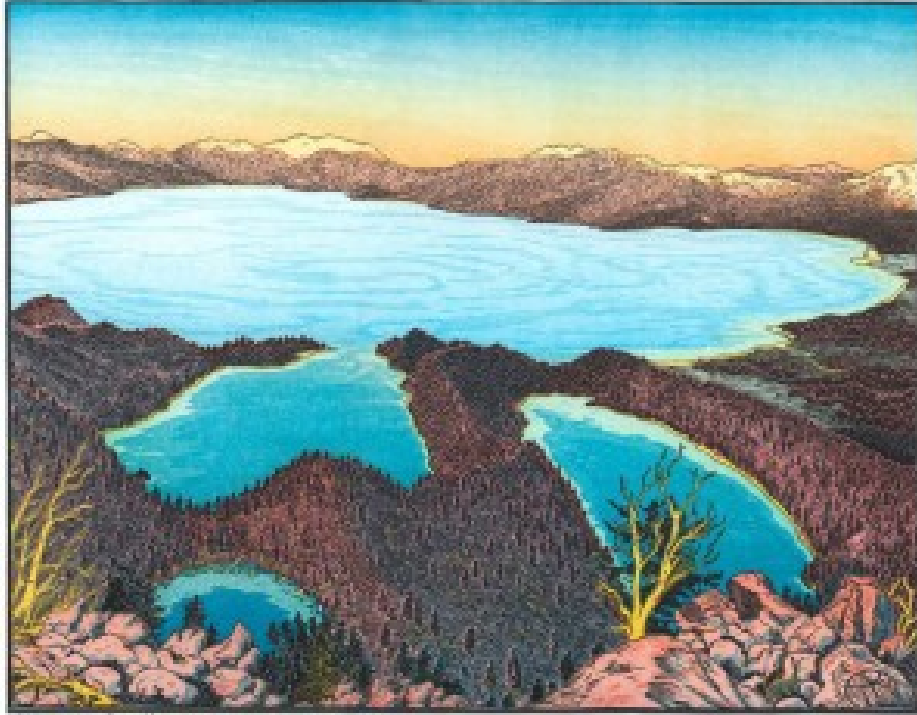


Museum exhibit captures Tahoe in its totality



“Lake Tahoe from Maggie’s Peak, Desolation Wilderness,” 2006, Woodcut print © Tom Killion

By Kim Wyatt

RENO – If you haven’t gone, go.

“Tahoe: A Visual History” at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno is a stunning achievement. The first major exhibit of Lake Tahoe, Donner Pass, and the nearby Sierra is a remarkable collection of work by 175 painters, photographers, printmakers, cartographers, sculptors, architects, basket weavers and more, spanning two centuries at our favorite place. Five years in the making, with more than 400 objects amassed from public and private collections, this exhibit is not to be missed. And there is still time; it ends Jan. 10.

It's fascinating to see everyday Tahoe scenes as they were envisioned by a who's who of artists. Ten galleries showcase the works; there are also exhibits in the lobby and research library. I would recommend starting on the third floor in the Robert Z. Hawkins Gallery, where you will find Washoe pieces, and ending on the second floor at the Maya Lin installation. This gives a sense of narrative to the exhibit; we begin and end at the lakeshore, with our history unfolding in between. It's a transformative experience.



Michael Light, "Highway 89, Cascade and Emerald Lakes and Mount Tallac Beyond, Looking Southwest, South Lake Tahoe, CA, 2014," Collection of the Nevada Museum of Art, The Altered Landscape, Carol Franc Buck Collection.

The Washoe exhibit begins with functional art: snowshoes, fishing nets, winnowing trays. But Louisa Keyser's breathtaking degikup baskets are in the realm of fine art. Also known as Datsolalee, Keyser's basketry was sought after for her innovation and skill. If you think you're not into baskets, her artistry will likely change your mind.

