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Gotlieb Adam Steiner and the G. A. Steiner Museum

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IN western Pennsylvania the last ice age left its indelible tracks. There is the Slippery Rock Creek Gorge and, nearby, McConnel's Mills (now a state park) and Moraine State Park. In the same area, not far from the town of Portersville and about fifty miles north of Pittsburgh, is the Kennedy Mill Farm. Located on an unpaved country road, it has a sturdy farmhouse and miscellaneous buildings, including poultry barns no longer used. Superficially, the farm provides no incentive for a passerby to stop and enter the gate. The most prominent feature of the place, however, is a striking windowless modern structure which has nothing to identify it. The casual visitor is not likely to guess that it is a museum, possibly unique in the United States. Museums are normally expected to be located where the interested public can find them readily accessible. But this stark edifice houses an exhibit not intended for the general public and therefore lacks an exterior tablet or plaque to indicate its contents or purpose. Within is a superb private collection of American Indian baskets.

The story goes back to the early years of this century. Got(t)lieb¹ Adam Steiner (Fig. 1), having had a successful career in the steel industry in Pittsburgh, decided to retire at about age 55 and devote himself to travel and stimulating hobbies. He and his wife attended

national expositions including the Louisiana Purchase Exposition held in St. Louis in 1903-04, and apparently there purchased a number of Japanese vases he found on display. He added similar items later, and such acquisitions are still retained by the family. However, according to his grandson, William Steiner Huff, "he made the remark that ceramic collecting was a rich man's hobby, and, since he didn't number himself amongst them, he decided to shift his interest to Indian baskets."

Gotlieb Adam Steiner was born in Allegheny², Pennsylvania, of Swiss parentage³ on March 28, 1844. In the midst of the Civil War, he joined the Union Army at the age of 18. His official papers state that he was a druggist.⁴ He was honorably discharged on May 13, 1863, "by reason of expiration of term of service." A letter he sent to his mother on December 15, 1862, describes military action in which he participated during the battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia. At the age of 21 he became a bookkeeper in related firms operating rolling mills and a blast furnace plant. By 1873 he was admitted to the partnership of both firms and the following year he married Elizabeth Voegtly of Allegheny.⁵ The plants were consolidated under the name Schoenberger Steel Company in 1894 with Gotlieb Steiner as second vice president. Five years later the firm was absorbed by the American Steel & Wire Company, and Steiner, after

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Fig. 1. Gottlieb Adam Steiner, 1844-1916.

being identified with the iron and steel industry continuously for 34 years, disposed of his interest. By 1900 he was free to pursue his hobbies.

Just when or how Steiner hit upon basket-collecting as an avocation is not clear, but travels with his wife included annual trips to the West, and these brought him into contact with dealers in the basketry trade. Two of his brothers had settled in the West much earlier. His oldest brother Nicholas was active in real estate in San Francisco where Steiner Street is named after him. Another brother, John, went to Carson City, Nevada, where he died of yellow jaundice in 1867. Letters and other papers associated with Gottlieb's basket purchasing have been preserved beginning in 1905. The items include offers of merchandise sent to him as prospective buyer, descriptions of individual items, and bills. The records indicate that he maintained active negotiations especially with the following dealers:

