

# PACIFIC NORTHWEST

The Seattle Times SUNDAY MAGAZINE | JUNE 12, 2005

## The Confluence

MAYA LIN'S ART LINKS A VISION,  
A LANDSCAPE AND A PEOPLE

**PLANT LIFE** > Charming new clematis

**TASTE** > Cheese, the blue period

**NORTHWEST LIVING** > From the rare, remarkable



by Paula Bock | photographed by Alan Berner

**D**URING THE BLESSING, Maya Lin sat on a plastic folding chair on a small island in the Snake River, basalt bluffs on either side, migratory flyway above, tribal history behind. Ahead lay the creation of seven major public artworks along the route traveled by Lewis and Clark.

The series, called the Confluence

Project, will stretch from Washington state's foggy forested coast to inland arid plateau; reach backward and forward in time; cross cultures. Two hundred years ago, people and cultures gathered where rivers met. At key confluences along the Columbia River Basin, Lin's artwork will look at the landscape from the perspective of the tribes as well as the explorers.

It is the largest and longest project the renowned artist and architect has undertaken since launching her career at age 21 with the design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Here, in Washington state, she plans to break ground at Cape Disappointment in the fall and work east, finishing with an island amphitheater, a natural "skybowl" at Chief Timothy

Park outside Clarkston in 2007.

At the moment, here in the skybowl, there is sun and ceremony. Rain had been forecast, but "Uncle" Horace Axtell, the 80-year-old spiritual leader of the Niimiipuu, the Nez Perce tribe, delivered on his promise to "take care of it." Actually, Uncle hadn't planned to get involved with the Lewis and Clark bicentennial at all: "You put

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# A Meeting Of Minds

DREAMING THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM, NATIVE PEOPLES AND A RENOWNED ARTIST FORM A DIFFERENT CORPUS OF DISCOVERY

Backed by the bluffs of the Snake River, "Uncle" Horace Axtell records thoughts about war, peace and Nez Perce history for a video about the Confluence Project.

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The river is the heart of the Confluence Project, and here at Sacajawea State Park, where the Snake and Columbia rivers join, Maya Lin will create a compass pointing to tribal homelands; she'll also install dock planks inscribed with an entry from the explorers' daybook.

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the whole history together and there's a lot of bad things happened since those two guys came over here."

But he wanted to do this for Maya. She'd listened to his stories — the land lost, treaties broken, ancestors killed. She'd listened to the river. She understood. It's hard to heal somebody's loss. Yet she'd honored those warriors on the Wall. That war was hard to explain. Every war is hard. Uncle

served seven months in Nagasaki and Hiroshima after the atomic bomb. So many poor little kids, such stench, he couldn't eat. It didn't seem right to kill so many people in their own homes. Wasn't right then, wasn't right back in 1877 when soldiers captured the Nez Perce Red Heart band and locked them in stockades at Ft. Vancouver. Women, elders, children. Nobody has forgotten the Nez Perce baby boy who

died there.

"Anyway," Uncle says, "some day people will talk about peace. That's a big word. The only time you really have peace is when you sleep. My ancestors tell me that when you take it back to the time of the first people, the Creator gave us language and land. For a long time the people lived at peace on this land. Every morning, as soon as they woke up, they thanked

the Creator. Qe'ciyew'yew'. Thank you."

Uncle rang a bell in the clear morning air. Qe'ciyew'yew'. On rows of folding chairs, tribal members sat next to state officials, teachers, a mayor, a millionaire donor, a sneezy dog, the former commander of Ft. Vancouver. Qe'ciyew'yew'. Uncle sang, prayed, beat an animal-hide drum. Qe'ciyew'yew'. Lin was moved to tears.

"Would I have even dreamed five years ago I would be part of a Nez Perce blessing ceremony?" she asked, walking through dry fescue and yellow-petaled balsam root after the blessing. "What we just witnessed today, I feel an incredible responsibility. Not just sympathy. You feel like working really hard not to disappoint, and that has nothing to do with tourism. It's on a human level, intimate,

about the larger landscape. This place has a power. For me, it's about the land. For them, it's the Creator. For everyone, it's something.

