

BASKET DESIGNS OF THE POMO INDIANS¹

By S. A. BARRETT

The following is a preliminary account of the basket designs of the Pomo Indians of California and is intended to show only the more important features of the subject. It is based chiefly on investigations carried on during 1904 for the Department of Anthropology of the University of California. Among the seven dialects of the Pomo linguistic stock there are but three, the Northern, Central, and Eastern, all in central Mendocino and central Lake counties, that are now spoken by any considerable number of Indians, and with the people in this particular region the art of basket making is, at present, on the whole more highly perfected than with the people of the remaining Pomo area. Consequently it is chiefly from the people of these three dialectic groups that information concerning basketry was obtained.

In technique Pomo basketry shows great variety. Of coiling there are two forms: single-rod and three-rod foundation. Of twining there are, exclusive of those used for border finish only, five forms: plain-twined, diagonal-twined, lattice-twined, three-strand twined, and three-strand braided. Of these twined weaves the first three are in common use, the fourth is rarely used as the weave of an entire basket, and the fifth is very rarely so used. The lattice-twined weave seems to be confined entirely to the Pomo and adjacent Indians of other linguistic stocks but of similar culture. The following fact concerning manipulation is noteworthy: As one looks at the outer surface of the bottom of a basket, coiling always progresses in a counterclockwise direction, twining always in a clockwise direction.

In form also a very great diversity is shown, there being all shapes from cylindrical, through globose and conical, to the flat

¹ Read at the meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Berkeley, California, August 31.

plate-form. To these should be added a special form, the elliptical or canoe-shaped, which it would seem is more rarely found elsewhere.

One of the most striking features of Pomo basketry, and the one which has been perhaps the most noticed by collectors, is the feather decoration, which finds its highest development with the Pomo. The variously colored feathers of different species of birds may be woven into the basket at intervals, thus allowing the pattern which is worked out in the fiber of the basket to show among them; or the entire surface of the basket may be so thickly covered with feathers as to entirely hide the fiber of the basket, in which case some simple pattern is worked out by the use of differently colored feathers. Similar to feather decoration is decoration with beads; but both may be regarded as only auxiliary ornamentation and usually secondary to the patterns which are produced by the use of fibers of different colors. Of these patterns some are simple, some complex; but all are composed of simple design elements, each with its special name.

In dealing with these design names a sharp distinction must be made between the design element as a simple elemental figure, and the pattern as a whole, the complex figure composed sometimes of a single repeated element, but as often of two or more elements in combination. In the three Pomo dialects under consideration there have been found in all twenty-nine names which are applied to design elements and may therefore be called elemental names. Eighteen of these are names of animate objects or parts of animate objects, as follows: deer hip or deer back, deer teeth, deer elbow, ant, striped water-snake, grasshopper elbow, turtle neck, quail plume, bear foot or track, bat wing, man, crow foot or track, goose excrement, turtle foot, fish rib, crab claw, star-fish, and mosquito. Of the remaining eleven, three are plant names — acorn head (cup), wild "potato" forehead, and pine tree; and four are names of natural or artificial objects — arrowhead, string, star and cross, the last having its origin in and taking its name from the cross¹ introduced by Roman Catholic missionaries. Three are names of more

¹ The name commonly given to the cross by the Indians is *karus*, evidently derived from the Spanish *cruz*. The design itself was not known to the Indians before the coming of the missionaries.

or less geometric figures occurring in nature — spot and two forms of zigzag, to which may be added a fourth, the finishing design.

