

INDIAN BASKETRY IN HOUSE DECORATION.

BY GEORGE WHARTON JAMES.



IN the pottery and baskets of the Amerind,¹ as well as in the blankets, the house decorator of the future will be compelled to deal. It is no fad that makes us seek to know something of the art-life and expression of the people whom we are thrusting to the wall after dispossessing them of the home of their forefathers. So far as we know they are the native-born, true Americans—the blue bloods of this continent—and just as the antique furniture, architecture, and records of our own nation's past are interesting and instructive to us, so should be the art manifestations of these aboriginal peoples. And when, added to the antiquarian interest, there is presented in

aboriginal blanket making, pottery, and basketry a distinctive and effective, though somewhat crude, decorative art, in which the expert may read the mythology, history, poetry, or religious thoughts of the designer and maker, it will be apparent that in these manifestations of Indian life and thought the true student has a wide and fascinating field.

What must be sought in the decoration of a room? The eye must be pleased. There must be agreeable forms tastily arranged, with due observance of proportion and harmonious combination or contrast of colors. The mind, the imagination, the memory, the sentiments, must all be appealed to in the decorations and furnishings. Every picture tells a story, suggests a thought, arouses an emotion, awakens a sentiment, stimulates a desire, evokes a question—hence serves its pur-

¹This is a new word coined by Maj. J. W. Powell, Director of the Bureau of Ethnology, from the two words American and Indian.

pose. The host or hostess delights in pleasing the intelligent guest, for a house is made beautiful not only for its immediate occupants, but also for its transient visitors and occasional guests.

Decorations and furnishings, also, are, in a measure, indexes to the mind of their possessor. The parvenu shows a want of artistic perception and a lack of innate refinement in the gorgeous ostentation with which he decorates his home. A man of wide sympathies, broad culture, and refined mind, unconsciously reveals himself in the chaste, appropriate, and yet widely differing articles of decoration and art with which he surrounds himself in his home.

Surely, then, the use of those articles with which the intimate and inner life of our predecessors in the possession of the soil we now call our own is inseparably connected, will appeal to the man of culture, refinement, and fine sensibilities. And basketry is widespread; it is interesting evidence of the earliest development of the useful faculties and gave the first opportunities for the exercise of the dawning esthetic senses; in its late development it became to the aborigine what the cathedral was to Europe in the middle ages: the book of record of aspirations, ideals, fears, emotions, poetry, and religion. Victor Hugo strikingly exclaimed, "the book has killed the building!" and thus aroused in all minds a desire to preserve the original significance attached to the cathedrals — the lofty spires speaking of man's aspirations heavenward; the solemn and silent aisles of the solemnity

with which he should approach God; the statues of apostles, prophets, and martyrs, acting as historic reminders of grand and godlike lives in the past; the figures of demons reminding him of the constant warfare of the soul to overcome evil; the more beautiful figures of angels and saints keeping him in remembrance that the powers of good were watching over him and were ever ready to

give him help; the crook reminding him of the Good Shepherd who longed to lead His flocks into green pastures; and the cross, of the sacrifice of Himself that the Savior made that the world might be saved — all these and a thousand other things which the bookless middle ages read into their sacred structures, we now see and remember with veneration and delight. And so, though of course in a less measure, do these more modest memorials of a simpler and less devel-

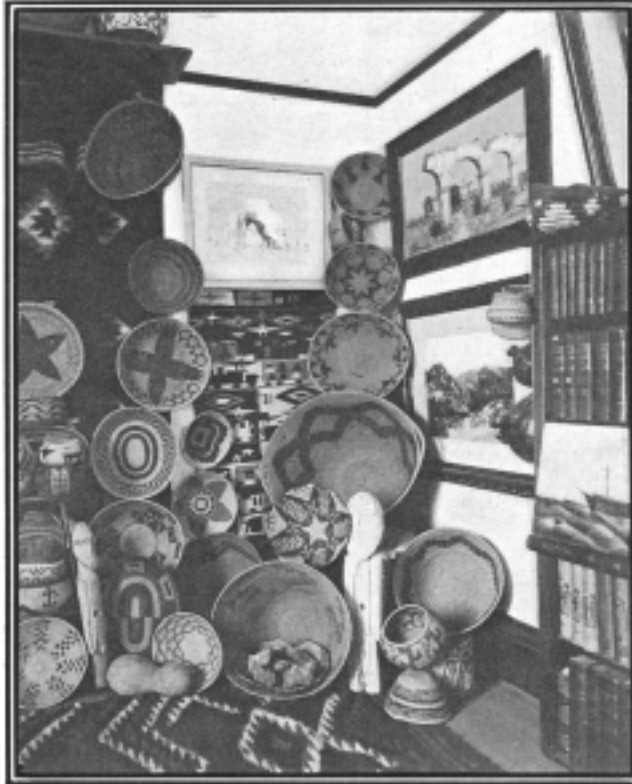


FIG. 1. INDIAN CORNER IN LIBRARY OF GEORGE WHARTON JAMES, PASADENA, CALIFORNIA.