Abe Cohn, The Emporium Company, Carson City, Nevada

Alex Lyall, Lyall & Henderson, Yellowstone, Wyoming

B. A. Whalen, Whalen's Curio Store, Los Angeles, California (later A. C. Hirschfeldt became the proprietor)

Nelson L. Salter, Yosemite Valley Store, Yosemite, California

D. E. Smith, Fred Harvey Co., Grand Canyon, Arizona

Grace Nicholson, Pasadena, California

E. M. Rhodes, Seattle, Washington

The merchandise was often sent on approval and, if not acceptable, could be returned at the dealer's expense. Abe Cohn of the Emporium Company accompanied each basket with a certificate designed to convey all the pertinent facts. It begins by assuring the potential purchaser that "no American collection can be deemed complete unless it contains a fine specimen of Washoe or Paiute [sic] basketry." Furthermore, the statement explains, the basket's "artistic merit lies in its age, beauty, originality of design, symmetrical form, number of days consumed in its construction, individuality (no two being alike), and number of stitches to the inch, for what intended and the materials used in its construction, interpretation of symbols in the decoration as intended by the weaver." Obviously, the products for which such certificates were designed were not the ordinary containers used under aboriginal conditions by an Indian family. Abe Cohn's baskets were "works of art," manufactured to appeal to the sophisticated buyer. The materials and weave were expected to be traditional, but the pattern, size, and shape of the "masterpieces" were guaranteed to be unique. Accordingly, an Emporium's certificate provides space for such information as: number of days in construction, stitches to inch, (native) use intended, Washo name, Paiute name, from whom obtained, and materials.⁶ Additional items such as "date obtained" and the "purpose of the basket" were often inserted later.

While most of Steiner's acquisitions are typical rather than unique, it is clear that he chose them largely on the basis of their esthetic appeal, and his collection includes fine examples of the weaver's craft. The geographical areas represented extend from the Caribbean (Arawak) to Alaska, but the largest number of containers, as will be seen in the itemized inventory below, comes from western United States and western Canada. Over the years the collection grew steadily. The basement of Steiner's Pittsburgh home had large storage cupboards in which he shelved baskets and ceramics; some items were kept in the living areas. It is said that he rotated the ceramics every month, but it is not known whether he did the same with the woven ware. In any case, in 1913 Dr. William J. Holland, Director of the Carnegie Museum of Pittsburgh, succeeded in obtaining the baskets on loan for the Museum. Special cases were built for their display. Additional baskets were turned over to the Museum from time to time until the total number reached five hundred.

The year 1914 brought Steiner both frustration and success. His brother John had died forty-seven years earlier when Gotlieb was 23 and a humble bookkeeper. Now that he was retired and of some means, Gotlieb felt ready to carry out a long-standing idea—to locate the grave in Carson City and to bring back the remains to the family plot in Pittsburgh. He had been informed that the Masons had handled the original burial which he assumed to have been in the Masonic Cemetery of Carson City. However, a search, aided by fellow Masons, failed to identify the grave. But the visit gave Steiner the opportunity of visiting the Emporium and of acquiring one of the masterpieces of Datsolalee, generally considered the outstanding Indian basket weaver of the time. His purchase of "Beacon Lights," L. K. 42,⁷ made headlines in western papers. An article in the *Carson City News*, April 1, 1914, announced the "Greatest price has been

paid for the Greatest Washoe Basket/Dat-So-La-Lee's masterpiece goes to grace collection in Pittsburg, Penn./Price nearly two thousand dollars." The *San Francisco Examiner* of April 4 carried a story about Steiner's futile search for his brother's grave and concludes with the statement that "Mrs. [sic] Steiner took a keen interest in the work of the Piute [sic] Indian basket weavers and from one of the Indian women she purchased a basket for which she is said to have paid \$2,000, the highest price ever paid for a Nevada basket." The Emporium certificate accompanying L. K. 42 states that it took fourteen months to complete and that it has 29 stitches to the inch. The *Carson City News*, describing the colors as golden white, dark brown, and ebony black, estimates that there are 80,000 stitches in all.

That was apparently Gotlieb Adam Steiner's last westward trip. He took ill in 1915 and his physical condition continued to worsen until he died on February 18, 1916. But the fascination basketry held for him never abated until the end. He carried on his usual negotiations with the dealers. On January 11, 1916, he inquired of Abe Cohn concerning the price of Datsolalee's L. K. 50. He wrote: "I had hoped to be well long before this, but after putting up a strenuous fight, I cannot report any improvement, being now practically confined to my room." Eleven days later L. K. 50 and 51 arrived—less than a month before he died.

In the 1930's Dr. Holland was succeeded as Director of the Carnegie Museum by Dr. Andrey Avinoff, who wanted more space for exhibiting the art of the Middle East. William S. Huff, Gotlieb's grandson, writes (personal communication), "Interest in American Indian art was at a low ebb." And so, in 1937, the Carnegie Museum returned the baskets to the Steiner family. Actually, the explanation given for the removal may be an oversimplification. In a recent letter to Mr. Huff (July 1979), Mr. James B. Richardson III, Chair-

man, Anthropology and Chief Curator, Section of Man, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, writes, "I gather that a rather unfortunate set of circumstances was responsible for its [the basket collection] being retrieved by your family . . . The Steiner collection represents one of the prime collections in the country, and is of major interest to Carnegie Museum of Natural History."

