



# Education Guide

## *Robert Cole Caples: Rooted in Nevada*

Written by: Russ Lindsay

Exhibition Curators: Sara Frantz and Russ Lindsay

Created to accompany the  
Nevada Touring Initiative's Traveling Exhibition Program,  
a program of the Nevada Arts Council,  
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# Robert Cole Caples: ROOTED IN NEVADA



More than 25 years have passed since the last major exhibition of artworks by Robert Cole Caples. As the privileged recipient of Caples' artistic estate, the Nevada Museum of Art has assembled a rich variety of materials that unveil the person behind the paintings and pastels. Featuring works from the Nevada Museum of Art collection—in addition to a selection of newly acquired drawings, notes and studio materials—this exhibition reveals the interests, inspiration, and character of a man whose creative spirit was indelibly rooted in Nevada. Robert Cole Caples was a mysterious man who prized personal privacy and a near-anonymous existence. He was a very private man who would have hated commercial success, and preferred the silence and solitude of Nevada's countryside over fame and attention.

Caples' former residence in Dayton, Nevada was recently placed on the State Register of Historic Places. This exhibition celebrates that designation.

*Robert Cole Caples: Rooted in Nevada* is presented as part of the Nevada Arts Council's Nevada Touring Initiative, and is supported by both the National Endowment for the Arts *American Masterpieces Initiative* and through a partnership with the Nevada Museum of Art. The Nevada Touring Initiative is designed to support the work of artists and increase access to cultural events and experiences at the local level, particularly in communities that have typically been underserved. The Nevada Arts Council is a division of the Nevada Department of Cultural Affairs.

## *Abbreviate, simplify and project*

*Idea isn't visual, but image dwells comfortably on a wall. Image—flat depth—lends itself to a wall, something projected. Image is there before I seek to find it in the wall. The scene sometimes possesses me, I try to interpret it, and sometimes I find some simpler answer to the complexities of things, to abbreviate, simplify and project.*

—ROBERT COLE CAPLES



**Robert Cole Caples in his studio,  
from the Robert Cole Caples Archive,  
Nevada Museum of Art.**

# Beginnings

*As a child, long before I undertook to spell or write anything, I communicated with myself and others through drawings and scribbling. I drew to make things come true, make things real and tangible.*

—ROBERT COLE CAPLES



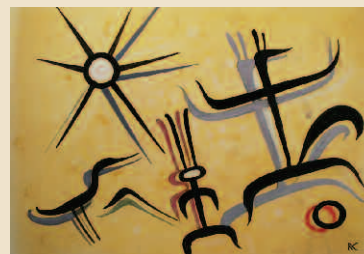
Robert Cole Caples arrived in Reno in 1924 at the age of sixteen. His earliest impressions of Nevada brought about an elevated awareness and sensitivity to line, form, light, and shadow. He learned to “look with awareness” as a way to create paintings and drawings that expressed “things felt.” Caples lived in several towns and cities during his nearly 35-year stay in Nevada, but the countryside around Reno and Pyramid Lake captivated his interest most. His frequent trips to Pyramid Lake brought him in contact with members of the local Paiute Indian population, an experience that strongly influenced Caples’ personal philosophy and much of his life’s work.

## First Encounter

*I traveled about northern Nevada. The first time out, I went with a guide from Yerington. He told me stories about his tribe, his early childhood, and the night sky. We went out to Topaz Lake to find an Indian, Sam...Harry Sam I think his name was. He was instructed to show me how arrow points were once made. It was a long deliberation. He placed a cloth on his hand meant to represent the skin of a deer. He placed a stone on the cloth, and he hit at the stone with a stick meant to be a bit of antler. He showed me how a flake would have come off of the stone. While he did this, I drew his hands. I only wished I’d made a portrait of him, but I was so interested in the procedure, I confined my drawings to his hands alone. I felt a great sense of gratitude.*