"I get so many proposals I have to turn down. I had retired from the monument business. But they were like: We don't have that much to celebrate in these last 200 years. Can you give us a reason to celebrate? They asked me because I'm a committed

environmentalist. Once I realized it wasn't about anger, it was more like: What is this about? . . . Can we rethink things we think we already know?"

**EVERYBODY AGREED** Maya Lin was the perfect choice, but few believed she'd sign on.

In the beginning, there was no money, no connections, no place, no permits, no support. Just a grand idea

that, coincidentally, came at almost exactly the same moment to an assortment of characters living up and down the Columbia River Basin.

In May 1999, on a Wednesday evening in the Blue Mountain foothills of the Umatilla Reservation, Antone Minthorn plopped down on his living-room couch and popped a documentary about Maya Lin into his VCR. The chairman of the Umatilla Confederated

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The Confluence Project started with no money, no connections, no permits, no support, but "you can't just let a great idea hang out there," says Jane Jacobsen, right, of Vancouver. Her first task as executive director was getting Maya Lin, left, to sign on. Her current chore is raising money to feed the \$22 million budget.



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Tribes had watched it before, but this time it crystallized as a solution.

What to do about the upcoming bicentennial? Not a celebration. Not another statue of two guys pointing West. That expedition, in Minthorn's eyes, was a collision between Manifest Destiny — conquer the West — and native beliefs about respecting the earth. "Manifest Destiny is very exploitive," Minthorn says, "very aggressive, relying on a lot of technology, a lot of greed factors. Wealth is created for those who claim it first, but a lot of damage is done."

The tribes believed no one owns the land though they could share in its spirit, food, medicine. Take only what you need, Minthorn explains, make sure there are resources for children seven generations ahead. In the video, Maya was clearly passionate about the environment, and brilliant, Minthorn could tell, from her work on the Wall, the Civil Rights Memorial, the Women's Table. Even more, the tribal leader admired her persistence. "The great things," he said, "you have to fight for them."

The next day, Minthorn called David Nicandri, Washington State Historical Society director coordinating bicentennial events. A minute later, Nicandri's phone rang again. Jane Jacobsen from the Vancouver National Historic Reserve Trust: Instead of every city squabbling for funds to make a bunch of scattered statues that wouldn't add up to much, she said, how about a series of artworks along the river — designed by Maya Lin?

Nicandri laughed. "Did Antone tell you to call?" he asked. No, she said, haven't seen Antone in a month. She and David DiCesare, who managed the Vancouver Historic Reserve,

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With bluffs on both sides, Nez Perce tribal members Horace Axtell (in the broad-brimmed hat) and Wilfred Scott lead those who came to the skybowl blessing ceremony for the Confluence Project.

## Crossing cultures and time through art

Confluence Project planners envision seven public artworks commemorating the landscapes and peoples encountered by Lewis and Clark 200 years ago. Some of the ideas for the sites are in the early stages of development, and financing for all projects is not yet complete.