For the next 35 years the baskets were stored in airtight barrels. During this period Gottlieb's youngest daughter, Elsa S. Huff, lived on the Kennedy Mill Farm. Her son William had become an architect. It occurred to Elsa that a happy solution to providing an adequate and a secure home for the collection would be the erecting of a structure designed by her architect son and located on the farm. Since the building was not to be open to the public, its isolated situation was not deemed a disadvantage. Ground-breaking took place in 1966 and the edifice (Fig. 2) was dedicated in 1972. The long storage period had resulted in no damage to the baskets, and the automatic heating and humidity controls in the new building were calculated to protect the contents for years to come.

William Huff has offered an analysis of the architectural concept which prompted his design of the building. He points out that the individual cells of the floor plan (Fig. 3) "are interlocked in what is known as the 'basket weave' pattern" but that this arrangement has nothing to do with the contents of the interior. "It was in the '50's at the Alhambra (in Spain)," he explains, "that I reflected on the applicability of such a tile pattern in structuring a building; it was not a nod to the Indian basket—though not an unhappy coincidence! Also many suppose the building's silhouettes reflect Pueblo Indian dwellings. Again, I had no such thought; rather, the design is a result of my own particular grasp of principles of architecture—proportion, composition, outline, etc.

"The plan possesses 2-fold, rotational symmetry—to be distinguished from bilateral, or mirror, symmetry. The front, though asymmetrical of itself, is consequently the same as the back. It is made up of 10 interlocking, repeating cells (and two towers) so laid out that they provide a variety of spatial experiences: the cluster, the vista, the dead end.

"There are no windows in the main hall in order to afford the maximum lengths of wall

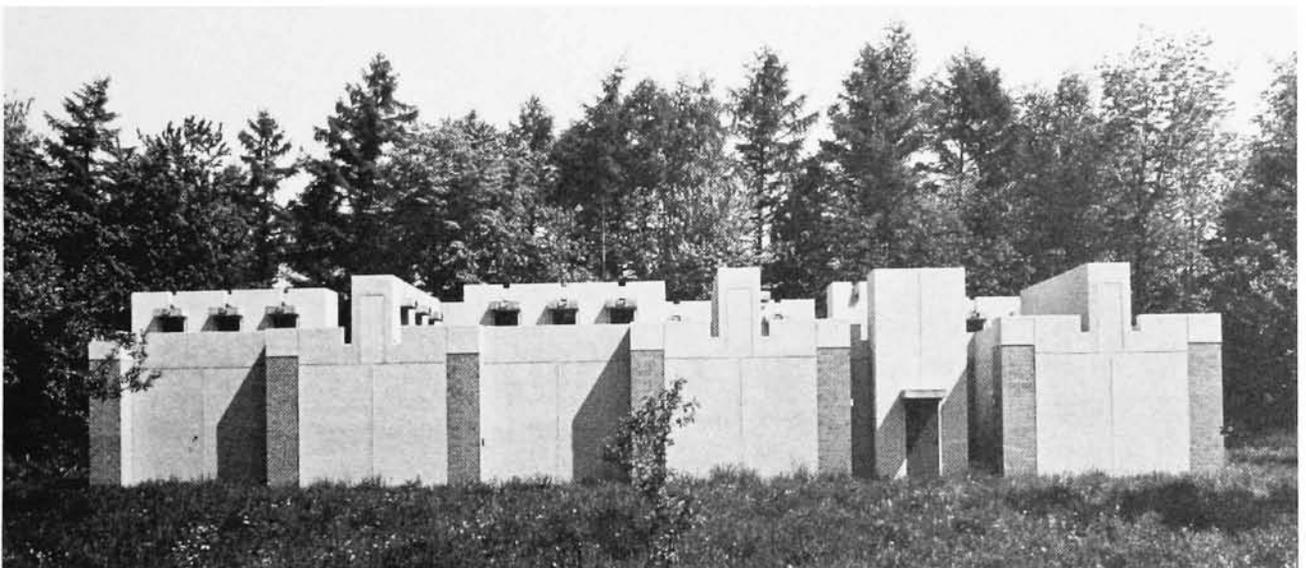


Fig. 2. Front view of the Gottlieb Adam Steiner Museum.

