



Najo Jām (Our Home), 2020, by collaborating San Antonio artists Carlos Cortés and Doroteo Garza, is a public artwork for Comanche Lookout Park that is pan-Indian—relating to the multiple indigenous tribes that lay claim to this land. The title *Najo Jām* translates to "our home" in the Coahuiltecan language Pajalate, paying tribute to our ancestors and future generations. This artwork is comprised of three stylized and aesthetic benches, a monument, and two oversized planters. The benches, monument, and one of the planters are located at Comanche Lookout Park. The other planter is currently on display at the River Walk Public Art Garden, located in Downtown San Antonio. The artwork is made from reinforced concrete to look like stone and wood. This technique is called *trabajo rustico* or *faux bois*, giving the artwork a natural and organic form, along with contributing to its aged appearance as if the pieces were placed from the far-off past. Representative of a welcoming space, the site invites interaction and respite after a long hike through Comanche Lookout Park, with benches featuring etchings related to Native American ceremony and religion.



Peyote Cactus

The monument is comprised of faux stone featuring deer and half-moon imagery along with a peyote stitch pattern design. The deer and half-moon are carved, while the peyote stitch pattern is comprised of tile—reminiscent of beadwork from various tribes, including the South Western and Plains Tribes. The peyote stitch is significant to the Native American church and often found on ceremonial instruments,



Najo Jām (monument), 2020. Collection of City of San Antonio.

rattles, and attire used in sacrament. The artwork is representative of peyotism, a significant part of indigenous religious ceremonies. According to legend, where the deer steps, peyote cacti grow. Native plants are planted in the various carved pockets in the monument including lechuguilla, yucca, various species of cacti, and yarrow—known for its medicinal uses. For *Najo Jām (Our Home)*, the plants selected for various artwork components were intentionally selected by the artists. Some are native to the area and many for their cultural significance.



Roy Winkelman, *Fresco in the Mission Concepcion Baptistry*, 2013. Florida Center for Instructional Technology.

Najo Jām blends several symbols and cultures truly creating a piece that honors the many different peoples who have and continue to call San Antonio home. Many Coahuiltecan are thought to have assimilated to the Catholic Church and the Missions. However, even those who joined the Church maintained a connection with the pre-Columbian tradition of peyotism. Frescos at Mission Concepcion show the blending of Christian and indigenous symbolism.ⁱ One fresco is thought to be a symbolic representation of peyote. In addition to the Pan-Indian narrative the project



conveys, there is also a blending of artistic style. The use of *trabajo rustico* or *faux bois* are typically associated with Latin America and France. Combining this technique with indigenous imagery creates a unique and aesthetic juxtaposition.



Comanche Chief Quanah Parker

Like the Coahuiltecan, peyotism and the Native American Church played a large role to the Comanche. While, the use of ceremonial peyote use had been around for thousands of years, the sacramental use in and founding of the Native American Church began around the 1880s for South Western Plains tribes.ⁱⁱ It is thought that the creation and spread of the religious practice had much to do with the suffering and oppression stemming from forced assimilation on the reservations.ⁱⁱⁱ One of the key influential figures in disseminating the Native American Church was Quanah Parker, a famed Chief of the Comanche. He was introduced to peyotism after being treated from a grave wound by the Coahuiltecan.^{iv} Not only did Quanah Parker help spread the religion—he brought forth the Half Moon Ceremony.^v The Ceremony uses the half-moon alter—as depicted in the monument.

Other important religious symbols represented in the artwork include the deer and half-moon, large spiritual components in the lives of south Texas and northern Mexico indigenous people. Specifically, representing ceremonial alters where peyote ceremonies would take place, the half-moon seen in the deer is a sacred image important to the Native American Church. The blue color scheme of the deer is culturally significant to indigenous peoples in northern Mexico. The stars on the deer represent the Pleiades, an important star cluster in numerous ceremonies. These etchings take inspiration from pictographs and petroglyphs, forms of ancient rock art that is painted or carved into stone. Deer marrow was used to create these paintings, furthering the sacred relationship to the animal.^{vi} The deer is known to be an important food source. Deer were important to the past and remain important today—thus bridging the past and future.



