

Japanese Ornamental Basket Work

JAPANESE ORNAMENTAL BASKET WORK. BY OLIVER WHEATLEY.

BASKET work, although made of a wood substance, is fashioned in a method so entirely different to ordinary wood working it may be said to belong rather to weaving from the point of view of its technique. Basket weaving, indeed, is a current term, and a precisely similar system of warp and weft is employed as in the case of weaving proper. This parallel is interesting, as although the difference between a basket and a piece of cloth is so great it really appears the two had a common origin.

Certainly both are of the highest antiquity, and from many circumstances it seems both belong to the earliest of the useful arts. Fragments of woven cloth and nets have been found among the remains of the Swiss lake dwellings, which in itself is evidence of the age of the art, and if we attempt to picture its origin it is fairly easy to imagine the placing of a set of fibres or twigs and interlacing them with another set, of course by hand alone, and which could also be the rudest hands without tools of any kind.

A further testimony of the antiquity of the art of basket weaving may be adduced from the circumstance that many races still barbarous, or semi-barbarous, are expert basket workers. In the Victoria and Albert Museum may be seen some admirable specimens of a high degree of excellence by native hands. Some of the American Indian tribes also do excellent work.

There is another point of interest in the fact that, although the design of the weaving may be varied to an endless extent, many of the patterns are to be found in widely separated localities. The beautiful Japanese charcoal basket, shown on page 44 (Fig. 3) is identical in design with specimens from such distant places as Uganda and Mexico, though whether this is due to similarity of impulse in the presence of similar needs, or whether all are traceable to a centre from which all have been diffused, is impossible to determine here.

Basket work, like many other essential arts, is one of those responses to needs which will never die, which are the same in any country, and the features which characterised its utility ages upon ages ago are the same to-day. It is very strong,

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and, at the same time, it is very light, two invaluable qualities in portable articles; further, the twigs of which it is composed will grow on otherwise worthless land and practically in a wild state. Willows, rushes, grasses, straw, palm stem and leaf, rattan cane, wistaria, ivy, bamboo, and other plant substances, woven in a vast variety of ways, are the materials of which it is composed, and which are quite distinct from timber. It therefore will be seen to constitute a separate art in itself, and

when we proceed to examine the range of objects for which it is suited, it will be recognised how important it in reality is. Briefly, there is scarcely an article of domestic furniture, large or small, that it cannot be fashioned into, from the casing of the tiniest porcelain dish to tables and chairs. It can be used in the construction of vehicles large and small, as well as for innumerable receptacles in use everywhere. And when we add the possibilities it offers of evolving beautiful design, it appears somewhat strange that basket work should be so overlooked as an art. As an art it has attracted but little notice, and is altogether a negligible quantity.

But, perhaps, it is this very facility for producing



FIG. 2.—JAPANESE BASKET SELLERS

beautiful forms which keeps it in the background. A basket is merely a basket, but paint the same design on a piece of vellum and it acquires instant importance as a work of "creative imagination." In the first place it is essentially a special art, its technique is totally distinct from every other, and its design, for the most part, is evolved from its technique and is not imported from elsewhere, as with most other arts, and as a consequence of this its design is mostly spontaneous, we may almost say subconscious, the patterns of many of them having been evolved in the first place by accident in all probability rather than intention, and by persons wholly unfamiliar with drawing or any other branch of art. Many of the native specimens, excellent as they are artistically, are not made as works of art at all, but are objects of utility, such as fish baskets or sieves, and the worker merely introduced the artistic element as the work proceeded. This form of design is by far its most living one, and basket work being all "manual," the ease with which variations are possible is very evident. At the same time, somehow or other, only too much of the European work has a