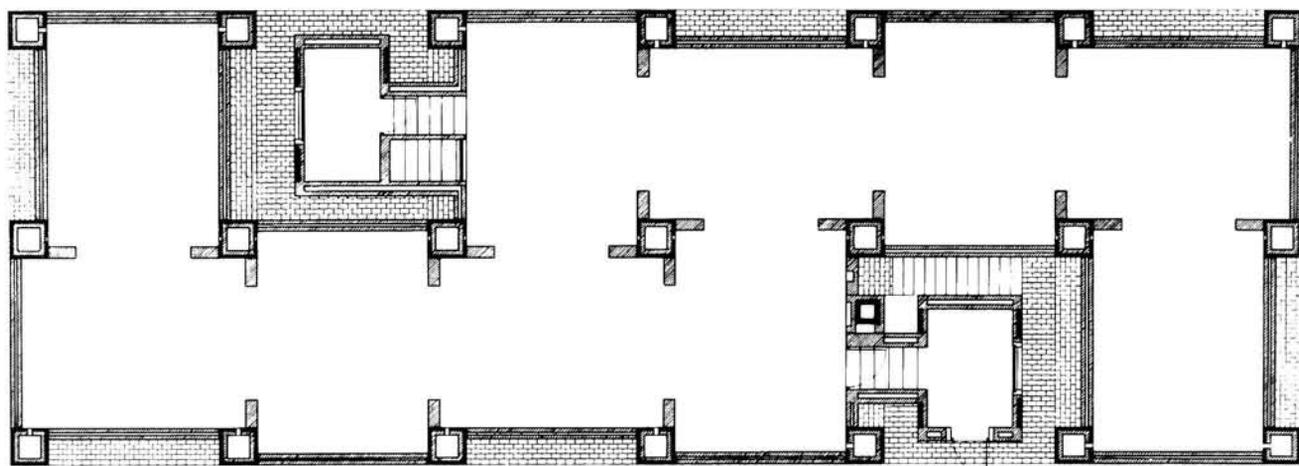


Fig. 3. Interior plan of the Gottlieb Adam Steiner Museum.



Fig. 4. Interior view of the museum. Washo display case is in the rear center.

for display (and security). There are monitors above the main roof which allow completely controlled light to enter. That is, they give one contact with the exterior condition—sun, cloud, dark, etc.—but the monitors do not allow any direct light to fall into the building.”

When the building was completed, a curator of the Museum of the American Indian Heye Foundation was brought from New York City to “advise on the display system.” Several considerations influenced the arrangement (Figs. 4-6). Attention was paid to the geographical location of the tribes represented, but other factors had to be taken into account. There were problems relating to the size and shape both of the baskets and of the display space. The identity of all items is noted on labels, information for which was extracted from bills and other records. The tribal names

do not always conform to those in common use today, but the synonymy is usually recognizable. Where the label is areal rather than tribal, e.g., Kern County, Mission, etc., there can be no certainty as to the exact source of the basket. Elsa Huff purchased additional baskets subsequent to her father’s death, so that the number housed in the new museum has grown to 555. Of these, a hundred are kept in storage areas; the other are exhibited.

An inventory made by William Huff (Table 1) begins with the tribe from which the greatest number of items has come and ends with those having provided no more than one. Where several Indian groups are combined under a single total, there is no way of subdividing it. I have added in parentheses synonyms found in recent anthropological literature.⁸



Fig. 5. Interior view. Display case in the foreground is Pomo; in background is Washo.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Harvey Kaplan (Fig. 2), and Clyde Hare (Figs. 4-6).

As noted previously, the G. A. Steiner Museum is not open to the public. If a mutually convenient time can be found, however, admission may be arranged by writing William S. Huff, 1265 Murray Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15217. It might be well to request directions for reaching the Kennedy Hill Farm!



Fig. 6. Washo display case in foreground. The large basket above is "Beacon Lights" (L. K. 42), made by Datsolalee.