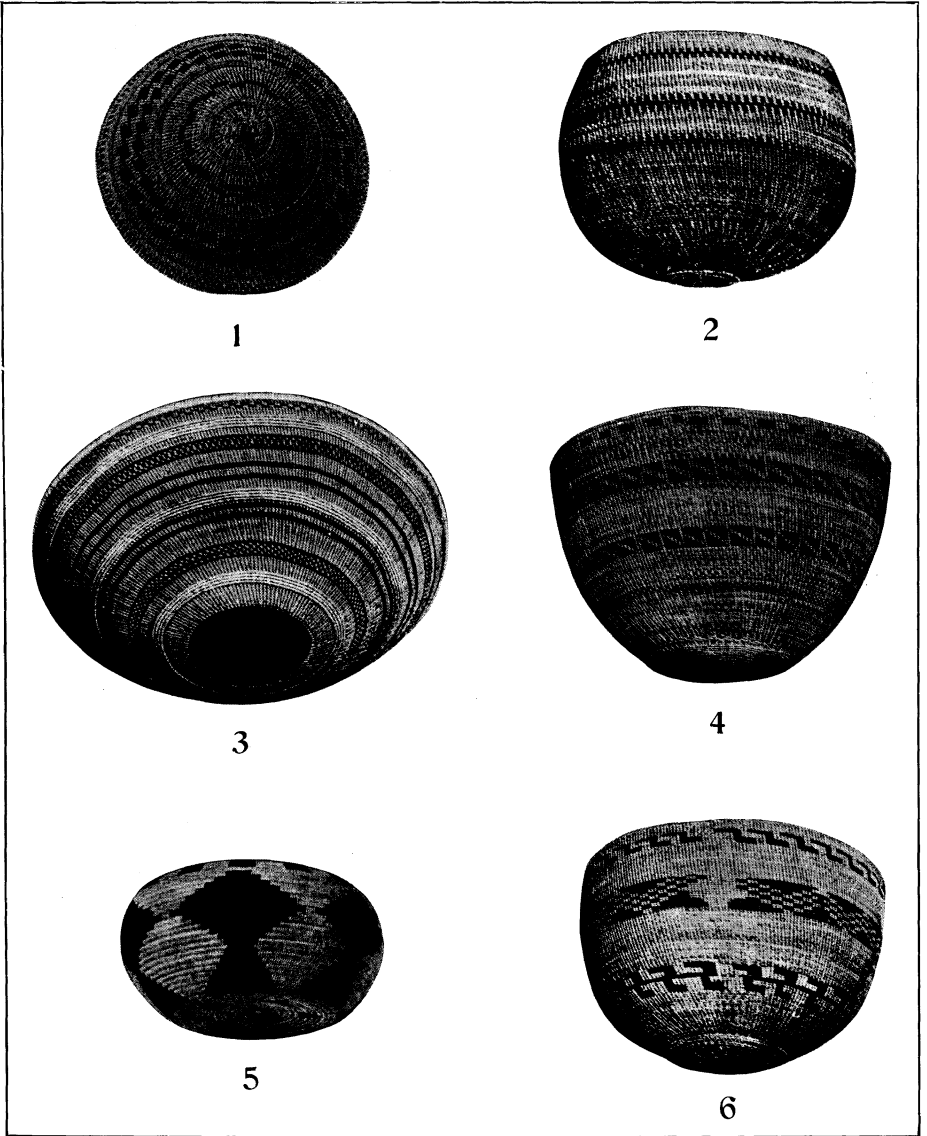
Some of the design elements bearing these names are of rare occurrence, and about fourteen constitute the bulk of the designs to be found in any ordinary collection of Pomo baskets. Two at least of the elemental names given are used only by the people speaking one of the three dialects, different names being applied to the same design elements by the people speaking the other dialects.

Some examples of these commonly occurring design elements are given in plate xxxix,¹ where seven of the most frequently occurring animal designs are shown. The central circle in figure 1 shows the deer-hip or deer-back design; the three upper bands in figure 2 show the deer-teeth design; and the two bands of very small square figures in figure 3, and also the lowest band in figure 4, show the ant design. In figure 3 also the four dark bands running around the middle of the basket are striped water-snakes, while in figure 4 the two bands of acute-angled triangles, the triangles in each band being separated by a white zigzag, show the design called grasshopper elbow. The large figures on the side of the basket shown in figure 5 are the turtle-neck design; and the lowest band of figure 6 shows the quail-plume design, the plumes in this case being arranged in pairs with a narrow dark line separating the individual plumes.

From these examples it will be evident that, although design elements are given names of special signification, as of animals, birds, and so on, they are in most cases not realistic. They are not intended by the Indians to be so; nor on the other hand have they any religious significance. They are primarily decorative and seem to have been named from some real or fancied likeness to the objects bearing the same names.

These designs bearing elemental names may be modified in size, form, and otherwise, and these modifications are not only recognized by the Indians, but qualifying terms indicative of them are used in

¹ The baskets shown in figures 2, 3, 4, and 6 of plate xxxix and figure 3 of plate xl are in the collections of the Museum of the Department of Anthropology of the University of California. Those shown in figures 1 and 5 of plate xxxix and figures 1, 2, and 4 of plate xl form part of a collection made by the writer and now the property of the Königl. Museum für Völkerkunde of Berlin.