FIG. 1.—JAPANESE BASKET-WEAVERS AT WORK

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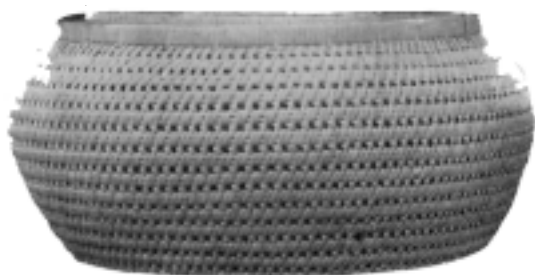


FIG. 3.—CHARCOAL BASKET

monotony compared with Oriental and native work, though this need not necessarily be the case, and wherever conditions permit, as with native peoples, it can assume forms of beauty. But it is the Chinese and Japanese, both so liberally endowed with the artistic spirit, who have carried the art to a pitch of excellence on a level with the finest productions of any art or of any period.

An examination of the examples here reproduced will convey better than can any words an idea of the power of design which the Japanese so freely infuse into



FIG. 4.—
FLOWER BASKET

this simple primitive craft. Prof. Jiro Harada, whose name is familiar to readers of this magazine as the author of recent articles on the Art of Japan,



FIG. 5.—
FLOWER BASKET

has kindly supplied the following very interesting particulars of the baskets in use in that country :—

“Europeans who have travelled in Japan—even though their observation in that country may have been made, as is so often the case, at the rate of 30 miles an hour—must have been attracted



FIG. 6.—FLOWER BASKET

by the daintiness of the bamboo baskets in which fruit is sold to the passengers at some of the railway stations. If a lengthened stay in the country has afforded them opportunities of seeing the life of the people, they could scarcely help noticing the very important part that bamboo baskets play in general usefulness as well as in decoration. A closer examination of the articles will enable them to discern the peculiar quality of artistic merit that some of them possess, while a still closer study will convince them that in the design and workmanship of these baskets, the artistic skill and temperament of the people have found expression.

“Take, for instance, the *sumitori-kago*, used to hold charcoal for the braziers which have always been the principal means of warming the rooms of the Japanese houses. Although adopted for such a humble use, they present a wealth of shapes and an extraordinary delicacy of finish, while certain examples will be found to possess unusual beauty. Even among the salt baskets nailed to the kitchen wall, beautiful workmanship can be found.



FIG. 7.—WASTE-PAPER BASKET

“Innumerable articles of most intricate work in woven bamboo strips are found in Japan. Handbags of all sizes and shapes, cigar and cigarette cases, tobacco pouches and pipe cases, and some of the tiny baskets used in the doll festivals, all bear traces of the infinite patience and endless artistic ingenuity of the people.

“The chief triumph, however, in bamboo weaving is to be seen in the *hana-kago*, flower baskets, and the *mori-kago*, commonly used for fruit. There are two kinds of the former: a very deep one to be hung by a hook on the post of the *tokonoma* in the guest room, and the other so shaped as to stand upright. These baskets are used either for the *ikebana* (to arrange flowers in) or for the *sōkwa* (to decorate with artificial flowers). They generally contain a piece of whole bamboo, with a joint at the bottom so as to hold water, although zinc and copper tubes are now often used for the purpose. There is hardly anything which will give a more effective touch to a Japanese room in the way of decoration than a quaint bamboo basket of deep lustrous brown, the shade and shape harmonizing with the *toko-bashira*, the post of honour, on which it hangs with a few sprays of green leaves and dainty flowers arranged in the Koryu or other known styles in the art of arranging flowers which is brought to such a state of perfection in Japan. Sometimes a flower-basket is placed in the *tokonoma* with a few chrysanthemums or iris, according to the season, arranged in the Ikenobō style, with an enormous bamboo

handle in] the shape of a halo around the flowers, and one cannot help being impressed by the aptitude of the basket for the function it has been designed to perform. Some of the *mori-kago* deserve special attention in this connection. There are but few countries besides Japan where the giving and receiving of presents go on so much regardless of the season, and where fruits are used for this purpose to such an extent. These are times when a present of fruit is brought in a most artistic basket which is often far more valuable



FIG. 8.—FLOWER BASKET



FIG. 9.—EGG BASKET

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than the contents themselves. The shape and the colour of the basket, in contrast or in harmony with those of the fruit, are often strikingly beautiful.

