

Past, Present, and Future: A Family's Reunion with Works of Silver Made by Ch'ahii and Eva Chi Begay

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In 2000, Jay C. McCray entered his artwork titled *Past, Present, and Future* into the Heard Guild Student Art Show. Jay's artwork was chosen to be featured on a student postcard, and he received a scholarship that enabled him to go on to earn his B.A. in American Indian Studies from ASU. While in school, Jay interned at the Heard Museum. He later went on to receive his law degree and is now a practicing lawyer on the Navajo Nation. Jay continues to practice art—jewelry and painting—and has participated in the Heard Museum Guild Indian Fair & Market as recently as 2024.

In late November 2024, Jay brought his mother Marguerite McCray and grandmother Rose C. Begay to the Heard Museum to view Diné silver jewelry from the C.G. Wallace Collection. Charles Garrett Wallace (1898-1993) donated over 500 works to the Heard Museum in 1975. These works included basketry, ceramics, textiles, small carved figures or fetishes, and silver jewelry, all of which Wallace amassed in his career working as a trader at Zuni, New Mexico, beginning about the 1920s.

At the time of his internship at the Heard Museum, Jay did not know that his family had ties to the trader and collector, and little did he know that, 20 years into the future, this connection would bring him and his family back to the Heard Museum. One day, Jay overheard his grandmother mention the name C.G. Wallace and as the saying goes, his ears perked up. Another grandmother disclosed that pieces made by family members from previous generations were given to the Heard Museum. Yet another grandmother mentioned that in the 1990s, she had been able to view a ring that was held in a museum in San Antonio, Texas. Shortly after hearing this discussion among grandmothers, Jay submitted a request to the Heard Museum's chief curator for him and a few members of his family to visit the museum's permanent collection.

Requests to view the collection by family members of artists who are represented in the collection are always a treat. In preparation for the McCray family's visit, AW Mellon Fellow Rebeka Peshlakai created a list of Diné crafted jewelry from the C.G. Wallace collection—nearly 200 pieces! Two pieces, a squash blossom necklace with handmade silver beads measuring up to 1 inch in diameter (Na-Sw-Na-J-295) and a four-strand necklace with tiny handmade silver beads measuring 0.13 inches in diameter (Na-Sw-Na-

J-299), caught the McCray family's attention. After reviewing the information in the collection database, we shared that the makers of these necklaces were identified as Chi and Eva Chi, respectively. The McCray family recognized the makers and helped us clarify some information. We have since added their remarks into the records for each of these necklaces.

The maker of the squash blossom necklace, was, according to the McCray family, Ch'ahii, which translates in the Diné language as "Hat". Ch'ahii is the great-great-grandfather of Jay, the great-grandfather to his mother Marguerite, and the grandfather to his grandmother Rose. (The misspelling of words and names in Native languages is common, when recorded by someone who is unfamiliar with the language, and the McCray family has seen Ch'ahii's name written with various spellings, such as Chi and Chai.)

The maker of the four-strand necklace was Eva Chi Begay. Eva was the daughter-in-law of Ch'ahii and was married to his son, James C. Begay. Marguerite recalls helping her maternal grandmother, Christine Mary Begay, to make small beads, like the ones on Eva's multi-strand necklace. Marguerite has never been to visit a museum or a museum collection, and did not know her family's created works were in the collection of a museum until Jay told her. For Marguerite, the entire experience was incredible. The large squash blossom necklace made by Ch'ahii was a favorite for her, and she plans to make a large-beaded necklace before she gets too old.

Jay was particularly inspired by the squash blossom created by Ch'ahii. He shares, "It spoke to me. You can see power. Not a lot of people get to see art pieces created by their great-great-grandfather. My grandmother [Rose], who is also grateful for the visit, felt the same way." Jay took the opportunity to study the impressive detail that makers across the collection took extra time to shape and include. The visit to view the jewelry within the Heard Museum's C.G. Wallace collection has motivated Jay to continue researching his family's silversmithing and artmaking legacy. He wants to find other pieces made by his family, if he can, and hopes that the history he is able to uncover is something that he can share with the younger members of his family.

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