

# MARKING THEIR TRAIL

Basque Arborglyphs  
in the Sierra Nevada

July 22 -  
September 19, 2021





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# MARKING THEIR TRAIL

Aspen groves make for the unlikely galleries. High in the remote meadows of the Sierra there are works of art secreted away by unexpected and unwitting artists. Nude figures, animals, names and dates, erotic scenes, portraits and profiles were carefully carved into the smooth white bark of young trees by Basque sheepherders during the early years of the twentieth century: immigrant outsider artists of the American West.

The Basque Country of Europe lies on the Atlantic coast and is divided between France and Spain. Basque culture is thought to be one of the oldest in Europe; many Neolithic cave paintings are found in the region. The Basque language (Euskara) is unique and unrelated to any other on the continent; it is even thought to contain Stone-Age words. Because the Basque region harbored support for democracy at a time when Spain was under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, Basques were forbidden from speaking their language. As a result, the Basque language had not yet been developed as a written form at the time most of the Sierra arborglyphs were made. So it's truly significant that we find Basque words carved into the trunks of trees so far from the carvers' homeland.

According to Basque scholar J. Mallea-Olaetxe, most of the Basque sheepherders who found themselves in the American West had little to no experience in the trade. The sheep industry in the U.S. was at its height in the 1930s and 40s, and sheepherders were being recruited to work the flocks. Arriving in the arid Western U.S. proved to be a bit of shock. As one Basque recalled, "We no sooner got off the train...we found ourselves in the desert [...] The boss would take a stick, and looking at that miserable desert stretching out there forever, he would scratch a map on the ground. To show where the water was, where the good feed was. Then you just moved out...in a year we would walk thousands of miles." The carvings they made on aspens is, in fact, the only tenuous record historians have regarding herding migrations of that time.

All the arborglyph rubbings included in our exhibition were created and archived by Jean and Philip Earl, who first heard of the carvings in a lecture at the University of Nevada, Reno. Intrigued, they began to actively seek out what they first termed "living galleries" and to experiment with methods of recording and preserving the images they found (muslin and black rubbing wax proved the best tools for the job). The Earls devoted 40 years to developing an archival record of the carvings, whose existence was inextricably linked to the lifespan of the tree onto which it was etched. In short, when the tree died, so too did the art. In all, the Earls completed upwards of 135 rubbings, from four distinct groves in the high Sierra. Arts and Culture El Dorado has selected the most striking of these rubbings for exhibition at Confidence Firehouse Gallery in Placerville. Marking Their Trail: Basque Arborglyphs of the Sierra Nevada celebrates this aspect of immigration in the American West and a diasporic culture who, in navigating the new terrain, created a unique visual language using the landscape itself as a means of expression.



Jean Earl demonstrating her technique for creating a rubbing of a woman carved on an aspen tree.



Arborglyphs (also called dendroglyphs, silvaglyphs or modified cultural trees) are shapes and symbols carved into the bark of living trees.

## About Aspen Trees

- The average lifespan of an aspen is 40 to 150 years, though the roots may survive thousands of years.
- A stand of aspen trees is connected by their roots under the soil, making them all part of one organism. Aspen are the largest single organism, by area, on Earth.
- Aspens can grow 24 inches a year, and can photosynthesize through their bark.
- Aspen shoots and leaves are popular with grazing animals.
- Aspens are the most widely distributed tree species in North America. They grow in Alaska and Canada, and all the way south to Mexico.

# CARVINGS AND CANVASES

Jean Earl

When the carvings first came to the attention of the general public, they were considered no more than graffiti, while others looked upon them as a form of mindless vandalism. No doubt the erotic nature of some of the images contributed to the general dismissal of their importance.

Gradually, anthropologists and archeologists from the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have come to recognize and value the carvings as a legitimate record of the shepherd experience in the American West. This change in attitude can be attributed in part to the work of Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe, an independent scholar associated with the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno campus. His book *Speaking Through the Aspens: Basque Tree Carvings in California and Nevada* provides scholarly documentation and interpretation of the cultural, historical, and artistic significance of the carvings. Over the last decade, significant efforts have been made by the Forest Service to document and catalogue the images. Unfortunately, many of them were lost before this effort was initiated. The majority of the images in this book were carved in the 1930s and 1940s. In two groves, up to seventy-five percent of the images have disappeared over the last forty years due to the death of trees. The rest will follow in their time.

The question most often asked of us as collectors is, "How did you discover the carvings?" In 1969, while attending a performance at UNR's Church Fine Arts Building, we encountered an art exhibit entitled "Basquos" by Frances Wallace and Hans Reiss. It was like nothing we had ever seen before. The exhibition featured black and white tracings of images carved by the Basque shepherders into the bark of aspen trees. We were fascinated especially by the idea that the original had been scored on living trees. Our curiosity aroused, we were determined to see the carvings for ourselves. Guided by the vague directions of Wallace and Reiss, we set off to explore the aspen groves of Sierra Nevada, in search not only of the carvings but in a larger sense, of the artists who made them.

