



## Western Science Seeks Cultural Knowledge

*In November of 2005, Agua Caliente Cultural Museum received an intriguing letter from Ellen Pearlstein, Associate Professor and Academic Coordinator for the UCLA/Getty Masters program in the Conservation of Ethnographic and Archaeological Materials.*

“ I am contacting you as faculty in a new graduate conservation training program at UCLA, in collaboration with the Getty. My area of expertise is the conservation treatment of organic materials, and especially anthropological materials, notably baskets, featherwork, wood, etc. I am hoping to develop a course for the fall quarter, 2006, where our six graduate students, who would then be in their second year of training, would perform treatments on objects owned by an indigenous collection.”

Following receipt of this letter, a curriculum was developed and the first class was offered in January of 2007. It became an innovative graduate course where technical conservation faculty collaborated with Native American guest instructors to teach about tribal museums, cultural objects, and conservation. The two-year course was designed to set up projects where cultural, technical, and analytical expertise are valued equally. A secondary goal for the course was to cultivate interest in the conservation profession within the tribal community to help address the needs facing the increasing numbers of tribal museums.

Continues

UCLA/Getty students in the 2007 program tour Agua Caliente Cultural Museum collections storage facility with Museum staff



The first class began with a Museum-organized student field trip to basket material collection sites to gather yucca, sumac, juncus, and deer grass with the late Donna Largo, a Santa Rosa Cahuilla basketweaver. Afterwards, Donna and the students met at the Museum for a workshop in Cahuilla coiled basketry construction. This helped them to more fully understand the importance of material selection and properties of the objects they would treat.

The following day, Moraino Patencio (Agua Caliente Cahuilla tribal member) talked to students about the history of the Tribe and Museum staff discussed cultural museum practices and procedures.

On the third and final day, students were given a tour of the Museum's collection storage facility, where they each chose two items to work on. This visit was accompanied by Sean Milanovich, Agua Caliente tribal member and Chairman of the Historical Preservation Committee, who advised the students of cultural perspectives relating to Cahuilla objects.

Participants in the 2011 program show the results of their whole juncus-twined basket lessons with Abe Sanchez



Upon returning to the conservation training labs at the Getty Villa, students prepared fiber sections along with graphic and photographic documentation, highlighting diagnostic features and relating how plant anatomy and native fiber processing influences the behavior of fibers in basketry.

Each student was also required to prepare a brief report on an issue impacting the cultural preservation of southern California indigenous plant materials. Topics selected for research included a review of efforts by state agencies and non-profit advocacy groups, such as the California Indian Basketweavers Association, to protect plant gathering sites on public lands from over-harvesting and pesticide use.

Another student interviewed northern and southern California basketweavers about their attitudes toward native repairs, providing insights into a wider and more contemporary range of acceptable repair practices than was previously familiar to conservators.

Willie Pink (lower left) at the Getty Villa discussing properties and preparation of plant materials to students



After the students studied the materials and consulted with the cultural experts specific to their project, they completed treatment and prepared housing for their objects.

Museum staff and cultural consultants were invited to attend the students' final presentations at the Getty Villa. Conserved and re-housed objects, along with the students' documentation, were then returned to the Museum.

In subsequent classes held in 2009 and 2011, students were presented – in addition to Moraino Patencio's history of the Tribe and staff lectures on museum practices – a workshop by Cahuilla basket weaver Rose Ann Hamilton on materials and Cahuilla basketry techniques. Abe Sanchez, master weaver and plant expert, taught them to make whole juncus twined basketry. Sean Milanovich shared cultural information at each class.

For part of this year's program, Willie Pink (Luiseño/Cupeño) traveled to the Getty Villa to teach properties and preparation of a variety of plant materials.

A report compiled by Cindy Lee from the 2011 UCLA/Getty program



The report illustrated above, prepared by Cindy Lee from the 2011 program, is an example of how culture and science are combined into a completed report.

UCLA/Getty student reports will soon be available on the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum Web site at [accmuseum.org](http://accmuseum.org).

This collaboration with the UCLA/Getty program has been a unique and mutually beneficial opportunity for the Museum and the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians to have conservation work performed on collections objects in need of stabilization and repair. Equally important is the student interaction with tribal members and Museum staff to discuss Native American perspectives and issues specific to the care of Native American collections and objects.

We look forward to working with and learning from Ellen Pearlstein and students of her innovative UCLA/Getty Program for years to come.

Ellen Pearlstein will be a Museum guest lecturer on April 18, 2012. She will discuss her research and findings on a rare feather blanket from Agua Caliente Cultural Museum collections.