

DENVER ART MUSEUM

1300 LOGAN STREET, DENVER, COLORADO

DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN ART

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THE MAIN DIVISIONS OF CALIFORNIA INDIAN BASKETRY

LEAFLETS 83-84
DECEMBER, 1937
2nd Printing, March, 1945

1. INTRODUCTORY. Basketry is the art which has been most developed by the California Indians. All of the dozens of tribes in the state have made baskets, each in its own special style. The number and variety of these basket types are bewildering to the student or collector. In order to help clarify the situation this leaflet attempts to indicate the various major groupings into which all California basketry falls. Only the most broad outline can be given, for space does not permit a description of fine technical points, the reasons for differences between the types, and the various exceptions to the general statements made here. In later leaflets in this series the individual types will be discussed in more detail.

It should be clearly understood that the boundaries between the areas listed are only approximations. The basket types of tribes near area boundaries often shade into one another.

2. MATERIALS. The vegetal materials most commonly used in basketry in the various areas will be listed in the regional sections to follow. The Latin names are listed at the end of the leaflet. See reference 8 for full details.

3. DIRECTION OF COIL is often helpful in the identification of baskets. Coils are customarily described as moving clockwise or counter-clockwise. To save space, clockwise moving coils will be called right coils in this leaflet and those moving counter-clockwise, left coils. The wefts in twining also move spirally, though it is not easy to see. Direction of coil is always indicated as seen on the upper or inner side.

4. FINE BASKETRY alone will be discussed, the many types of coarse utility wares being left for a future leaflet.

5. MAJOR TECHNICAL DIVISIONS. In the northern fifth of the state—somewhat less to the east—all basketry is made in twined technics. South of this sector is a rather narrow band across the state in which both twining and coiling are practised as fine arts. All of the rest of the state is held by tribes who make their best basketry by coiling. This southern area may also be roughly divided into northern and southern sections. In the northern third rods are used inside the coils, while grass stems replace rods in the southern part.

The state may also be divided on the basis of design arrangement. In the northern half the designs are prevailingly diagonal or zigzag arrangements. In the southern half they are mostly horizontal, though both diagonals and verticals are used.

6. TWINED BASKETRY resembles cloth in having vertical warps, or foundation elements, bound together with horizontal wefts, or binding elements. Twined basketry is, of course, much more stiff and coarse than cloth; and, if true twining, is made by running two wefts at a time in the manufacture, whereas cloth has only one. It can most easily be distinguished by the presence of vertical or diagonal corrugations in the fabric (A-E,L,S). For further details see Leaflet 67, sections 11-17.

7. COILED BASKETRY has a continuous coil which begins at the center of the bottom and rises to the rim. The coil is the warp, or foundation, of the basket, and successive circles of it are simply wrapped or lashed together, usually by sewing with a flexible weft. This coil and the presence of horizontal corrugations in the fabric are the easiest means of distinguishing the technic (F-K, M-R, T-V). For further details see Leaflet 67, sections 4-10.

8. NORTHWEST TWINING (A-C). In this area basketry is of two types: that with a glossy yellowish-white background and patterns in red, black or both, with an occasional use of yellow (A); and that with a brown background with yellowish-white designs (C). Plain twining is the technic used in both cases. The wefts move to the left. Women's caps, dance and storage baskets, and baskets for trinkets (A) or the tourist make up the first type. The second covers bowls for cooking and serving food (C), hoppers for mortars, trays and burden and storage baskets. The white surface and the designs are applied by half-twist overlay and do not show on the inside (B). This is the chief identifying feature of such basketry. For a description of half-twist overlay see Leaflet 68, section 3.

The designs are largely made up of small triangles and somewhat larger rhomboids combined in repeated but disconnected units, or in bands moving in zigzags. On hemispherical shapes these bands are usually horizontal, but on trays or deep shapes a diagonal line prevails.