—ROBERT COLE CAPLES

**This photo from the Robert Cole Caples Archive at the Nevada Museum of Art shows some of the people Caples befriended and sketched during his travels in northern Nevada.**



**The inspiration for these paintings of Indian symbols, which date from the mid-1950s to 1960s, were derived from the artist’s encounters with Nevada’s indigenous people in the 1930s.**

# The Federal Arts Project



*The reason for making portraits of Nevada Indians goes back to the time of the Federal Arts Project. It's a long story, but briefly, I would be appointed one of the two artists to represent Nevada. My territory was northern Nevada. I was hired by the Federal Arts Project to create drawings that would be of interest to the University [of Nevada, Reno]. Indian portraits would be the best answer, so go and find them.*

—ROBERT COLE CAPLES

Caples set up his first studio at Reno's Masonic Building in 1928, and then a second at the Clay Peters Building in 1929. For a short time he specialized in charcoal portraiture, but in 1932 he gave up such commission work to take up the study of Indians he met during his wanderings. As an employee of the Federal Arts Project, a program started in 1935 as part of President Franklin D. R. Roosevelt's New Deal Agenda to employ visual artists, he produced charcoal sketches of Nevada's Indian people that are among his finest works. During the 1930s, Caples used a Washoe Indian legend as the basis for a mural housed in the Washoe County Courthouse in Reno. Following his involvement in the Federal Arts Project, Caples entered a new phase of work characterized by constant experimentation with new materials, techniques, and artistic implements.

## On the Road of Ages

*For the first time I was being paid to do something I truly enjoyed. I was traveling all over the desert, and I was being welcomed by people I had admired at a distance, but had not thought I could ever speak with them. For me, meeting the Indians was as if I was on the road of ages, welcomed to walk with people who had known the desert since the beginning of time, because these people were truly the people of the silent land.*

—ROBERT COLE CAPLES



**Indian Images**  
 Not dated  
 Oil on board  
 Courtesy of University of Nevada, Reno,  
 Department of Art,  
 James R. Herz Collection

## Look, Discover, Imagine

- >> How do you think that Caples' artwork was influenced by his relationships with the Washoe and Paiute Indians?
- >> What stories do you think that Caples was trying to tell in his paintings *Indian Symbols*, *Coyote Summons the Animals*, and *Indian Images*?
- >> When you look at the painting called *Indian Images*, which part catches your attention the most? Why?



# Faces, Lined Like the Desert



*Jigger Bob was a magnificent Indian who lived out at Pyramid Lake. I counted him as one of the finest to find and draw. It was agreed after much comings and goings that he would sit for me. I felt very honored that he would consent to pose. I made a drawing of him that I believe is now called "The Story Teller." I showed him with a rabbit skin around his shoulders, it was a rabbit skin robe to put the drawing back in time a bit. The likeness, I like to believe, is rather close. His face was lined as the desert is lined, it reflects for me, the stuff of the desert. I began to feel that these Indians were part of the scene, part of the mountains. Such landscape work I undertook to do in future years was definitely influenced by the features and the weather-beaten faces I had looked at and admired.*

—ROBERT COLE CAPLES

Caples is best known for his legendary Indian charcoal drawings from the 1930s, one of which was chosen to represent Nevada at the 1939 New York World's Fair. He portrayed distinct individuals performing their everyday tasks—figures that seem to have no awareness of the viewer and exude an innate form of dignity and intelligence. Those drawings won Caples his appointment as an administrator with the Federal Arts Project in Nevada. Years later, the drawings were reproduced in two portfolios published by the University of Nevada Press.

