



Pasatiempo

Contemporary American artists who move around large amounts of soil and call themselves earthwork artists have nothing on their Native American predecessors.

For thousands of years, the ancestors of today's Native Americans sculpted the earth — sometimes into massive complexes — for the purposes of burial, astronomical study, organization of villages, defense, agriculture and other ceremonial purposes.

Today these mounds have slipped from our consciousness — if not from existence altogether. Many have been plowed over; some, turned into racetracks and golf courses. But there was a time in this nation's history when these mounds captured the people's imagination and posed some important historical and political questions.

Artist Miles Coolidge was astounded to stumble across R.G. Kennedy's 1994 book on Indian mounds, *Hidden Cities* (Penguin Books), in a bookstore at the University of California, Irvine, where he teaches studio art. "I had been following the work of Robert Smithson [the *Spiral Jetty*



Teri Thomson Randall | The New Mexican

MOUNDS of TIME



Above, *Indian Mounds, St. Paul, Minn.*, offset lithograph, 35 x 55 inches

Top right, *Prehistoric Mound at Marietta O.*, offset lithograph, 35 x 55 inches

Top, *Fort Pierce, Fla., Indian Mound or remains of old fort*, offset lithograph, 35 x 55 inches

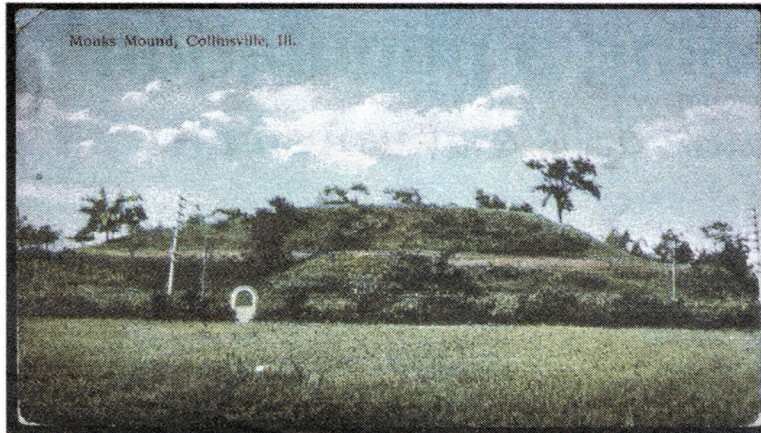
All Miles Coolidge images courtesy the Lannan Foundation Collection

artist] and Michael Heizer [who also makes massive earth projects]. It seemed to me there was such a striking similarity between the work of ancient Native American artists and today's earthwork builders that it seemed strange that given my exposure to the subject from contemporary art, I hadn't heard of Indian mounds. Why hadn't they seemed more significant?"

Coolidge's interest in ancient mounds inspired a new body of work in which he created poster-size enlargements of turn-of-the-century postcards of Indian mounds. The series of seven prints, which belongs to the collection of the Lannan Foundation, is now on exhibit at the Harwood Museum of Art in Taos through March 21. This evening, Jan. 30, the Harwood hosts an opening reception for the Coolidge show as well as for concurrent exhibits *Earl Stroh: Taos Makimono Suite* and *Tony Magar: Worlds*.

During a recent phone interview from his home in Los Angeles, Coolidge said he created the images to "reinsert mound architecture into the consciousness of contemporary America, to amplify their historical status."

Indian mounds are found from Wisconsin to the Gulf of Mexico, from the Appalachian Mountains to the eastern Mississippi River basin. Current estimates place the origins of these scattered sites at 2500 to 3000 B.C., though some were in use just centuries ago. When the French arrived in Louisiana in the late 1600s, they found a mound complex in Natchez that was still being used ritually. Thomas Jefferson sponsored



Monks Mound, Collinsville, Ill., offset lithograph, 35 x 55 inches

small expeditions to gather information on Indian mounds and even excavated a burial mound on his Virginia estate. In the course of that dig he invented stratigraphical observation, the basic principle of modern archaeological investigation.

Controversy over who built the mounds persisted throughout much of the 1800s. Intellectual opinion of the day attributed the earthworks to transplanted Egyptians, the Lost Tribes of Israel or Welsh settlers — any group other than Native Americans, who were considered too unsophisticated for the task. In 1894 the U.S. Congress charged the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology, under the leadership of John Wesley Powell, to settle the “lost race” controversy once and for all. The large-scale investigation led by scientist Cyrus Thomas determined that Native civilizations were in fact the builders of these monumental earthen projects.

Coolidge’s turn-of-the-century postcards suggest that these mounds were magnets for curious tourists at the time. Footpaths carve their way to the tops of many. A photograph of a mound in Marietta, Ohio, shows outdoor furniture perched on top.

By today’s standards, turning an Indian burial mound into a scenic overlook seems disrespectful. Yet Coolidge maintains that of all the various responses to mound architecture — including plowing them under or building golf courses over them (“that’s like dancing on someone’s grave,” he said) — tourism is relatively benign and the most respectful.

“At least tourists are paying homage to the significance of these sites, even if they are not strictly using them in the way they had been originally designed,” Coolidge said. “Tourism comes from a genuine desire of wanting to know about something, and it provides a way in which the significance might be processed in our culture.”

Today Indian mounds, or what is left of them, no longer hold the place they once did in the American imagination. People who depend on highways or airplanes for long-range travel will probably never see one. Coolidge’s work brings these ancient earthworks to the fore once again, asking us to reshape the way we imagine our past. ◀

DETAILS

- ▼ *Miles Coolidge: Mound Postcard Posters*
- ▼ Opening reception with the artist 5-7 p.m. today, Jan. 30
Exhibit through March 21
Concurrent opening reception for *Earl Stroh: Taos Makimono Suite*
and *Tony Magar: Worlds*
- ▼ Harwood Museum of Art, 238 Ledoux St., Taos, 505-758-9826