

# CARRYING A CULTURE: THE DISTINCTIVE REGIONAL STYLES OF SOME BASKET MAKING NATIONS IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

by Karen Petkau

"Baskets...are a manifestation of a people's history, origins and relationship to other entities in their universe" (Turner 1996). The process involved in making a basket is steeped in the traditions and beliefs of a cultural group and is representative of those beliefs. "The basketry style of a people encodes their identity," as well as a set of ideas that are interwoven in this ancient art form (Laforet 1990).

A well-made basket then becomes a part of the larger group of work from the region and a representation of that region's style. In this way, personal choices, assumptions, and preferences reflect the culture of an entire region. These personal choices would be based on the beliefs that are instilled in children from the time they are born, in the form of teachings, stories, and observations of the actions of their parents, elders, and teachers (Cruikshank 1979). The characteristic of each basketry type is necessarily general, as there is variation within each group, and analysis is often based on comparisons to other groups' work. Discrepancy arises, in part, due to lack of documentation by collectors. Many collectors did not record the basket makers' name. This is an important detail that was overlooked at the time when most collections were made, possibly due to an inherent gender bias of those doing the collection, as they were mainly male, and baskets are traditionally within the women's sphere (Fortney 2001).

Basketry was common and essential practice in nearly every region of pre-contact British Columbia and well into the twentieth century. In this article, a small sample of the baskets, and the characteristics of techniques and designs adopted and developed by a few communities living near the Fraser and Columbia rivers, will be discussed.



Figure 1: Basket #978.49.455 from the White Rock Museum Collection.

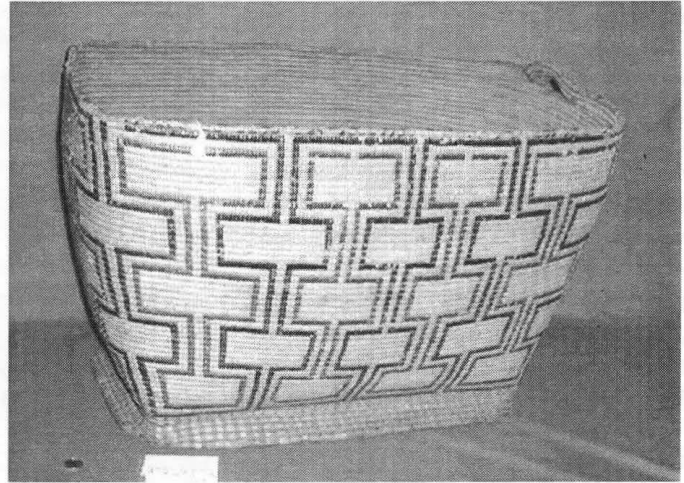


Figure 2: Basket #978.49.525 from the White Rock Museum Collection.

## The Art of Design in Coiled Basketry

Basketry designs are a very important medium for individual artistic expression and, moreover, often reveal familial relations and cultural continuity (Brandford 1984).

To incorporate design for beauty on the form of a basket that is produced to be functional tests the skill of a basket maker, as she is bound by the constraints of her medium. Any representational form must be adapted within the constraints of these physical boundaries (Farrand 1900). Consequently, it is not surprising that the majority of designs are geometrical patterns, although these are based on objects and patterns seen in nature.

Also, many designs are varied over and over in subsequent work, each time becoming just a little bit different from the previous piece and often more complex. There is, therefore, a good deal of uncertainty and ambiguity when it comes to discussing the meaning of the decoration on particular baskets. It is nearly impossible to trace the history of these various designs due to the lack of documentation of the baskets that have survived. While a few collectors recorded the name of the village or territory where they collected a basket, very rarely was the name of the basket maker ever recorded. Even in many major museum collections the provenance of baskets is uncertain.

## *Nlaka'pamux (Thompson)*

The Nlaka'pamux people make their home along and surrounding the lower Thompson River, the upper Fraser River, south of Lillooet, north of Hope, and along the Nicola River. In all, their traditional territory is approximately 160 kilometers in length and 145 kilometers in width (Teit 1900). Together with the Stl'atl'imx, Secwepemc, and Okanagan, they form the Interior Salish.

Some of the Nlaka'pamux people believe that Coyote taught them the art of coiled basketry. In another legend, as told by Annie York, a man who went to visit the moon received the instructions on how to make baskets from an elder couple (Hanna and Henry 1996).

The making of a coiled basket was a long process and the finished product had to be of high quality, as these baskets were used for carrying and storing water, and also for cooking. Baskets that needed to be waterproof often did not need any additional treatment as the small coils and fine stitches were enough to create a watertight product. It is characteristic of the Nlaka'pamux basket makers to prematurely turn the corners of their baskets, which becomes more and more accentuated as the basket was built up. As a result, the baskets often slant to the left, as if twisted slightly.