Our first excursion took us to Glenshire, where we discovered the "Gallery of Three." Three trees on the edge of the meadow were marked with the carvings of male figures. One was an abstract armless Picasso-like figure with a pipe. Another was an abstract armless figure with a hat. The last was a more traditionally clothed figure with arms and a hat. We were immediately captivated by their artistry.

So began our 40-year odyssey among the aspen groves. Weekend excursions and family camping trips were planned around exploring new groves and revisiting known ones. We gave a name to each carving, and there was a great sense of loss when we returned and found one of our favorite carvings was deteriorating or completely gone.

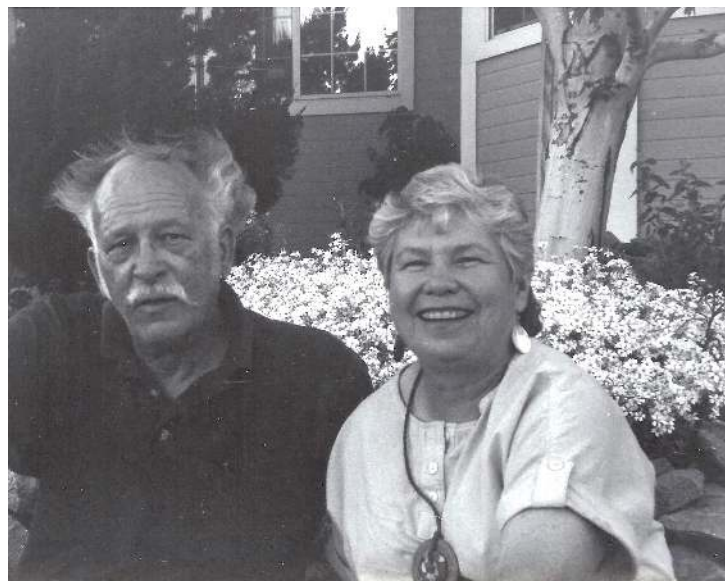


It was the sense of loss we felt for those familiar images that led to our search for a way to preserve them. This proved problematic. Photography was difficult due to poor lighting and the tendency of the carving to wrap around the tree providing only a partial image to the camera. Wallace and Reiss had used tracing paper to capture the images, but larger carvings were not suited to this technique and the paper often tore when stretched.

What we needed was a material large enough to accommodate the carvings and durable enough to stretch without tearing. Muslin proved to be the answer. It provided a neutral background and could be stretched lightly around the tree. The raised scar could then be transferred to the material by a “rubbing technique” using black rubbing wax, producing a copy of the carving onto the muslin. Using this technique, we have collected about 135 images over the years.

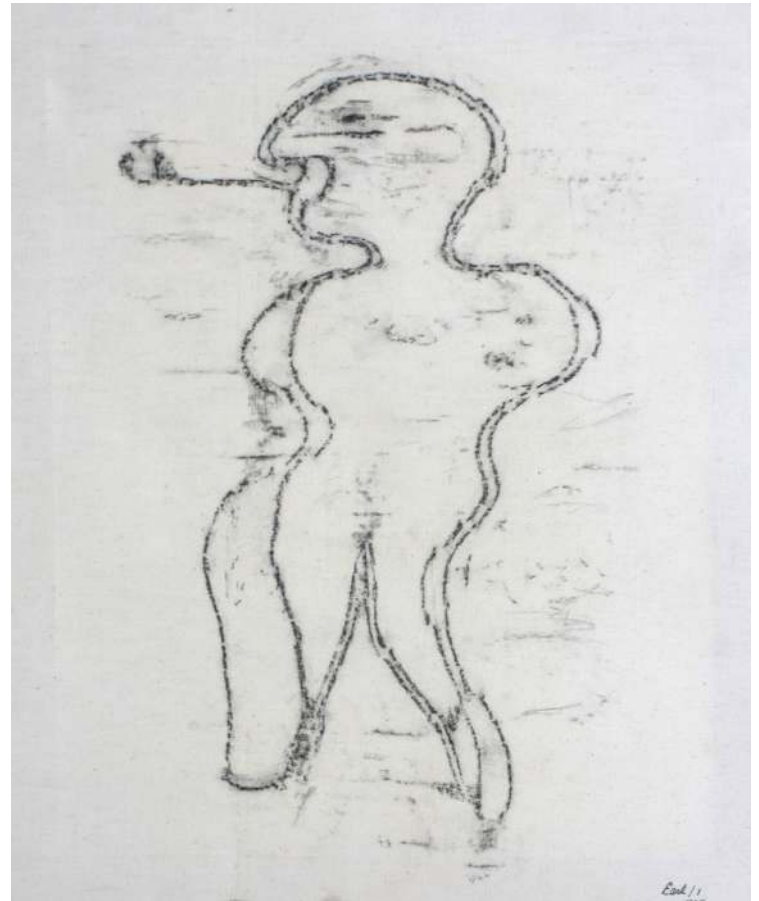
Thus, the shepherd carved the image, the tree maintained and modified the design, the collector lifted the image from the tree and has now reproduced it to present this unique art form for your enjoyment. The herders carved for their own reasons, not for an audience and certainly not for recognition. No doubt they would be astonished to see their private galleries open to the public for tours and their carvings documented in an art book. Nonetheless, these singular images, born of isolation and opportunity, represent the last echoes of a now vanished way of life and the men who lived it. As such, they are deserving of our acknowledgement and appreciation, even as the trees upon which they were carved disappear from the physical world into that of memory.

