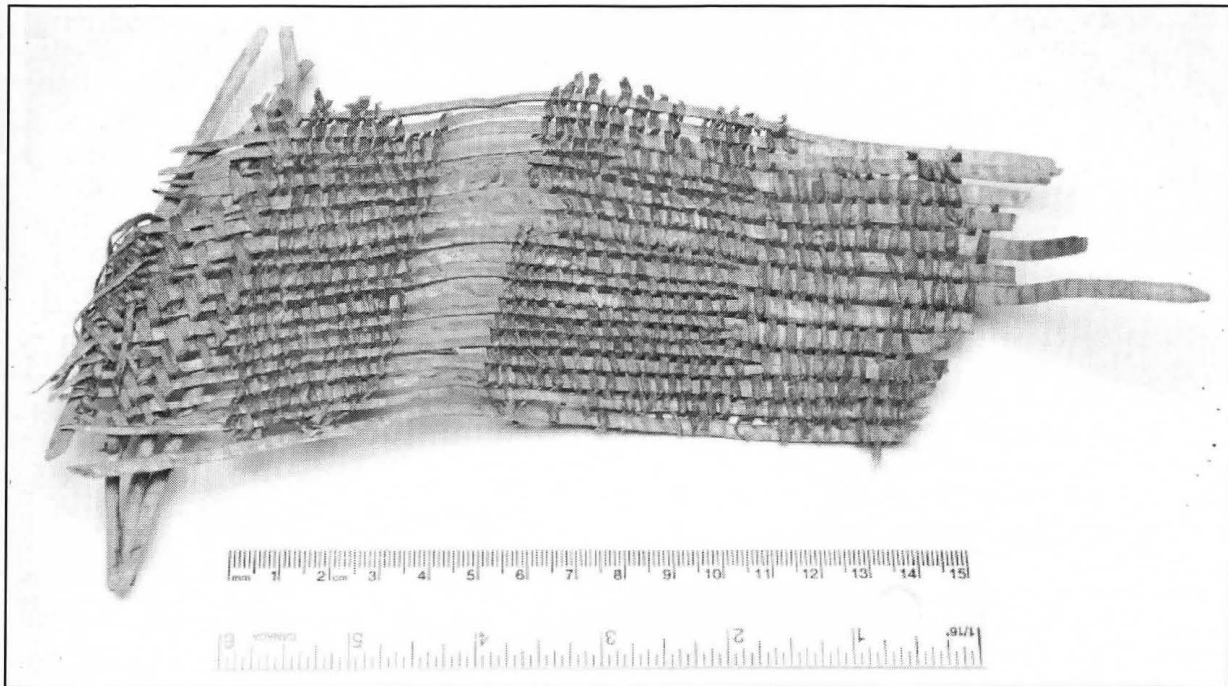


How to Describe Basketry in Twelve Steps

Kathryn Bernick



The photograph in Figure 1 shows the largest of four pieces of a basket found 40 years ago on a muddy bank of the Fraser River near Abbotsford. The person who rescued the artifact from being washed away donated it to the Royal BC Museum (then called the BC Provincial Museum). It has been in the museum's collections, in Victoria, ever since.

Imagine that you have a free day and have volunteered to document and describe this artifact. By being organized and having a plan you could reserve part of your day for checking out the museum's exhibits or strolling along Victoria's Inner Harbor—instead of spending the entire day immersed in warps, wefts, wrapping, twining, and pitch. (Basketry people don't use the term "woof," that's for textile weavers).

Here's what I would do:

1. Check the museum's accession records. In this case, we learn that the basketry, catalogued as artifact number DgRn 9:2, was found along with a quartz crystal microblade in a small mudslide. Without contextual information there is no way of knowing how these objects might be associated. There are no other recorded finds from DgRn 9, which, it transpires, may not be the actual find-location since records for sites in that stretch of the Fraser are confused.

2. Assess the artifact's condition. Obviously it is fragmentary. Waterlogged when found, it is now dry and relatively rigid. This transformation was achieved with minimal shrinkage or distortion through treatment by the museum's conservators. Although there are no records of its original condition or of the particular treatment, the results are successful from an archaeological perspective.