The most common method of design in coiled basketry is imbrication, a process of folding a strip of coloured bark or grass over itself, and underneath a stitch, which holds it down. The design element is then folded over top of the stitch that has just been taken and back over itself again so as to be under the next stitch as well (Mason 1902).

Baskets made after 1926 tend to be of a single design field, with a large imbricated design on bare coils, two series of designs, or the whole basket being imbricated. Baskets with an unimbricated background, covered in groups of repeating small design elements, are most typical of the Nlaka'pamux. The traditional design colours are red and black, but the only limit to colour choice was imagination when aniline dyes were introduced.

The coming of Europeans had less effect on the coiled basketry of the Plateau than other regions (Miller 1990), but changes were made. Cooking baskets and containers were rapidly replaced with the new, easily obtained European manufactured products, thus decreasing the number of traditional basketry forms. People began to make copies of European items, such as tables and teacups, as seen in the Royal British Columbia Museum collection. Feet, which were added to baskets only after 1800, and handles became more prevalent.

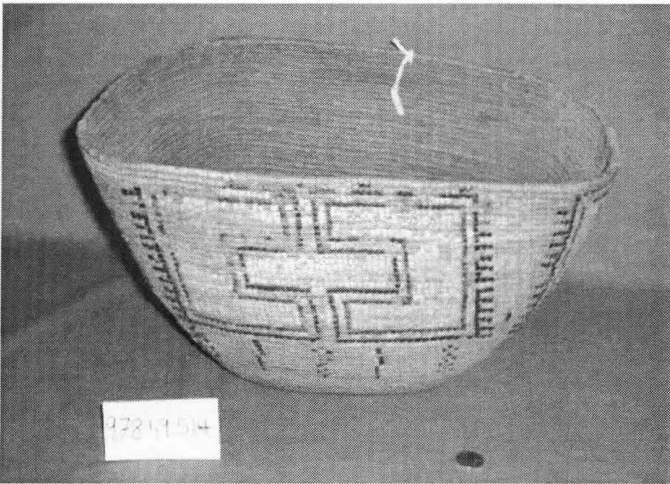


Figure 3: Basket #978.49.514 from the White Rock Museum Collection.

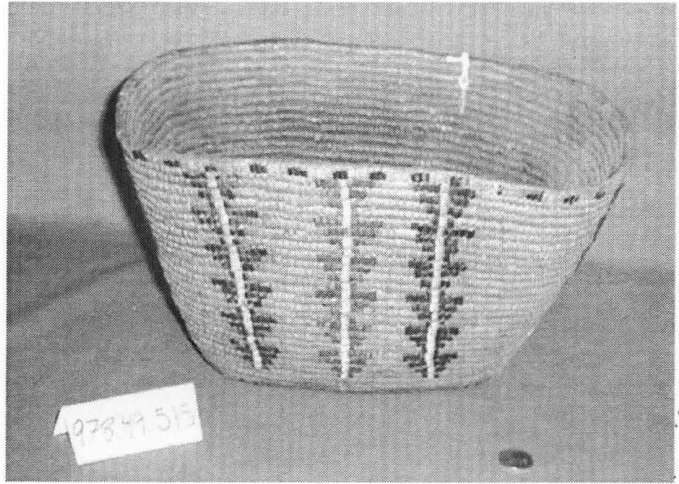


Figure 4: Basket #978.49.515 from the White Rock Museum Collection.

#### *Stl'atl'imx (Lillooet)*

The Stl'atl'imx live to the north and northwest of the Nlaka'pamux along the Lillooet River and tributaries, and a portion of the upper Fraser River. Their traditional territory is similar in size to the Nlaka'pamux.

The baskets from this region are more rectangular than those from other regions, and have high walls. Corners are sharper, which may be a result of using slats for the foundation (Haeblerlin, Teit, and Roberts 1928). A square shape predominates (Turnbaugh and Turnbaugh 1986), which Haeblerlin et al. believe may have been copied from the cedar bentwood boxes of the coastal people.

#### *Klickitat*

The Klickitat people are part of the larger group of people speaking the Sahaptin language. They make their homes along the north side of the Columbia River valley, near the slopes of the Cascade Mountains in Washington State (Schlick 1994).

In 1930 the Klickitat, along with the Nlaka'pamux, Stl'atl'imx, and Tsilhqot'in were the major producers of coiled baskets (Schlick 1994). The most common use of coiled baskets in this region pre-contact (before the mid nineteenth century) was as cooking pots. Since the introduction of metal cooking pots, this basketry form is found much less frequently. The elders today remember their elders creating big beautiful baskets that, when the maker was sitting on the floor, would come up to their chin (Schlick 1994). Some also remember baskets that were flat on one side, to be carried on a horse (Schlick 1994).

