

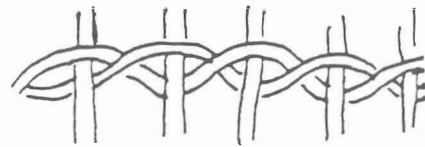
WILSON MUSEUM BULLETIN

Winter 1992-1993

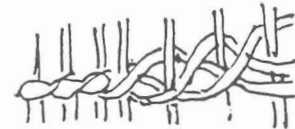
Vol. 3, No. 26

BASKETS and BIRCHBARK

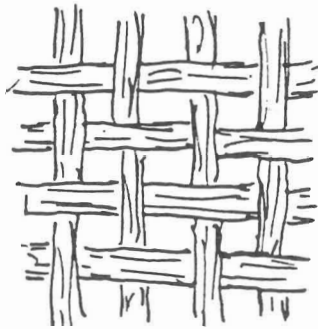
Basket making has a very long history, predating human life and activity. Baskets were — and are — made by insects, animals and birds, one quickly thinks of caterpillar cocoons, beavers' homes and, of course, birds' nests — the very first egg baskets. Humans, however, have not been slow to follow; wherever fibers suitable for basketry, or fibers which could be made suitable for basketry were found, people have made baskets — grasses, rushes and sedges, small twigs and branches stripped of their bark and shredded or used entire, leaves such as palm, agave and maize, cut into strips, certain barks, roots and the fibers of trees — these were all used, frequently several in one basket. There seems to be no limit to the variety of basket forms made possible by various materials and methods of weaving or sewing.



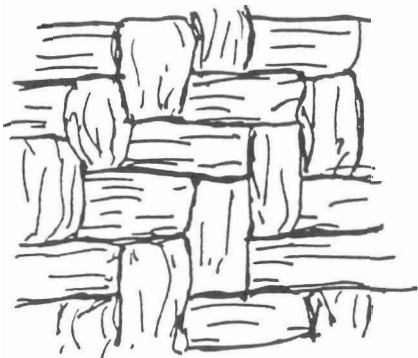
Single twining.



Three-strand twined work.



Open checkerwork.



Twilled work.

In woven baskets the warp and weft cross each other, in plain weaving, if these are similar in size and flexibility the result is a checkerboard, very noticeable when warp and weft are of contrasting colors, in wickerwork the warp is comparatively stiff and the weft more pliable so there are ridges over the warp, in twilled work the weft skips one or more warps to form a design or an overall pattern. Twining is the most intricate, the warp being rather rigid the weft fibers are added, usually in pairs, and are twisted about each other between the warps, when the weft strands are added in threes they are braided as they pass through the warp.

Coiled baskets are sewn, not woven, they are usually of twigs, splints or grasses wrapped with a pliable fiber which is firmly sewn into the adjacent coil. They can be of any size from tiny to the size of a barrel and the sewing material, depending on the size and use of the basket, would be twigs, split twigs, roots or shredded roots. A bone awl was used to separate the fibers of the coil so that the thread could be inserted.

Indians of the Northwest Coast made very fine soft baskets of twined spruce root. The roots were harvested in the spring and summer, the bark removed and the root split, the outer part was kept for the weft and the inner for the warp, the heart was



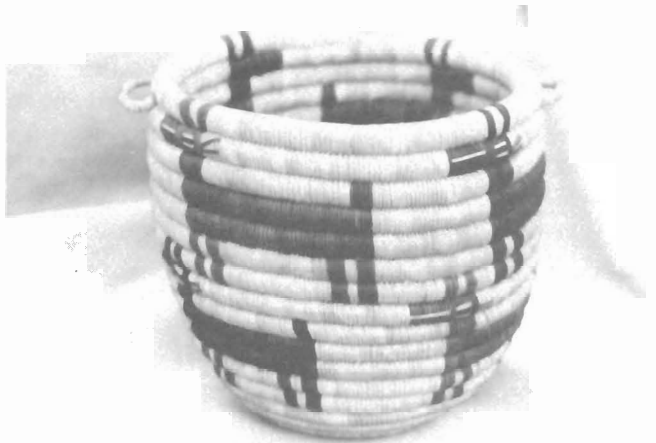
Three lower baskets, Northwest Coast, cover of one on right has a small hollow knob, when shaken seeds inside produce a gentle rattle. Upper basket shows design in false embroidery



Birchbark decorated with moose hair embroidery



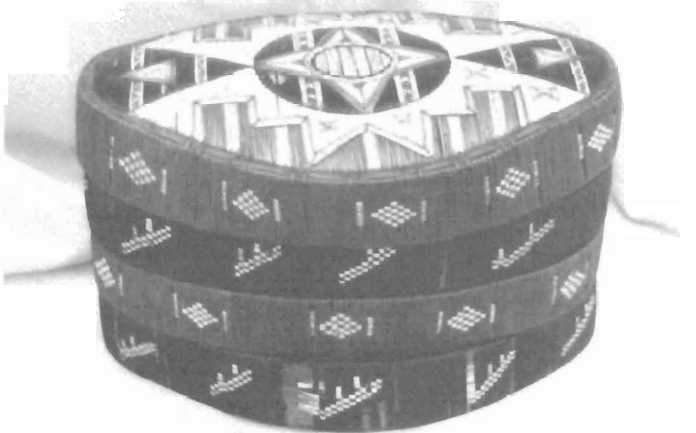
Birchbark container showing Double Curve Motive.



