

# DENVER ART MUSEUM

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## *Department of Indian Art*

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PIMA BASKETS

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PIMA INDIAN CLOSE COILED BASKETRY

**TRIBAL LOCATION.** The Pima Indians are a sedentary, semi-agricultural people of Piman stock, numbering about 5,350, and living on the Salt River and Gila River reservations in south central Arizona, not far from Phoenix. The country is a dry, sandy desert of broken plains and mountains, with very scanty rainfall. Many types of cactus and of desert grasses and brush grow sparsely in the sunbaked soil. Willow, cottonwood and cat-tail grow along the water courses. The people live in small, permanent villages of earth lodges. They raise several kinds of grain and vegetables with the aid of irrigation.

**FORMS.** The Pima women have long made excellent baskets in many shapes and sizes. The following are the principal forms made today: Basket bowls (a) with curving walls, ranging in depth from 1 to 10 inches and in diameter from 6 to 30 inches; baskets of similar size with straight walls, either sloping out (b) or rising at right angles to the bottom (c); jar shaped baskets or ollas, with or without lids, (d) ranging in height from 4 to 40 inches and in diameter from 6 to 30 inches, either globular, or with shoulders and constricted necks; flat plaques (e); miniature replicas (f) in very fine weaves of all the above forms. (See cut on cover.)

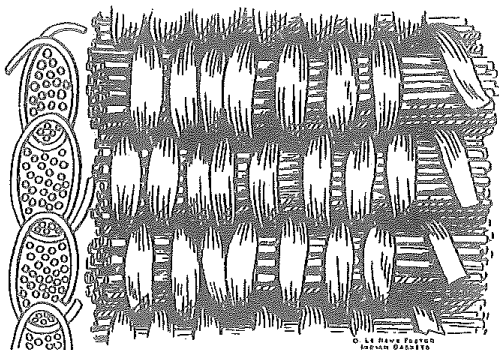
**USES.** Basket bowls are used for the preparing and serving of food, for winnowing grain, and for the transportation of various small objects; the straight sided baskets serve for the temporary storage of foodstuffs, etc.; the jar baskets are grain or meal storage bins; food is served on the flat plaques; the miniature baskets are apparently made only for sale.

**MATERIALS.** Foundation coil; cat-tail (*Typha angustifolia*), fine splints of cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*) and willow (*Salix nigra*). Sewing material; splints of willow, of the outer covering of the seed pods of devil's claw or martynia (*Martynia probosidea*) and of cottonwood, bark of the mountain mahogany or manzanita (*Cercocarpus parvifolius*).

**PREPARATION OF MATERIALS.** Cat-tails are gathered in July, split, dried and tied in bundles. For the cottonwood and willow splints young twigs are gathered in the spring, stripped of bark with teeth and fingers, and split into splints, or long thin slivers, with teeth or awl and fingers. The martynia pods are gathered in the autumn when dried, and are soaked in water or buried in moist earth. When soft, the outer covering is stripped off and split into several splints. Martynia is cultivated to some extent by the Pimas. Mountain mahogany bark is gathered in the spring, stripped from twigs and tied in bundles. Before being used in basket-making all materials are

softened by soaking in water or by burying for some time in moist earth.

**TOOLS.** Awls were formerly of bone, cactus thorn, or mesquite wood, but now are commonly made of steel, with handles of wood or gum. Steel knives of convenient size.



MAGNIFIED SECTION AND CROSS SECTION OF  
CLOSE COILED BASKET

**TECHNIC.** There are two methods of beginning a basket. In the first method a bundle of several strands of foundation material is closely wrapped for about an inch with a sewing splint. This section is then coiled on itself and fastened with stitches. In the second method a checkerboard plaited

knot of four or more strands of sewing material is made. The protruding ends are gathered into a bundle which is wrapped with a sewing splint, thus beginning the coil.

From these beginnings the sewing of the coils is carried on. Each coil is stitched with splints of sewing material to that portion which is already made. The stitching is done by making a hole with an awl through the upper edge of the coil already made. The sewing splint is passed through this hole, over the foundation material above it, and then back through the next hole in the finished coil, continuing thus until the final coil is reached. Foundation material is added as it is needed.

Bowls have counter-clockwise coils and deep, straight sided baskets and jars clockwise coils. While being made bowls are held with the inside facing the maker and the sewing is done from the inside on the edge farthest from the maker, thus producing the finished surface on the inside of the basket. The jars and other deep forms are held with the opening facing away from the maker and are sewed from the outside on the edge nearest the maker, so that the finished surface is on the outside of the basket. Exceptions to these rules are occasionally found.

As the wall rises from the bottom of the basket its in or out curve is formed by changing the position of the awl hole from the top of the completed coil to the inner or outer side.

Basket rims are finished with an over-and-over stitch, either straight or oblique, or with a herringbone braid. The latter finish is the most common.

**COLORS.** Black from the martynia; creamy yellow from the willow; dead white from the cottonwood; red from the mountain mahogany. The overwhelming majority of close coiled baskets show only the first two colors. The use of the white cottonwood and of the red mountain mahogany is of fairly recent occurrence.

**DESIGNS.** There are two types of design, one having geometrical forms and the other life forms. In the first class are found endless variations of frets, whorls, swastikas, stars, crosses, terraces, zigzags and triangles. In the second class are found conventionalized forms of men, animals, birds, plants, etc.

Human and animal forms have been borrowed in recent times from the Apache, eagle and kachina designs from the Hopi.

The vast majority of baskets show black patterns against a light ground, black centers and black rims.

As far as can be ascertained the basket makers have no knowledge of the meaning of the geometrical designs. These have been named by the Americans squash blossoms, turtle backs, whirlwinds, stars, shields, coyote tracks, butterfly wings, etc. The so-called "mystic maze" design has probably been copied by the Pima from a figure carved on the walls of the Casa Grande ruin, located on their reservation.

**MODERN BASKET MAKING.** Because of the lack of interest of the young people in their native crafts Pima basketry is dying out. Baskets are now mostly made for the commercial trade.

Compiled from the following sources by Jean Allard Jeançon and F. H. Douglas:

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5. Prehistoric North American Basketry Techniques and Modern Distributions. Gene Weltfish. Vol. 32, No. 3, 1930.