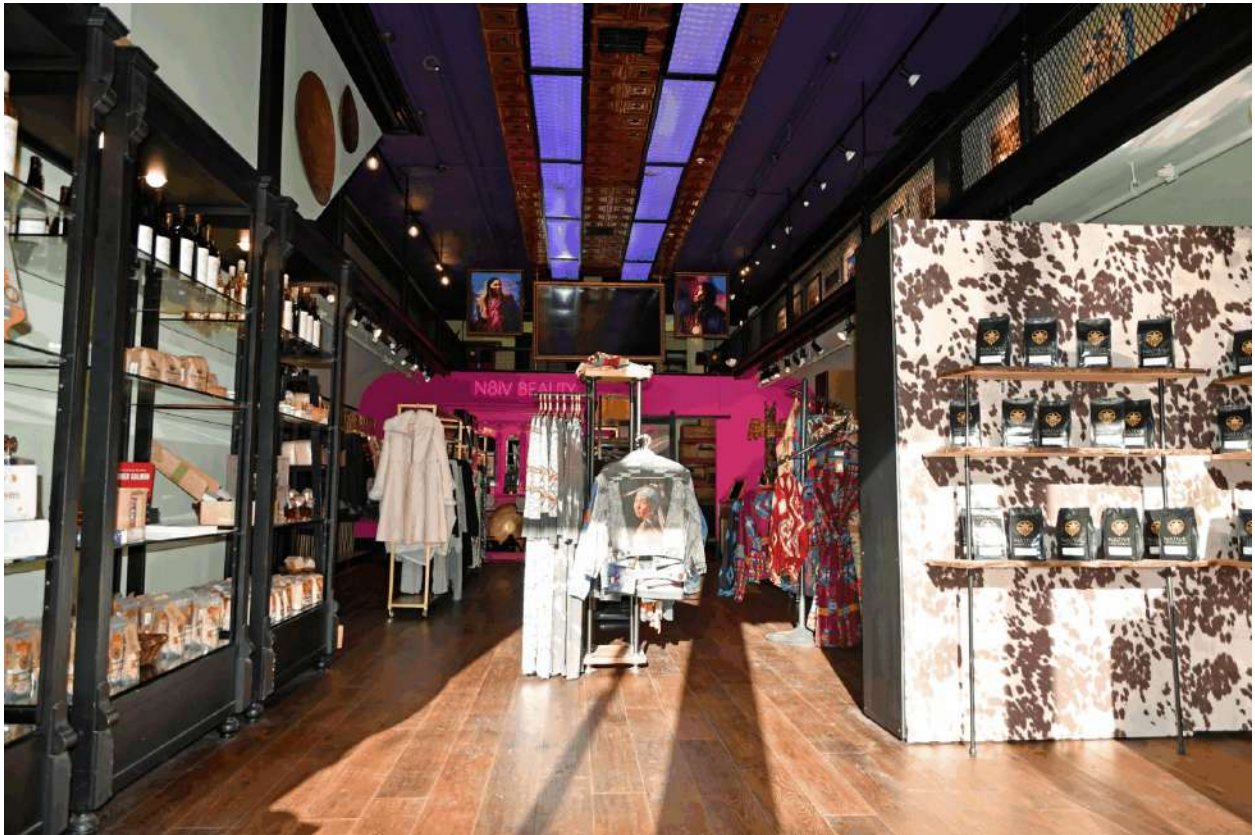




Native Star Boutique Reclaims Ancestral Grounds in San Diego

June 17, 2025



Native Star Boutique celebrated its grand opening in Spring 2025. The store features clothing, cosmetics, and other items by Native American creatives. (Photo by Rose McFadden)

By Jeanne Ferris

The grand opening of an Indigenous business is a moment of celebration and a tangible sign of progress for the Original Peoples of California.

While the red ribbon fluttered across the doorway of the *Native Star* Boutique on Fifth Avenue, it is more than just a symbol of a grand opening.

It is a beginning that holds immense significance for the Kumeyaay Nation in the Gaslamp Quarter, downtown San Diego, an area with a complex history of significant displacement

for the Kumeyaay due to forced relocations and land seizures beginning with the Spanish Invasion, the Mexican Period, and later, American colonizers.

