

INDIAN BASKETRY

By George Wharton James



FIG. 6. APACHE BASKET.

ONLY an Indian basket! True! but what a world of meaning and history a discerning soul may see in that basket. It is easy to sneer; it is sometimes harder to discern.

Only an Indian basket!

Yes, but that basket and its fellows, for untold centuries, have taken the place of all the utensils the modern housewife deems indispensable—earthenware, glass, tin, agate, iron, brass, copper ware. Long before pottery had its birth, as well as for long after, basketry performed all the useful functions of the vessel of earth. Indeed, earthenware—pottery of all kinds—is the legitimate offspring of basketry, with accident, rather than design, as its father. The basket is the true mother (absolutely and literally the matrix) of the original clay vessel, as well as of the later products of the shuttle and loom.

Was water to be carried? Use the wicker woven *esuü*, the *tusjeh*, or the *olla*. Was water to be boiled or food cooked? Place it in the boiling basket, which must be so closely woven that it will not leak, and strong enough to bear the weight of the hot stones dropped into it. Was food, liquid or solid, to be given to visitors from afar?

Place it in baskets. Was a ceremonial to be performed? See the important place the basket occupies in the rite. Was it a marriage, the exorcism of a demon, the healing of the sick, the burial of the dead? Without a basket the rite was incomplete. Indeed, in every function, social, religious or ceremonial, the basket had its place in aboriginal life, and only in very recent years has it been supplanted by the modern utensils of the white man. Baskets were made to suit every human need and every human whim. In a fully assorted collection, tiny baskets, not much larger than a thimble, can be seen side by side with giant granaries, capable of holding many bushels, and in which three or four adult persons may comfortably ensconce themselves. Here is a flat plaque used as a plate; there a heart-shaped basket of fine stitch and exquisite design, made as a treasure holder for some dear friend. There are mush bowls with capacities from a pint to four or five gallons, and *esuüis*—water bottles—of the same varying sizes. There are door mats and slippers, “bottleneck” trinket holders, such as the one held in the hands of the Mono weaver, Fig. 3; food wallets, sallybags, gambling plaques, and sacred baskets, used only in important religious ceremonials. Ingenuity and invention have been taxed to the utmost by these rude Amerindian workwomen to find new forms and shapes, and when the ultimate seemed to be reached, they conquered new worlds by introducing gorgeous and beautiful feathers, glittering pieces of pearl or abalone, various shells, bright pendants of silver, tin, brass and copper, as ornaments to enhance the effectiveness and attractiveness of their work.

Compare this work of the rude Amerind savage woman, ye sneerer and scoffer at Indians, with that of the average woman of the poorer classes of the civilized races, and how does the comparison strike you? What is there in the work of the latter, with all the advantages modern civilization affords, that can begin to compare in artistic concept, imaginative design and skilful execution with the work of the savage?

It has taken centuries for its development. From the earliest ages of human history the art has grown. It has already reached its golden age. Indeed it has passed its day of meridian splendor. Civilization, to the Indian, has generally meant demoralization. With the advent of the Spaniards into North America began the decline of nearly all aboriginal art. Before that time the young girl patiently learned from her mother the art to which hereditary instincts inclined her. Tiny tots of five years of age awoke to find themselves in *kathaks*, or carrying baskets, on their mothers' backs, going up the

lines of centuries of hard struggle against adverse conditions graven on her expressive face, as she returns home laden with material for the exercise of her art. Her "savage" brain is busy. Is she scheming to injure a neighbor? Is she plotting some great social *coup*? Is she meditating some new way of outdoing her dearest friend? No! just now all her mental energies are devoted to the baskets she intends to create from the material she carries on her back. She is planning the shape, determining the design, arranging the color scheme, hence the look of contentment that overspreads her wearied



FIG. 2. ONE OF THE OLDEST BASKET MAKERS OF SAHOBA, WHO WAS KILLED IN THE EARTHQUAKE, CHRISTMAS DAY, 1899.

steep trails of the mountain sides, where they had been carried ever since they were born. When they questioned whither? and why? they were told they were going for the year's supply of willow or chippa or squaw grass, or martynia, or fern, or the scores of other kinds of material used in the making of baskets. And almost ere the little ones were aware of it, their eyes were trained, their fingers skilled to help their mothers in seeking out and picking the shoots suitable for the work.

