

Women of Genius

in the Southwest

We do not know the names of many of them—our Southwestern foremothers who brought gentleness to a harsh land, who saw beauty where others saw only desolation, and who through their creativity turned the very earth into art.

So many of them are lost, along with their accomplishments, because the products of women's minds were rarely thought worth saving. And yet, despite a lack of training or reward for a creative imagination, they were unsuppressible—they could not help being innovative.

They walked alone in their inspiration. Being unrecognized for their contributions meant they had to develop a self-sustaining belief in the importance of their thoughts and feelings, a personal propelling force in the face of doubts and difficulties.

For Anglo women, the Southwest offered a chance for a fresh start in a new land unfettered by the controls of the staid communities of the East. Many women went into business, developing independent outlets for their creativity.

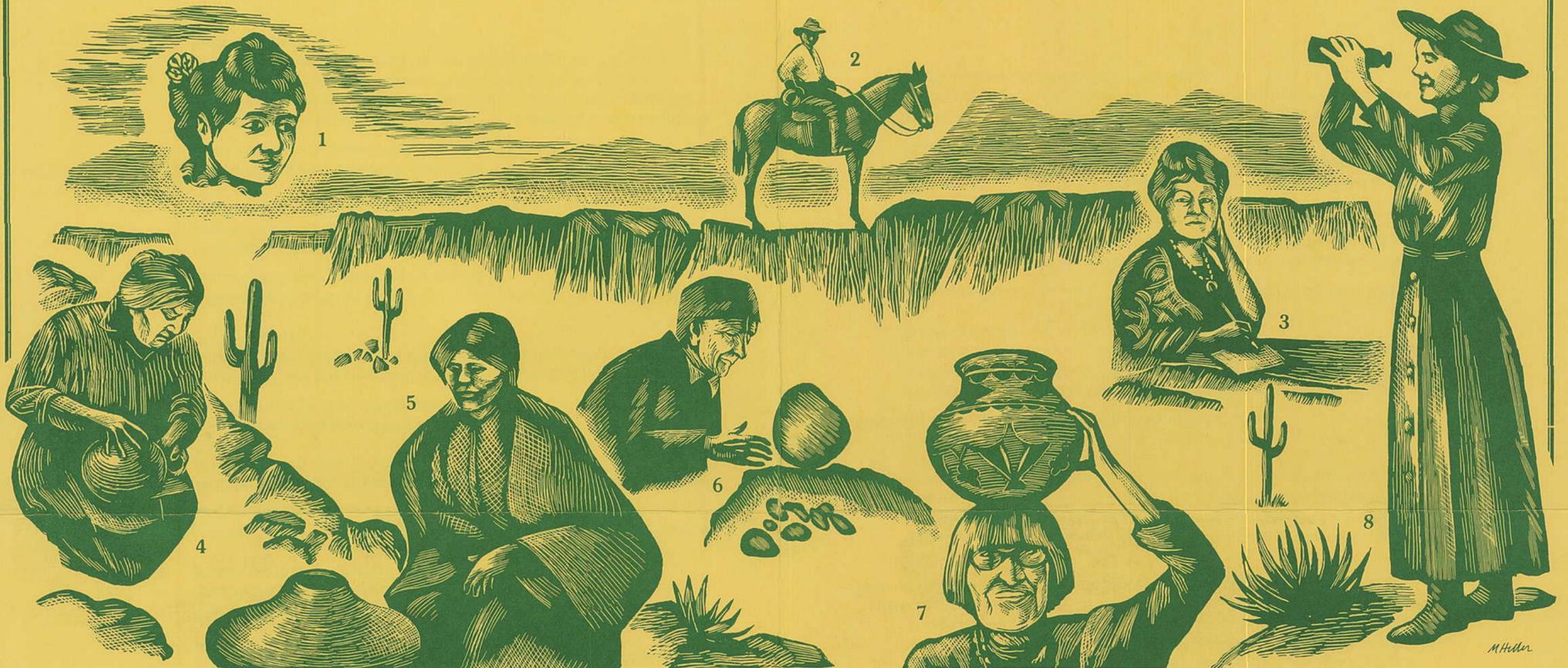
A great number of Hispanic women shone within the constrictions of their culture by gaining fame as herbal doctors and midwives. More possibilities be-

came available with the advent of the Mexican Revolution which diverted the energies of Mexico's men and opened opportunities for its women in journalism, politics and business.