The preferred material for warps is hazel. Yurok baskets nearly all have hazel twig warps. Willow is used mostly by the Karok. Myrtle has some use among the Karok only. For wefts the roots of yellow pine, redwood, and spruce are the most common sources. Willow is a frequent substitute, and grape a less common one. The white overlay is white or bear grass. Maiden-hair fern stems provide the black overlay, and the stems of giant fern, dyed with alder bark, provide the red overlay. Oregon grape sometimes is the red dye. Both white overlay and the porcupine quills sometimes used for overlay may be dyed yellow with wolf moss.

The tribes making this basketry are: Hupa, Karok, Yurok, Tolowa, Chilula, Whilkut, Chimariko, Mattole, Nongatl, Lassik, Sinkyone and Wailaki.

9. NORTHEAST TWINING (D-E). The basketry of this area is like that described in the preceding section with the following important exceptions. The chief difference is that the white surface and the designs are applied by full-twist overlay twining (see Leaflet 68, section 4) so that they appear both inside (E) and outside (D). This is the chief factor in identification. The second difference is that all of the basketry shows the white surface. The work is less smooth and fine than that of the northwestern section and there are certain variations in shape. A common design in this area is made up of several parallel lines rising in terraces (D-E). The wefts move to the left. The materials of this region are those described in section 8.

The tribes making this basketry are the Pit River bands, especially the Achomawi and Atsugewi, the Shasta, and the northern Maidu, Wintun (Wintu) and Yana. Several small and now extinct tribes also made it.

10. POMO TWINING (L, S). The Pomo, a people living some distance north of San Francisco, are the most versatile of the California basket-making tribes. They have both the twining of the north and the coiling of the south, a number of variations of each type being used. Pomo twining is either plain (S), diagonal (L) or lattice. The common color is a medium tan with designs in red or black, but never both on the same basket. The chief design elements are the triangle and rhomboid, small rectangular elements and single zigzag lines. The designs are mostly simple zigzags in horizontal bands or bold diagonals made up of larger elements.

Of the thirty vegetal substances which may be found in Pomo basketry the following are most commonly used in twining. For the warp, willow stems are preferred, with hazel in second place. For the weft, the light tan background is provided by sedge root and digger pine root. The black weft is bulrush root or bracken fern root. The red weft is redbud bark.

The most common shapes are semi-globular forms (L), bell-shaped carrying baskets and shallow trays (S). The work is smooth and well shaped, and extraordinarily fine in the best examples. The wefts move to the left.

11. POMO COILING (F-J) is done on either a one-rod (H, J), or a three-rod (F, G, I) foundation. One-rod work has separated stitches; three-rod work has close-set stitches. The background is a light to medium tan with black designs. These baskets may be decorated with feathers (I), beads (F-H) or both (G, I). The chief shapes are more or less deep truncated cones, shallow forms with incurving rims (F, J), and ellipsoid forms, long and narrow with mouths much smaller than their bases (H). The work is very smooth and fine. Right coiling is the rule.

The warp or foundation rods are willow or hazel twigs. Sewing is done with sedge root for the light tan and bulrush root for the black.

The basketry of neighboring tribes, the Huchnom, Wappo, Lake and Coast Miwok and the Patwin (southern Wintun) shows Pomo influence. The basketry of the Yuki is coiled and has a superficial resemblance to Pomo work. But it has a number of peculiarities which set it in a class apart. It also somewhat resembles the work of the group treated in the next section.

12. NORTHWEST CENTRAL COILING (M, T, V). In this region basketry is prevailing on a three-rod foundation, though the Miwok also use one-rod. The two main producers of this type are the eastern Miwok and the southern Maidu. Both kinds of baskets have a light cream to medium tan background. But the designs of the Miwok are prevailing black and the Maidu strongly favor red for their patterns. Maidu design is marked by the presence of bold masses of rather large triangles (T) or rather wide parallel bands of horizontal zigzags. The Miwok favor more delicate designs (V). The lines of the zigzags are narrow and the arrangements of triangles much smaller and farther apart. They also have vertical designs. A large deep bowl with straight sides flaring out from a fairly large base is the most characteristic shape (T, V). More shallow bowls, trays, and a few semi-globular forms are

also made. Right coiling is the rule, except in flat trays which have left coiling. The work is regular, strong and rather coarse.

