



NATURE'S MIRROR
Images and
Artifacts from the
Edward S. Curtis
Collection

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1. *Gathering hanamh — Papago*
by Edward S. Curtis, c.1907.
This photograph shows a basket
acquired by the museum (Fig. 3).

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hile traveling and taking photographs for his masterwork, *The North American Indian* (1907–1930), Edward S. Curtis (b.1868, d.1952) amassed a vast collection of Native-made objects. In 1938, for the sum of \$909.94, the state of Arizona purchased sixty-seven items that Curtis had collected from Arizona Indian tribes, including forty-two baskets now in the collection of the Arizona Capitol Museum, Phoenix and made by Hopi, Apache, Maricopa, Akimel O’otham (Pima), Tohono O’odham (Papago), Havasupai, Hualapai and Navajo basketmakers. The baskets, as well as selected Curtis photographs, are featured in an exhibit titled *Nature’s Mirror: Images and Artifacts from the Edward S. Curtis Collection*.



2. *Pima Baskets*, by Edward S. Curtis, c.1907. This photograph shows two baskets acquired from Curtis by the museum (Figs. 3, 4).

The North American Indian

The Library of Congress (n.d.) sums up Curtis’s achievement in this way:

The North American Indian by Edward S. Curtis is one of the most significant and controversial representations of traditional American Indian culture ever produced. Issued in a limited edition from 1907–1930, the publication continues to exert a major influence on the image of Indians in popular culture. Curtis said he wanted to document “the old time Indian, his dress, his ceremonies, his life and manners.” In over 2000 photogravure plates and narrative, Curtis portrayed the traditional customs and lifeways of eighty Indian tribes. The twenty volumes, each with an accompanying portfolio, are organized by tribes and culture areas encompassing the Great Plains, Great Basin, Plateau Region, Southwest, California, Pacific Northwest, and Alaska.

3. Wine basket, Akimel O’otham or Tohono O’odham, 1880s–1907. Willow, devil’s claw (*Martynia* sp.). 16 ¼" diameter (41.3 cm). This basket is shown in Figures 1 and 2. Cat. No. 1982.035.012.

In 1912, the year that Arizona attained statehood, the state legislature voted to authorize “the purchase of a Set of ‘The North American Indian’ by Edward S. Curtis” (State of Arizona 1912: 432). The sum of \$3,000 was to be appropriated from the state’s general fund to purchase the twenty-volume set and folios. Two years later, the volumes still had not been purchased. Also in 1914, Curtis sent a letter to Arizona governor George W. P. Hunt stating that he was “now prepared to deliver the material, according to this Act, and respectfully ask how such delivery is to be made” (1914). Hunt requested that the Arizona state historian, Thomas E. Farish, reply to Curtis. Apparently,





4. Basket, Akimel O'otham, 1880s–1907. Willow, devil's claw (*Martynia* sp.). 26" diameter (66 cm). This basket, which features a "coyote track" design, appears in the Curtis photographs shown in Figures 2, 5 and 6. Cat. No. 1982.035.011.



5. *Maricopa Group* by Edward S. Curtis, c.1907. This photograph shows a basket acquired by the museum (Fig. 4).

Farish was reluctant to purchase the volumes; however, a letter from the Arizona Attorney General, G. P. Bullard, to Hunt states that "the State Historian has no option in the matter, and must purchase said set out of said appropriation, and that said appropriation can not be used for any other purpose" (1914). Farish's reply to Hunt concludes that "it appears to me that an appropriation has been made authorizing and directing a non-existent officer to purchase and pay for a set of books under the terms of a non-existent contract, and that the delivery of such books has not been made" (1914). Eventually, the state acquired only the three volumes and one folio of images dealing specifically with the tribes of Arizona.

The Baskets

It is unclear what the impetus was for the state of Arizona to purchase forty-two baskets from Curtis in 1938, eight years after the completion of *The North*

American Indian. By the 1930s, though, Curtis was in dire financial straits, which may help to explain his sale of items he had collected.

Curtis is known for, and has been criticized for, having used costumes and props in his work, including items unrelated to the subject(s) of the photograph (Lyman 1982). Because little documentation accompanied the baskets in the Arizona Capitol Museum's collection, we do not know whether these items were used as props or were collected for other reasons. With the assistance of Ann Marshall and Diana Pardue, of the Heard Museum, Phoenix, one Akimel O'otham or Tohono O'odham basket (Fig. 3), two Akimel O'otham baskets (Figs. 4, 7), two Western Apache baskets (Figs. 9, 10) and a Jicarilla Apache basket (Fig. 11) in the collection have been found in photographs taken by Curtis in the early 1900s.

There are eleven Apache baskets labeled "Jicarilla Apache" by Curtis in the museum's Curtis collection. Recently, Diane Dittmore of the Arizona State Museum, Tucson, examined the baskets and determined that most were Western Apache, rather than Jicarilla (2006). In total, three Apache baskets have been identified in Curtis's photographs. Two Western Apache baskets (Figs. 9, 10) of exceptional quality are seen in Curtis's *Apache Still Life* (Fig. 8). Another basket (Fig. 11), identified by Curtis as Jicarilla Apache, is shown in a photograph of a San Juan woman, who balances it on her head (Fig. 12). Curtis points out that the Jicarilla Apaches had a "fair skill in basketry, this being their chief industry and source of barter with neighboring tribes" and that "the Pueblos of the Rio Grande use many baskets, which they obtained chiefly from the Jicarilla in exchange for corn" (1907:54). It is unclear whether the basket shown in Figure 12 was actually traded from the Jicarillas to the San Juan Indians, and *then* collected by Curtis, or if it was one of Curtis's props.