Today, American Indian women are most widely recognized for their genius in the arts, but through the centuries they have contributed stunning technical innovations as well. In a fresh look at early life here, anthropologists Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow have reasoned that because women were the plant gatherers, it was only they who knew enough about natural cycles to begin planting seeds, thus developing agriculture, raising humankind into a new level of achievement. It is also reasoned that since women were the cooks, it was certainly a woman who first smeared a layer of mud inside a basket, thereby introducing pottery to the Southwest.

For all the early women here life was hard. For many, their genius was expressed in mere survival for themselves and their children, and if they had any energy left, it was spent in joy and appreciation of their lives and their land.

—Carolyn Niethammer



Teresa Urrea 1873–1906

La Santa de Cabora was the natural daughter of Don Tomás Urrea, a Spanish grandee, and a young Tehuaco Indian woman. When Teresa was fifteen, she went to live with her father on his ranch in southern Sonora. There she met and became the student of an elderly woman herbalist who soon recognized that her young pupil was demonstrating powers of calming and healing that far surpassed her own. Teresa used the herbal concoctions, but relied on her psychic powers as well. These increased after Teresa had a brush with death. Word spread of her ability to restore hearing to the deaf, to heal the lame, to ease the pain of broken bones so they could be set. Families would come from miles away, bringing their sick relatives for her to cure. On an average day more than two thousand people would be camped on Don Tomás' ranch. Cabora became the Lourdes of Mexico.

Teresita's popularity and her close relationship with Yaqui and mestizo rebels caused her to be expelled from Mexico in 1892. Her father took her to a ranch near Tumacacori, then to El Paso, and finally to the mining town of Clifton, Arizona. She went on a tour of the U.S., married and had children before she died of consumption at the age of thirty-three.

Mary Austin 1868–1934

Mary Austin made her home in Santa Fe for only the last ten years of her life, but she had made frequent visits to the Southwest, and had become known as a great appreciator of the power and beauty of our region. In *The Land of Journey's Ending* she wrote: "There is no class of vegetation so deeply experienced in the business of translating the qualities of the soil into food and seed producing stores as the spine and scantily clad leaves of the Sonoran zone. As if all their secret processes were primed to catch the advantage of the rainy hour, the desert growth produces in the observer a sense of expectancy more poignant than the sense of desertness." On the art of writing she said, "The limitation of quality in work is naturally the limit of the mind you start with, you cannot dip out the ocean with a pint cup. Though I believe that the quality of almost any writer's output can be improved by dipping from deeper and deeper levels, have it always in mind that you may easily go deeper than the average reader can follow."

Nampeyo, Maria, and Ida Redbird were all extraordinary women in societies in which no one was supposed to be extraordinary. They did not strive for recognition above the other women of their villages, but shared their techniques so that all who wished could improve their wares.

Nampeyo ca. 1857–1942

Nampeyo lived in the Hopi First Mesa village of Hano, but she learned to make pottery from her grandmother in the village of Walpi. She often gathered potsherds from nearby ruins of earlier villages and attempted to recreate the designs of brown and red on a creamy yellow background. Already an accomplished potter in 1895, when the old village of Kikyatki was excavated, she began studying the pots that were unearthed and adapted the ancient designs, shapes and materials, investing them with her own perception and discrimination. Her influences helped to revive and maintain a dying art and five generations later that influence is still felt.