Treaties intended to protect Kumeyaay land rights were not ratified by the U.S. Senate and all Kumeyaay land rights were subsequently “lost” and lands were taken into private ownership or became U.S. holdings.

As a result, groups of Kumeyaay families were forced to relocate to different areas (government-enforced reservations), which eventually led to the formation of distinct communities and bands.

Today, Kumeyaay tribal members that survived and adapted, reformed into 12 separate bands which are federally recognized sovereigns of government: Barona, Campo, Ewiiapaayp, Inaja-Cosmit, Jamul, LaPosta, Manzanita, Mesa Grande, San Pasqual, Santa Ysabel, Sycuan, and Viejas. There are also Kumeyaay communities in Baja California, Mexico.

Under an auspicious new moon on the sidewalks of Fifth Avenue, a big drum began its call at dusk, awakened by tribal members of the Kumeyaay Nation.

This sacred instrument signaled all to come forward and share in this commencement and receive a blessing.

It was a call to the entire community (Native and non-Native) to step forward and support this significant milestone.

More importantly, it was an acknowledgment of **land back** to a Kumeyaay citizen and owner, visionary Ruth-Ann Thorn, Payómkawichum/Luiseño, and an enrolled Member of the Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians.

The presence of Sycuan Tribal Chairman, Cody Martinez, was a powerful symbol of united support.

“As we begin this ceremony to celebrate Ruth-Ann, we respectfully acknowledge the unceded ancestral land of the Kumeyaay Nation,” he stated. The Kumeyaay Nation has lived in harmony on this land for thousands of years. We continue to live here to maintain our deep cultural and spiritual ties to this land. We honor and thank the Kumeyaay Nation, past and present, for their stewardship and their immense resilience. Congratulations!”

San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria’s (Tlingit Haida) office, by proxy, presented an official proclamation to Ms. Thorn in commemoration of the event.

Birdsingers ishpaahepshu (also known as Blue Eagle Vigil) from the Viejas Band of the Kumeyaay Nation and Jamie Labrake from the Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation, gave their blessings through traditional songs and prayers.

Multi-colored beribboned dancers swayed in response.

Under the *Native Star's* shingle, 631 Fifth Avenue has transformed back to California Native ground.

The *Native Star's* bay window displays of color and distinct aesthetics are a stark contrast to what once displayed signs offering a reward for any “Indian”—dead or alive.

During the 1800s, state-side and in the Gaslamp Quarter, government-sanctioned monies encouraged desperados, prospectors, miners, cowboys, militia, and ranchers (bounty hunters) who made the sport of hunting a daily occurrence and a terror for Native Californians.

The expansion of the West and the gold rush was, in truth, about “acquiring” land.

Native Star's unique blend of Native history and culture is a must-see, as it embodies the loving curation of a vibrant and thriving culture that is both of the present and the past — and older than the United States.

Not only is she the first California Native owner of an all-Indigenous retail store downtown and possibly in the state of California, but Ms. Thorn is now the proud owner of the historic Yuma structure that houses her boutique.

The Yuma building, a historical landmark, was built in 1882 by Captain Alfred Henry Wilcox, a significant contributor to early San Diego's development.

Its architecture is devoted to the restoration of “Victorian Italianate Revival.”

The Yuma building, with its three stories, skylight, and unique basement ‘speakeasy’ (particularly in an earth-quake-sensitive geography), is a fascinating blend of history and modernity, adding to the allure of *Native Star Boutique*.

The street-level walls are 16 inches thick, and the walls on the second and third floors are 12 inches thick, allowing neighbors and street noise to be filtered well both inside and out.

Yuma, Colorado, was one of Captain Wilcox's last stops on his river excursions and his home base, hence the name.

The Yuma, in effect, also symbolizes the return of ancestral ground to a California Native, serving as a poignant reminder of shared history and the adaptability of the Kumeyaay people (twelve federally recognized bands, which include four bands in Baja California, Mexico).

To add to the uniqueness of the occasion, the first tribally owned bank in California (and one of 17 in the U.S.) assisted with funding the acquisition of the Yuma for Ms. Thorn—a transaction which took a total of about five months to accomplish.