## Releasing the spirit

*I asked if the Indians wanted copies of the drawings. I told them that a photographic copy of each sketch would be brought to them. That seemed to clear everything with the Indians. They posed more readily and the older Indians, who had seemed reluctant to pose, now agreed to sit for me. I think they felt having the photograph I no longer had a hold of them. This goes back to something they believed for centuries, that part of their spirit was tied up in the image. In this instance, the drawings would have been a powerful hold on them indeed. The photograph seemed to make everything come out even, and all were happy.*

—ROBERT COLE CAPLES

Look,  
Discover,  
Imagine

**Jigger Bob**  
circa 1930s  
Charcoal on paper  
Courtesy of private collection



>> What qualities or characteristics do you see that are similar between Caples' landscape paintings and his drawing of Jigger Bob?



**These undated landscapes reflect a period of transition for Caples. During the 1940s and 1950s he created elegant, haunting scenes of Nevada's mountains and atmospheric effects.**

# Origins of the Potter Book



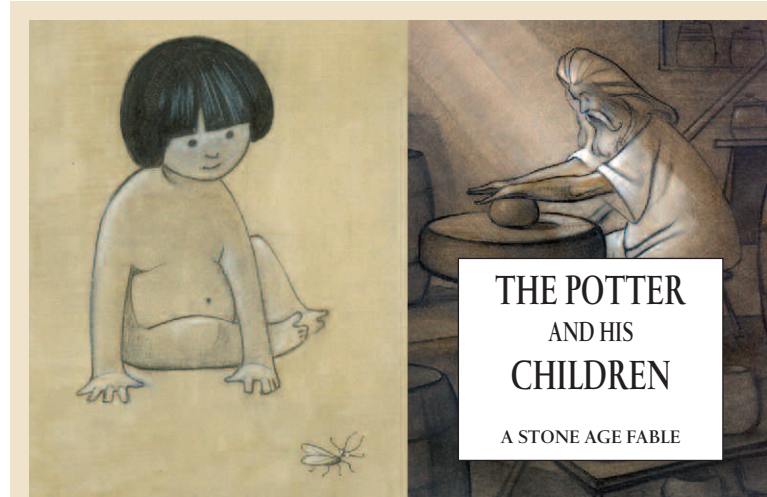
While mainly known for his landscapes and portraits, Robert Cole Caples also wrote and illustrated the book *The Potter and His Children: A Stone Age Fable*. The concept of the book haunted Caples for many years and by the mid-1960s it consumed all his creative energy.

Caples drafted at least four manuscripts during his lifetime, beginning with his first effort in the 1930s while he worked at the Clay Peters Building in Reno. The original story is interlaced with the artist's personal experiences, particularly his contact with members of the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe, whose people are depicted in many of his best-known charcoal drawings.

Following publication of his book in 1971, Caples soon discovered that readers and reviewers responded very favorably to his illustrations, but much less enthusiastically to the story. Working up to the last months of his life, Caples steadfastly attempted to promote the book but encountered rejection and a growing sense of dismay.

## *Education and Influences*

Though Caples generally avoided formal education, he studied briefly at the National Academy of Design, the Art Students League of New York, and the Santa Barbara Community School of Art. It was not until his involvement in the Federal Arts Project of the 1930s, which brought Caples into contact with a diverse range of painters and printmakers that he began to evolve and expand his work in new directions. Thereafter, his work in Nevada's rural towns and vanishing mining camps was said to reflect stylistic elements of Edward Hopper, Stuart Davis, Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood.



Manuscripts written by Robert Cole Caples that reside in the Robert Cole Caples Archive at the Nevada Museum of Art include:

- >> *Manta Here is the World, 1930s*
- >> *Manta the Earthmaker, 1934*
- >> *The Potter and the Lizard, 1945*
- >> *The Potter and His Children, 1964, 1968, 1970*

# Finding a Direction

Over the years Caples lived and painted in Virginia City, Carson Valley, Goldfield, Indian Springs, Dayton, and other locations throughout Nevada. His wanderings mirrored a complex internal journey to find a direction in his work. During the 1940s and 1950s Caples' painting matured as he began to portray not just landscape, but elegant, haunting scenes that reflected Nevada's mountains and dramatic atmospheric effects.