Essay first published in *Basque Aspen Art of the Sierra Nevada*, 2011, Baobab Press  
Written by Jean and Phillip Earl, essay courtesy of Jean Earl

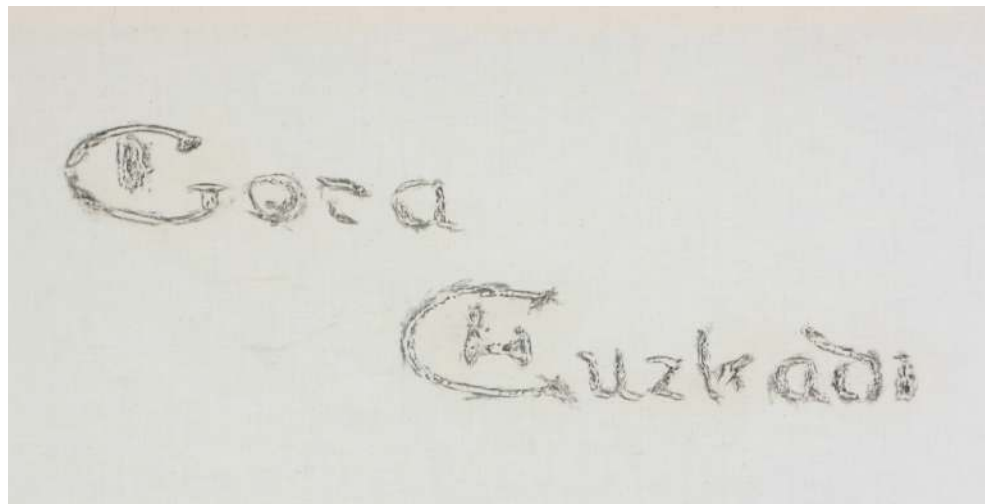




*Basque*  
Caitlin Thompson  
Photograph, 2021

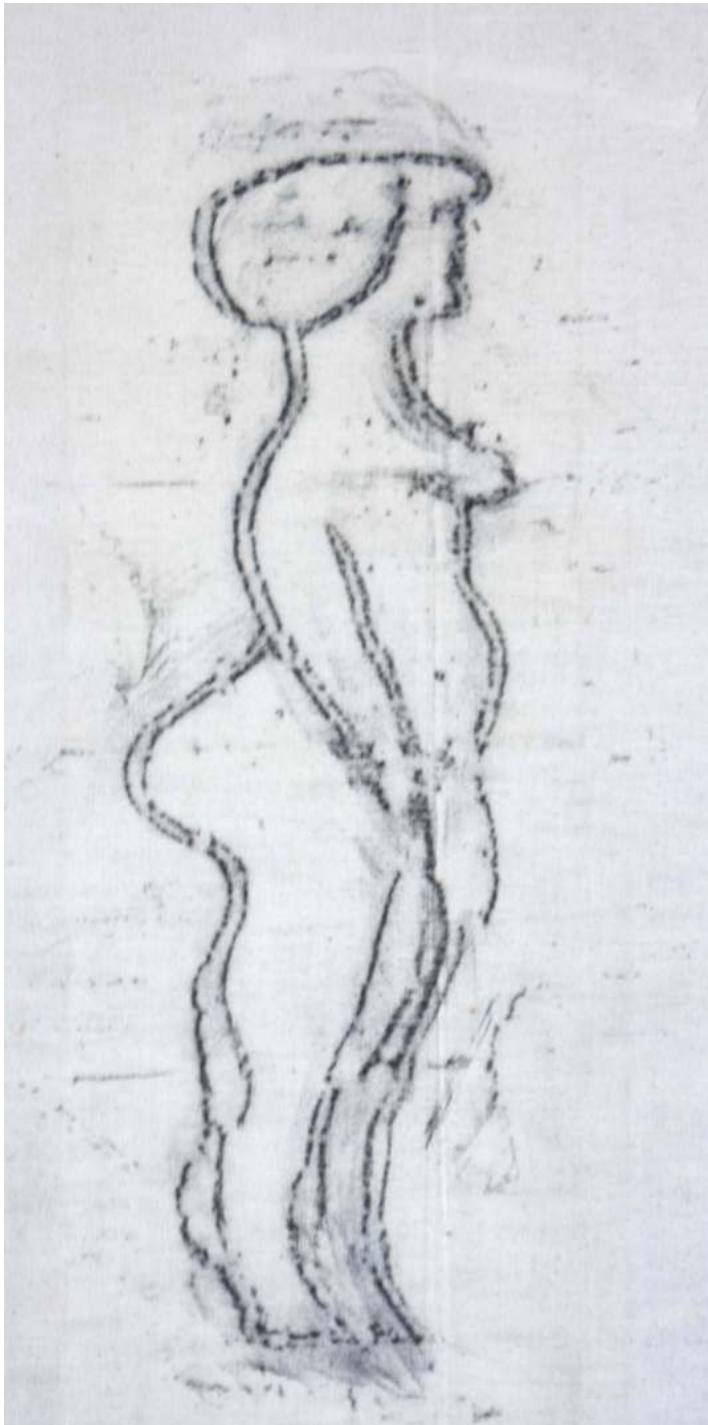


*Man with Pipe*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1975



*Gora Euzkadi*  
"Long Live Free Basque Country"  
Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing  
2008

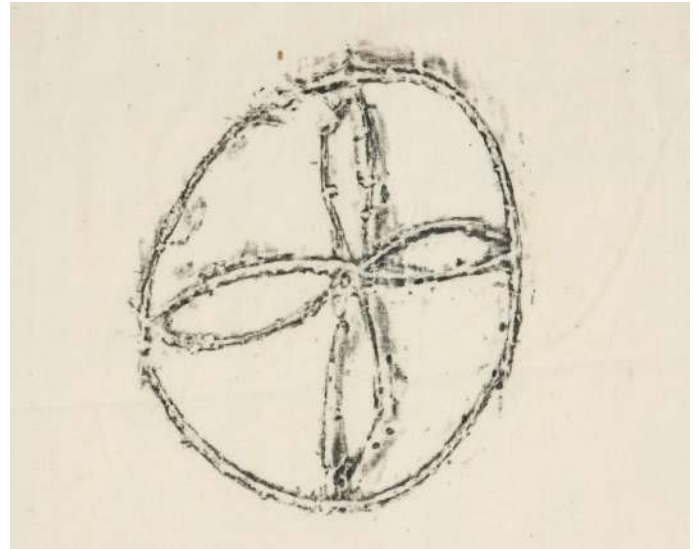




*Nude Girl*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1978



