

# KAYPER

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## ART OF THE STATE

BY KRIS VAGNER



Zoe Bray poses with one of the portraits in her exhibition, *Nevadan Basques*.

PHOTO/KRIS VAGNER

## People person

Zoe Bray

**"I'm an anthropologist, so I'm generally interested in people,"** said Zoe Bray. She's also a portrait artist.

Bray was born in Paris to an English father and a French mother. She has French and British passports and speaks French, Spanish, Basque and European-accented English. Her academic specialty is Basque studies.

The Basques are an ethnic group from the western Pyrenees of France and Spain. About two million Basques live in Europe, and about a million are dispersed across the globe, including a few thousand in Northern Nevada, where a wave of Basque immigrants—many of them shepherders—arrived between the mid-1900s and the 1960s. Basque restaurants remain in Reno, Elko, Winnemucca and other Northern Nevada towns.

"I got into studying the Basque people for two reasons," Bray said. "One is an academic reason—that I felt writings about the Basques were always kind of absolutist. 'The Basques are this. The Basques are that.' ... So, I wanted to break down those hard categories and show the fluidity of what it is to be Basque."

The second reason was more personal. Bray's mother's family is Basque. "But I had to discover this identity for myself, given that I was living abroad and feeling at home in other countries," she said.

Bray was exposed to art growing up but didn't pick up a paintbrush herself until she moved to Florence, Italy, to pursue a doctorate in political science. There, she and a few other students studied traditional techniques at a master painter's studio.

In 2011, she moved to Nevada and became a professor in the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno. Soon after arriving, she attended a Basque picnic, where she met Marie Louise Lekumberry, owner of J.T. Basque Bar and Dining Room in Gardnerville, whose father had come from a French Basque village.

"I realized I know her family back home," said Bray. In 2012, she painted Lekumberry's portrait.

A few months later, she painted Joan Arrizabalaga, a Reno artist whose grandparents had come from the Spanish Basque country. At that point, Bray didn't have a sense of where her portrait series was going.

"We connected more just as fellow artists," she said. "When I did Joan's portrait, I wasn't really thinking about the Basque aspect of it."

In 2018, Bray drew some portraits at the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering. She made large charcoal drawings of people like Kiaya Memeo, a descendant of Spanish Basques who lives in Lamoille; and Ana Mari Arbillaga, a prominent member of Elko's Basque community who moved from Spain to the U.S. in 1960.

By now, Bray's portraits fill the walls of the Metro Gallery in Reno's City Hall, and this fall she's scheduled to exhibit them at the Musée Basque in Bayonne, the main city in the France's Basque region.

"I discovered drawing or painting somebody's portrait is a great way to get to know them," she said. And she's already planning her next projects. "I'll always continue painting local Basques, but I think as I get established here, I want to just paint the diversity of Reno, Nevada," she said. "I have a lot of fascinating people I've met who I'd like to paint." □

*Nevadan Basques, Portraits by Zoe Bray* is on exhibit through March 1 at the Metro Gallery in the lobby of Reno's City Hall, 1 E. First St.