POMO BASKETS, SHOWING ANIMAL DESIGNS

connection with the elemental names to form the complete name of the design. There are fourteen such qualifying terms used exclusively in connection with elemental names and descriptive of form, size, color, and direction. These are: large, small, long, short, crooked, half, sharp, slender, black, white (space, naked), inward, outward, above and below. Some of these terms are equally applicable to any and all design elements, while others are used only in connection with one or two; as, inward, outward, above, and below, which are used only with the arrowhead design.

Plate XL shows various modifications of the arrowhead. Figure 1, showing an elaborate spiral pattern, contains three forms of the arrowhead: inward arrowhead, outward arrowhead, and arrowhead sharp. The inward arrowhead is the triangular figure shown on the lower or left-hand side of the spiral. In weaving the basket each successive round made reduces the breadth of the triangle and tends to carry its outer line inward toward the median line of the pattern; hence its name inward arrowhead. Opposite this, on the upper or right-hand side of the spiral, is the outward arrowhead, the breadth of which widens with each successive round in weaving, the outer line tending outward or receding from the median line of the pattern. The arrowhead sharp is shown as a small triangle along the outer margins of both the inward and outward arrowheads, being separated from the larger triangles by narrow white lines. The wide elaborate pattern passing around the middle of figure 2 shows the above arrowhead and the below arrowhead, the former being the large triangle pointing downward from the upper edge of the pattern and the latter being the triangle pointing upward from the lower edge of the pattern. The derivation of these terms is self evident. The large plain triangles arranged as in figure 3 are always called arrowhead half. The long tapering points, some of which project downward and some upward in figure 4, are called arrowhead slender.

A design element may occur alone or in repetition as a pattern, in either of which cases the simple elemental name with appropriate qualifying terms is given as the name of the pattern. However, two or more design elements may be combined to form a complex pattern, thus permitting of a great variety. The name given to such

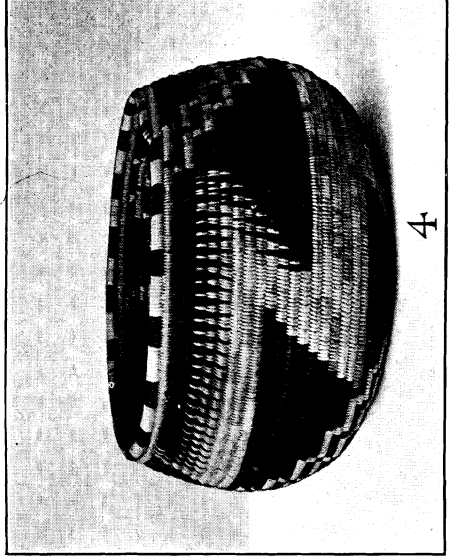
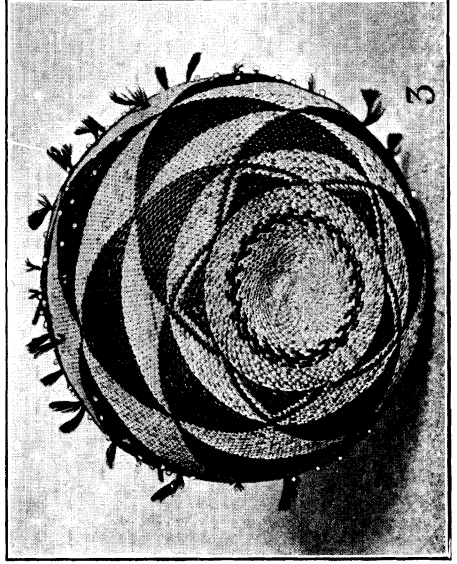
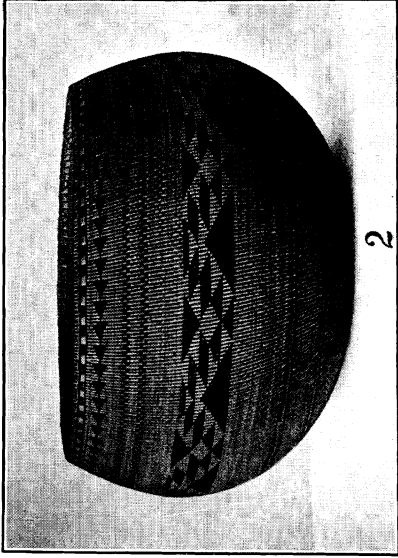
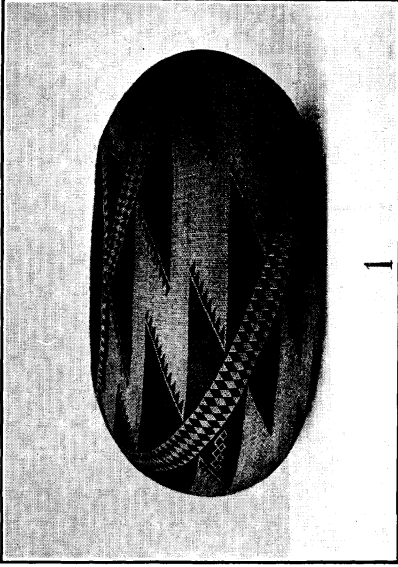
a combination of design elements is not that of one of the elements, nor is an entirely new name invented for each new combination. The term used is not so much a name as a descriptive phrase in which the principal constituent design elements are mentioned and their relations one to another are usually given.