None of the twelve Hopi baskets in the Curtis collection has been matched to Curtis photographs. However, one of the most interesting items is a coiled bowl that appears to depict the twin war gods (Lomawaima 2006). It is similar to those made on Second Mesa, Arizona, which are "unique in the Southwest for their designs and relatively thick coils," and "are made with a foundation of a bundle of galleta grass or rabbitbrush and sewn with narrow splints of yucca leaves" (Whiteford 1988:144).

Many of the Hopi examples in the collection are plaques used to serve food and are traditionally given as wedding gifts. Plaques made on Third Mesa were generally made of plaited wicker. There are six such baskets in the museum's collection. They may have been used as utility baskets, as colanders or for storage.



6. *Maricopa Still Life* by Edward S. Curtis, c.1907. This photograph shows two baskets acquired by the museum (Figs. 4, 7).

7. Basket, Akimel O'otham, 1880s–1907. Willow, devil's claw (*Martynia* sp.). 17½" diameter (44.5 cm). This basket appears in the Curtis photographs reproduced in Figure 6. Cat. No. 1982.035.019.





8. *Apache Still Life* by Edward S. Curtis, c.1907. This photograph shows two baskets acquired from Curtis by the museum (Figs. 9, 10).

9. Basket, Western Apache, 1880s–1900. Willow and devil’s claw (*Martynia* sp.), three-rod foundation. 27¼" diameter, 10½" tall (69.2 cm x 26.7 cm). This basket features a petal design and what appear to be arrows. This basket appears in Figure 8. Cat. No. 1982.035.021.

10. Basket, Western Apache, 1880s–1900. Willow and devil’s claw (*Martynia* sp.), three-rod foundation. 24¾" diameter, 7½" tall (62.9 cm x 19.1 cm). This piece depicts possible *gaan* dancers, with lightning bolts and quadrupeds. This basket appears in Figure 8. Cat. No. **AQ**



Three baskets in the collection with tags bearing the names “Maricopa-Pima-Papago” have been matched to Curtis photographs (Figs. 3, 4, 7). Interestingly, Curtis photographed and identified them as “Pima” (Akimel O’otham), “Papago” (Tohono O’odham) and “Maricopa” in different images. A wine basket (Fig. 3) from the collection, either Tohono O’odham or Akimel O’otham, is shown in at least three Curtis photographs: *Gathering hanamh — Papago* (Fig. 1), *Papago Kitchen* and *Pima Baskets* (Fig. 2). It has seen some use as the interior is stained, perhaps with wine. An Akimel O’otham basket in the collection (Fig. 4), appears in many of Curtis’s images,

including *Pima Baskets*, *Maricopa Group* and *Maricopa Still Life* (Figs. 2, 5, 6). And another Akimel O’otham basket is shown in *Maricopa Still Life* (Figs. 6, 7).

There are two Havasupai burden baskets in the collection. According to Whiteford “baskets were not only the Havasupais’ most important domestic utensil but also their major craft” (1988:109). These two baskets are of the deep conical twined type. One has no design motifs, whereas the other features woven colored rings circling the basket. They appear to be made of either willow or cottonwood.

The museum has one small Hualapai basket collected by Curtis that features designs executed in red and green. Curtis commented that “[Hualapais] make few rather coarse baskets of varying shapes: conical burden baskets, gum-coated water bottles, flat trays for gathering and parching grass seeds, and straight-sided storage baskets” (Curtis 1907:93). This basket was most likely created for sale or trade.

The museum also has one Navajo basket in its collection, a wedding basket with a black-and-red design. According to Curtis, “few baskets are made [by the Navajo] and these are of but a single pattern — a flattish tray for use in ceremonies. Such baskets must be of a prescribed pattern, with a break in the design at one side. When the basket is in use this side is always placed toward the east” (1907:77).

Conclusion

The exhibit *Nature's Mirror: Images and Artifacts from the Edward S. Curtis Collection* is on display at the Arizona Capitol Museum until December 30, 2006. It features twenty-three baskets from the museum's collection as well as an array of Curtis's images, including the photographs that can be matched to six baskets sold by Curtis to the state of Arizona. A first edition volume of *The North American Indian* as well as the letters exchanged between Curtis and various members of the Arizona state government in 1914 are also on display.

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11. Basket, Jicarilla Apache, c.1900. Sumac. 20½" diameter (50.8 cm). This basket appears in a Curtis photograph of a San Juan woman (Fig. 12). Cat. No. 1982.035.031.

12. *From the Threshing Floor — San Juan*, by Edward S. Curtis, c.1926. This photograph depicts a San Juan woman balancing a Jicarilla Apache basket, now in the museum's collection, on her head (Fig. 11).

