One of the largest aspects of the new permanent exhibit at the Imperial Valley Desert Museum is a diorama of Lake Cahuilla. A stunning painted mural covers one wall to give visitors the impression that they are standing on the shore of the ancient lake. The diorama will also serve as an object theater for our fourth-grade field trips. The newest addition to this exhibit is a set of large ceramic ollas commissioned specifically for the diorama.

**LAKESHORE DIORAMA**

**A8**

**QUESTIONS?** Contact Local Content Editor Richard Montenegro Brown at rbrown@ivpressonline.com or 760-337-3453.

**Land of Extremes**

**LAKESHORE DIORAMA**

Ollas made today look very similar to ollas made hundreds of years ago. COURTESY PHOTO

By Neal V. Hitch

The Lakeshore diorama will provide an interpretation of life along the lake about 400 years ago. Among the items that mark the shoreline will be a balsa-covered fish trap, grinding stones, and newly made large ceramic vessels. Called saa’kay or saa’kay in Kumeyaay, these vessels are generally known by the Spanish term olla. Traditionally made by the women of the tribe, these ceramics were used for cooking, holding water and storing food and non-potable supplies. They could be scaled with care in nets or buried to help keep water cool for future use, and would have been an essential part of any habitation site.

### Alliance for California Traditional Arts

In December, the Imperial Valley Desert Museum was awarded a $5,000 grant from the Alliance for California Traditional Arts. The $5,000 grant was to support the interpretation of current traditional ceramic activity in our region. The grant has allowed us to include a video in our Visible Storage area. When the "First People-Kumeyaay" documentary was filmed two years ago the producers shot 70 hours of footage in order to make the 55-minute movie. The newest olla to be entrusted to the Kumeyaay Paipai community of Santa Catarina in Baja California. When comparing the older ollas with the new ones, it is easy to see the similarities in the vibrant red, while the other faded. This suggests that it was partially intact beautiful painted olla. The two sides suggest that it was partially buried for some time, allowing one side of paint to be preserved a brilliant red, while the other faded. This olla is important in telling the story of Imperial Valley ceramics because it supports the idea that painted pottery might be more common in the region than some people think.

**Celebrating ollas**

Nearly 50 large ollas in the Museum’s permanent collection are clearly made in the same tradition. They serve as a powerful reminder of a traditional craft that is as alive today as it was a thousand years ago.

Neal V. Hitch is director of the Imperial Valley Desert Museum in Ocotillo.