"To make a specially beautiful basket, it was customary to take the old bamboo pieces used in the construction of Japanese houses, where, by the age and smoke of



FIG. 10.—FLOWER BASKET

certain makers in Tokyo have especially distinguished themselves of late, and among them Iizuka Hosai holds a prominent place. Of the few in Kyoto special mention should be made of Morita Shintaro, while in Osaka, Ogawa Nihei is well known. In this connection it may be well to remember that the city of Shidzuoka has long been famous for the production of certain articles in bamboo, and that Kyoto and its vicinity are famous for the growth of excellent bamboo. Some of the baskets made by the more eminent producers are quite as much works of art as



FIG. 11.—FLOWER BASKET

many years, they have become tinted with a peculiarly rich brown. It is only in recent years that an artificial means of obtaining this rich and unchangeable tint by dyeing has been invented. In the production of these artistic bamboo baskets

for travelling, but a certain number of ornamental ones will receive a share."

Let us turn now to the particular examples of which illustrations are given. It is worth noting how fine are the effects produced by an introduction of flat members among round ones, and those



FIG. 12.—FLOWER BASKET

any of the articles in other materials whose artistic merits have long been generally recognised.

"The material used for baskets in Japan is by no means confined to bamboo. Among the substances more or less commonly used may be mentioned rattan, vine, and willow. Partly to provide these materials and partly to utilise the idle land, hundreds of acres of hitherto unused spaces in castle grounds in various parts of the country were planted with young willow trees about two years ago. Of course the bulk of the articles that will be made with them will be those intended for practical use, such as large baskets

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FIG. 13.—FLOWER BASKET

of other forms (figs. 5, 6, 11, 15). This element in particular is lacking in European work, a curious circumstance when we think of the value attached to plain surfaces in other branches of design. This however is very extensively employed by all Oriental basket workers, and a somewhat analogous employment of plain structural ribs is shown in fig. 21 as a relief to the closely-woven fibres inside.

A structurally different system is employed in figs. 22, 23, 24. Here all the members start from one end, and by crossing at various angles, and also in consequence of the varying width of the members at certain places, produce an effect at once pretty and structurally very sound. Fig. 24 suggests an extended use, and shows what may be done by this method for decorative details of furniture generally—a Celtic art in actual interlacings.

Of all the materials employed for the work, bamboo appears to make the finest as well as the strongest. It can be divided into extremely slender fibres, such as those of the Burmese example, fig. 25, or the Formosan basket, fig. 26. The curious effect of fig. 27 is not produced by structural design. A body form is first made, and bunches of fibres are then tucked in as seen, their ends being free inside, but as most of these baskets so made have a lining, these free ends present no objection. The same system is employed in fig. 11.

At the Japan-British Exhibition a basket was exhibited (fig. 9) composed of vertical and horizontal flat half-inch strips of bamboo, the horizontal ones forming complete rings, but the joints were completely concealed as effectually as a metal joint would be. It is qualities such as these which raise the craft of basket-making to a veritable art like cabinet-making or silversmith's work, a development which can only take place when the art is pursued as a serious one. We have ample evidence of the exceedingly durable

