



A coiled basket by Louisa Keyser (Dat So La Lee), titled “Our Ancestors Were Great Hunters” (1905), was made for the curio market.

VIA DONALD ELLIS GALLERY

Tall tales were told about the Native American ‘princess’ Louisa Keyser. But the beauty of her baskets isn’t in doubt.

## Weaving Myths of Creation

By MARC TRACY

The Native American baskets sold in the early 1900s out of Abe Cohn’s Emporium, a men’s clothing store in Carson City, Nev., were exceptional. They were woven by Dat So La Lee, said to be a “princess” from the nearby Washoe people whose royal status permitted her alone to utilize a special weaving style.

The truth was less exciting. Dat So La Lee preferred her English name, Louisa Keyser. She was a Washoe woman, but the

tales Cohn and his wife, Amy, spun about her — her esteemed heritage, her meeting with the Civil War general John C. Frémont — were myths.

As for many of her baskets’ distinctive and lovely incurving bulge, known as degikup, it almost certainly was influenced by the baskets of a different people, the Maidu, much as the fine stitching of Keyser’s work was lightly derived from the baskets of yet another Native American people, the Pomo. Nothing lent Keyser special authority to make her baskets her way.

“Interchange and borrowing was common in the production of baskets for the curio trade,” Marvin S. Cohodas, a professor emeritus of art history at the University of British Columbia who wrote an essay about Keyser accompanying the show, said in an email.

The Cohns originally hired Keyser to be their washerwoman, according to Cohodas. The Cohns noticed her skill — she may have begun by twining around Abe’s whiskey flasks — and backed her financially in ex-  
CONTINUED ON PAGE C2



# Weaving The Myths Of Creation



Louisa Keyser helped turn a utilitarian craft into fine art and was promoted at the time as a “princess” by a couple who sold her work.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE C1

change for her exclusive weaving services (she no longer had to clean for them).

The Cohns fashioned their apocryphal embellishments as the baskets’ extraordinary artistic value became apparent. They also arranged for her to weave outdoors or, during winter, in the Emporium window; at least once, Amy Cohn lectured while Keyser posed near her.

No matter their back story, Keyser’s baskets sold well and today are considered remarkable. They can be found in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum, the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

And, after just a small handful sold in the past half-century — one, in 2007, for \$1.2 million, a high at the time — they are about to receive a new spotlight: Five will be featured at the Independent 20th Century art fair opening on Thursday in Lower Manhattan as part of what the fair calls a “major highlight exhibition” designed by the architect Annabelle Selldorf.

The prices for the five baskets, one of which by Tuesday was on reserve, range from \$350,000 to \$1.5 million, said Donald Ellis, whose namesake Vancouver gallery commissioned the mini-show.

Keyser, who lived from around 1850 to 1925, is among the most prominent names in Native basket weaving, said Jessica L. Horton, a professor of modern and contemporary art at the University of Delaware. Ellis, in an interview, called her “the Rembrandt or Michelangelo of the field,” adding of Native American art, “It’s considered the best basket-making culture in the world, and she was the best in it.”

Melanie Smokey, a Washoe weaver, said, “Our Washoe tribe, which is a very small tribe, is known across the nation because of her work specifically.”

Keyser’s baskets were arguably made possible not only by her talent and efforts, but by the support of white patrons, a sensational legend and a contemporary “basket craze” that placed a premium on the exoticism and authenticity of Native crafts.

It is notable, in an era vexed by questions of cultural appropriation, that Ellis is not shying from this kink in the story of Keyser and her baskets. Promotional material from the gallery refers to the Cohns’ “elaborate false narratives” and the halo of “pseudomythological significance” they constructed around Keyser.

“While there are some today who imagine the Cohns’ having taken advantage of Keyser, the aim of this presentation is to foreground Keyser’s exceptional artistic output while acknowledging the complicated relationship that enabled it,” Ellis said in an email.

Herman Fillmore, the culture and language resources director of the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California, said that cultural borrowing was common in Keyser’s time among Washoe, for example in their adapting modern materials such as canvas to build warmer homes. “It’s not right for the rest of us to tell our basket weavers how to weave their baskets,” he said.

For Horton, the professor, Keyser’s story is important to understanding her baskets, if not in the way the Cohns intended.

“It’s complicated where we put our gratitude,” she said, “but thanks to the fraught

## Independent 20th Century

Thursday to Sunday at the Battery Maritime Building at Cipriani in Manhattan; [independenthq.com](http://independenthq.com).

relationship that unfolded around the Cohns’ Emporium and her own artistic brilliance and fortitude, we know her name and have an archive through which we can re-read the details of her life, and the pretty inspiring story of a Native woman at the turn of the 20th century navigating a global art market under conditions of terrible colonization.”

The five baskets at the fair are from Keyser’s classic middle period. They include one from 1916 titled “Myriads of Stars Shine Over Our Dead Ancestors,” which, Ellis said, Abe Cohn esteemed as her greatest work (as does Ellis). Another, titled “Brotherhood of Men,” was the one the Ellis Gallery sold in 2007 for \$1.2 million. Most of the approximately 150 surviving works by Keyser are at institutions, Ellis said.

Then as now, the degikup evident in four of the show’s baskets is a source of much of the enthusiasm around them. “It’s a high-walled basket,” said Horton, “and in its most perfected form the actual designs integrated into the walls of the basket will flare and then get smaller to add emphasis to the sculptural shape.”

For centuries, baskets have been an important part of the culture and lifestyle of the Washoe, whose word for “lake” was taken for the Sierra Nevada’s most famous landmark. (The name Lake Tahoe, Fillmore pointed out, is something like “lake lake.”)

