

# DENVER ART MUSEUM

1300 LOGAN STREET, DENVER, COLORADO

DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN ART

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## Main Types of Basketry in Washington and Northwestern Oregon

LEAFLET 98

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1. **INTRODUCTORY.** In Oregon and Washington is found a bewildering number of Indian tribes whose names and manners of life are little known to any but a few specialists. Over 100 separate groups, belonging to half a dozen linguistic families, are listed for the two states. All of these tribes are basket-makers. While there are not as many basket varieties as there are tribes there is a rather wide range of types. This leaflet attempts to indicate the main divisions of basketry in part of this area, with little or no consideration given to tribal differences.

2. **THE CASCADE MOUNTAINS** form a natural barrier which is a very important factor in Indian life in Washington. It divides the state into two sections, a western quarter and an eastern three quarters. The tribes to the West are immensely influenced by the Pacific; while those in the East are mountain and plains people.

3. **THE COLUMBIA RIVER** is another natural influence of great importance. For it provides a link between East and West and an avenue for intertribal trade and influences. Any detailed study of the basketry of this area must give much consideration to these two natural features, the great river and the mountains.

4. **TRIBAL MARRIAGE CUSTOMS** had a bearing on the very mixed state of basketry in this area. For here, to a considerable extent, it was the custom for women to marry outside of the local group. This meant that women who knew their own tribal style of basketry were constantly carrying these ideas among other tribes.

5. **OREGON BASKETRY** falls into two main geographical divisions, separated by the Cascade mountains. Only the western section is dealt with in this leaflet. The other section falls in with the Plateau section of the United States and its basketry will be treated along with that of the other interior tribes in a future number of this series.

6. **NINE MAIN TYPES** of basketry are found in Washington and western Oregon, each with many subdivisions. The following sections of this leaflet will be concerned with descriptions of the major details of each type. See Leaflet 67 for more details about coiling and other construction technics, and Leaflet 68 for detailed description of imbricating and other decorative technics

7. **IMBRICATED COILED BASKETRY** (H, I) is made on both sides of the Cascades in Washington. There are two main subdivisions, based on shape. East of the Cascades the baskets are round, tall, slim and slope straight from the small bottom to the larger top (I). West of the Cascades the baskets are ellipsoidal (circles with two opposite sides flattened), much less tall and slim than those west of the Cascades, and have sides rounding up from the small base to the larger mouth (H). This basketry is very tight and strong. The best examples are so hard as to suggest wooden vessels.

Both types are made by coiling and are decorated by imbrication. Coiled baskets have a continuous coil starting in the middle of the bottom and rising to the rim. Their sides have horizontal corrugations. Imbrication comes from the Latin word *imbrex*, meaning "tile". It is used because this method of decoration produces a series of decorative stitches which overlap like the tiles or shingles on a roof.

The coils are made of bunches of finely split cedar roots, *Thuja plicata*, sewn with larger sections of the same material. The imbricating is done with stems of squaw grass, *Xerophyllum tenax*, or with cherry bark, *Prunus emarginata*, or the rhizomes, or root-like stems, of horsetail, *Equisetum*. The grass is used in its natural white or dyed yellow with wolf moss, *Evernia vulpina*, or Oregon grape, *Berberis*. The cherry bark is a natural red-brown, and the horsetail is dyed black by soaking in mud. Also naturally red-brown cedar bark is used.

Very large, bold single or multiple zigzags make up most of the designs. There are also triangles, diamonds, diamond nets and occasional rectangular designs. All designs show a wealth of small detail.

All of this basketry is commonly called Klickitat (Klick-ih-tat) after the name of one tribe which makes it. Actually only the tall round shapes are made by the Klickitat, Yakima and some of their neighbors east of the mountains. The other variety is made by a number of small tribes of the Salish (Say-lish) linguistic family west of the Cascades. Some of the best known of these are: Cowlitz, Muckleshoot, Puyallup, Nisqually and Snqualmi. Leaflet 32 shows a map of these tribes.

In the light of present knowledge it is impossible to tell the work of one tribe from that of another

8. **WRAPPED TWINED BASKETRY** (L, N, O, P) is produced by a number of tribes in the extreme northwest corner of Washington and along the Pacific coast of that state.