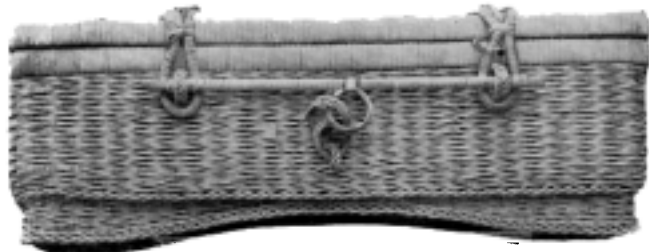


FIG. 14.—LUNCH BASKET

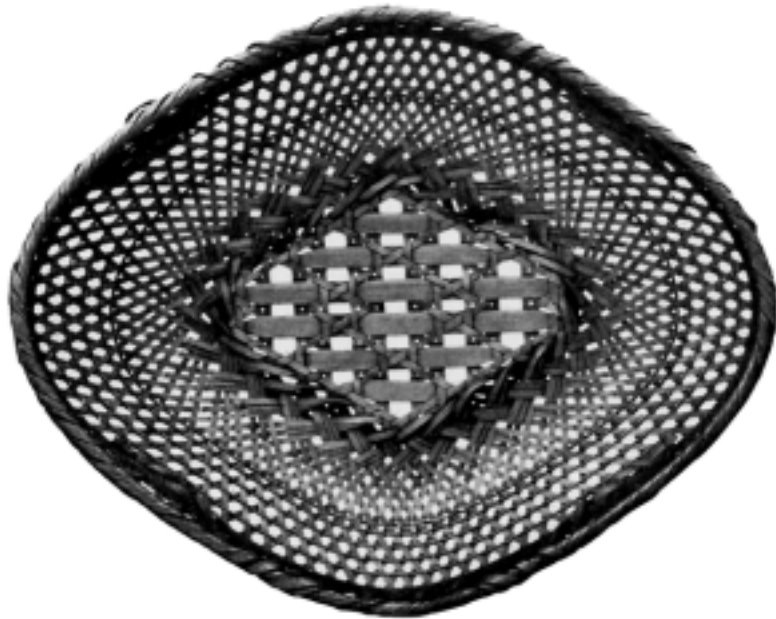


FIG. 15.—FLAT BASKET PROBABLY USED FOR GATHERING FLOWERS

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FIG. 16.—FLOWER BASKET

both large and minute, the alternations and spacings of the members, and lastly in regard to the application of finishing varnishes and lacquers either all over or on part, as well as gilding of basket work.

But, again, it is quite an open question whether the range of tricks such as are practised by the Chinese is known in this country. The very pretty buttons to the clasp on fig. 28 are no doubt quite easy to make when the trick is known, but until then it is somewhat of a puzzle; or the unusual production, fig. 29, a Japanese example, which recalls string work rather than what it in reality is, a basket. Then, too, we never employ it decoratively, as in fig. 30—an example, by the way, which completely disproves the notion that the Japanese are incapable of symmetrical design.

It cannot of course be contended that all these things are works of great art: they are not intended to be. Most of them are merely objects of use, but with a qualifying factor; and

character of English productions, and a great deal of latent taste is also no doubt present, but it is not taken as far as it might be. The full resources of the craft are not utilized, as regards the range of substances suitable for the work, the range of sizes of the strips and twigs,



FIG. 17.—FLOWER BASKET

it is this latter which can influence our lives so profoundly, and which is coming to be more and more recognised. As Mr. Joseph McCabe once remarked, "A world without art would be an impossible place to live in"; and modern research tends to show constantly that expensive outlay is



FIG. 18.—FLOWER BASKET

not necessarily the one condition. Basket-work, consoling thought, is usually very cheap, though not always. It needs effective draperies and carpets of pleasing colour and texture to display it to greatest advantage: but with these accompaniments many of the forms approach nearer to the poetic details of domestic adornment so cherished by the romantic painters like Ford Madox Brown than almost any other articles of modern use. To the craftsman it should be some stimulus to know that it is an art which needs very few tools and no machinery, so that initial outlay, always such a serious consideration, is the lowest possible.



