

Substance of Stars

O'odham labels & extended texts

***Se:he'e Ki* (Elder Brother's house, or "Man-in-the-Maze")**



***Se:he'e Ki* (Elder Brother's house, or "Man-in-the-Maze")**, early 1900s

Akimel O'odham

Yucca, martynia

Heard Museum Collection, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Byron Harvey III, NA-SW-Pi-B-340



***Se:he'e Ki* (Elder Brother's house, or "Man-in-the-Maze")**, early 1900s

Akimel O'odham

Willow, martynia

Heard Museum Collection, Gift of Miss Marion R. Plummer and Mr. and Mrs. Stanley W. Plummer, NA-SW-Pi-B-444



***Se:he'e Ki* (Elder Brother's house, or "Man-in-the-Maze")**, early 1900s
Akimel O'odham
Willow, martynia, cottonwood, cattail
Heard Museum Collection, NA-SW-Pi-B-14



***Se:he'e Ki* (Elder Brother's house, or "Man-in-the-Maze")**, early 1900s
Akimel O'odham
Willow, martynia, cottonwood, cattail
Heard Museum Collection, Gift from the Estate of Mrs. John C. Lincoln, 3586-1

There are several interpretations of the Man-in-the-Maze image used by the O'odham. The design is a metaphor of the passages of life, and at the same time symbolizes *Se:he'e Ki*, the house of *Se:he*, Elder Brother. (He is named *I'itoi* by Tohono O'odham). Akimel O'odham believe that his home is in a sacred mountain called *Muhadag Do'ag*. Elder Brother constructed his house in a labyrinthine manner to thwart his enemies who would get lost trying to find him.

The symbol may have been created to describe this moment of the O'odham creation story, with the depiction of Elder Brother standing at the winding entrance of his home, but it is also a metaphor for the Akimel and Tohono O'odham, who use it as an emblem. The figure of *Se:he*, or *I'itoi*, is representative of the people, his creations, as they embark upon their life journeys. In this interpretation, the human figure is birth and the center of the maze is death and eternity.

Elder Brother's *Ki* is symbolic of the protective house of the community and their ancestors. The maze symbolizes life itself, and O'odham *Himdag*, the traditional values, culture, and ways of life. The twists and turns are moments of decisions to be made, demarcations of life's passing phases through childhood, adolescence, adulthood and elder status. The last part of the maze turns back, providing a place to pause and look back at life's journey. The center of the maze also represents a dream, the fulfillment of life, the passage into death and reunification with the Creator.

“O'odham today recognize this design, this symbol, as the ‘Man-in-the-maze’ because the design itself represents a maze. What we don't fully realize is that it is a religious symbol, representing *Se:he*, Elder Brother, the creator of humans and many other creatures. And there are many interpretations by various people regarding this image. In recent years I've heard people say that the Man-in-the-maze should not be standing at the top center, as I've always known it, but it should be tilted to the left, off-balance, because that's supposed to represent the imbalances of human life, because humans are not perfect. And then others say that *Se:he* is supposed to be standing in the opposite direction, with his head toward the center, not his feet. That's how the Tohono O'odham represent their deity, whom we call *Se:he*, but they call *I'itoi*, standing in that direction.”

—BARNABY LEWIS (Akimel O'odham)

Clan Symbols



Ñui (Buzzard) clan-symbol basket, early 1900s
Akimel O’odham
Willow, martynia
Fred Harvey Fine Arts Collection at the Heard Museum, 177BA



Bán (Coyote) clan-symbol basket, early 1900s
Akimel O’odham
Willow, martynia
Heard Museum Collection, NA-SW-Pi-B-224

In the O’odham creation story, *Jeved Ma:kai* (Earth Doctor) is the First Man, who creates the earth, light and the first four sacred beings: *Se:he* (Elder Brother), his sister *Nasia*, *Ñui* (Buzzard) and *Bán* (Coyote). As in many cultures, animal beings and human beings play important roles in the foundations of the universe.

“On these two baskets we have the buzzard, and on the other a design that basket weavers call coyote tracks. In the early part of our history there were two clans that O’odham people were part of and identified with: *Bán*, the coyote, and *Ñui*, the buzzard. Today, at least with the coming of the non-Indians, the Akimel O’odham have not continued to follow the clan ways, and today a lot of people are not aware of which of these clans their ancestors belonged to.”