Twined basketry has vertical ribs which are bound together by pairs of wefts twisted around and between them. In wrapped twining one weft is stiff. The other is flexible and is wrapped around the crossings of the warps and the stiff weft. This technic produces different surfaces on the exterior and interior. On the outside appear rows of diamond-shaped stitches; inside there are horizontal corrugations resembling those of coiled basketry.

The base of the basket shows either plaited red-brown cedar bark strips or twined pale yellow-green stems of a rush, *Juncus*. The warps and stiff weft are cedar bark and the flexible weft is white squaw grass, *Xerophyllum tenax*.

The vast majority of the baskets show a shiny white surface on which appear, in bright colors, little birds, animals, whales, canoes and various simple geometric figures. The most common shape is a round box, usually small, with a flat lid (L, N). Some boxes are oblong with rounded corners, a flat shoulder and a lid raised above the shoulder (P). There are also shapes like that shown at O, and almost flat oblong wallets.

This basketry is made by the following tribes running from Vancouver Island south along the Pacific coast: Nootka, Makah, Quileute and Quinault. The work of these tribes is indistinguishable except that it gets coarser as one moves south. This basketry is usually referred to as West Coast basketry, or Makah basketry.

**9. STIFF OVERLAY TWINED BASKETS** (B) are produced by the Quinault, Chehalis and Chinook in southwestern Washington. In its basic construction overlay twining is just like the plain twining defined in section 8. It is called overlay because when a design is to be placed on it extra wefts of a different material are laid over the construction wefts and twisted into the fabric as work proceeds so as to produce a design.

These Quinault stiff baskets are made of brown spruce roots and the overlay designs are made with pale yellowish-white squaw grass. The loops on the rim are very typical not only of this kind of basketry but of the whole region, being found there almost exclusively.

This type of basketry may be recognized by its stiffness, round, deep shape, brown color with light glossy designs, and, frequently, rim loops. The designs belong to the bold zigzag or over-all netting type so common in the whole region.

**10. SOFT OR FLEXIBLE TWINED BASKETRY** (G, J, R) is highly developed and widely spread in the area west of the Cascades. Two technics are used, overlay twining and wrapped twining, both already described in this leaflet. The wrapped twine type is made from the Quinault south along the coast to around the mouth of the Columbia and inland in the region south of Puget Sound. It differs from that described in section 8 in several ways. Instead of little round boxes with lids there are rather deep wide mouthed bowls and fairly straight sides rounding at the bottom (R). The exterior surface is standard for wrap twining. But the interior is different. For beside the standard horizontal corrugations there are often sections showing several of the flexible wefts carried diagonally across a number of warps. J shows this.

Both cedar bark and cattail are used in the construction, either one or the other, or both. The wrapping is done with squaw grass, the shiny surface of which covers the exterior of the baskets. The design style is indicated by R. The common colors are black and a yellow-orange, though aniline red and green may be used. The yellow dye comes from Oregon grape and the black from mud.

This basketry is—or was—made by the Chehalis, Cowlitz, the various small tribes between the Chehalis and Quinault, and the several Chinook groups around the mouth of the Columbia.

The overlay twine type is produced by the Skokomish along the western side of Puget Sound (G). Cattail is the common material for construction and the overlay is squaw grass. The usual shape is a tall round one with almost vertical sides, bottom and top being about the same size. The baskets are soft and flexible. The rim usually has the loops shown in the photo. The colors are as in the wrap twine type described in this section. Little animal figures just below the rim are very typical of Skokomish basketry.

**11. CLAM BASKETS** (T) are made generally in the region west of the Cascades. The material is brown cedar root. There is no decoration. The clam baskets of all tribes making them are identical as far as our present knowledge goes.

**12. COARSE PLAITED BASKETS** (K, S, Q) of three kinds are made in the Puget Sound region. The first, (Q), is made of cedar wood splints and has no decoration except the rim loops. K is made of cattail with some squaw grass overlay. Both are rough work baskets with no pretensions of quality.

