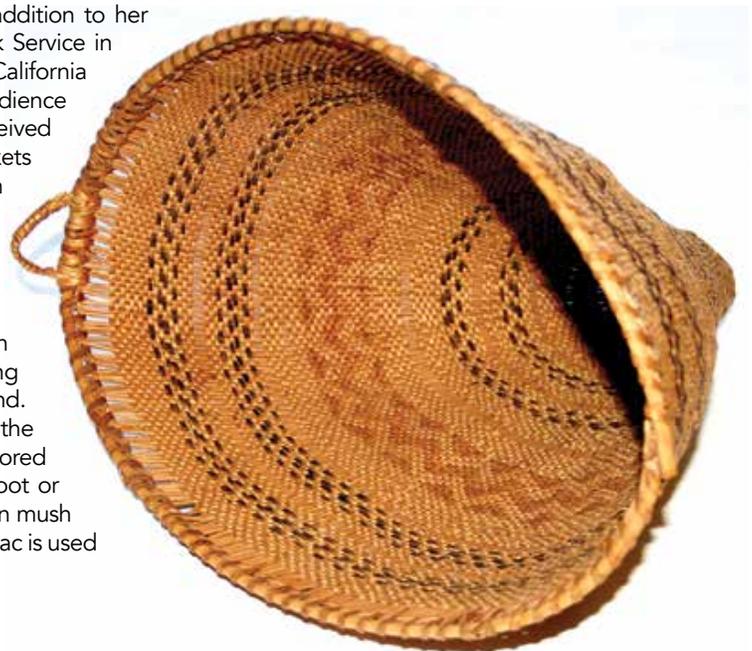
"I am proud to carry on the tradition that began in the Sierra Nevada Mountains with my father's grandmother, Lucy Telles," says Lucy Parker. "It is important to me to make the baskets of my people. My heart is big with it."

Lucy Telles learned basket weaving from tribal elders and began demonstrating basket weaving at Yosemite National Park for the National Park Service in 1947, as tourism heightened after World War II. After Telles passed away in 1956, the Park Service asked Julia Parker, Lucy Parker's mother, to take over as a cultural demonstrator, a role she relished for 55 years as a storyteller, teacher, and basket maker.

Julia Parker nurtured the basket-making legacy of her Kashi Pomo tribe. In addition to her role with the National Park Service in Yosemite, she introduced California Native Basketry to a vast audience worldwide. She has received many honors, and her baskets are in the Smithsonian Institution and the private collection of Queen Elizabeth II.

Today, Lucy Parker carries on the tradition with her family gathering their materials from the land. Willow is stripped to make the strings for weaving and colored brown with bracken fern root or with the tannic acid in acorn mush for enhanced designs. Sumac is used for red coloring.

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Climate change and increasing population in the Sierras has slowly eroded plant life. "Gathering takes longer now than it once did, making the process longer and harder," says Lucy Parker. Once gathered, some plants need a year or more to dry and be prepped for weaving.

While women are most commonly the basket makers within the tribes of the Sierras, Native American men also made baskets, especially larger work baskets since, as Lucy suggests, "Men generally have stronger, bigger hands to make the bigger functional baskets."

Parker baskets are still coveted among basket collectors and other basket makers. "Sometimes I will sell from home or at a workshop where I am teaching," says Lucy. "If I were to sell with a gallery, it would take away from the personal relationship I have with the basket and the buyer."

Like her mother, Julia, Lucy teaches at colleges, conferences, or at tribes in California and also on the east coast. Next June, she and her daughter, Ursula Min-ne-ah Jones, and Julia's great-granddaughter, Naomi Kashaya Jones, are teaching a workshop in Norway.

*A Tradition of Making: California Native Basketry* at the Randall Museum is on view through September 2019. Visit their website at [www.randallmuseum.org](http://www.randallmuseum.org). Baskets shown here are part of the Randall Museum's collection and all photos are credited to the Randall Museum. Extra descriptions within captions are courtesy of Lucy Parker.

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ABOVE: Tule stem and root, black from soaking in mud; twining and weaving. "Tule is a very strong material. You've got to split that tule when it's green. If it's dry, it'll break."

BELOW: Pine root, xerophyllum on hazel shots warp; twining. "Those are tribal designs of Northern California. See where the design is on the outside? Because the material is dark on one side and light underneath. If you were able to flip it and turn it over there would have been the design on the inside. So there are a lot of tricks like that. This basket probably has a thousand spokes."