—BARNABY LEWIS (Akimel O’odham)

When Animals Could Speak



Basket with animal, insect, bird and human representations, early 1900s

Akimel O'odham

Willow, martynia

Fred Harvey Fine Arts Collection at the Heard Museum, 175BA



Basket with animal, insect, bird and human representations, early 1900s

Akimel O'odham

Willow, martynia,

Heard Museum Collection, NA-SW-Pi-B-209



Basket with animal, insect, bird and human representations, early 1900s

Akimel O'odham

Willow, martynia

Fred Harvey Fine Arts Collection at the Heard Museum, 176BA



Basket with turtle and lizard representations, early 1900s

Akimel O'odham

Willow, martynia

Heard Museum Collection, Gift of Ms. Grace Nixon, NA-SW-Pi-B-526



Basket with lizard representations, early 1900s

Akimel O'odham

Willow, martynia

Fred Harvey Fine Arts Collection at the Heard Museum, 1031BA

“These baskets display a mixture of different animal and human figures, as well as insects with butterflies, and these represent insights as part of our creation narratives. It is told in the creation narratives that, in the beginning, Earth Doctor, when he first made life on earth, he made animals first, and they spoke like we speak now as human beings. But, after he made human beings, then the animals ceased to speak, and the humans started speaking as we do now. During times of dreaming, he said that animals can communicate with the humans through speech, and this is based on that belief that animals spoke during the time of creation.”

—BARNABY LEWIS (Akimel O’odham)

Butterflies

“*I'toi* (Elder Brother) saw all the beautiful things he had made and was happy. He realized that things would change—the women’s hair would turn grey, the children would grow old, the leaves in the trees would fall, the flowers would lose their color. So, he looked at the colors of all the beautiful things he had made and decided to make something of pure joy, to remind the people of the original beauty of life before it faded. One day he was with some children and resting under a cottonwood tree. He reached up into the tree and pulled down some leaves, placing the colorful leaves into his bag of creation. *I'toi* looked through the tree leaves and into the blue sky and saw into the universe beyond. He fell asleep, resting his head upon his bag. When he awoke, he remembered that he had put all these colorful things into his bag, and called the children over to see.

“*I'toi* opened his bag for the children, and out flew hundreds of butterflies of every color.

“The birds were upset, and came to *I'toi* and complained that he had created other creatures who could fly, and that he made them even more beautiful than the birds. *I'toi* told them that they should not be jealous, since he had given each bird a voice and a song, whereas the butterflies could not speak. The birds were happy again to realize this, and we have the beauty of butterflies and birdsongs to enjoy.

“*I'toi*’s gift to the children reminds us that when times are hard, we always have the beauty of the butterflies, and the rest of his creations, to make us remember the positive things we have.”

—THOMAS “BREEZE” MARCUS (Tohono O’odham)

Water Symbols



Basket with water symbol design, early 1900s
Akimel O'odham
Willow, martynia
Heard Museum Collection, NA-SW-Pi-B-116



Basket with water symbol design, early 1900s
Akimel O'odham
Willow, martynia, cattail
Heard Museum Collection, NA-SW-Pi-B-23



Basket with water symbol design, early 1900s

Akimel O'odham

Willow, martynia

Heard Museum Collection, Gift of Mrs. George W. Ullman, NA-SW-Pi-B-556



Basket with water symbol design, early 1900s

Akimel O'odham

Willow, martynia

Heard Museum Collection, NA-SW-Pi-B-200

These basket designs are Akimel O'odham, but we know that archeologists, anthropologists and other professionals identify and label these designs with other people's and other countries' names. They call this a Grecian fret design, as seen in ancient Greece, but that description is not accurate for us. In the view of Akimel O'odham, who are river people, this pattern represents water, as we know that water is the essence of our life in this harsh environment. So, these are water designs, a motif we have used for centuries.