In 1964 the Church Fine Arts Building at the University of Nevada, Reno hosted a Robert Cole Caples retrospective exhibition (1927 – 1963), an event featuring approximately 50 works created by Caples during the 35 years that he resided in Nevada. The exhibition's catalogue included an introductory essay by Walter Van Tilburg Clark—the essay stands as the seminal description of Caples' life, personal philosophy, and the evolution of his art. In describing Nevada's landscape and its impact on Caples, Clark stated: "It takes a long time to recognize such gradual, undefinable changes... and an even longer time to realize that they have any bearing upon one's own activity." The works shown on this page demonstrate how Nevada's landscape had taken hold of Robert Cole Caples and became a limitless source of inspiration.

## What Mattered Most?

*What mattered most at all times everywhere? The desert.  
Pyramid Lake country and the hills around Reno.*

—ROBERT COLE CAPLES



**Untitled**  
**Not dated**  
**Oil pastel on paper**  
**Collection of Nevada**  
**Museum of Art, bequest of**  
**Rosemary Riley Caples**



**Untitled**  
**Not dated**  
**Pastel and ink on paper**  
**Collection of Nevada**  
**Museum of Art, bequest of**  
**Rosemary Riley Caples**





# The East-West Spirit of Robert Cole Caples



Robert Cole Caples was my father-in-law, my teacher, and my friend. In his heart/mind he had unified the spiritual teachings of East & West, and this rare unity illuminated his later art. Robert had been trained in Chan, Zen, and shamanism. After studying at the Art Students League in New York, and the Santa Barbara School of Art in California, most of his life before World War II was spent among the Paiutes near Reno, Nevada where he was given the tribal name of Longfoot. He is properly remembered as the most important painter in the history of Nevada for his early work and its reverence for Native America.

But I knew a different Robert in the 1960's, a Robert too little known in Nevada. After World War II his friend Varda in San Francisco introduced him to the Chinese and Japanese Buddhists who became his teachers, especially Tobase Roshi. In the process, Robert's style of painting shifted from the realism of his prewar period to a more open abstract fluidity. His Chan/Zen name was Wu-cho ("no attachment").

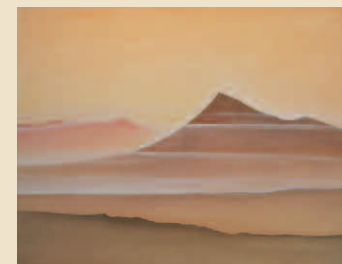
The many weekends I and my wife spent with Robert and his wife at their estate, "Turtle Hill," in Litchfield, Connecticut, were filled with the rich aesthetic experience of his paintings, their vast library of Chinese & Japanese art, their extraordinary art collection (particularly Tang sculpture & Zen calligraphy scrolls which he would unroll a few inches at a time), long philosophical conversations about Chan and Zen Buddhism (especially as interpreted by D. T. Suzuki), the reading of much haiku, archery, chess, and a great deal of warm humor.

—©LANIER GRAHAM

**Landscape**  
Not dated  
Mixed media on paper  
Courtesy of University  
of Nevada, Reno,  
Department of Art,  
James R. Herz Collection



**Strange Land**  
1960  
Mixed media on board  
Collection of  
Nevada Museum of Art,  
gift of Dr. and  
Mrs. William C. Miller



**Untitled**  
Not dated  
Lithograph and oil on paper  
Collection of Nevada  
Museum of Art, bequest of  
Rosemary Riley Caples

Lanier Graham began his curatorial career at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1965, the same year that Robert Cole Caples became his father-in-law. Caples was very influential to Graham, and the two spent much time together exploring art, Zen, and Native American shamanism. Graham is currently the Director of the University Art Gallery at California State University, East Bay.