- 1 CAPE DISAPPOINTMENT STATE PARK**  
Ilwaco, WA  
Viewing platform; basalt fish-cleaning station; outdoor amphitheater; cedar totems with names of Native American tribes the explorers encountered.  
Lewis and Clark journal entry describes arrival at this bay.  
Groundbreaking ceremony: Nov. 18.
- 2 FRENCHMAN'S BAR COUNTY PARK**  
Vancouver, WA  
To be coordinated with the Port of Vancouver's proposed Columbia Gateway Project master plan.
- 3 VANCOUVER NATIONAL HISTORIC RESERVE**  
Vancouver, WA  
Pedestrian land bridge 40 feet wide, earth-covered, arching over Highway 14, linking the National Historic Reserve with the waterfront; shoreline restoration.
- 4 SANDY RIVER DELTA**  
Wheelchair-accessible ramp and bird blind/wildlife-viewing platform inscribed with current status of all the birds and animals Lewis and Clark described and classified.
- 5 CELILO FALLS PARK**  
Near The Dalles, OR  
Goal is to honor Celilo Falls, which was for thousands of years (before the dams) a thriving Native American fishing ground. May include a native fishing legend.
- 6 SACAJAWEA STATE PARK**  
Pasco, WA  
Compass-like seating area pointing to tribes' homelands; shoreline restoration and interpretive trail.  
Lewis and Clark journal entry of a day in the life is inscribed on planks of boat dock.  
Completion: 2006
- 7 CHIEF TIMOTHY PARK**  
Clarkston, WA  
Natural outdoor amphitheater or "skybowl" tells history of Nez Perce people.  
Lewis and Clark journal excerpts about canoeing and portage used at lookout point.  
Groundbreaking in 2005; completion in 2006



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*If not for help from many tribes, Lewis and Clark probably wouldn't have reached the Pacific Ocean, say Bessie Scott, her husband, Wilfred, and Horace Axtell. Here, they wait for a video crew to interview them about Nez Perce tribal history. Behind them is the Snake River and silhouettes depicting the Lewis and Clark journey.*



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had been thinking about the circle of history and realized, "Wait a minute. Lewis and Clark didn't discover the West. They didn't even open it up. They just happened to come through here with the help of the tribes. So what was the land like then? The cultures?"

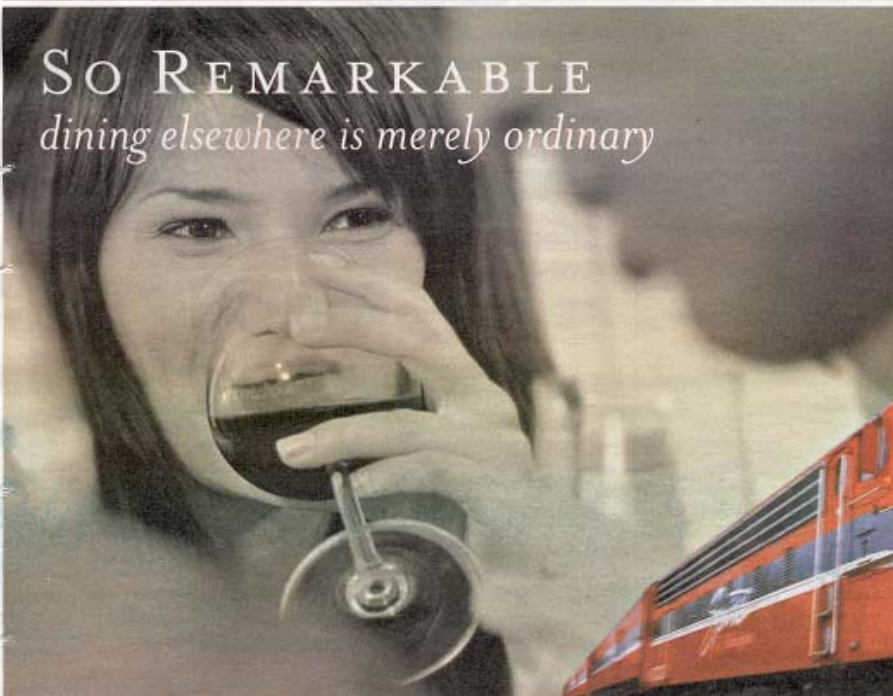
Well, if you're serious about this, Nicandri told them, call the coast, Pacific County. They're doing something big because that's where Lewis and Clark first saw the ocean.

"Nabiel," Jane rang the Long Beach city manager. "What are you all thinking about for public art?"

Nabiel Shawa launched into a rhapsodic riff about how Pacific County had the richest Lewis-and-Clark history in the state, how this was where the explorers completed their mission, first walked the rugged shore, saw condors and sturgeon and carved their names on the trees. Deep breath. "And I know we're here"

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