—BARNABY LEWIS (Akimel O'odham)

Agriculture



Basket with squash blossom design, 1950–70
Eva Miguel (Akimel O’odham)
Willow, martynia
Heard Museum Collection, NA-SW-Pi-B-362



Basket with squash blossom design, early 1900s
Akimel O’odham
Willow, martynia
Heard Museum Collection, NA-SW-Pi-B-242



Basket with squash blossom design, early 1900s

Akimel O'odham

Willow, martynia, cattail

Heard Museum Collection, NA-SW-Pi-B-128



Basket with squash blossom design, 1950–70

Linda Mike (Akimel O'odham)

Willow, martynia

Heard Museum Collection, NA-SW-Pg-B-185

These baskets are presented here as a symbolic image of the O'odham farming tradition. Farming was an integral part of daily life for our people. Our agricultural practices afforded the people an ability to not only survive but to thrive in the desert homelands we call *O'odham Jeved* (the People's Land). Our ancestors created and maintained a water delivery system made up, at its pinnacle, of over a thousand miles of canals that provided the water for many villages and their farming needs. Over 100,000 acres of land along the Salt River Valley was once farmed by our people. This provided an opportunity to no longer just subsist but to prosper along the shores of the Salt River.

Our people excelled in the creation of baskets, pottery and many other notable art forms. The intricate designs and attention to details expressed in our material culture prove they were not made solely out of necessity, but that artisans existed. Their talents exceeded what was needed for necessity.

Today, farming is viewed with mixed feelings. Our traditional way of life and farming ended around the turn of the twentieth century. The decline of water, and lack of access to it, gave way to tribes leasing their lands to non-Indigenous farmers.

After the disruptions to our farming traditions in the last century, today's younger generations are learning a renewed respect and appreciation for our agricultural heritage. The youth understand the benefits that traditional foods have for our bodies. The ability to feed our people is vital to truly being a sovereign nation. The revitalization and continuance of traditional farming is not only beneficial to our physical health but also to our mental well-being and understanding of our cultural heritage—a heritage that provided our people prosperity, in a very harsh environment, which we could not have had without it. Today, there is much interest in support of tribal farming. The foundation of our federal recognition as a tribe is our language and culture. As sedentary people of the Sonoran Desert, agriculture has supported our ability to exist here from time immemorial.

—JACOB BUTLER (Onk Akimel O'odham)

Ancestral O'odham inspiration



Huhugam, 2021
Jacob Butler (Onk Akimel O'odham)
Etched *Laevicardium elatum* shell
Heard Museum Collection

Traditionally, etched *Laevicardium elatum* shells were used as vessels. The shells are found along the beaches of the Sea of Cortez. They are indigenous to that area but are found all over the valley, at places our people once lived.

The shell is etched with the fermented juice of the saguaro fruit. Also known as *Navait*, the shell is designed with a protective coating of lac and submerged in saguaro wine. The acidity of the wine etches the unprotected sections of the shell creating an image that is permanently etched into it.

This process was started here with our ancestors over 1,400 years ago. Our *Huhugam* were the first people in the world to etch shell with an acid. This tradition lasted for 400 years and then stopped. Today, a few of their descendants are revitalizing this artform. This shell was etched in saguaro wine and rubbed with red clay from our community.

This shell is titled *Huhugam*, who are the ancestral Akimel O'odham. The image represents our ancestors, the land we call home and our continuum.

—JACOB BUTLER (Onk Akimel O'odham)



Basket with sun motif, early 1900s

Akimel O'odham

Willow, martynia

Heard Museum Collection, NA-SW-Pi-B-231

Just like the stars, the sun (also a star) played a role in our understanding of the environment and in explanations of our existence. Traditional aspects of our daily lives were determined by solar calendar events. In fact, the O'odham new year is observed by all O'odham communities in June during the summer solstice. At this time, traditionally and even today, in a few communities we still hold the wine ceremony.

This ceremony was significantly important to the people. Fruits of the saguaro cactus were fermented and drunk in ceremonies to call on the rains for our summer plantings and for the wild plants we depended on for a major part of our traditional diet. Wine baskets would be filled, and the people would consume this sweet liquid in shells and other vessels traditionally. Our people tracked the sun and created calendars for annual events.

Special openings in traditional buildings known as *Vah:ki* (great houses) would shine a beam of light on the adjacent wall of a room. When that beam of light aligned with a marker, the people knew it was the spring equinox or summer solstice. Today, we plant around the same times and harvest our wild annuals throughout the year based on the observations of the sun.