# Transitions

*I so love Nevada that ten thousand Connecticut's couldn't budge its well-remembered mountains from my spirit—a weightless but imperishable memory.*

—ROBERT COLE CAPLES



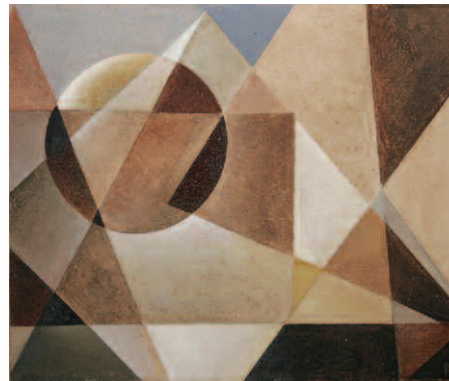
## Dayton, Last Stop in Nevada

Between 1956 and 1958 Robert Cole Caples spent his final years in Nevada working out of a small studio behind his home in Dayton, a place known to his friends and family as *Lizard Hall*. In January 2007, the Nevada State Historic Preservation Office announced that the Dayton residence had been listed in the Nevada State Register of Historic Places.

## Connecticut

Caples moved to Connecticut in 1958. His departure from Nevada seemed to dampen his inspiration to paint. Several loads of sand trucked to his farm in Connecticut were not enough to recreate the awe-inspiring atmosphere that possessed him when he lived and painted in the desert. Caples passed away on November 17, 1979 in the Connecticut house he called *Turtle Hill*.

***Ambient Planet***  
1949  
Oil on board  
Collection of Nevada  
Museum of Art, bequest of  
Rosemary Riley Caples



***Lizard Hall***  
1958  
Oil on illustration board  
Collection of Nevada  
Museum of Art, bequest of  
Rosemary Riley Caples



***Leaves***  
1950's  
Oil on illustration  
board  
Collection of Nevada  
Museum of Art,  
bequest of Rosemary  
Riley Caples

# Curators and Contributors



## *Russ Lindsay*

Russ interned at the Nevada Museum of Art while completing a Graduate Certificate in Art Gallery and Museum Studies from California State University, East Bay. Russ received his BA in Art (Illustration) from California State University, Fullerton and an MA in National Security Affairs from the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. In 2006 he successfully nominated the Dayton, NV home and studio of Robert Cole Caples to the Nevada State Register of Historic Places. His chief pastime is researching and collecting the work of Nevada artists.

## *Sara Frantz*

Sara Frantz received her BFA in Studio Art from the College of Saint Rose, in Albany, New York. She obtained her MA in Museum Studies from John F. Kennedy University, in Berkeley, California in 2007. She has been the Registrar at the Nevada Museum of Art for the last seven years.

*Special thanks to the following individuals & organizations for providing materials used during preparation of this Education Guide:*

- >> Jacque Sundstrand, Manuscripts/Archives Librarian at the Special Collection Department, University of Nevada, Reno. Many of the quotes used in the Education Guide were extracted from a radio interview with Robert Caples conducted in 1976, a recording of which is held by University of Nevada Special Collections Library.
- >> Staff members and volunteers at the Nevada Historical Society.
- >> Keni McKenzie, for kindly providing access to invaluable letters and cards from Robert Cole Caples.
- >> Rosemary Brittain, for sharing her recollections and memories of life in the Caples family.
- >> Lanier Graham, Director, University Art Gallery, California State University, East Bay, for commentary that truly unveiled the character and inspiration of the artist.

Education Guide edited by:  
 Rachel Hartsough, Curator of Education  
 Colin Robertson, Associate Curator of Education  
 Miriam Stanton, Curatorial Assistant  
 Ann M. Wolfe, Curator of Exhibitions and Collections