See that patient figure in bronze, the

face as she nears her simple *hawa* or *kish* of tules or willows, where her burden is gladly deposited. Here it is in the days following, that she carries out the basket plans she has matured in her busy brain. No pen or pencil, no paint or brush is used to transfer to paper the ideas thus arranged. She stores them in the secret recesses of her own brain, and none but herself knows what she will make until her busy fingers give objective shape to that which she has planned. And, by and by, her little girl will begin

to imitate her, and, under her mother's direction, the child will learn to fashion the flat bottom, then the curved sides, and finally the complete basket.

Ah! little brown mother, clothed in the skins of wild beasts or the rude cotton texture of your own industrious weaving, you may well be able to sleep soundly on the hard and unyielding ground when night comes. Yours has been a life of toil, and you little dreamed, you, in your far-away

made the textile art. She discovered the properties of the crude material, learned how to dress and prepare it, and invented every known stitch woven with the most complex machinery into the costliest fabrics of our modern civilization.

Hence it cannot be said that the intelligent collecting of Indian baskets is a fad.

One begins to collect baskets at first, perhaps, because of their exquisite shape, well-balanced colors, delicate weave, artistic de-

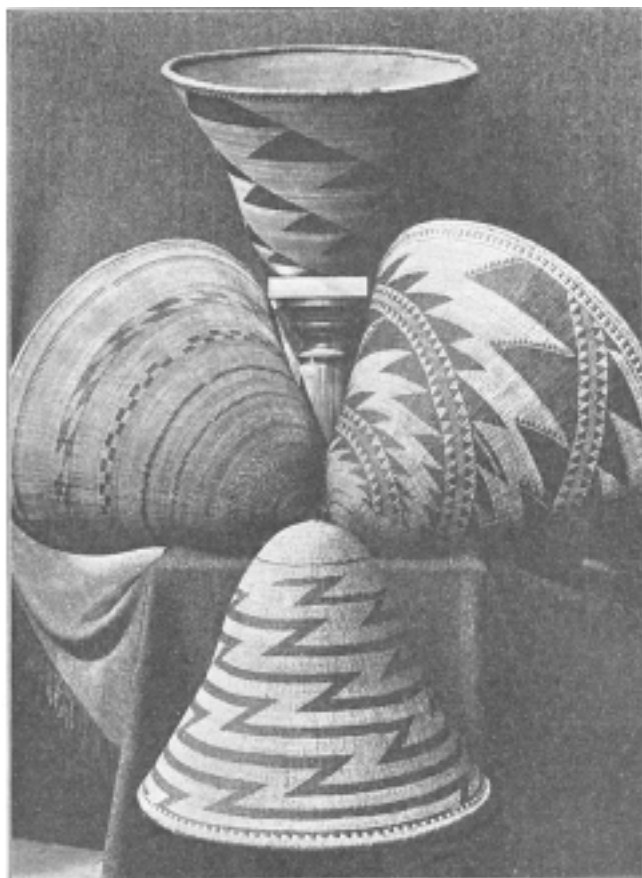


FIG. 9. POMA CARRYING BASKETS IN THE PLIMPTON COLLECTION.

dim ages of savagery, that your hard labor and thought were to bring comfort and luxury to untold thousands of men and women and children in the future. For, let it not be forgotten, that it was the poor, ignorant savage who took all the first weary steps in all the arts and many of the sciences, and gathered and stored the knowledge and skill which we enjoy as our priceless and inalienable inheritance. She it was who

sign, or skilful finish, and as knowledge of exterior things grows, light upon inner things begins to dawn, and her basketry reveals the Indian a new creature. She is a human being, with aspirations, ambitions, longings after the beautiful, desires to create; a soul seeking the ideal, groping for the lofty, the high, the true, the pure, the noble.