*Portrait with Txapel (Beret)*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1985



*Lauburu (Sun Sign)*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1990s



*Star and Moon*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1985,  
Jose Mitjana'ren Izar (carver)



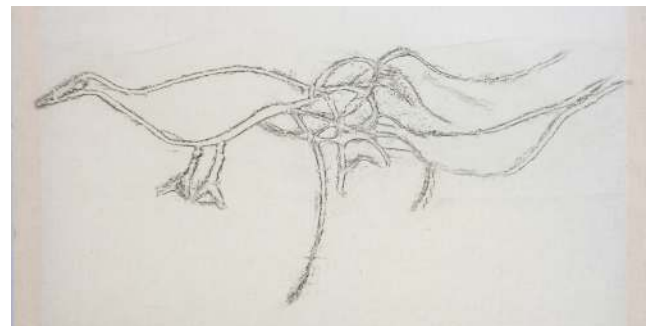
*Fish on a Line*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1972



*Man with Kercheif*,  
Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing,  
2002



*Bird with Fancy Tail*  
Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing,  
2003



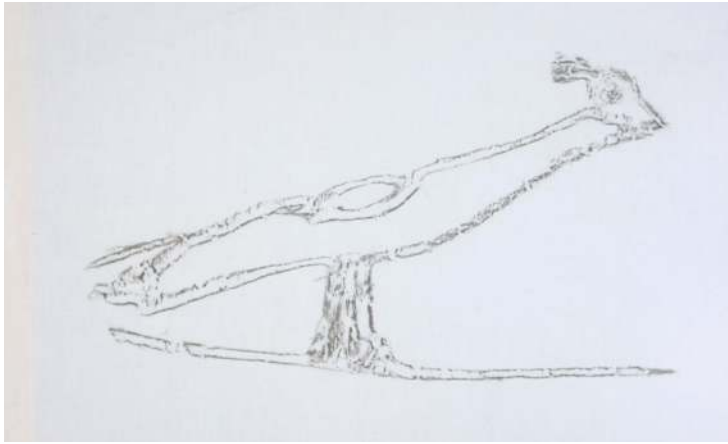
*Horned Figure*, Caitlin Thompson  
Photograph, 2016