The Soboba Band of Luiseño Indians, the sole owner of the FDIC-insured, three-year-old Legacy Bank based in Murrieta, played a significant role in her quest.

“Their contribution is deeply appreciated,” Ms. Thorn said. “I couldn’t have realized this dream without them.”

Bridgette Loya (Yaqui descent), senior VP, relationship manager/Tribal division of Legacy, shared, “We are open to helping any tribal person with business expansion, purchasing commercial real estate, purchasing equipment or inventory, working capital, and debt refinancing.

It may sound like a cliché, but we really believe in making dreams happen. Why pay \$5k in a monthly lease for a small space when you can pay \$5k monthly and *own* the whole block?”

Why, indeed!

In a way, a collective of tribal ancestors guided the reclaiming of this land, to which Ms. Thorn often credits them and “asks for guidance at the start of each day.”

With the aroma of fry bread cooking in the back of the *Exclusive Collections Gallery* (Ms. Thorn’s other adjacent business) by the ever-popular Kumeyaay Frybread, guests eagerly consumed the powdered sugar confections sated and blissed with the dopamine released from sweets.

Inside the store, toward the back, a hot pink, neon-lit sign, *Native Star*, beckoning one to enter like a lighthouse beacon to a lost sailor seeking port.

“I want to give credit to my [talented] longtime partner, Jens Rossen, on all of the improvements and build-outs. He worked long hours to bring it up to standard,” Ms. Thorn said.

More congratulations were in order when she revealed later they were engaged to be married.

Electronified Native drum beats at the turnstile by DJ Randy Boogie (Diné) [appropriately named, given the hip-shaking tunes he played] resonated throughout the store, combined with the animated hum and buzz of shoppers, thereby raising the decibels considerably.

By the end of their purchases, strangers had become friends, and friends had become closer.

Meanwhile, *Native Star* hosts served guests Indigenous-crafted teas, coffees, lemonades, and spirited libations.

Handsome Eshpaa Leo (Kumeyaay, Cupa, Pueblo, Tsalagi, Nhañho, Apache) and his lovely silver-haired mother, Stephanie Saavedra live at Santa Ysabel Reservation, are *N8iv Beauty* print models (*N8iv Beauty* is also Ms. Thorn’s creation and exclusive vegan skincare line sourced from tribal acorn oil) who came to celebrate.

Eshpaa enthusiastically said, “I’m so excited to be here! This place is so beautiful, and I love this jacket [*Original Landlords* men’s apparel]—I want them all.”

A few of the fashion designers, such as Jeremy Arviso (Diné/Hopi) of *Original Landlords*, attended, “I drove in straight from Arizona to support the opening, and tomorrow I’m going to Legoland with my son to celebrate the end of the school year. It’s gonna be a good weekend.”

Afterward, the 21+ only crowd filtered downstairs to listen to the guitar riffs and pipes of Tracy Lee Nelson (La Jolla Band of Luiseño Indians), who is forever “married to the blues.”

On velvet couches and easy chairs, guests sat, flutes of bubbly in hand.

Contemplation of the large highlighted art on the walls was inescapable.

The familiar, solemn countenances of Indigenous spiritual leaders reach through the ethers of time and space, capturing one’s attention like an extra-firm handshake.

The artwork: Chief Sitting Bull, *Thǎthǎŋka Íyotake* (Hunkpapa Lakota), Chief Joseph, *hinmatóowyahtqít* (Nez Perce), and Chief Plenty Coup, *Alaxchíia Ahú* (Crow Tribe), famous for their resistance against U.S.-sanctioned targeted erasure.

L.A.-based activist artist Votan (Mayan/Nahua) created their images; all artwork adorning every wall on the property is available for purchase.

These images are synonymous with the musical genre of the blues, which played in the background (incorporating elements of call-and-response singing and narrative storytelling), coincidentally born of the resistance to the brutal hardships of enslavement faced by African Americans.

Yes, surely Ms. Thorn’s ancestors are smiling—it’s good to hear happy music and genuine laughter again on these grounds.

And so, the healing begins with art, with song, and spirit willing, a renewed love for our two-legged brothers and sisters, and a reinforced respect for the ground on which we stand.