The chief basket-making peoples of to-day in America are found in Nevada, New Mex-



FIG. 1. CALIFORNIA BASKETS IN THE CAMPBELL COLLECTION.

ico, Arizona, California, and the region of the North Pacific Ocean. In Nevada are the Paiutis and Washoes; in New Mexico and Arizona, the Zuni, the Hopituh (commonly known as the Moki), the Mescalero, San Carlos and White Mountain Apaches, the Havasupais, the Pimas and the Maricopas. California has long been known as the home of the particularly expert basket weavers. Gualala, Yokut and Poma baskets are especially sought after, and those of the Mission Indians are attractive and interesting. A Mission Indian weaver is shown in Fig. 2. In Oregon there are the Wascoes, Klickitats, Klamaths, etc., and in Washington, the Chehalis, Makahs, Skokomish, Yakimas, etc. In British Columbia the Thompson River Indians make fine basketry, and a good collection of their work is to be found in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. In Alaska the Chilkahs, Haidas and others make excellent baskets, and the Aleuts of Attu Island do as fine work as is to be found in the world.

A satisfactory collection should possess typical baskets of all these various peoples. None are exactly alike; most of them have marked and distinctive peculiarities; all are full of human interest and fascination.

Beginning with the Paiutis, they make three separate and distinct styles of baskets, as well as their *pa-bi-chi*, or baby cradle. Their mush bowls are very similar to the work of the Apaches and Cahuillas, yet in weave are slightly different. Willow or osier, split to the re-

quired width, and colored or white as desired, is used as the wrapping splint. The inner coil is composed of yucca, bast, or fiber, two or three or more strips according to the fineness or coarseness desired. The larger the quantity of material inside, the thicker and heavier the coil is. The sewing passes over the elements of the coil and through the upper element of the coil below, looping always under the subjacent stitches. The ornamentation is produced by working into the fabric various designs with strips of martynia, or splints dyed a dark brown or a reddish brown. The most noted work in mush bowls of the Paiutis, however, is not known by their name. These are known as "Navaho Wedding Baskets" and "Apache Medicine Baskets," and may be accepted as the highest type of Paiuti weaving found in their original habitation, for by contact with the Yokuts, the Paiutis of California have much improved in artistic skill. They are woven as above described, but finished on the border in a style peculiar to the Paiutis, Navahoes and Havasupais. No other weavers make a similar diagonal border whip stitch, which I call the "herring-bone" finish. It is both a beautiful and appropriate stitch, and is a distinguishing mark of the weave of these two peoples. The colors are invariably white, black and reddish brown. Nearly twenty years ago the favorite wife of the last great chief of the Paiutis, Winnemucca, gave me one of these baskets bowls, and told me the meaning of the design. The Paiuti



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FIG. 5. KUCHYEAMPSI, THE HOPI BASKET MAKER.

believes in a lower, or under world, that corresponds in its hills and valleys to this upper world. These are represented in the design. It was from this under world that all the Paiutis came, and from these have sprung all the races of the earth. The means of communication between the lower and upper worlds is called Shipapu, and is likewise represented in the design by the opening. The simple-hearted Indian woman sincerely believes that if she closes



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FIG. 7. RAMONA WITH HER "COMFORT" BASKET.

this representation of Shipapu she will render it impossible for any more Paiutis to be born in this upper world. This is the real significance of the design. The hole is not left, as so many affirm, that the evil spirits may be allowed to escape, but is the representation of Shipapu which no Indian, even in its symbol, will dare to close. These baskets are traded to the Navahoes on the south side of the Grand Canyon, and

by them taken to the Apaches. They gain their name "Navaho Wedding Baskets" from the fact that in all important and distinguished marriages of this wild and nomadic people the Shaman, who is called upon to seek the blessing of the "People of the Shadows" upon the young couple, demands one of these baskets. When brought it is filled with corn meal mush prepared by the bride's mother or nearest elder female relatives. Then the Shaman sprinkles the blue

pollen of the larkspur upon the porridge so as to divide it into four parts; and calling for the bride, who up to this time has been hidden under her mother's blanket, he takes her hand and that of the groom. Seating the bride on the west side of the *hogan*, he puts the groom before her with the basket of mush between them. An olla of water is then brought and groom and bride each pour water over the other's hands, after which the groom, with thumb and fingers, takes a pinch of mush from the point where the pollen touches the edge of the basket on the east. He eats it while the bride does the same. Then, in succession, he and she take pinches from the north, west, south and center of the basket, and when the center pinch is eaten the ceremony is complete and the youth and maid are man and wife.