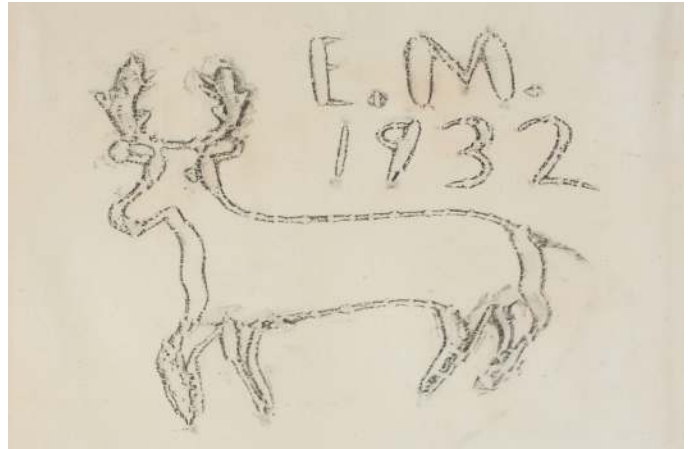
*Deer Profile Right*  
Jean and Phillip Earl, Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1990s

*Large Nude with Hat*  
Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1993



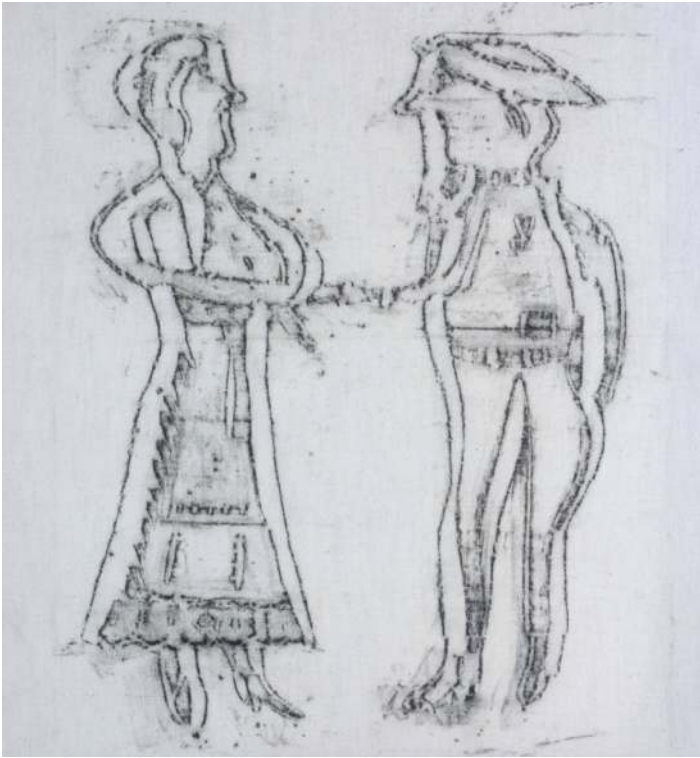


*Little Quail*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1990s



*Deer*, Jean and Phillip Earl, Wax-on-muslin  
rubbing, 1970s, Etienne Maizcorena (carver)





*Country Couple*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1970s,  
Etienne Maizcorena (carver)



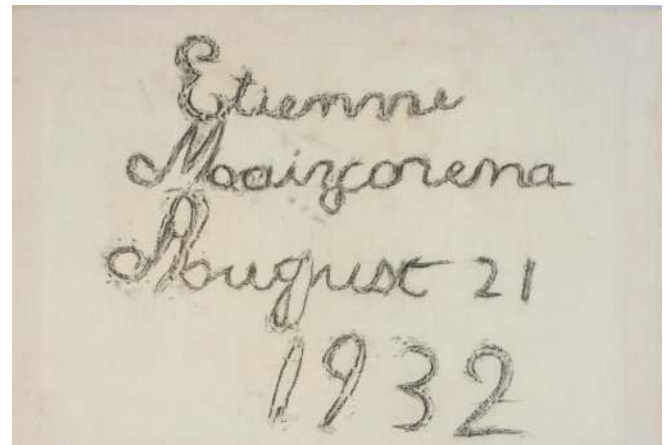
*Photograph of Etienne Maizcorena*, 1915  
Photo courtesy Dolores Taylor

*Etienne Maizcorena*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1970s  
Etienne Maizcorena (carver)

### About Etienne Maizcorena

Etienne Maizcorena was born in 1890 in Iparralde near Baigorri on a farm called Xorrotz, and his carving activities are divided between two mountain ranges. In 1931 - 1932 he worked in the Lake Tahoe area, from 1940 - 1942 the Summit Lake area in Humboldt County. Etienne's favorite subjects were old country couples dressed in detailed costumes, facing each other or shaking hands.