FIG. 19.—TOBACCO POUCH (ACTUAL SIZE SLIGHTLY LARGER THAN THIS)

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FIG. 20.—CHARCOAL BASKET



FIG. 21.—FRUIT BASKET

The new Department of Woods and Forestry might very well give special attention to the matter; it is pre-eminently a forestry subject, and can be localized in any district, the more rural the better. But it is not more straw hats and market baskets that are needed. It is rather the creation of that precious and abiding element, the thing to please, than merely the thing to use.

One difficulty here in England is the limited range of materials compared with countries like China and Japan. The bamboo does not grow here, neither do the palm and rattan; but wistaria might very well be cultivated, and since the akebi is a mountain ivy, that no doubt would also thrive here. Of course, materials can be imported, but that is not quite the same thing as raising them on the spot.

On the other hand, certain woods reduced to shavings yield excellent weaving material, such as

that of which strawberry baskets are made, and which would provide the flat forms among the round osiers with admirable effect. An osier bed, according to the best methods, can be got into full producing capacity in three years, and will continue to yield for ten. It is comparatively easy to establish, the plants being raised from cuttings which root very readily. The first essential is to select cuttings from the best variety.

There appear, therefore, no insuperable difficulties in the way of developing an art craft of basket-making in this country. It is practised very much in the Black Forest, Germany, from where some of the best European examples emanate, as well as some of the worst, artistically; and in any case the prevailing taste in English decoration would no doubt produce a new type of basket, altogether different from any made elsewhere.

In a primitive civilisation without educational influences the growth of basket design would no doubt be spontaneous, evolving forms such as have been alluded to in the earlier part of this article, and that is the ideal method; but in these days it is next to impossible to escape the contagious influence of what is going on elsewhere, and in practice, as a consequence, it is certain every designer begins with a decorative motif which he proceeds to bring into conformity with the work in hand. It is not therefore necessary to keep too exclusively to basket-work forms for inspiration.



FIG. 22.—FLOWER BASKET

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FIG. 23.—FLOWER BASKET

Many of the pretty forms which basket making has evolved so strongly resemble the intricate interlaced ornaments of the Book of Kells and



FIG. 24.—HANGING FLOWER BASKET

Norse carvings that the conclusion seems irresistible that it is the former which has inspired the latter and has been the prototype from which they have originated. Conversely, a perusal of these painted and sculptured forms, owing to the freedom from the restrictions of technique, may suggest many

richer and higher examples than could unaided basket technique alone.

Allusion has been made to the necessity of introducing flat forms among the round ones; and nowhere do we find this principle better displayed than in Celtic painting and carving.

But if basket-work would benefit by the introduction of plain forms it seems equally true that ordinary joinery might benefit by the introduction of basket-work. Small Celtic basket details would make a very elegant enrichment of wainscot and cabinet



FIG. 25.—BURMESE BASKET



FIG. 26.—FORMOSAN BASKET

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FIG. 27.—FLOWER BASKET

of Economic Botany at Kew, for their courtesy in placing examples at my disposal for illustrating this article. The baskets shown in figs. 3, 4, 7, 14, 26, 28, 29, 30, were photographed at the Exhibition, where the Japanese basket-making industry was represented



FIG. 29.—HAND BAG



FIG. 28.—HAND BAG

by a very interesting group of exhibits; those shown in figs. 5, 6, 8—13 are at South Kensington, and the five examples illustrated in figs. 21—25 are in the Museum at Kew. The others (figs. 15—19) belong to the Editor. O. W.

work, either open or set against a background, and if a very substantial treatment is desired it could be woven into the wood-framing itself. It is not even necessary, however, to stop here. Midway between basket-weaving and joinery is wood-bending, and some of the feats which are performed by this process are, when seen for the first time, truly astounding. Its efficiency as a practical art consists, like basket manipulation, in enabling wood to take other forms than angular ones, dispensing with jointing, and thereby combining strength with lightness.

In conclusion, my thanks are due to the Japanese officials of the Japan-British Exhibition, and the Keepers at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Museum



FIG. 30.—VASE ENCASED IN A BASKET