Sturdy coiled basket, Southwest.



Wood and birchbark boxes, decorated with porcupine quills, eastern birchbark area.



discarded. Checkerwork of red or yellow cedar bark was used for mats, some hats and baskets, diagonal plaiting for belts and carrying straps. Many of these baskets would hold water, and, to the south, the Pomo of California made coiled baskets which also could be used for water.

The Plains Indians, who were nomadic, preferred containers of skins or leather to baskets. Indians of the Southwest, those of the pueblos and villages, made handsome, sturdy, coiled baskets as well as plaited mats and baskets.

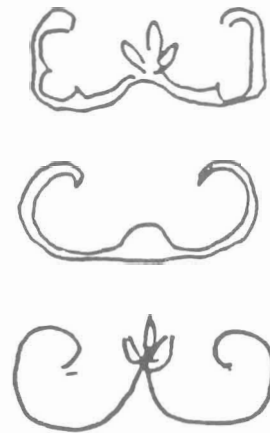
In the northeast strong baskets were made of ash splints; the cut tree or log was laid on supports and pounded for some time to loosen the fibers, these were then stripped off, smoothed and cut to the required size. Cedar, though not as strong, was also used, it needed no pounding. This was part of the paper birch tree (*Betula papyrifera*) area where, at least at first, birchbark containers were more used than baskets. The bark was readily obtained and quickly turned into serviceable containers of various kinds. Sewing material was ash splints or stripped spruce root, an awl was used as in most Indian sewing and needles were the penis bone of bear, mink, raccoon, or otter which have a natural perforation. Winter bark, which more easily separates into layers, was used for canoe and wigwam coverings and also for carefully made and, perhaps, elaborately decorated boxes which were regarded as permanent possessions. Round or oval boxes with covers, often decorated with porcupine quills or moose hair embroidery, were used for small personal items, larger containers, rectangular or round, some with covers and straps or bails, were used for clothing or food. These might be colored a dark rich brown with elder bark dye, a design then engraved, the dark bark cut away so that the design showed in the lighter color of the inner bark, older containers usually show the double curve motive while later ones tend more to realistic representations

Water tight dishes were made by folding the sheet of bark so that no seam was needed, the outside of the bark usually being on the inside of the pot, the folded ends were sewn at the top, the entire rim being reinforced with a twig or splint sewn about it. These dishes could be used for cooking — either, after soaking, hung over the fire or placed on branches over coals. Stone boiling was another method of cooking. Wissler attributes stone boiling to a group living along the west coast, early hunters may well have roasted or grilled meat over the campfire but the stone boilers made baskets which held water, then found, eventually, that by dropping hot stones in the water, replacing the cooler stones with more hot ones, the water would boil. "There was now suitable food for young children, the aged and the sick." Stone boiling spread over the continent and the Penobscot Indians cooked by this process, using

seamless birchbark containers. The hot stones were added and removed by means of shaped sticks. Birchbark vessels, easily replaced when compared to baskets, made possible cooking directly over a fire. Speck wrote that he saw two quarts of water, in a container of folded bark, brought to boil in about twenty minutes. The vessel had first been thoroughly soaked and the fire reduced to coals, such pots do not last long.

Each spring maple sugar was made with the same equipment, Indian women and children went to their hereditary sugar groves where they camped while making the sugar. The sap was collected in bark buckets, taken to the camp where it was boiled down. The hardening syrup was poured into birchbark cones about nine inches long — these were often a gift to a friend.

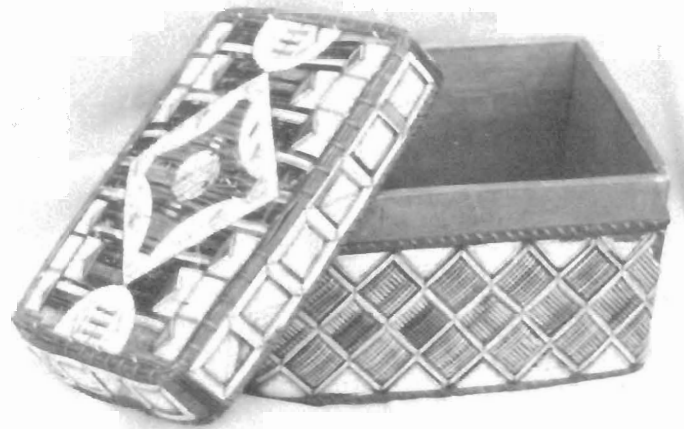
Such birchbark and basket containers — made for use, even as cooking pots — are now exhibited in museums as works of art.



Double curve motive.

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Wood and birchbark boxes, decorated with porcupine quills, from the eastern birchbark area.

Indian baskets and birchbark containers from the Roland M. Roward Collection will be shown throughout the summer, included in this exhibit will be Indian baskets collected by Dr. and Mrs. J. Howard Wilson previous to 1900.



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