#### **Analysis of a Collection: The White Rock Museum Collection**

What follows is an interpretation of the traits discussed above in regard to a few of the burden baskets in the White Rock Museum collection. The analysis is based on the previous literature review as well as comparisons with basketry collections of known provenance. These include the Royal British Columbia Museum and the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. Even in these cases, however, the region of origin is known (in the case of the baskets used for comparison), but the maker's name is usually not given.



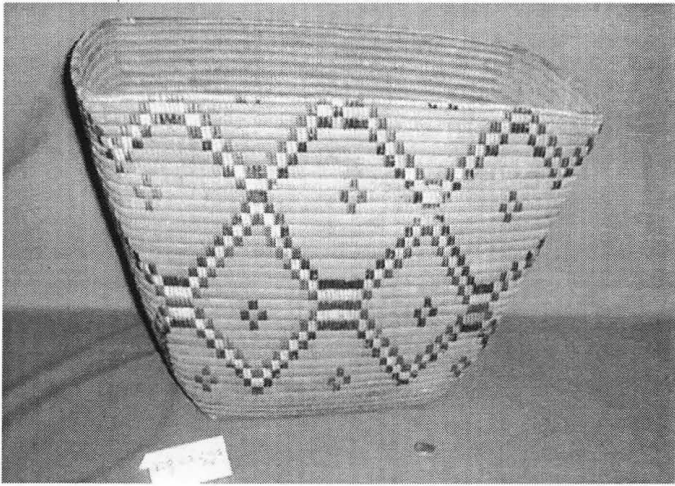


Figure 5: Basket #978.49.529 from the White Rock Museum Collection.

Figure 1: Basket #978.49.455 from the White Rock Museum Collection.

This coiled basket is made with solid slats and is very angular in shape. Designs include imbrication and multiple lines of beading per coil. The pattern is of a rainbow, necklace, or grasshopper (Haeberlin, Teit, Roberts 1928). According to Farrand, it could also be lightning (Farrand 1900). It bears a resemblance to artifact #2931 from the Royal British Columbia Museum, which is from Pemberton Meadows (Mount Currie, Stl'atl'imx). Based on the shape, beading on the upper field, and the slat coils, this is done in the Stl'atl'imx style.

Figure 2: Basket #978.49.525 from the White Rock Museum Collection.

This basket is imbricated with quite a common pattern. It is found on a cylindrical Klickitat basket (Lobb 1978). In a brochure from the Frohman Trading Company there is a photo of a basket bearing a striking resemblance to this one in design as well as size and shape, including the foot (Frohman Trading Company 1902). They list it as Nlaka'pamux.

Figure 3: Basket #978.49.514 from the White Rock Museum Collection

Almost two thirds of the top of this basket is fully imbricated with the open-mouthed design (Farrand 1900). The straight lines coming off the sides of the mouth are whiskers or hairs. The Nlaka'pamux never use this design and it is very distinctive of the Stl'atl'imx. The basket is very similar to artifact #145638 in the Royal British Columbia Museum, from the Fountain Reservation, Xaxl'ep, in Upper Stl'atl'imx territory, though not as large.

Figure 4: Basket #978.49.515 from the White Rock Museum Collection

This is another older type of basket. It has beading at the top of the rim and at the bottom of the sidewall. The design is a ladder or arrowheads (Haeberlin, Teit, Roberts). This sort of vertical design and its lopsidedness is very typical of the Nlaka'pamux.

Figure 5: Basket #978.49.529 from the White Rock Museum Collection

This basket is made with a bundle foundation, though it looks like slats because they are so flat. The imbrication is very shiny. According to Mason (1902), the design is a net. In between the holes of the net are flies, or big stars. The shape is very angular and may be Stl'atl'imx or modern Nlaka'pamux.

Figure 6: Basket #978.49.571 from the White Rock Museum Collection

On this basket we see a repetition of a small motif across the entire field. This design bears some similarities to a basket in Mason (1902) where it is considered to be crossing trails or stars. It is likely Nlaka'pamux.

## Conclusion

As the major container for food collection and storage in most Native cultures in pre-contact British Columbia, baskets were an integral part of food systems. They were also an item that was traded for many other goods that could not be procured in the region where the basket maker lived (Schlick 1994). Even in the times after the arrival of Europeans, baskets were considered valuable trade items and the ability to produce them would serve a woman well. It was a way to enter the new market economy. "A basket maker would never be poor" (Schlick 1994). Baskets were practical.

Baskets were also a part of a young girl's life even before she was born: an expectant mother would place basket materials under her head at night to promote the birth of a girl child (Thompson and Marr 1983). And the skills involved in making a basket were important ones for a daughter to learn.

