

History in the Making

Volume 3

Article 10

2010

Home Lands: How Women Made the West

Oceana Collins
CSUSB

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making>



Part of the [Women's History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Collins, Oceana (2010) "Home Lands: How Women Made the West," *History in the Making*: Vol. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol3/iss1/10>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Arthur E. Nelson University Archives at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in History in the Making by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.

Home Lands: How Women Made the West

CAROLYN BRUCKER and VIRGINIA SCHARFF, curators. Autry National Center of the American West April 16 – August 22, 2010.

Companion Volume: *Home Lands: How Women Made the West* by VIRGINIA SCHARFF and CAROLYN BRUCKER Berkeley: University California Press, 2010.



When we think of women in the old west we think of the rugged and brave pioneer wife or perhaps the clever and spiritual Native American woman. But do we ever consider women in the old West as doctors, mayors, authors or builders? As we move beyond the stereotypical Little House on the Prairie and Pocahontas, we uncover a rich and diverse history of women in the West shaped by the choices they have made, each individual and remarkable in its own right.

Home Lands exhibit at the Autry National Center offers the visitor a unique perspective on how women have shaped the west based on their choices as providers and leaders. The exhibit focuses on three themes that have integrally influenced the lives of women in the West: earth, transportation and water. To highlight

the themes, three regions in the west were chosen as focal points for the exhibit: northern New Mexico for earth, the Colorado Front Range for transportation and Puget Sound, Washington for water. Patrons are exposed to a multitude of mediums including vision, sound, and tactile experience that delight the senses and inspire the mind.

On the day of my visit to the museum the exhibit halls were full of people, men and women, all from different ethnic backgrounds, each one admiring this unique perspective of women's history. One of the curator's goals in designing the exhibit was to create a space that would appeal to a wide audience range.¹

Earth

Entering the exhibit hall the smell of wood hits your olfactory sense from the simple peg board that displays the title of the exhibit. Dr Brucken, one of the curators, explains that simple, home materials that would be accessible to women were the inspiration behind the entrance wall and all of the walls in the exhibit.² Moving on, the visitor sees an immense wall covered in corn husks, underneath of which is displayed a massive grinding stone and pottery of the southwest, handmade from the earth by women. This area brings the visitor right into two main themes of the exhibit: home and the earth. In a side room, a visitor can sit and enjoy a projection of the stories of one woman's experience as a mixed-blood woman growing up in the southwest—read from her diary by her granddaughter—which celebrates the diversity and rich culture of the region. The room's walls are made of burlap, purposely wrinkled to create texture and bring it to life. Along a large wall in the back of the exhibit area, a mural celebrates the twentieth century generations of women of the southwest. Dr. Brucken pointed out that instead of creating a handrail to protect the mural, a floor mosaic made of multi colored corn spells out “Earth remained a potent symbol for twentieth century New

¹ Interview and tour of the exhibit with Dr Carolyn Brucken May 11, 2010.

² Interview and tour of the exhibit with Dr Carolyn Brucken May 11, 2010.

Exhibit Reviews

Mexican women” and keeps the visitors at a safe distance, while adding living texture.

One aspect of the exhibit was particularly challenging: how to display books in an interesting way that could create an interactive space for the visitor. The result is ingenious: a wall of glass encases the books, each with their own microphone sticking out with the voices of women reading from the text. As part of the same exhibit, the cookbooks of Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, an independent southwestern author, educator, and home economist who lived from 1894 to 1991, are displayed while her voice is projected through a special speaker hanging from the ceiling. This speaker is made specifically to optimize a woman’s voice range. On one of the walls in this section is a rope, along which visitors are encouraged to hang their favorite foods or recipes from safety pins. Alive with texture, sound and color, the southwest area of the exhibit brings the visitor closer to the earth and home.

Transportation

As the visitor enters the next section, the Colorado Front Range, the eyes are immediately drawn to the mustard-yellow life size figure of a Native American woman elevated on a horse. Behind her, small lights hang in the distance across the room while strips of blue dyed cloth flutter on the wall creating the illusion of a sky. This section highlights women on the move and change in the 19th and early 20th century. The visitor is struck by the manner in which transportation changed the way of life for women via horses, the railroad, and automobiles. The exhibit tells the story of Owl Woman, a Native American girl who went to live at an American fort, and it even displays her tea set; immediately upsetting the normal images of a Native American’s home. Moving on, the visitor also learns about Dr Justina Ford, the first female African American doctor in the late nineteenth century, Colorado.

One of the more popular interactive areas on the day I visited was a wall of rear-view mirrors with air fresheners hanging from them. Guests are allowed to write sayings on the air fresheners. Another striking feature of this area is the contrast between old and modern. The curators wanted to emphasize how

the landscape and women's experience has changed with each stage of transportation progress. Yet another important theme in this section shows how spaces have changed from the flat expanse of the prairies to the rectilinear spaces that occupy the landscape now with roadways and housing developments.

Water

Moving from the plains to the lush, damp region of the Puget Sound the exhibit takes us into the importance of water in women's lives, from producing income in the form of fishing and farming, to energy. Electricity in the form of hydropower transformed the lives of women through modern conveniences such as washing machines and vacuum cleaners. The navy is also highlighted in this section, as well as the women working in canneries. Telephone receivers allow the visitors to listen to the stories of one woman's experience as a Japanese immigrant in the Puget Sound. Another important theme in this area is how women from many different cultures co-existed. From Scandinavian immigrants to Japanese immigrants, the Northwest was a melting pot of independent women on the cutting edge of technology. Seattle was also home to the first female mayor in the United States and this area tells her story. The wall treatment in this area is can lids to represent the industry that allowed independence for many women in the Northwest region.

Home Lands is a beautifully unusual exhibit displaying different and lesser known aspects of women's lives in the west. The exhibit artfully employs various mediums that are fun and accessible for people of any gender and age. The goals of the curators have been masterfully met, even if a person is unaware of the underlying themes, the exhibit allows the patron to immerse themselves into the themes using the senses, so that the patron walks away with the sense that their understanding of women's experience in the west has been transformed, if even just a little.

Oceana Collins
California State University, San Bernardino