Native Star Boutique showcases verified Indigenous-owned or supported and/or crafted products and clothing/textiles based in California and other Indigenous origins:

- Arrowhead Earrings
- Askari Healing Farms Tea (Inupiaq/Chugach Alaska Native Corporation, Valdez Native Tribe)
- AyLeLum (Coast Salish/Snuneymuxw First Nation Hereditary Chief)
- *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer (Citizen Potawatomi Nation)
- Cara Romero Photographs (Chemehuevi)
- Cat Spring Yaupon Tea (Chickasaw Nation)
- Cody Sanderson Jewelry (Diné)

- Copper Canoe Woman (Haítzaqv Nation/Nuučaanúł)
- Del Curfman, *Apsáalooke* (Crow Tribe of Montana)
- Denipah LaRance Jewelry (Hopi-Assiniboine)
- Feathers Hair Care (Hoopa/Yurok)
- Hunter & Mazzetti Wine (Rincon Indian Reservation)
- Isabella Rose (Diné)
- Jeremy Salazar (Diné)
- K. Looking Horse (Hunkpapa, Itazipco Lakota, and Dakota)
- Maria Begay Earrings (Diné)
- Native Star Coffee (Payómkawichum)
- N8iV Beauty (Payómkawichum)
- Native Star Designs by the Original People (Payómkawichum)
- Original Landlords (Diné/Hopi/Gila River Pima/Tohono O’odham)
- Passamaquoddy Maple Syrup
- Patricia Michaels (Citizen of Pueblo of Taos)
- Pranee Designer Handbags
- Ramona Farms (Gila River Pima/Tohono O’odham)
- Randy Barton Tees (Diné)
- *Red Man’s Words* by Elder Dr. Duke Redbird (Saugeen Ojibway Nation)
- Sea Bear Wild Salmon Smoked Jerky (*SeaBear is not owned or operated by a specific tribe, but they do have a product that acknowledges and potentially supports tribal families who participate in salmon harvesting.*)
- Seka Hills Balsamic Vinegar (Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation)
- Simply Creative Soap (*heritage family recipes made with sustainable and ecological best practices*)
- Sita Couture (India)
- Sky-Eagle Collection (Osage)
- Spirit Mountain Roasting Co. (Quechan/Pima)
- Stuart Sampson Paintings (Citizen Potawatomi Nation)

- Sweet Grass Trading (Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska)
- Tammy Beauvias Bags (Kahnawake Mohawk Territory)
- *Tawâw: Progressive Indigenous Cuisine* by Chef Shane Chartrand (Cree/Métis)
- *The Sioux Chef's Indigenous Kitchen* by Chef Sean Sherman
- The Warrior Blends Mushroom Salt (Huron/Wendat)
- Thunder Voice Co. (Diné/Totonoc)
- Wabanookwe Luxury Totes (Ojibwe)

Why did you choose the star as your logo?

“Founded on the rich traditions of Native American culture, our name reflects a profound belief that we [Payómkawichum], as the Star People, originate from a place beyond our earthly realm.

Across the United States, countless Indigenous creation stories celebrate the stars, reminding us of our connection to the universe and the unique paths we each travel.

Just as no two stars are alike, each creator at *Native Star* shines with their own brilliance.

Our boutique is a vibrant tapestry woven from the diverse talents of artisans who bring their unique visions to life.

From exquisite art and fashion to handcrafted jewelry and gourmet foods, each piece in our collection is a testament to the creativity and spirit of the [First People] of this land.

Our creators are more than just artisans; they are stars in their own right—individuals who pour their hearts and souls into their work, crafting items that tell their stories and celebrate their heritage.

“Each creation is as unique as a snowflake, reflecting the diversity and beauty of our culture.” –Ruth-Ann Thorn

Native Star Boutique is located at 631 Fifth Ave, San Diego, CA 92101

Phone: (619) 895-3027

Website: <https://native-star.com/>

Instagram and Facebook: @nativestarboutique



The celebration for Native Star Boutique welcomed bird singers and dancers along with tribal peoples from across Southern California and beyond. (Photo by Rose McFadden)