Excerpt taken from *Speaking Through The Aspens*,  
J. Mallea-Olaetxe, 2000







*Bird #1*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1970s



*Smoking*, Jean and Phillip Earl,  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1980



*Carved Figure*  
Caitlin Thompson  
Photograph, 2021



*Abel 1904*  
Caitlin Thompson  
Photograph, 2021





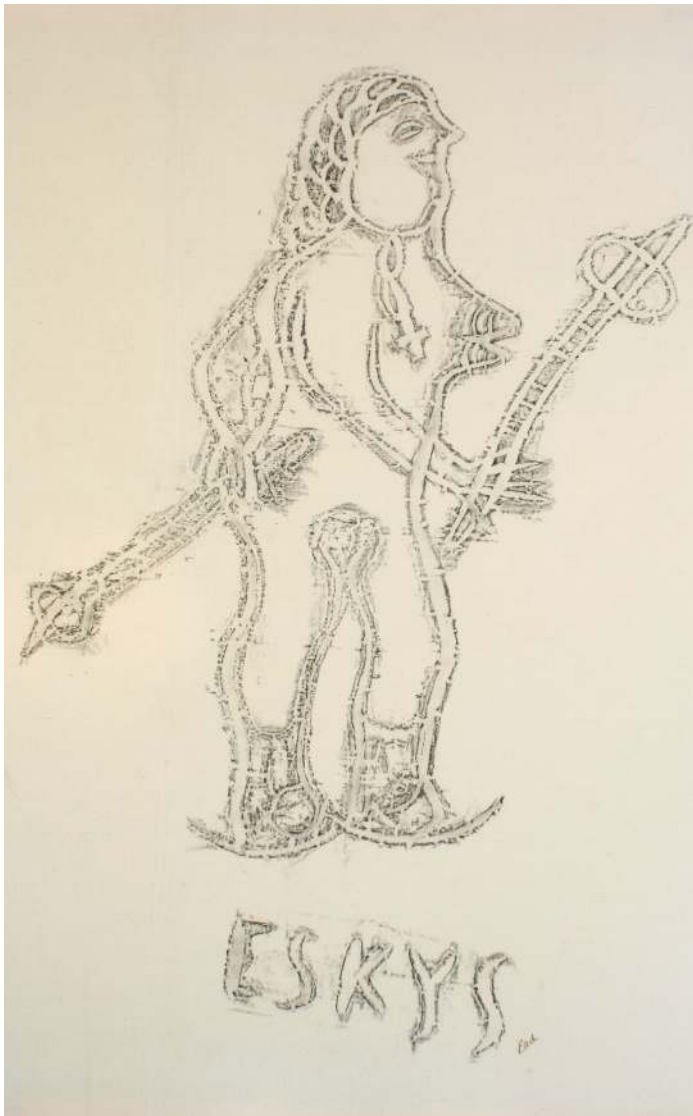
*Woman with Cloche Hat*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1970s