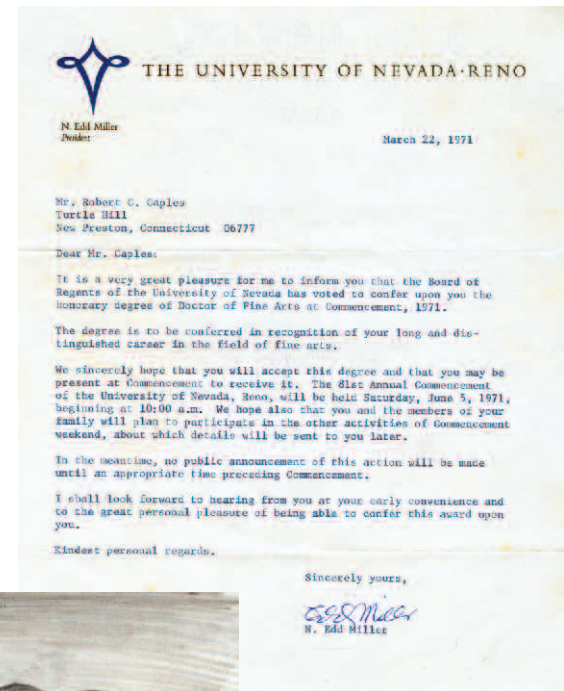
# The Robert Cole Caples Archive

## NEVADA MUSEUM OF ART



### Scope and Content

The Robert Cole Caples Archive consists of materials donated to the Nevada Museum of Art in 2001 by the Rosemary Caples estate. The collection spans a significant period of the artist's life beginning in the 1920s when Caples first arrived in Reno, through the 1960s and 1970s in Connecticut where he spent the final years of his life after leaving Nevada in 1958. Noteworthy materials include manuscripts, drawings, and letters associated with the book written and illustrated by Caples titled *The Potter and His Children: A Stone Age Fable*, published in 1971. The Archive constitutes a unique and comprehensive visual record of the artist's work as seen in photographs, negatives, newspaper articles, and material from his studio. Correspondence and studio notes offer significant insights into Caples' creative influences and philosophy, as well as personal reflections on his own life, artistic struggles, and achievements.



# Resources



## Nevada Museum of Art

Robert Cole Caples Archive  
including correspondence, photographs, and art

### Online

#### NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

Terri McBride

“Artist’s Residence in Dayton Added to Nevada State Register of Historic Places,”

Nevada Department of Cultural Affairs

January 11, 2007

<http://dmla.clan.lib.nv.us/docs/dca/press/2007/01-11.htm>

#### NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

Karen Woodmansee

“Dayton Artist’s Home Makes History”

Nevada Appeal

February 2, 2007

<http://www.nevadaappeal.com/article/20070202/DAYTON/102020097>

## Nevada Historical Society

Nevada Art Research Project (NARP) & Historical Society artist files  
Reno, Nevada

Growdon, Marcia Cohn

“Robert Cole Caples (1908 – 1979)”

Nevada Historical Quarterly, Volume 33.2

(Summer 1990): pages 158 – 161

### Books

Robert Caples

*The Potter and His Children*

(New York: Carlton Press, 1971)

Jackson J. Benson

*The Ox-Bow Man, A Biography of Walter Van Tilburg Clark*

(Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2004)

## University of Nevada, Reno Special Collections Library

### RADIO INTERVIEW

*A Guide to Radio Shows*

*Nevada, One of Fifty – 1976*

97-02/14 Program 14

Guest: Robert Caples

Subject: Nevada Indian Art

*Robert Cole Caples, A Retrospective Exhibition 1927 – 1963*

Forward by Walter Van Tilburg Clark

University of Nevada, Reno, 1964

Walter Van Tilburg Clark Collection

NC527/1/3, NC527/3/6, NC527/4/11

University of Nevada, Reno

Special Collections Library

Art Collection

<http://www.library.unr.edu/specoll/photoweb/artcoll/>

The Nevada Arts Council's Nevada Touring Initiative (NTI) features two components—the Traveling Exhibition Program and the Tumblewords Program. These programs are designed to increase access to visual arts exhibitions and writers in residency at the local level. Website: [www.NevadaCulture.org](http://www.NevadaCulture.org)



# Robert Cole Caples