The Maidu use willow or redbud for the foundation rods and for the light sewing splints. The red sewing splints are redbud with the bark. Black sewing splints are the roots of the yellow pine, dyed by burying in mud and charcoal. Among the Miwok, willow rods are preferred for foundation, with sumac coming far behind. Light sewing splints are usually peeled redbud twigs, though sedge or slough grass root and the roots of both digger and yellow pines also were used. Bracken fern root is the common black, and redbud bark the red.

West of the Maidu and running over into Nevada are the Washo. Their basketry, made on both one-rod and three-rod foundations, has a strong general resemblance to that of their neighbors, especially the Miwok. Both red and black are used in the designs. In the best baskets, which have the three-rod foundation, the work is much finer and the stitches smaller and closer together. The older baskets are relatively coarse and are mostly deep bowls. The newer baskets have extraordinarily fine and regular stitching and a great perfection of shape. More or less globular forms appear most frequently in this group (M). Right coiling is used. The Washo designs are much like those of the Miwok. The one design which is peculiarly Washo is made up of tall slender triangles (M), either single, combined in pairs to form diamonds, or arranged in large units. All designs using this element have a sharp and delicate animation which is easily noted.

13. CENTRAL VALLEY COILING (N, Q). Basketry from this section has one characteristic which sets it off from the types so far described, the use of a bundle of grass stems inside the coil. The coil is quite flat. The stitching is rather open so that the stems can be seen. The ellipsoid shape of the stitches and their open spacing are important identifying features. The background is a rich medium to dark tan, with red and black designs, though sometimes the colors are used singly. There are three common shapes: deep bowls (Q), much like those of the Maidu but wider in relation to height; jar-like vessels with a flat, wide shoulder and a short neck; and perfectly flat trays. The jar is the so-called "bottle-neck" (N). The coiling is right in the bowls and trays, left in "bottle-necks." The most common designs are parallel horizontal bands with central diamonds (Q). Rows of stiff, angular human figures are also used, as are broad vertical bands and diagonal zigzags. The bottle-necks are likely to have black feathers or tufts of red wool around the outer edge of the shoulder (R). These baskets are made by the Yokuts, or Tulare, tribes.

The bundle foundation contains the stems of a grass. The tan sewing material is marsh grass root, the black is bracken fern root, and the red, redbud bark.

14. SOUTHEASTERN COILING (K, R, U). In an area beginning near the eastern border somewhat north of the center of the state and broadening

out to include all but the southwestern edge of the state live a number of tribes whose basketry is united by certain features. All use a grass stem coil, though rods are sometimes used. Designs are red and black on a light background, with close-set, narrow stitching. Coiling is to the right, except in "bottle-necks." Horizontal, vertical and diagonal design arrangements are used. The most typical form is a deep bowl with slightly curving sides flaring boldly up from a small base (K). The bowls of the northernmost tribe in this area, the Mono, are shaped a good deal like those of the neighboring Maidu and Tulare, with a quite large base and less boldly flaring sides. The form reaches its most characteristic development among the tribes in the center of the area, such as the Panamint and Kern River. "Bottle-necks" are also made, but lack the sharp shoulders of the Tulare form (R). The shoulder becomes more and more rounded toward the South. Mono "bottle-necks" and globular forms (U) tend to be much wider than high. The designs are of the Tulare type. A thick hour-glass is much used as a design unit by the Panamint.

The basketry most typical of this area has grass stems in the foundation and splints of the willow for the white color. In the north of the area the red and black are redbud bark and bracken fern root respectively. The southern tribes use tree yucca root bark for the red and the seed pods of the devil's claw for the black.