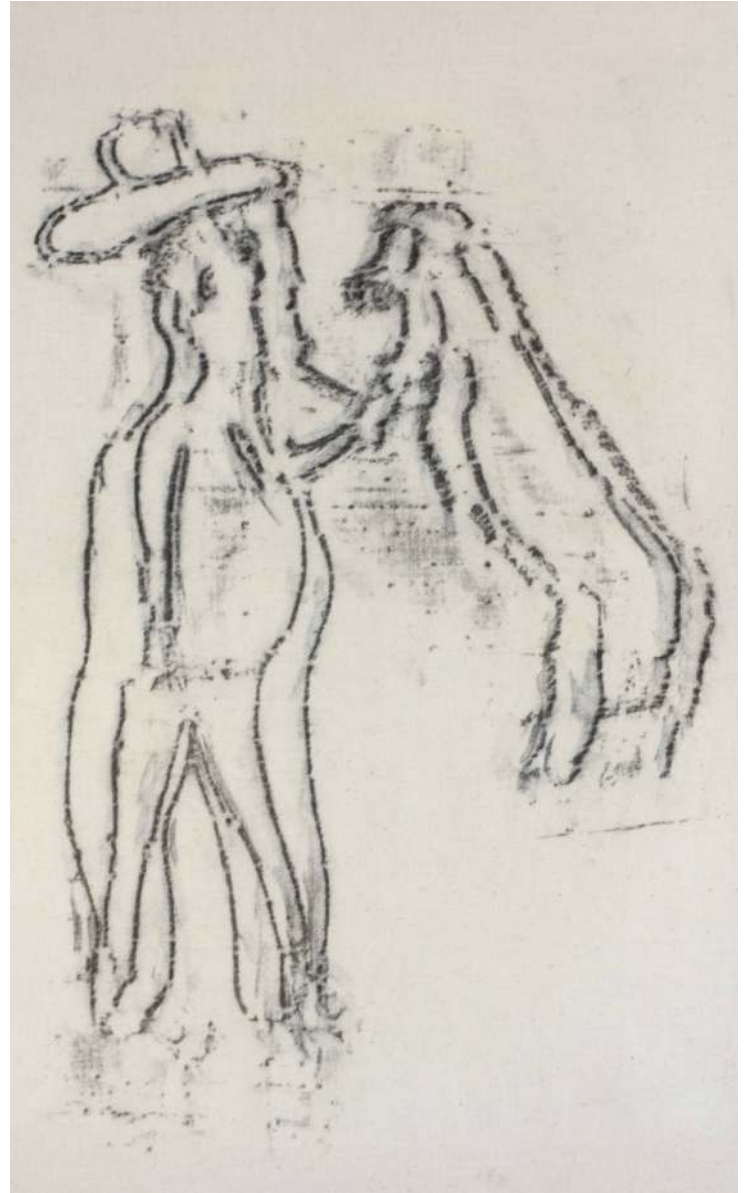
*Miss USA*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1980s  
Jose Mitjana'ren Izar (carver)



*Female Bust/Nude*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1992  
Borel (carver)



*Eskys*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1980s



*Shepherd with Dog*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1970s  
Etienne Maizcorena (carver)



*Lady with Bird*, Jean and Phillip Earl  
Wax-on-muslin rubbing, 1980



*Message Board*, Caitlin Thompson  
Photograph, 2016





Arts and Culture El Dorado's mission to promote, connect, and empower arts and culture throughout the county is achieved by targeted programs and services, a vibrant gallery exhibition series, and a focus on initiatives which support and sustain the cultural life of the region.

Terry LeMoncheck, Executive Director

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## **SPECIAL THANKS**

Caitlin Thompson, Jean Earl

"With gratitude to my husband, children and friends who went down many "dirty roads" while collecting the rubbings.

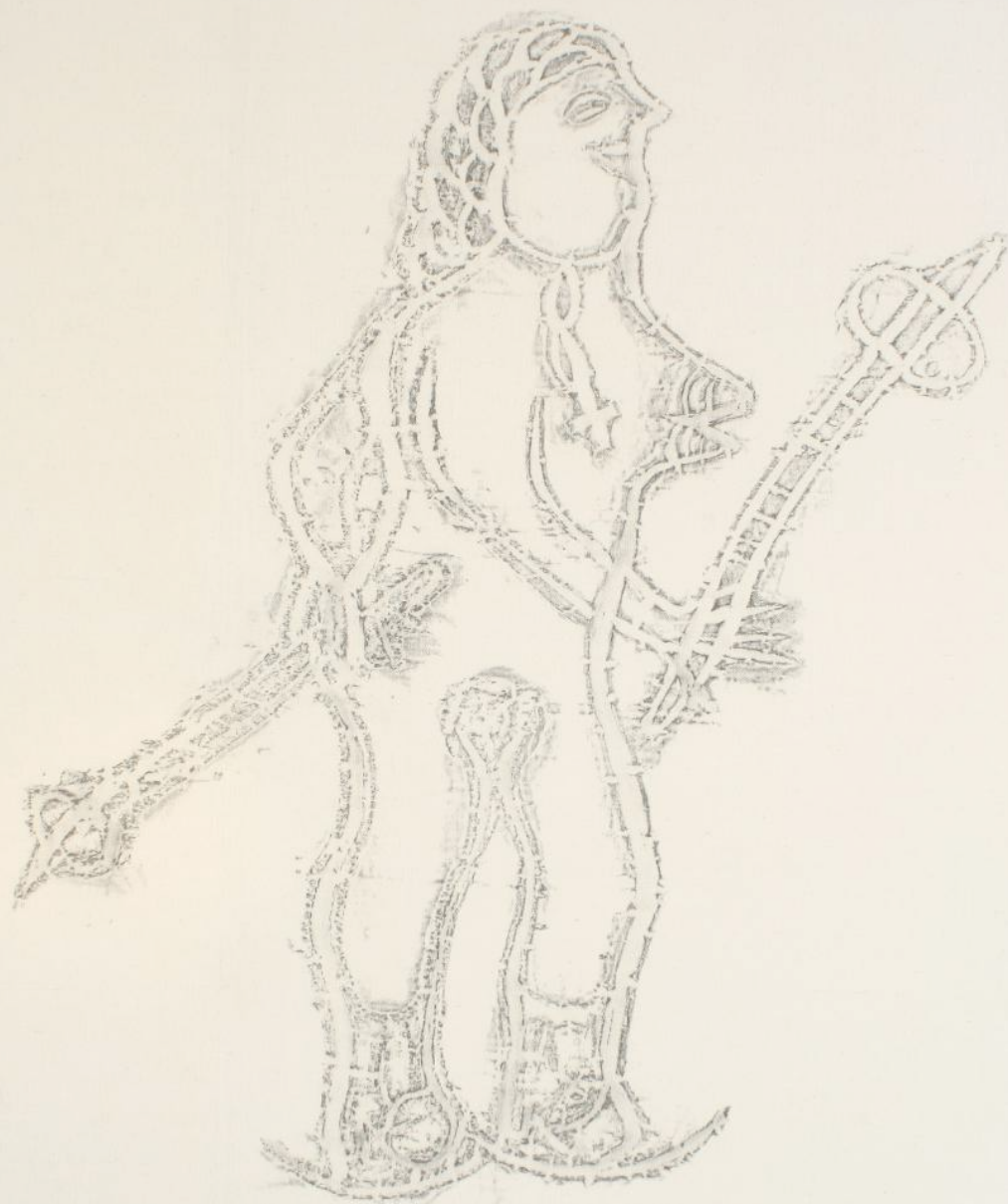
Thanks also to Baobab Press and The Nevada Arts Council for recognizing the artistic value of the images.