Here again qualifying terms are needed, and we find an even greater variety of such qualifying terms than are used with the simple design elements. They cover all phases of design arrangement, direction, relative position, number, color, and quality. Those most commonly used are: banded, single one going around or running around, two going around or running around, vertical or straight up, spiral or slanting, crossing, scattered, placed anywhere, edge or border, middle or in the middle, on both sides, and or with, single or one, double or two, spotted, and bad. Thus the broad band about the middle of the basket shown in figure 6, plate xxxix, is called, by the people speaking one dialect, wild "potato" forehead zigzag on both sides arrowhead, while the lowest band of design in the same figure is called quail-plumes in the middle running striped water-snake. Also in plate xl, figure 4, the entire pattern which extends spirally from the bottom to the top of the basket is called design arrowhead in the middle zigzag, and the pattern of figure 1 is called design sharp points in the middle arrowheads on both sides.

A similar, though much more limited, use of qualifying and descriptive terms seems to occur among the Yurok and Karok, and perhaps other Indians of northwestern California, where common design names modified by terms signifying form, size, design arrangement, and position are occasionally found.¹

Borrowing of designs or of names seems almost totally lacking among the Pomo, and invention of designs, as also of weaves and forms, is quite unknown. There are, it is true, certain patterns which have been recently introduced, but these can hardly be said to be due to invention. Informants maintain that they are copied from patterns on articles manufactured by whites. Furthermore these patterns are not given the names of any of the standard old

¹ Dr A. L. Kroeber, *Basket Designs of the Indians of Northwestern California*, Univ. Calif. Publ., Amer. Archeol. and Ethnol. 11, 127, 133, 141, 1905.



POMO BASKETS, SHOWING VARIATIONS OF ARROWHEAD DESIGN

designs, nor are new names invented for them; they are simply called "new style," "new fashioned," or "no name." However, this class constitutes such a small percentage of the patterns to be found in any Pomo collection that it is practically negligible. Comparatively all, then, of the patterns found among the Pomo are composed of standard old design elements and are given the same names and interpretations by all informants; due allowance, of course, being made for the differences due to the dialect spoken. A nearly total lack of individuality of interpretation by different informants is thus shown in connection with elemental names, although there is a limited amount of individuality in the use of qualifying terms.

The total known number of Pomo design names somewhat exceeds the numbers so far found among some other peoples: as the Hupa who have nineteen, and the Karok who have fourteen;¹ but on the other hand is much smaller than the number found among the Maidu, who have more than forty.² However, notwithstanding this seemingly comparatively small number of elemental names, the Pomo probably possess as great a number as any other Indians occupying a like area, and they are certainly able, by the use of their many and varied qualifying terms, to adequately differentiate the most complex patterns one from another, and further, these combinations of elemental names and qualifying terms produce pattern names which are so descriptive that it is possible for one acquainted with the subject to form, to a certain extent, a mental picture of the pattern from its name.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
BERKELEY.

¹ Dr A. L. Kroeber, *op. cit.*, p. 154. It seems very probable, however, that both the Hupa and the Karok will ultimately be found to have fully as many design names as the Yurok, who are of the same general culture, and who have more than thirty such names, though only about half of these are in common use, the others occurring quite rarely.

² Dr R. B. Dixon, *Basketry Designs of the Indians of Northern California*, Bull. Am. Mus. Nat. Hist., xvii, pt. 1, 23, 1902. The Maidu, however, occupy a much larger territory than the Hupa, the Karok, or the people of the three Pomo dialects in question, and should, therefore, be expected to possess a greater variety of design names than any one of these.