The common Paiuti carrying baskets and seed-roasting trays are coarsely woven. The warp twigs are made to open out and new ones are added as the basket enlarges. The weft splints are carried around in pairs and twined around two of these warp twigs so as to produce a twilled effect, somewhat after the fashion of the work of the Haidas and Clallams. Their basket water bottles, or *tusjeh*, as they are called by the Navahoes, are striking specimens of adaptability to environment. Wandering over trackless deserts, often miles away from water, a carrying vessel was needed for the precious element that would withstand more than ordinary risks of breakage. The white man's canteen of zinc is not so well adapted for desert uses as is the Paiuti *tusjeh*. With two horsehair lugs woven into the side, a thong of buckskin passed through these and over the saddle, fastens it so that

it can safely be carried. Should it fall there is no danger of its being broken. Horses may run away, fall, kick, and the *tusjeh* be in the heart of the difficulty and it will withstand all strains and resist all pressures. The shape is almost uniform; rounded at the bottom so that it can easily be rested in the sand, bellying out and retreating to the neck, which is wider at the lip than at the point of junction with the

weavers is Dat-so-la-lee, a full-blooded Indian, sixty years of age, whose work is wonderful in its shape, symbolization and weave. Though heavy and plump, her delicacy of touch, artistic skill and poetical conception excite admiration. Her hand is symmetrically perfect, her fingers plump and tapering, and her nails beautiful filberts. She is fully conscious of the sensations and emotions her work arouses in the hearts of connois-



FIG. 10. ALEUTIAN BASKETS IN THE PLIMPTON COLLECTION.

body. It is coated with pinion gum. The weave is very coarse and of the coiled order, with a neat wrap stitch on the rim.

The Washoes make a basket similar in weave to the Paiutis and which can be differentiated only in that the colors used are more varied and the designs or symbols more diverse, and, generally, the weave is much finer. The queen of the Washoe

seurs. During the past three years she has produced sixteen baskets with sixteen stitches to the inch; three baskets with twenty stitches to the inch, and four baskets with thirty stitches to the inch. Her white splints are made solely of willow. A willow shoot is split into from twelve to twenty-four splints, with the teeth and fingernails. The finer the stitch desired the greater the

number of splints from the shoot. Only those portions of the fiber immediately over the pith and under the bark are used. They are all then made of uniform size by scraping with a piece of glass. The warp, or inside of the coil, is generally composed of two thin willows stripped of the bark. For colors the red bark of the mountain birch, and the dark root of a large fern that grows in the foothills of the Sierras are used. So exquisite is Dat-so-la-lee's work that her baskets have brought fabulous prices, ranging from \$150 to \$250. Three of her recent creations are valued respectively at \$600, \$800 and \$1,500.

The Hopituh, or Moki, are the makers of sacred meal trays of striking design and coloring. Of these there are two distinct types, the yucca or amole, made at the three villages of the middle mesa—Mash-

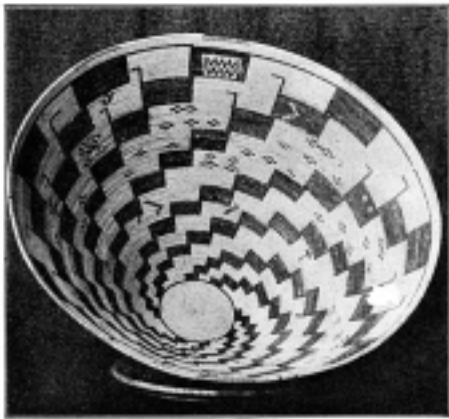


FIG. 4. YOKUT BASKET.