This basketry is often confused with that from the Tulare area. But the differences between background colors and stitch character are clear guide posts. The southeastern baskets have a light background of long narrow stitches set closely together (K), while the Tulare types show a tan background of ellipsoid stitches somewhat widely spaced (Q).

The chief basket-making tribes in this area are the Panamint or Koso, the Kern River or Tubatulabal, the Mono and the Kawaiisu.

15. SOUTHWESTERN COILING (O, P). The baskets from the southwestern corner of the state have a coil made up of grass stems sewed with the stem of a rush, the color of which is the best identifying feature of the type. This coil is large and round, differing from the rather thin and flat coils made elsewhere with a grass foundation. The rush stems vary in color in their length from yellow to brown. This color range creates an irregularly mottled background which is the distinguishing feature of this basketry. Another feature is the glossiness of the surface. Designs are black, and are arrangements of geometric elements, often, but not necessarily, asymmetric (O); and rather realistic life forms, chiefly rattlesnakes, eagles and turtles (P). Small, somewhat globular bowls (O) and flat trays with low straight walls (P) are the common shapes. Flat or open forms coil to the right, globular forms to the left.

The foundation bundle is of grass stems. The white sewing material is sumac. The mottled brown-yellow sewing material is from the stem of the rush. The black designs are sumac dyed with sea blight.

This description applies to the recent, more or less commercial basketry. The older baskets are made of the same materials but are much coarser and have very simple designs, if any. Shallow and deep bowls are the common shapes. The walls are quite flexible.

The basket-making tribes in this area are the various groups of Mission Indians, the Cahuilla or Kawia, the Serrano, and the Chumash. Chumash basketry, now excessively rare, differs slightly in having three rushes in the coil.

16. SOUTHERN COAST. South of San Francisco lived various tribes called today by the general name Costanoan. They have so completely vanished that nothing is known about their basketry. South of them, down almost as far as Santa Barbara, lived the Salinan groups. Their culture has been enough preserved to indicate that their basketry was of the Yokuts type (see Section 13).

17. KLAMATH, PAIUTE AND CHEMEHUEVI. The Paiute are not considered in this leaflet because culturally they do not belong to California, even though some of them are within its boundaries. While the range of the Klamath includes part of California, they are primarily a tribe of Oregon, and for this reason are omitted here. Chemehuevi basketry is more southwestern than Californian.

18. LATIN NAMES OF MATERIALS:

Alder	<i>Alnus rhombifolia</i>
Bear grass	<i>Xerophyllum tenax</i>
Bracken fern	<i>Pteridium aquilinum</i>
Bulrush	<i>Scirpus maritimus</i>
Devil's claw	<i>Martynia</i>
Digger pine	<i>Pinus sabiniana</i>
Giant fern	<i>Woodwardia radicans</i>
Grape	<i>Vitis californica</i>
Grass	<i>Epicampes rigens</i>
Hazel	<i>Corylus californica</i>
Maidenhair fern	<i>Adiantum pedatum</i>
Marsh grass	<i>Cladium mariscus</i>
Myrtle	<i>Myrtus communis</i>
Oregon grape	<i>Berberis nervosa</i>
Redbud	<i>Cercis occidentalis</i>
Redwood	<i>Sequoia sempervirens</i>
Rush	<i>Juncus</i>
Sea blight	<i>Sueda</i>
Sedge	<i>Carex barbarae</i>
Spruce	<i>Picea sitchensis</i>
Sumac	<i>Rhus trilobata</i>
Tree yucca	<i>Yucca arborescens or brevifolia</i>
White grass	<i>Xerophyllum tenax</i>
Willow	<i>Salix</i>
Wolf moss	<i>Evernia vulpina</i>
Yellow pine	<i>Pinus ponderosa</i>

Compiled from the following sources by F. H. Douglas:

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Thanks are due to Dr. A. L. Kroeber, University of California, for assistance in preparing this leaflet.