Maria Martinez ca. 1885–1980

Maria Martinez, who lived in the Rio Grande pueblo of San Ildefonso, is credited with developing the distinctive burnished silvery-black pottery and later the black-on-black ware for which she and the pueblo are now famous. Inspired by potsherds found by archeologists, Maria experimented to find the right mixture of clay and sand that would reach back 700 years to reproduce the old type of hard, thin pottery. Like so many innovations which are eventually hailed as creative breakthroughs, the black pottery was at first considered an unfortunate mistake. It was hidden for several years in a storeroom. When at last it was shown to a shopkeeper, his enthusiastic response encouraged Maria and Julian, her husband, to further develop this distinctive style.

Ida Redbird 1892–1971

A potter of the Maricopa tribe, Ida Redbird took the commonest stuff of the earth, merged it with some special fineness within herself, and produced traditional red pots of exceptional beauty. An exacting perfectionist who sought out just the right clays, she developed a technique for achieving an unusually high polish on her pots. An enthusiastic teacher and demonstrator, she inspired the comment: "She knew the anguish and happiness of true creativity. Her contentment at work must have been immense. That's success."

A special kind of vision is required to anticipate needs not yet felt by the many. Both Sharlot Hall and Edith Stratton Kitt recognized the worth in collecting Arizona's history while much of the Old West was still alive.

Sharlot M. Hall 1870–1943

Sharlot Hall's family homesteaded on Lynx Creek near Prescott in 1882 when she was twelve. As a young woman she became known as a poet and writer, and because of the feeling she expressed for Arizona, she was appointed territorial historian in 1909. Sharlot could see that modernity was soon to wipe out all traces of the days of cowboys and pioneers. Traveling by wagon and horseback, she covered thousands of miles, visiting every town and mining camp in Arizona, collecting maps, manuscripts and photographs to preserve for all of us those golden years of the frontier.

In 1912 she quit the post to care for her parents and run their ranch, but in 1929, freed of domestic responsibility, she took on the task of restoring to its original state the old log house which was the home of Arizona's first governors. The Governor's Mansion is presently a part of the Sharlot Hall Museum in Prescott.

Key to Illustrations

1. Teresa Urrea, 2. Edith Stratton Kitt, 3. Mary Austin, 4. Ida Redbird, 5. Nampeyo, 6. Georgia O'Keeffe, 7. Maria Martinez, 8. Sharlot Hall.

Edith Stratton Kitt 1878–1968

Edith Stratton Kitt played a similar role in the preservation of our heritage. In 1925 she was persuaded to take over as secretary of the Arizona Pioneer's Historical Society. She inherited a room in a hotel furnished with a desk, a table, two spittoons and one bookcase of publications of no relation to Arizona. There were only a few members and most of them were elderly. Edith Kitt started her job by attending every old-timer's funeral and politely but firmly requesting that the heirs donate the papers of the deceased to the Society. Over the next twenty-two years she received more than five thousand reminiscences, built up the membership, and began collecting early newspapers and books to make the Arizona Historical Society what it is today, one of the finest history research institutions in the Southwest.

Georgia O'Keeffe b. 1887

For many years, as a resident of northern New Mexico, Georgia O'Keeffe has applied her talent as a painter to interpretations of her intense experiences with nature—flowers, bones, rocks, and entire landscapes. In her own recent book about her life as an artist she states: "Where I was born and where and how I have lived is unimportant. It is what I have done with where I have been that should be of interest." She discusses particular images found in her work: "The black rocks from the road to the Glen Canyon dam seem to have become a symbol to me—of the wildness and wonder of the sky and the world. They have lain there for a long time with the sun and wind and the blowing sand making them into something that is precious to the eye and the hand—to find with excitement, to treasure and to love."

For further reading suggestions, see the bibliography on reverse side.

Sonoran Heritage is a National Endowment for the Humanities Learning Library program at the Tucson Public Library.