Table 1

BASKETS IN THE G. A. STEINER MUSEUM

Kern County (Tubatulabal, Kawaiisu, Kitanemuk?)	76
Washoe (Washo)	64
Pomo	60
Mission (Luiseño, Diegueño, Saboba, Serrano, San Fernando, Ventura)	21
Apache	20
Tlinkit (Tlingit)	19
Navaho	18
Pima	16
Panamint (Western Shoshoni)	16
Karok	14
Paiute	14
Mono	13
Ojibwa	12
Tulare (Yokuts)	11
Aleut	11
Papago	11
Fraser River	10
Klikitat	9
Maidu	8
Cherokee	8
Moapas (Paiute?)	7
Hupa	7
Chemehuevi	6
Yurok	6
Makah (Nootka)	6
Thompson River	6
Klamath	5
Yokut (Yokuts)	5
Eskimo	4
Hopi	4
Havasupai	4
Hat Creek (Atsugewi)	4
Skokomish (Twana)	4
Chukchanci (Chukchansi)	4
Chilcotin	4
Yuki	4
Concow (Konkow)	3
Chetimachas (Chitimacha)	3
Nez Perce	3
Iroquois	3
Haida	3
Shasta	2
Pitt River (Achomawi)	2
Modoc	2
Umatilla	2
Oraibi (Hopi)	2
Wegat (Wiyot)	2
Yakutat (Tlingit)	2
Sitka (Tlingit)	2
One each: Arawak, Bella-Bella, Canal Lake (?), Cayuse, Chilkat, Cowican (Cowichan), Cowlitz (Chehalis), Nomelaki (Nomlaki), Tolowa, Wailaki, Walapai, Wasco, Wintun	

NOTES

1. In early papers the longer spelling is used. Later the shorter form is more common.

2. Allegheny was later absorbed into Pittsburgh and became its "North Side."

3. Nicholas Steiner and Anna Arn came from Canton Bern, Switzerland. Nicholas accompanied his uncle, a widower, who brought along his seventeen children (his second marriage produced thirteen more). Anna Arn, an orphan and ward of the church, although engaged to Nicholas, could not emigrate until she came of age. When she made the crossing, Nicholas, unaware that she was on the way, returned to get her. They passed each other in mid-ocean. She went on to Pittsburgh to stay with relatives (or friends?). When Nicholas returned from Europe, they were married in 1834 in Belmont County, Ohio—why in this locality is not clear. They thereupon settled in Allegheny (Pittsburgh).

4. Gotlieb's first position was with a local dry goods house. After two years he apprenticed himself to a druggist and had advanced to the point where he was entrusted with the filling of prescriptions when the war broke out.

5. The family name Voegtly has long been associated with "Allegheny." Early in the nineteenth century a Swiss immigrant, Henry Rickenbach, persuaded Swiss families, including that of Nicholas Voegtly, to settle there. In 1833 Voegtly donated the land on which the Voegtly Evangelical Church has stood for 146 years.

6. On the assumption that the Emporium's baskets are always constructed of three materials, the certificate calls for the checking of *Circes* (sic) *occidentalis* (red), *Pteris aquilinum* (sic) (black), and *Salix* or White Willow (white). It may be noted that misspellings are not uncommon. Thus, *Circes* for *Cercis*, *aquilinum* for *aquilina*, Paiute for Paiute; Washoe is now spelled Washo.

7. Datsolalee (a simplified spelling of her Washo name) was Mrs. Louisa Keyser. Her reputation as a basket weaver was widely known among dealers and collectors, but Abe Cohn had an agree-

ment with her that gave him a virtual monopoly on her finest products. Her masterpieces were numbered in order of their manufacture: L. K. (Louisa Keyser) #____. They were also named to describe the pattern she wove into them. Thus, L. K. 42, Beacon Lights, was so called because "large signal fires or beacon lights were built upon high hills to call absent members of the Washoe tribe together for consultation as danger threatened."

8. The synonymy here in large part has been taken from George Peter Murdock and Timothy J. O'Leary, *Ethnographic Bibliography of North America*, 4th ed., (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files Press, 1975), and Robert F. Heizer, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 8, *California* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1978).

