

LETTER TO THE EDITOR ON
THE SUBJECT OF AMERICAN
INDIAN BASKET-WORK.

DEAR SIR,—The value of a full and correct understanding of the details relating to the origin of ornament is so great that, perhaps, I need not apologise for addressing a few lines to you upon North American Indian baskets—objects which are remarkable for the variety of pattern-work displayed upon them and for their general decorative value. In America native-made baskets are greatly treasured, and fabulous prices are sometimes paid for examples displaying remarkable quality of workmanship. As much as fifteen hundred dollars have been asked for a single example of surpassing excellence. But the point upon which I wish especially to say a few words is the symbolism displayed in the ornamentation of these articles. As is generally known, the tribal languages in America are somewhat limited in their vocabulary, and symbolism becomes a necessity of intercourse. Marks and signs of

American Indian Basket-Work



FIG. 1

the most rudimentary character are the only means of written intercommunication ; but these, at times, bear a remote resemblance to the ideographic forms of China and ancient Egypt.

In the four baskets which I send to you for examination, some interesting symbolic patterns appear, which, if my information be correct, seem to call for fuller investigation and elucidation of the subject than, to my knowledge, has hitherto been attempted. How far the symbolism of the ornament upon them is established by ancient usage I am unable to say. The Indians themselves are generally most reticent upon the subject. Fig. 1 is a basket made by a squaw of the Atsugo or Hut-Creek tribe of the State of California. The triangular forms running round the basket in bands represent arrow heads. Those pointing obliquely upwards represent dead birds. Those pointing obliquely downwards represent dead ground game. The large central ornament represents a store-house. By the combined forms it is meant to express "We have hunted and filled our store-houses." Fig. 2 was made by a Digger Indian. The two dark encircling bands signify two tribes in search of game, represented by the arrow heads pointing up and down. At the base of the basket a circle is shown from which radiate short lines (see Fig. 3). This represents a group of men gathered round the camp fire—the whole signifying that "two tribes upon friendly terms went hunting, and afterwards gathered round the camp fire."

Fig. 4 is another Digger basket. The cross in the large central ornament represents a fire (probably suggested by crossed sticks), and the triangular forms attached may signify game. In

the bands of ornament we recognise the men gathering round. At the base of the basket is a four-petalled blossom, supposed to be a melon flower, which indicates the period of the ceremonial.

Fig. 5 is a basket made by a Washoe squaw. The zig-zags represent lightning in the hills. The diamond form symbolises a chief, and the arrow heads pointing downwards, ground game. The whole signifies that "our chiefs were out hunting when a great storm of lightning occurred in the hills." These examples are typical of the great variety of subjects treated by American basket-weavers, and my only object in referring to them is to draw attention to what appears to me to be a fascinating study, intimately connected with the beginning of



FIG. 2

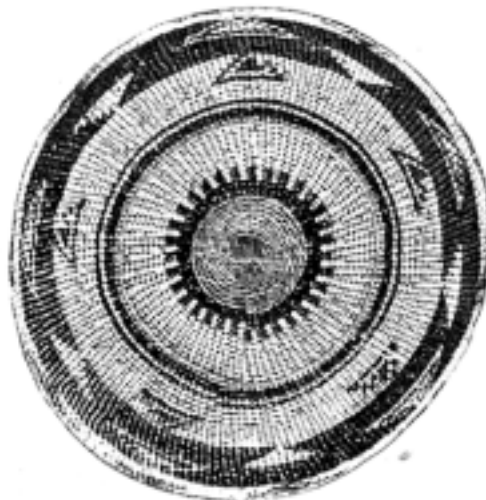


FIG. 3



FIG. 4



FIG. 5

art; and to induce others, better qualified than myself, to contribute to your columns further information upon the subject.

Yours truly,
TRAVELLER.