Just around the corner, John C. Fremont and other early Western explorers kicked off Tahoe creative representation with the first surveys of the area. The resulting maps and sketches revealed to the world the features of Lake Tahoe and the surrounding Sierra. Map geeks will appreciate the detail of our first cartographers.

The precision of the maps is in marked contrast to the explosion of color in 19th century landscape paintings by Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Hill and others that anchor the "Golden Age" exhibit. Bierstadt, in particular, was among those to leave exactitude behind for intensity, lingering on clouds, light, and water.

As coach roads opened, artists began to widen their vistas. In the mid-1870s, trees begin to disappear from the works, or grow spotty—a reminder of the Comstock and its costs. By the time we get to Donner Pass, the presence of humans begins to dominate, with glimpses of dystopian landscapes. Idealism gives way to economics.

In "Surmounting the Summit: Donner Pass in the 19th Century," the building of the transcontinental railroad is rendered in paintings and photographs that celebrate this engineering feat, with little of the blood and guts that went into the making of it.

"Harsh Realities" is one of the more powerful exhibits. In this, artists take on the history of the railroad with Chinese workers at the forefront. I won't spoil the surprise of "Mountain of Fortune," but it's art that shocks and illuminates. There is also a fascinating rebuttal here by artist Zhi Lin to Bierstadt's "View of Donner Lake, California (1871-72)," commissioned by railroad titan Collis Huntington.

Nick van Woets' "American Pine Bark" ushers us into Lake Tahoe as seen through the eyes of timber barons: a source of 300,000 board feet removed daily. Tahoe as resource versus a source of

inspiration creates a jarring feeling. There are familiar photos of denuded hills around Glenbrook punctuated by a few surprises like a Maynard Dixon sketch.

The second floor begins with tourism, and “The Rise of the Resort.” Once reliable transportation had been achieved via the railroad and steamers, visitors flocked to the lake and needed lodging. There is Tahoe Tavern memorabilia and advertising ephemera; oil paintings are replaced by posters and photographs, which then give way to architecture, impressionism and eclectic depictions of the region. Here, I loved learning about artists new to me, like Anne Brigman, Ruth Bernard and Frances Gearhart.



Albert Bierstadt, “Donner Lake from the Summit, 1873,” Oil on canvas, 72 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 120 3 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches, Collection of The New-York Historical Society, New York.

The gallery leading to “Water Woes” is dotted with bright contemporary work by Phyllis Shafer, Gregory Kondos and Tom Killian. (If you’re into block prints, this exhibit is a real treat. I’ll be back for more.)

You’ll end at three commissions by Maya Lin, sculptor of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. It’s a good place to wrap up the tour, as these pieces expand one’s

perspective of the Lake Tahoe Basin, and our place in it.

There really is something for everyone in this exhibit. I'd give two to three hours; the museum has a café if you want to space it out. And you can get all of your holiday shopping done in the fantastic museum gift shop, which carries the work of local artists. You can also purchase the exhibit's companion book, a 488-page tome that features the art in the collection and narrative that ties it all together. It's a beautiful book, and would make a great gift.

This exhibit documents not only art and history, but also the utility of the lake: the Washoe used it for food, the Comstock for wood, the railroad barons for passage. This ambitious collection may very well inspire us to remain stewards of the lake, our lessons made visible.

Go. You'll be glad you did.

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Notes:

- Tahoe: A Visual History runs through Jan. 10 at the **Nevada Museum of Art**, 160 West Liberty St., Reno.
- Admission is \$10 general, \$8 student or senior, \$1 children 6-12; members and children 5 and younger get in free.
- Hours: Wednesday-Sunday 10am-6 pm; Thursday 10am-8 pm. Closed Mondays, Tuesdays and holidays.
- In conjunction with the exhibit, the museum is offering classes, lectures, and special events on making pine needle baskets, printmaking, Tahoe cartography, the history of the Chinese in the building of the transcendental railroad and more. For more information, go **online**.

*Kim Wyatt is the owner of the independent press **Bona Fide Books**.*