ongnavi, Shipauluvi and Shimopavi, and the willow, made at Oraibi, on the western mesa. In Fig. 5 is represented Kuchyeampsi, the finest weaver of the former type among the Hopi, though she is here shown making baskets rather than plaques or trays. The weaving, however, is of exactly the same character. The material of the inner coil is a native grass called *wu-u-shi*, something like our broom corn. The coil is wrapped with splints stripped from the leaves of the amole, or soap plant, one of the yucca family. These splints are generally about one-sixteenth of an inch in width, though for finer work they are made smaller. The wrapped coil varies from a quarter of an inch to an inch in diameter. As the coil progresses, each stitch or wrap is caught into

a stitch of the coil beneath with such uniform exactness that it has the appearance of a worm closely coiled up. The native colors of the design used to be black, brown, yellow, red, and the natural white of the yucca, but of late years the aniline dyes have been used with the Indian's fondness for glaring and incongruous results. The designs are multiform, every conceivable pattern being worked out. These trays are used by the Hopi in their various ceremonies for the carrying of the "hoddentin," or sacred meal. Sprinkling of this meal constitutes an important part of all Hopi ritual, for the propitiation of the evil powers of nature.

A singular and interesting fact connected with these "hoddentin" or sacred meal trays used by the Hopi is that the manner of finishing them off reveals the station in life of the weaver. There are three styles of finish, one, known as the "flowing gate," where the grass of the inner coil of the completed basket is allowed to flow out as shown in the basket to the left of Kuchyeampsi in Fig. 5. The second is the "open gate," where the long ends are cut off, but still allowed to appear; and the third is the "closed gate" where the grass is completely covered with the coil splint. The first is made by a maiden, the second by a married woman capable of bearing children, and the third by a barren woman or widow. And such is the Hopi faith, that a variation of this tribal requirement would produce disastrous results. If the maiden were to finish off her basket in the "closed gate" style, the symbol would so affect the reality symbolized that she would render herself incapable of the joys of maternity, a result to her of most unhappy import.

The Mescalero Apaches of New Mexico make a coarse and crude basket which has little of value to commend it to any but the collector.

The San Carlos and White Mountain Apaches, however, are experts, proud of the fineness of their work, poetic in the designs they conceive, and accomplished in weaving that which they imagine. Their basketry is of the coiled order and made generally of willow or twigs that are similar. One or more willows serve for the inside of the coil, and willow splints are wrapped around and caught into the coil below. Black and white are the main colors, the body of the

basket, of course, always being white, and the design worked out with black, which is generally the pod of the *martynia*. The more skilful weavers model their ware in a variety of shapes, so that one can have flat-bottomed bowls, conical bowls, saucers, jars of varied forms, bottles with wide necks, oval trinket baskets, and the like. Fig. 6 was made by a White Mountain Apache and is one of the largest baskets in existence. It is over forty inches in diameter and

that of the Havasupais, and yet the expert can tell the difference in a moment. The finishing-off border stitch of the Havasupai is the herring-bone stitch before described as belonging to the basketry of the Paiutis and Navahoes, while that of the southern Apaches is an ordinary wrapped stitch, a simple coiling around of the splint.

The Pimas and Maricopas make baskets similar to those of Paiuti, Havasupai and



FIG. 3. MONO BASKETS AND WEAVER.

forty-two inches high, and contains fully a quarter of a million stitches. It took Jatta Louisa, its maker, two years to make, and its perfect shape attests her skill and patience. Such baskets were originally used as granaries and may still be found doing similar service.

There is little that one can write about to differentiate the basketry of the White Mountain and San Carlos Apaches from

Apache, and yet easily distinguishable. The work is coarser than that of Havasupai or Apache, and the border stitch is generally of a backward and forward kind of weave peculiar to these peoples. Their designs are striking and varied, the Greek fret and circular forms of the Swastika being largely represented.