Deer Petroglyph at Agua Fria National Monument in Arizona. Bureau of Land Management.



Najo Jām (side bench), 2020. Collection of City of San Antonio.



The two side benches are a *faux bois* (fake wood) and faux stone slab hybrid. The back rest appears to be comprised of stone while the seat mimics the appearance of wood. The pieces look organic and aged as if they were placed together in the far-off past. Featuring various patterns, the inside back rest presents the peyote stitch pattern. The central bench is a faux stone construction. The bench has seating on both sides and features a distinct design on each side. The inner side has a carved peyote button placed on top the peyote stitch. The back of the bench also features the peyote stitch and a pattern inspired by the morning star drum tie. Carrying an ancestral memory, the drum and songs are important symbols loaded with lore and significance. Passed on generation to generation, the songs are often comprised of vocals with an occasional phrase. Song remains important today, with younger generations breathing new life into this historical tradition. In addition, there are carved deer hoof prints on the seat, directly correlating to the peyote legend of the cacti growing from where the deer steps. These etchings speak to the monument installed next to the central bench and two planters.



Najo Jām (center bench), 2020.
Collection of City of San Antonio.



Najo Jām (large planter),
2020. Collection of City of
San Antonio.

One planter, located at Comanche Lookout Park, is designed with tiled banding. The vessel is inspired by frequently traded historic indigenous pottery. They were often comprised from a simple shape and used to carry water. Both planters are filled with site specific, native plants. The large tiled planter has a *soto*, also called a Prairie Candle, which was traditionally used to light prayer smokes for the peyote ritual. other planter references the shape of a peyote button. The planter will be on temporary display



Najo Jām (peyote button planter),
2020. Collection of City of San Antonio.

at the Garden as part of a rotating series of public art, before permanently moving to Comanche Lookout Park. This installation marks the first temporary districtwide connectivity piece to debut at the River Walk Public Art Garden. The peyote button planter features the vibrant and durable Mescal Agave.

This artwork, with use of symbolism creates a sense of welcoming and homecoming; along with honoring history and culture and paying tribute to the land on which it is built.

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Prepared by Doroteo Gaza, Artist & Jordyn Patrias, Public Art Project Manager



Project Plant list:

Monument

Lechuguilla—*Agave Lechuguilla*
Yarrow—*Achillea millefolium*
Stonecrops— *Sedum crassulaceae*
Zebra Cactus—*Haworthia attenuate*
Golden Barrel Cactus—*Echinocactus grusonii*
Ghost Echeveria— *Echeveria lilacina*
Red Yucca—*Yucca hesperaloe*
Bicolor Sage—*Salvia sinaloensis*
Mexican Oregano—*Poliomintha longiflora*
Uvalde Spineless—*Opuntia speciose*
Prickly Pear—*Opuntia santarita*

Large planter

Sotol—*Dasylyron wheeleri*

Peyote Button planter

Mescal Agave—*Agave parryi*

ⁱ Tracy L. Barnett, "San Antonio Missions Preserve Native American History," *Houston Chronicle*, April 8, 2016, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/life/travel/weekend-getaways/article/San-Antonio-missions-preserve-Native-American-7237657.php>.

ⁱⁱ Omer C. Steward, *Peyote Religion: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), Xiii.

ⁱⁱⁱ William T. Hagan, *Quanah Parker, Comanche Chief* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 52-53.

^{iv} Steward, *Peyote Religion: A History*, 45-53.

^v Ibid, Xiii.

^{vi} John MacCormack, "Ancient Artwork Offers a Puzzling Picture of the Past," *San Antonio Express News*, March 4, 2012, https://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local_news/article/Ancient-artwork-offers-a-puzzling-picture-of-past-3380300.php.