—JACOB BUTLER (Onk Akimel O'odham)



Basket with water motif, 2001

Annie Antone (Tohono O'odham)

Yucca, banana root, martynia, bear grass

Heard Museum Collection, 4106-1

Basket weaver Annie Antone works with forms and colors associated with ancient Huhugam pottery. Here, she has modeled the appearance of classical water motifs and red-slip-on-buff clay decorations, but transposes these ancestral designs into woven baskets using traditional weaving materials. In doing so, Antone merges the ancestral past with contemporary O'odham culture, expressing continuity through change.



Heron and Snake bracelet, 2021

Jacob Butler (Onk Akimel O'odham)

Etched fossilized *Glycimeris gigantea* shell

Heard Museum Collection, Gift of Drs. William G. and Kathleen L. Howard, 5029-1



Heron and Snake bracelet, 2021

Jacob Butler (Onk Akimel O'odham)

Etched fossilized *Glycimeris gigantia* shell

Heard Museum Collection, Gift of Drs. William G. and Kathleen L. Howard, 5029-2

The bracelet with the small heron or crane at the *umbo* (top of the shell) creates the band with the snake's body. This bracelet is a replica of a shell bracelet found at a site here in our community that is attributed to the "Red Mountain" phase in the ancestral O'odham (Huhugam) timeline. This image is found in the material culture of our Ancestors.

The bracelet with the wings of the heron overlapping the snake forming the band is a contemporary depiction of this very ancient motif.

They are carved fossilized *Glycimeris gigantia* shells that were sourced from our ancient gathering sites along the shores of the Sea of Cortez. They are the largest shells I have found and are not commercially available. Together, they represent a continued tradition from time immemorial.

—JACOB BUTLER (Onk Akimel O'odham)

Artist Commissions – creation of Stars



Stars over Ce:dagi Wahia, 2022

Thomas “Breeze” Marcus (Tohono O’odham)

Oil on canvas

Heard Museum Collection, Gift of F. Francis and Dionne Najafi/Pivotal Foundation, in honor of Jill and Wick Pilcher, 5031-1

In beginning of all things, *Jewed Makai* (Earth Medicine Man) sifted through darkness where only water existed. *Jewed Makai*, a supernatural being, did not need light to see, but realized it would be needed for the things to come.

Jewed Makai reached down into the water, scooping water into his mouth, looked upwards and spat towards the sky. This created the first stars.

This piece is named after one version of the sequence of O’odham creation stories that tell how stars are made. *Ce:Dagi Wahia*, which translates to “Green Wells,” is an O’odham village which lies just on the south side of the international border of the US and Mexico at the southern end of the Baboquivari (*Waw Giwulk*) mountain range.

Although this version of the story is shared in the oral traditions during winter among many O’odham communities, an O’odham elder named Felix Antone (*baht*/passed on) who was from *Ce:Dagi Wahia*, was known for sharing this story, and it has since been carried on by other Tohono O’odham story tellers such as Michael Enis and others.

For those unfamiliar, traditional O’odham homelands stretch from the most northern point of present-day Phoenix, all the way south into Sonora, Mexico. For O’odham in Mexico as well as on the north side of the border, it isn’t two separate countries, it is simply home.

—THOMAS “BREEZE” MARCUS (Tohono O’odham)



Jeved Makai creates the Milky Way, 2022

Dwayne Manuel (Onk Akimel O'odham)

Acrylic on canvas

Heard Museum Collection, 5032-1

In the O'odham creation story, *Jeved Makai* (Earth Medicine Man) creates the Milky Way by using his staff to stir the stars. In the painting, this moment in O'odham time is depicted with *Jeved Makai* seen from a ground-level perspective. This point of view expresses the monumentality of *Jeved Makai*'s process of developing and interacting with the early universe. His body is covered in tints and shades of blue light that shine from the swirling Milky Way birth above him. Tracing the outer contours of his body is purple and orange reflected light from the glowing star mixture that races around him. It is in this exact moment where we witness the immense power of *Jeved Makai* as he sets the macrocosm of O'odham life, history and culture.

—DWAYNE MANUEL (Onk Akimel O'odham)