A third plaited type, from the Pacific coast tribes, is shown by S. It is made of strips of cedar bark. It shows a combination of plaiting and twining, for there is a row of twining between each pair of horizontal plaiting members.

**13. TWINED "SALLY BAGS"** (E, F, M) are produced by a number of tribes on or near the Columbia River between the Cascades and the great northward bend of the river. The popular name applied to the type is given above. These are cylindrical—or near cylindrical—rather deep flexible bags with more or less flat bottoms. They are all made by simple twining with decoration applied by wrap twining. The warps are Indian hemp fibre (*Apocynum cannabinum*) or commercial twine and the decorations are made with corn husk or commercial wool threads. In the field of color and design there are two types. One (F, M) has a light greyish brown background with designs in dark brown. The designs on recent Wasco and Wishram bags show conventionalized birds, fish, human figures with strange skelton-like bodies, and butterflies. Simple geometric figures appear on the older bags of this group. The other type (E) has a red-brown background on which appear the big complex zigzags so typical of the whole region. Type 2 has a rather rounded bottom and is often folded flat. Though both types are made by all tribes in the region, type 1 is usually associated with recent Wasco and Wishram, and type 2 is the older form.

**14. FLAT TWINED "NEZ PERCE" BAGS** (A, D). In material and construction these bags are like those described above, but in shape and method of decoration they are quite different. The entire outer surface—except near the bottom—is covered with corn husk or rush applied by false embroidery. By this technic a strand of corn husk is wrapped around each weft, stitch by stitch, on the outside of the bag, the interior being unaffected by the process. On this corn husk surface appear brightly colored geometric designs done most frequently with commercial wool threads. The designs are ordinarily single units distributed regularly over the surface (D). But some bags, possibly older ones, show all-over designs completely covering the surface (A). All are flat and rectangular in shape. There are many sizes. Usually the designs differ on the two sides.

These bags are called by the name of one tribe which makes them, the Nez Perce of Idaho. But they are generally made by the tribes of southeastern Washington and the adjacent regions. There seems to be no way to tell the work of one tribe from that of another.

**15. OREGON TWINED OPENWORK BASKETS** (C). A number of tribes along or near the coast of Oregon south of the Columbia River made twined baskets with hazel twigs. They resemble somewhat modern commercial baskets and thus differ from others in this region, but possess one feature which sets them apart from baskets made by Whites. This is the doubling of the handle which arches across the mouth of the basket. The two handles are not side by side but one above the other. These baskets are called Siletz, the name of a reservation where the broken remnants of many little tribes have lived for many years.

Little is known about the basketry of the Oregon coastal tribes owing to their early and rapid dying out. Reference 5 indicates that it was all twined. Much of it resembled in technic and materials the basketry made by the northern California tribes with hazel warps, conifer root wefts and white squaw grass overlay. Besides the openwork baskets described above there were in general use large burden baskets and tightly woven ones for water. Reference 5 gives such other details as are known.

**Compiled by F. H. Douglas from the examination of specimens of all types in the Denver Art Museum; from conversations with Dr. Erna Gunther; and from the following sources:**

**BUREAU OF AMERICAN ETHNOLOGY**

1. Coiled basketry in British Columbia and surrounding region—Haeberlin, Teit, Roberts and Boas. 41st Annual Report for 1919-1924. 1928

**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON**

2. Wishram ethnography—Leslie Spier and Edward Sapir. Publications in Anthropology, Vol. 3, no. 3, 1930
3. The Quinault Indians—Ronald L. Olson. Publications in Anthropology, Vol. 6, no. 1, 1936
4. Lower Chinook ethnographic notes—Verne F. Ray. Publications in Anthropology, Vol. 7, no. 2, 1938

**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA**

5. Culture element distributions: VII, Oregon Coast—Homer G. Barnett. Anthropological Records, Vol. 1, no. 3, 1937

**SOUTHWEST MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES**

6. Cornhusk bags of the Nez Perce Indians—Anne Wyman. Leaflet 1, 1935

**UNITED STATES NATIONAL MUSEUM**

7. Aboriginal American basketry—Otis T. Mason. Annual Report for 1902. 1904

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