Finally, thanks to the lonely shepherders who carved a living legacy on the Aspen Trees."

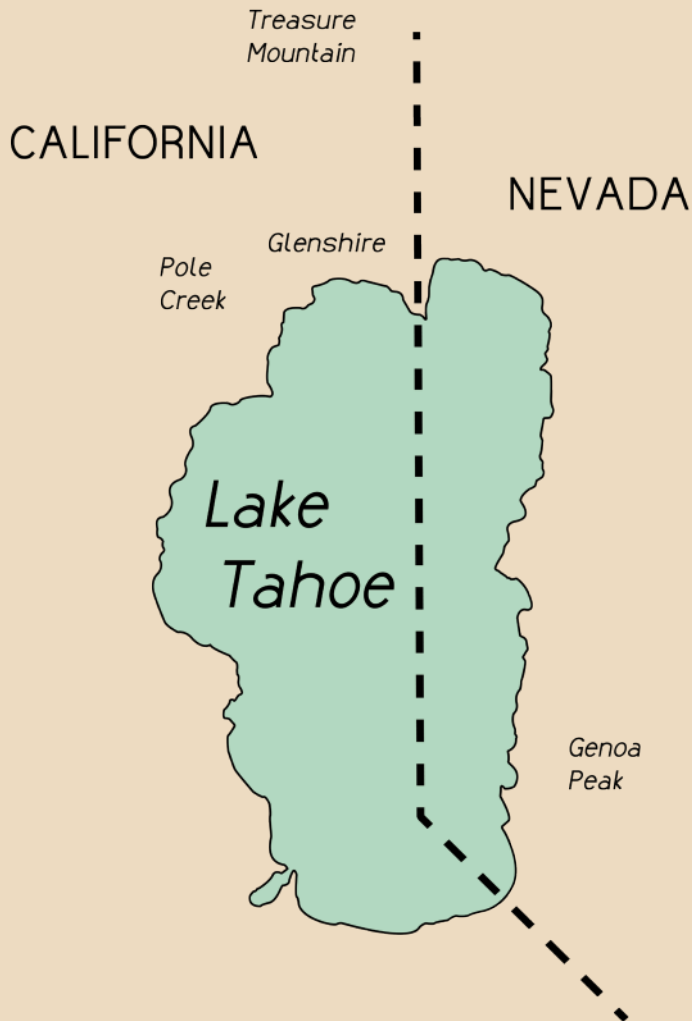
-Jean Earl

*Marking Their Trail* is supported in part by  
National Endowment for the Arts, California Arts Council,  
and the City of Placerville:





ESKYS



Most of the rubbings in this exhibiton come from four galleries in groves near Lake Tahoe.

Genoa Peak, Pole Creek, and Treasure Mountain are under the stewardship of the U.S. Forest Service; Glenshire on private property with no public access.



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