Fig. 7 is a typical Mission Indian basket of flat shape, and is one of the most highly-

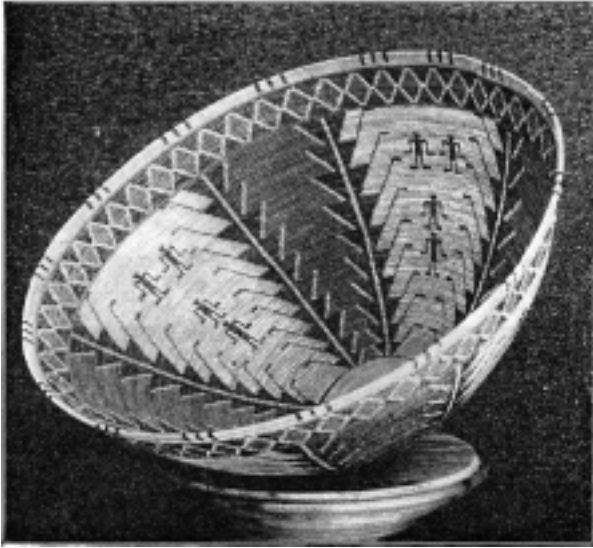


FIG. 3. TULARE BASKET.

prized baskets of my collection. It is simple, yet beautiful. Its colors are white and brown. The design represents the evening star and the heavens studded with lesser stars. Its maker was Ramona, the widow of Juan Diego, the "Alessandro" of H. H.'s fascinating romance, "Ramona." When I asked Ramona why she made that pattern she said in effect: "Sometimes I cannot sleep when I lie down at night. I see again that awful man coming over the hill with his gun in his hand and I hear the shot, as he fired at my husband. Then I see him pull his revolver, and hear his vile curses, as he shot again and again at the dead body. And I look up into the sky and my face is wet with my tears and I try to think of what the good padre tells me 'that I shall some day go up there somewhere and be with Juan again.' I hope so, for I love the stars, and when I begin to think of being up there my sorrow ceases and I am soon asleep."

A very common pattern of the so-called Kern and Tulare baskets is made in imitation of the diamond-back rattlesnake. When this is worked in appropriate colors it is a most striking and pleasing design. It is seen in Fig. 8. The makers do not always slavishly adhere to any set design, and the result is, by and by, a loss of the distinctly imitative pattern, and the gain of a conventionalized form that, by successive mutations, may lose all resemblance

to the original. This is seen in the St. Andrew's Cross design, which is often found on the baskets of the Sierra Nevada foothills. When you ask the weaver the signification of this cross pattern she tells you it is the rattlesnake design, and yet you can see no resemblance between the two. Cut the diamond in half, however, and join the two halves together in reverse order and the St. Andrew's Cross is formed.

Of the Pomas many pages of this magazine would not more than suffice to do justice to the skill and dexterity shown by their weavers. Figs. 7 and 9 are representative baskets. This people alone have eleven kinds of weave, for each of which they have a distinctive name. In

Fig. 9 the Cuset weave is represented, which, of all others, lends itself to grace and beauty.

The ornamented feather baskets—the so-called "Moon" and "Sun" baskets—are of Poman make and are Tsai weave, with the feathers of the woodpecker, quail and other birds cunningly inserted to produce most charming color and sheen effects.

In Fig. 10 are some of the Aleut baskets woven by the women of that far-away isle. They use a delicate sea grass and make basketry that reminds one of the exquisite drawn work of the Mexicans. The patterns of the baskets on the bottom row are beautifully embroidered in wool or silk of different colors. The cigar case (middle figure, bottom row) is almost as finely woven as a piece of grosgrain silk. It is a beautiful specimen of the weaver's art, though the silk used for embroidering the design is of modern colors and is of the dazzling and inharmonious combination that the aborigine so delights in. The design represents mountains and valleys. The basket on the right of the middle row was made on King's Island in Behring's Strait. It is of sea grass and of the overlap weave, with decorations in leather. The cover is ingeniously made in three terraces so that it reduces in size and is crowned with a round knob.

In a book entitled "Indian Basketry," which is just published, I have endeavored to present this interesting subject in the detail and fulness its interest warrants.