oped people appeal to our sympathies and ask us to preserve their original significance. It would be a misfortune to our advancing civilization to lose sight of that which meant so much to those of a dying civilization. We know ourselves better when we know what stirred the hearts, moved the emotions, and quickened the higher faculties of the races of the past. These baskets, thus looked at, become the embalmed mummies of the mentality and spirituality of ages that are past — of a civilization that would soon otherwise be lost.

Every well-appointed house might appropriately arrange an Indian corner. Here baskets, pottery, blankets, arrow-points, spear-heads, beads, wampum, belts, kilts,

moccasins, head-dresses, masks, pictures, spears, bows and arrows, drums, prayer-sticks, boomerangs, katchina dolls, fetishes, and beadwork might be displayed with artistic and pleasing effect.

Such a corner is shown in Fig. 1. This is in the library of the author in Pasadena, California, and while by no means a model, it will serve to illustrate, and perhaps will stimulate to higher endeavor those who are open to the suggestion.

Those who were privileged to see it, will remember the great charm of the library of Mrs. T. S. C. Lowe in Pasadena, California. Mrs. Lowe possesses the largest and finest collection of Indian baskets in the world. Her collection numbers over a thousand specimens, many of them exceedingly rare and precious. In this library many choice baskets were tastefully displayed on and around the book cases; Indian blankets adorned the floors, chairs and tables; Indian baskets were used as receptacles for waste paper, newspapers, photographs, cards, etc.; and other trinkets were displayed that made this room a most unique and highly pleasing one, with a marked individuality that impressed and stimulated effort in like direction.

Without attempting to make a large collection, a dozen or a score of well-selected baskets could be so artistically arranged as to give a very pleasing effect to any room where they were displayed.

Take such a basket as that in Fig. 2, which is in the Plimpton collection, San Diego, California. It is mellow in color and striking in

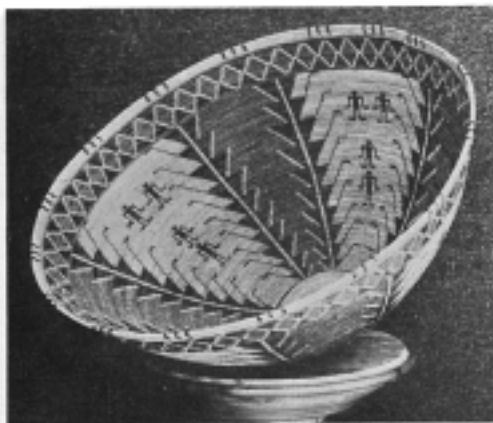


FIG. 2. TULARE BASKET IN THE PLIMPTON COLLECTION.

design. Suspended on the wall as a plaque, or hung in some corner, it would produce an artistic and agreeable effect. The observer would note the pattern, and if curious would

ask the meaning of the design. The human figures, the terraced steps, from which quail plumes protrude on the sides where the figures are, the diamond-back rattlesnake design forming a beautiful border around



FIG. 3. HAVASUPAI BASKET IN THE COLLECTION OF MRS. WILLIAM WHITING, HOLYOKE, MASSACHUSETTS.

the top of the basket, all demand explanation. For, gradually, the world is learning that the Indian woman has poetry and mythology and symbolism and imagination in her soul, and that she uses these powers in the making of her baskets, incorporating into her designs ideas of every conceivable character.

Fig. 3 shows a Havasupai basket which holds an honored place in the drawing-room of Mrs. William Whiting of Holyoke, Massachusetts. While the weave of the Havasupais is not nearly as fine as that of the Monos, Kerns, Pomos, or Yokuts, this is a beautiful basket of bold, pleasing, and effective design. I happened to be in Havasu canyon when this basket was in process of manufacture, and knew its maker well. She was a most devout woman, and, as her father owned (for a Havasupai) a large number of horses and cattle, she was making this basket as a propitiation of the powers that controlled the rain, so that her father's stock would have an abundance of water and feed. The central figure is the sun, and the radiating figures with steps are the rain clouds. In this basket she, accompanied by her mother and other female relatives, carried the sacred meal, which she sprinkled before the shrine shown in engraving No. 4. Then, with prayers and dancing, "Those Above" were pleaded with to send the rain. Without the sprinkling of the sacred meal all prayers would be ineffective, but when sprinkled

from a basket made with special prayers of propitiation, and with designs symbolic of the powers propitiated, both prayers and dancing were made efficacious and of great power.