Like other developments in weaving dur-

ing the period, degikup arose not out of utilitarian considerations — that is, the best way to design a basket used to carry things — but rather out of the demand for baskets from non-Native consumers who sought them as artworks.

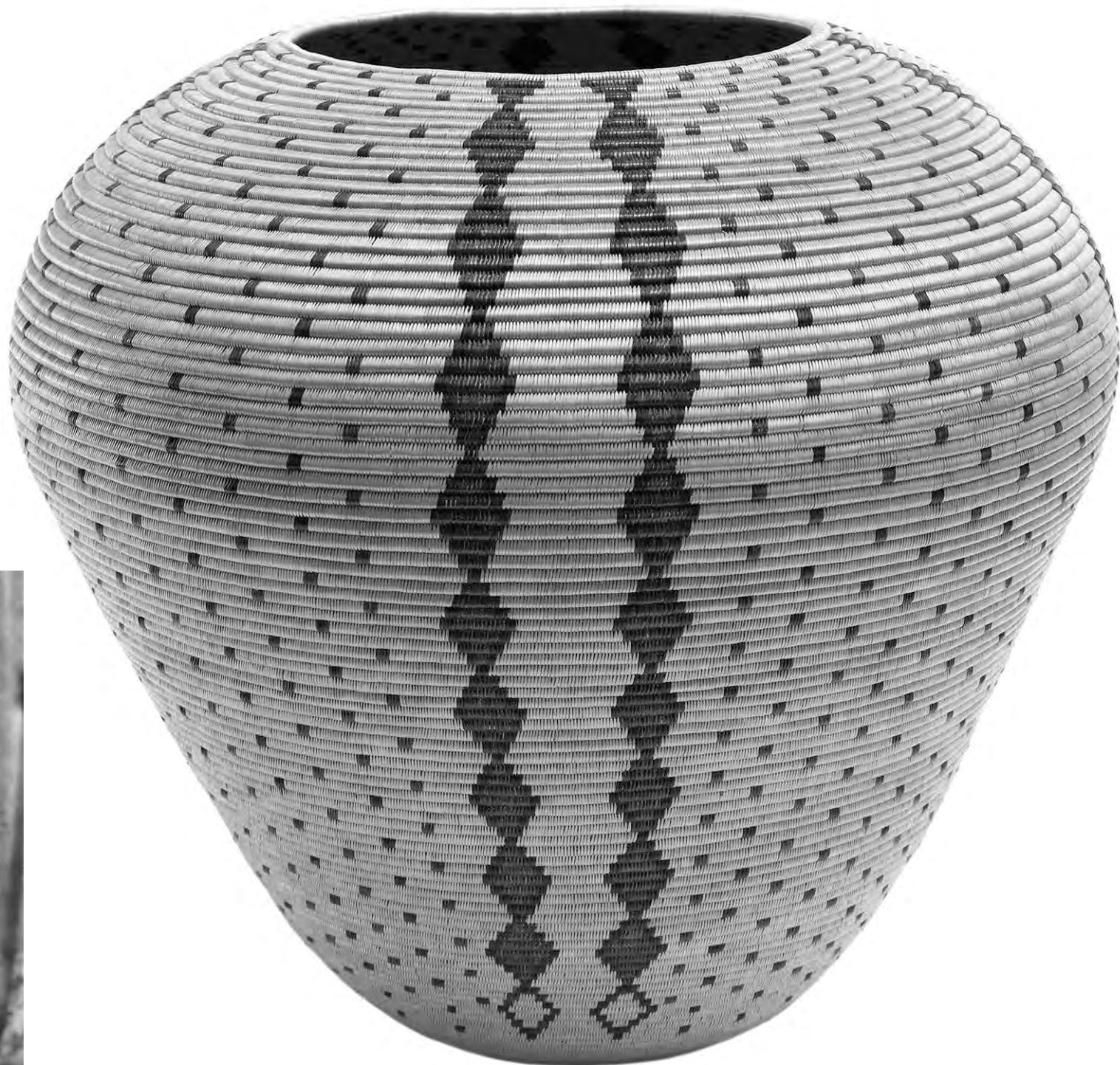
“The fact that these baskets would not receive hard wear meant that more area of the basket could be covered with design,” Cohodas said. “Innovation was thus rampant, with weavers drawing on whatever was available, including new tools, shapes, materials and designs.”

One Pomo weaver adapted Keyser’s degikup, he noted. A Yokuts weaver used Apache designs. The Washoe weaver Sarah Jim Mayo was, like Keyser, widely imitated. “There was no criticism of these actions as appropriations,” Cohodas added. “Likewise there was no criticism when most Washoe weavers took on the degikup shape, and many weavers also adapted Keyser’s flame design and scatter pattern.”

Heather Law Pezzarossi, a professor of anthropology at Syracuse University, argued that our contemporary arguments over cultural appropriation are misapplied to Keyser’s baskets.

“Authenticity is a completely Western, American fixation we’ve mapped onto this concept of indigeneity to make it part of an American past, not an American future,” she said, noting that it was the Cohns who were most invested in the concept.

“Instead of valuing these baskets because of the ways that those Western art dealers told us to value them a hundred years ago,” Pezzarossi added, “why don’t we look at them afresh and value them a different way?”



PHOTOGRAPHS VIA DONALD ELLIS GALLERY

Above, a basket by Keyser titled “Myriads of Stars Shine Over Our Dead Ancestors” (1916). Below, her “Brotherhood of Men” (1912), made of willow, redbud and bracken fern root.



Abe Cohn in 1923 outside his Emporium in Carson City, Nev., showing off examples of Keyser’s handiwork.