Basketry is also the major art form of First Nations women. It is the oldest of all craft arts, with the exception of tool making (Turner 1996). "Baskets are more than objects; they are carriers of culture. They were created, they represented aesthetic values, not just object of beauty" (Bernstein 1900). To view baskets as merely art, however, separates them from human and historical relations.



Figure 6: Basket #978.49.571 from the White Rock Museum Collection.

## References

- Brandford, J.S. 1984 *From the Tree Where the Bark Grows*. New England Foundation for the Arts, Cambridge.
- Cruikshank, Julie 1979 *Athapaskan Women: Lives and Legends*. National Museum of Man Mercury Series: Canadian Ethnology Service Paper No. 57. National Museum of Canada, Ottawa.
- Farrand, L. 1900 *Basketry Designs of the Salish Indians*. The Jesup North Pacific
- Expedition Vol. 1, Pt. 5. American Museum of Natural History, New York.
- Frohman Trading Company 1902* Alaska, California and Northern Indian Baskets and Curios. C.H. Crocker Co., Portland.
- Haerberlin, H.K., J.A. Teit and H.H. Roberts 1928 *Coiled Basketry in British Columbia and Surrounding Region*. Forty-first Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1919-1924. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.
- Hanna, D. and M. Henry 1996 *Our Tellings. Interior Salish Stories of the Nla7kapmx People*. University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver.
- Laforet, A. 1990 *Regional and Personal Style in Northwest Coast Basketry*. The Art of Native American Basketry. A Living Legacy. Contributions to the Study of Anthropology, No. 5, edited by F.W. Porter. Greenwood Press, New York.
- Lobb, A. 1978 *Indian Baskets of the Northwest Coast*. Graphic Arts Center Publishing Co., Portland.
- Mason, O.T. 1902 *Aboriginal American Basketry*. Report of US National Museum, Smithsonian Institution. Washington, DC.
- Miller, G.L. 1990 *Basketry of the Northwest Plateaus*. The Art of Native American Basketry. A Living Legacy. Contributions to the Study of Anthropology, No. 5, edited by F.W. Porter. Greenwood Press, New York.
- Schlick, M.D. 1994 *Columbia River Basketry: Gift of the Ancestors, Gift of the Earth*. University of Washington Press, Seattle.
- Teit, J. A. 1900 *The Thompson Indians of British Columbia*. Jesup North Pacific Expedition, Vol. 1, Pt. 4. Memoir of the American Museum of Natural History, Vol. 2, New York.
- Thompson, N. and C. Marr 1983 *Crow's Shells: Artistic Basketry of Puget Sound*. Dushuyay Publications, Seattle.
- Turnbaugh, S.P. and W. A. Turnbaugh. 1986 *Indian Baskets*. Schiffer Publishing Ltd., West Chester.
- Turner, N.J. 1996 "Dans une Hotte," *L'importance de al vannerie dans l'economie des peuples chasseurs – pecheurs – cueilleurs du Nord-Ouest de l'Amerique du Nord* ("Into a Basket on the Back": *The Importance of Basketry in Foraging/Hunting/Fishing Economies in Northwestern North America*"). *Anthropologie et Societes*. Special Issue on Contemporary Ecological Anthropology – Theories, Methods and Research Fields 20(3): 55-84.

---

**Karen Petkau is finishing her Bachelor of Science at the University of Victoria with a double major in Biology and Environmental Studies. This article is an abridged version of a paper prepared as a directed study for the White Rock Museum in order to shed more light on their wonderful collection of First Nations' baskets.**

---

# DEBITAGE

---

In August 2003, Rob Field from Arcas Consulting Archeologists will serve as chief archaeologist on an arctic expedition in search of Sir John Franklin's ships, HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror*. The joint Irish-Canadian expedition is directed by author Captain David Woodman, and funded by explorer/adventurer Kevin Cronin. Award winning filmmaker John Murray will produce a documentary film of the expedition, to be broadcast on the History Channel. This is the ninth expedition in the search, and the team is very optimistic that this is the year of discovery.

---

National Aboriginal Day is on June 21, 2003. For activities and events in your community check out the Indian and Northern Affairs Web site <[www.ainc-inac.gc.ca](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca)>.

---

Now on exhibit at the Vancouver Museum, *Honouring the Basket Makers*, presented by the Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, and Skwxwú7mesh Uxwixw (Squamish) First Nations, in collaboration with the Vancouver Museum. Contemporary and traditional baskets on display honour the basket makers of these three First Nation communities. For more information see the Vancouver Museum Web site <[www.vanmuseum.bc.ca](http://www.vanmuseum.bc.ca)>.

---

The 2002 winner of the D. Geordie Howe Prize, awarded to an University of British Columbia undergraduate, is Carolyn Saunders. Her paper is entitled *Prehistoric Use of Avian Resources in the Arctic: Challenges and Opportunities for the Archaeologist*.