



Precious Cargo: California Indian Cradle Baskets and Childbirth Traditions

From the California Exhibition Resources Alliance (CERA)

Exhibition Highlights

The “Precious Cargo: California Indian Cradle Baskets and Childbirth Traditions” traveling exhibition is comprised of historic and contemporary cradle baskets and artifacts. Thirty California Indian weavers were commissioned to create cradle baskets characteristic of their region for inclusion in the exhibition. The exhibition is divided into eleven thematic sections:

1. Living in Accord

Aside from its marvelous functional attributes, the cradle symbolizes life’s most significant moment: the miracle of birth. Traditional native perspectives on birth reflect unique world-views. The actions of parents during this period involved a strong belief in reciprocal relationships, particularly with the supernatural powers influencing all aspects of life, including fertility, growth, and the gift of good health.

2. Form and Function

The diverse environments of California were reflected in the cultural diversity of the Native people. Cradle basket forms, techniques, and materials used in their construction mirror this diversity, revealing a marvelous variety of style.

3. Touchstones

Important rituals were often linked to natural sites. Long ago, women experiencing difficulty conceiving might seek a remedy by visiting a “baby rock.” Some sites associated with fertility represent mythic figures turned to stone eons ago. Making personal contact with these empowered places was believed to grant the pilgrim fecundity.

4. Taking Precautions

Infant mortality was relatively high in the early days, so parents were particularly careful before and after childbirth. Rooted in the value of sacrifice, expectant mothers abstained from certain foods like meat and salt. To stay clean and free from any possible contamination, rather than scratch with her fingernails, the new mother used a scratching stick for several days following birth.

5. Cutting the Cord

Native Californians took special care of the infant’s umbilical cord. Among the Pomo, it was important that the person cutting the cord in the minutes following birth be wealthy and good-natured, as his disposition would influence the character of the child.

6. Ties that Bind

The birth of a child also meant the arrival of a new family, and tribal member. The activities surrounding this event can illuminate and set into motion the entire social organization and structure of a community. This structure often determines who makes the cradle. The formal exchange of gifts defined and solidified relationships between families. A birth built new alliances, now bound by blood.

7. Person Molding

From a holistic standpoint, the cradle is a person-molding thing: as a physical container, as metaphor, and as a vehicle for thoughts and values. Aside from its obvious function, the cradle is an active agent in the long term shaping of the child's personality and orientation into the world.

8. Identity

In today's multi-cultural society, the cradle basket is an object easily associated with Native Americans. Within the tribal community, it quickly signals an affiliation. The cradle might also be directly involved at important junctures of the child's development as an individual when its identity is being formed.

9. Osatti: Little Women

Throughout California, mothers and grandmothers made model cradles for their children and grandchildren to play with. Young girls emulated their mothers, caring for imaginary children, learning the nuances of cradle use: how the infant should be placed in the basket, properly laced in, transported, lain or set upright. Rather than a toy, it truly was a model for future roles. It might also represent a girl's first attempt at weaving a cradle basket, made from the trimmed remains of other baskets.

10. Harvesting Nature's Gifts

The raw materials necessary for making cradle baskets come from a broad range of environments: mesquite root from the southern desert; tule from the central valley; hazel from the mountainous northwest. The use of certain plant species for specific parts of a cradle often represents a local tribal tradition.

11. Sign of the Times

Cradle baskets represent one of the most enduring traditions in Native California, yet they have also been subject to change. They have evolved and transformed in style, incorporated new and exotic materials, and responded to the conditions and influences of a changing world. Change is not necessarily the antithesis of tradition, but rather a part of it.

The "Precious Cargo: California Indian Cradle Baskets and Childbirth Traditions" exhibition tour was organized by the California Exhibition Resources Alliance (CERA) in concert with the Marin Museum of the American Indian. CERA is a network of professionally operated museums and cultural organizations that collaborate to create and tour smaller, affordable, high quality exhibitions that enhance civic engagement and human understanding. CERA is supported by generous grants from The James Irvine Foundation, The William Randolph Hearst Foundation and the California Council for the Humanities.