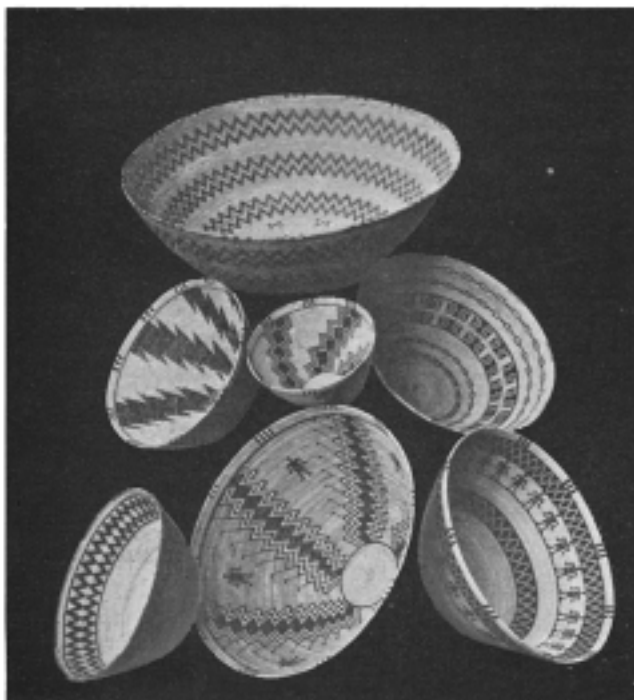


FIG. 5. TULARE BASKETS IN THE PLIMPTON COLLECTION.

Any one or all of the so-called Tulare baskets in Fig. 5, in the Plimpton collection, could be used to good advantage. Even to the tyro they are interesting and beautiful. They are of fine weave, smooth and even in texture, and are the highest art expression of this fast dying race. The large basket in the center of the bottom row shows water and the ripples upon it, in a highly conventionalized zigzag design. Reaching out from the zigzags are the plumes of the quail. These inform the hunters, four of whom are seen, that on the left side of the stream there is good quail hunting.

The simple but beautiful design of the smaller basket to the left, on the bottom, is a highly conventionalized form of the diamond-back rattlesnake pattern, the regular

form of which is represented in the basket to the right. The row of human figures in this basket shows it to be a dance basket, and it was undoubtedly used by the woman who made it to hold ceremonial water or food during the performance. When one remembers that every dance was a religious rite to the Indian — that he never danced for pleasure — this memorial is regarded with a reverence that would otherwise not attach to it.

In the basket above it a beautiful illustration is offered of the changes designs are subject to, whereby their original appearance is lost, and they become no longer imitative in character, but symbolic. The two center rings are of imperfect double St. Andrew's crosses. Few ordinary observers looking at this design would see any resemblance to the diamond-back rattlesnake design below, and yet this is but the development of that. The diamond is divided into segments, and thus affords pleasing variety. But its original significance is not lost. The early weavers incorporated the rattlesnake design into their weave for two reasons: the first was undoubtedly

in obedience to the imitative faculty, which suggested that here was a simple and easily copied design, ready at hand,

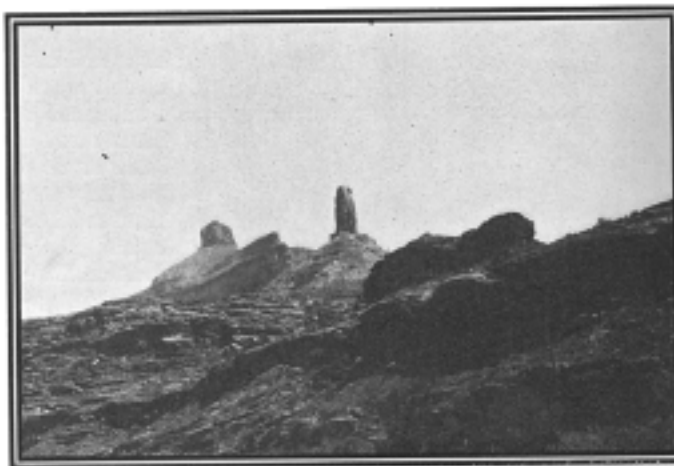


FIG. 4. HAVASUPAI SHRINE, WHERE THE INDIANS DANCE AND SPRINKLE MEAL DURING THEIR PRAYERS FOR RAIN.

one that would be pleasing to the eye; the other was a religious motive. The

incorporating of this design into the basket signifies that its maker was desirous of propitiating the evil power behind all rattlesnakes, and that she constantly prayed that none of them should ever harm any of her family. In this basket she kept the sacred meal—prepared by herself, but consecrated by the shaman or medicine man, with many smokings, prayings, and other rites—which she daily sprinkled around her house and at a certain shrine in order to secure the protection of herself and family from all evil.



