BASKETS IN NATIVE CALIFORNIA

California Indian basketry has long been recognized as some of the world’s finest. Baskets from Native California can be seen in countless museum collections and exhibitions where they are conserved and appreciated both as historical artifacts and as fine art. However, basketry in Native California goes beyond art; basket-making is a cultural tradition linking Native cultures of today with their past. Organizations such as the California Indian Basketweavers Association (CIBA) help to support the growing number of contemporary Native weavers who continue the tradition of creating utilitarian, ceremonial, and commercial basketry.

I. Native California Basketry

Traditionally, baskets have been made for utilitarian, religious, and commercial purposes. Throughout history, utilitarian baskets have been used for activities such as harvesting and preparing foods. Open-twined weaves are used for fishing and trapping while tighter, close-twined weaves are used for storing, cooking, and serving food and drink. Large, tightly woven, wide-rimmed burden baskets have been used with open-weave handled seed beaters to harvest seeds. Among Native Californians, baskets have also been used as clothing in the form of ceremonial caps, work caps, and even baby cradles. Basketry has been used in ceremonial events, often as special containers or as ceremonial caps. Generally, these baskets are more elaborate than their utilitarian counterparts, offering more decoration in color, pattern, and ornamentation, with shell or feather adornment being the most common. Sometimes ceremonial baskets are also given as gifts.

Beyond the exchange of ceremonial baskets as gifts, commercial basket weaving was practiced—even before Anglo-American contact. Ceremonial and other special baskets were the primary type of goods sold to others. Less accomplished weavers might seek to purchase special baskets from a better weaver. Since ceremonial baskets were used again and again, this pre-contact market was not very large; however, following contact with non-Native settlers, Native California basketweavers began to produce an increasing number of baskets for sale. Missionaries sometimes used or traded baskets. For instance, it is believed that the Russian mercantile colony at Fort Ross traded baskets with the Kashaya Pomo in the early 1800s. Another example of early non-Native basket use can be seen in Chinese cooks’ use of Native-made baskets in their kitchens during the Gold Rush.

Learning the weaving process, from the harvesting and preparation of materials to the techniques of weaving and coiling, is an important cultural tradition passed down from one generation to another. In the past, it was usually a household/family practice. Female children grew up learning basketry skills and, as adults, were able to meet the needs of their households. (As previously noted, if the weaver demonstrated great skill, baskets may even have been sold commercially.) Now, Native Californians teach basketry outside their own communities; but the weaving tradition continues to be tied directly to the lands and resources used to produce basketry, and to the continuity of knowledge and skills that Native families and communities maintain.

In addition to the notable skills of weaving, creating baskets involves extensive knowledge of materials and their preparation. This knowledge includes land...
management strategies focused on maintaining plant materials used in basket making. Such strategies include seasonal burning to control growth, disease, and weeds. Regular harvesting of root materials maintains a loose, aerated soil promoting healthy growth. While these land management practices were more common before contact with non-Native settlers, they are still used today.

Some basket materials used for weaving, coiling, and dying include willow, maidenhair fern, maple, alder, cedar, hazelnut, mistletoe, pine, chokecherry, brackenfern, oak, bulrush, wild grape, redbud, sedge, bear grass, and white grasses. Foundation materials come from the more woody parts of plants while twining materials come from a variety of carefully processed plant parts, particularly roots. Plants with natural color contrasts or dyed plants are often used for decoration.

III. Colonization and Disenfranchisement

In the short span of years between the Gold Rush and the Depression, Native Californians lost rights and access to their lands and were systematically deprived of the ability to practice their cultural traditions. More often than not, colonization policies resulted in relocating native peoples to lands that could not support their material needs. Reduction of access to resources hindered the ability of Native basketweavers to continue the traditional ways of life that supported basketry.

Assimilation efforts during colonization included the removal of Native children from their families and their subsequent enrollment in boarding schools where their cultural traditions were replaced with Euro-American models and worldviews. The disciplined, mandatory use of English, rather than Native languages, was one of the many ways in which assimilation was accomplished. Another means of assimilation came in the teaching of Euro-American crafts rather than Native skills.

At the same time assimilation was underway, colonizing Americans grew increasingly interested in the basket weaving of Native California. Traditional baskets were seen as artistic commodities and a “vanishing” art form, making them “exotic” and highly collectable. This interest allowed Native Californian women to earn money at a time when few jobs were available to Native Californians. Basket-collecting also resulted in the preservation of numerous baskets; however, purely utilitarian examples are under-represented in such collections.

IV. Revitalization of Cultural Tradition

The struggle to keep Native Californian basket weaving traditions alive gained more support late in the 20th century through the efforts of a number of key Native Californians. Mabel McKay, Essie Parrish, Marie Potts, Florence Harrie, and Kathy Wallace are just a handful of the Native Californians who have been involved in this movement. Through the revival of basketry, other Native traditions have also been renewed. For example, Native women can wear ceremonial caps to religious gatherings because both the basketry and religious practices have been maintained and revived.

While Native Californian basketry has experienced a revival, many issues still threaten its practice. One such issue is access to basket making materials. California Native American tribes have been able to retain very little of their original lands and, therefore, must rely on state and federal policy regarding access to resources in order to obtain weaving materials. U.S. Forest Service policy of pesticide spraying for vegetation
control is another issue threatening Native Californian basketry. The use of pesticides can result in health problems for basketweavers since many weaving materials are prepared by using one’s mouth. These are only a couple of the issues facing modern Native basketweavers in their ongoing efforts to preserve the cultural traditions and skills of basketry. Organizations such as the California Indian Basketweavers Association, or CIBA, provide a good source of news regarding contemporary Native Californian concerns. You may visit their homepage at www.ciba.org.