FIG. 6. KUCHYEAMPSI, THE MASHONGNAVI BASKET WEAVER.

A careful study of the various weaves found in North American basketry reveals wonderful ingenuity, taste, and skill. The Pomas alone have nine distinct weaves now in use and five that are obsolete, all of which have appropriate names; and there are perhaps twice as many other weaves in use by different peoples. To see the various methods by which the stitches are made—how colored splints are introduced; how strengthening ribs are placed; how the bottle-neck baskets are narrowed and again widened; the various ingenious methods of finishing off the basket—all these afford subjects for interesting study.

Fig. 6 is a photograph of Kuchyeampsi,

a Hopi basket-maker at Mashongnavi, one of the cliff cities of this interesting people whose Snake Dance has made them famous throughout the world. Connected with the basketry of the Hopi are many singular facts. There are seven villages of this people, and yet at only four are baskets made. Three of the villages—Mashongnavi, Shimopavi, and Shipauluvi—produce one kind of basket, and Oraibi another. This engraving represents the style made at the three villages. These baskets are more often found in the

round tray or plaque form, and are generally known as the sacred meal trays of the Moki. The name Moki should never have been given to these people by the whites. It is not their proper name, and is a term of reproach applied to them by the Navaho, on account of their uncleanly sanitary conditions. They call themselves the Hopituh, or People of Peace, and all well-informed writers and speakers refer to them now as the Hopi. To return to the basketry. These trays receive the name "sacred trays" because they are used in the ceremonies of the Hopi to hold the sacred meal, without which no prayer is effective. Meal is sprinkled upon every possible occasion.

Fig. 7 shows a number of Hopi women during the thrilling Snake Dance, standing where the dancers, carrying the snakes, pass them and so receive a pinch of the sacred and beneficial meal. They are also thus made the beneficiaries of the prayers that accompany the sprinkling of the meal. The ceremony is most weird and interesting.

In the finishing off of the baskets the Hopi woman is required by inexorable custom to symbolize her own physical state. There are three styles of finish, known respectively as "the flowing gate," "the open gate," and "the closed gate." The first is well illustrated in the rear basket to the left in Fig. 6. This is made by a maiden.

The open gate shows the ends of the inner grass cut off and the basket finished by tightly winding the wrapping thread of yucca over them, leaving about half an inch exposed. This is the style of finish required



FIG. 7. HOPI WOMEN READY TO SPRINKLE MEAL UPON THE SNAKE DANCERS

of a matron capable of bearing children.

The closed gate, as its name implies, shows the inner grass completely enclosed in the yucca wrapping, and is the style of finish observed by the barren married women and widows.

Nor are these facts all that are connected with these singular and interesting social revelations. Recently I learned that by a strange law of correlation between symbol and thing symbolized existent in the Hopi mind, the simple-hearted maiden or mother weaver implicitly believes that if she closes the "flowing" or "open" gate of her basket, she produces a similar result in her own condition, which thus precludes her, in the one case, from becoming a happy wife, and in the other deprives her of the further joys of motherhood. For to the unsophisticated and uncivilized "heathen" Hopi woman marriage without many children is unhappy and unblest.

In some baskets the whole history of a nation is symbolized, and to an intelligent sympathy expressed towards the weaver and her ideas, I owe the gleaning of much mythological, traditional, and historical lore that had hitherto entirely escaped ethnologists and others interested in the history of the Indians.

Colors, also, to the Indian are often significant of religious interpretation, and to learn the many methods for producing splints of pleasing color followed by the Indian woman, is to have a revelation of patience, industry, skill, and invention.

Indian baskets can be made to contribute to the intellectual pleasures of any ladies' club or social gathering. Let a loan collection be made of as many baskets as can be found. Then let some intelligent and interested member of the club prepare a paper or deliver an extempore talk covering the following points: the geographical home of the tribe of the maker of the basket under consideration; the weaver's own home; the material used in making the basket; how the colors are made, and the significance of the design, whether imitative, conventionalized, imaginative, ideographic, or symbolic. Such a talk could be followed by a general discussion and exchange of ideas that would prove to be profitable and instructive to the whole company.

Merely a loan collection could not fail to give interest and increase knowledge, and if, to complement it, a number of photographs were placed on exhibition showing the "majellas" making the baskets, considerable added interest would be secured.