The basketry no longer needs to be immersed in water (it is stored on a shelf alongside stone artifacts), and the pieces can be handled and flipped—carefully—so as to view both sides.

3. Determine what part of the basket is represented. The presence of a rim indicates a basket wall. Without the rim, it is not always possible to distinguish between basket wall and base fragments, or even between basket and mat fragments.

4. Identify the primary weave type. Baskets are classified according to the main weave of their walls. Weaving involves two sets of intersecting elements: passive warps and active wefts. On baskets, the warps are normally vertical and the wefts are normally horizontal. The way in which the wefts engage the warps identifies the weave. DgRn 9:2 is a (fragmentary) basket woven in close plain twining with up-to-the-right (/) pitch (Figure 2).

5. Record the size of the fragment and calculate original basket size. With a flexible cloth or plastic metric tape (the kind used in sewing), measure the longest and widest dimensions aligned with the weaving elements. This 26 x 15 cm fragment is the largest of the four surviving pieces of DgRn 9:2. The original basket was more than 26 cm tall. Its circumference at the mouth cannot be determined from the available fragments. A rough calculation indicates that all four pieces combined comprise about 600 cm² area of intact weaving, which is what is available for analysis.

Figure 1. Fragment "a" of basket DgRn 9:2. Front (outside) view. Photo by Kim Martin. Image courtesy of Royal BC Museum.

6. **Measure the element widths.** Using calipers, preferably plastic to reduce the potential for accidental damage, measure the widths of five to six warps and calculate the average. Aim to include the range of widths present; if there is great variation, record the range as well as the average. Round to whole millimetres. Some analysts measure every warp element but I have found that the additional work does not add useful information. DgRn 9:2 has 4-mm-wide warps. Repeat the procedure for the wefts. DgRn 9:2 has 2.5-mm-wide wefts. For specimens with more than one type of weft element, repeat for each type.

7. **Calculate the weaving gauge.** Hold the calipers open and count the number of warps in a 10-cm interval. Use a flexible tape if the basketry is not flat. Then count the number of weft rows per 10 cm. For very small fragments, count the number in another interval (perhaps 5 cm, or 2 cm) and then multiply the result to provide the "per 10 cm" statistic. Using a standard gauge-interval helps for comparison with other collections. The weaving on the upper part of the DgRn 9:2 basket wall is tighter than lower down. The finer, upper weaving gauge is 25 warps per 10 cm and 32 weft rows per 10 cm. The lower part of the fragment has 20 warps and 28 weft rows per 10 cm.

8. **Look for evidence of basket shape.** The DgRn 9 basket exhibits two methods of inserting new warps during the weaving process (Figure 3). In a few places, a single new warp was added leaving the loose end visible on the inside of the weave. A second method, which occurs about 13 cm below the rim, involves splitting the warps in two. Whereas an occasional single warp insertion would not result in a noticeable expansion, multiple additions along the same weft produce a flare in the basket wall. On DgRn 9:2, the weaving is tighter (finer) in the top 13 cm of the basket wall so there would have been only a slight flare.

9. **Identify the material.** Wood splints, which is what DgRn 9:2 is made of, are easy to distinguish from bark. However, determining the plant species, or even whether the splint is root or withe (slender branch), requires serious expertise. RBCM botanist Dr. Ken Marr examined thin sections with a compound microscope and identified the warp of DgRn9:2 as *Thuja plicata* (western red cedar).

10. **Locate any reinforcements and document their method of construction and locations on the basket wall.** The DgRn 9 basket has three rows of two-strand wrapped reinforcement at the rim and another three about 6 cm below the rim. They were constructed during the weaving process by laying a robust element across the warps on the inside of the basket and wrapping it onto each warp element using two flexible, non-intersecting strands (Figure 4). The robust element is 4 mm wide and 2 mm thick; the wrapping strands are 3 mm wide. The wrapping strands spiral in an up-to-the-right direction (/ pitch), each stitch passing over two warps at a time.

11. **Determine the selvage type (spelled "selvedge" in the UK).** On a basket, the selvage is the rim. The DgRn 9 basket has a figure-eight wrapped false braid selvage, which is both decorative and strong (Figure 5). There is a preparatory weft

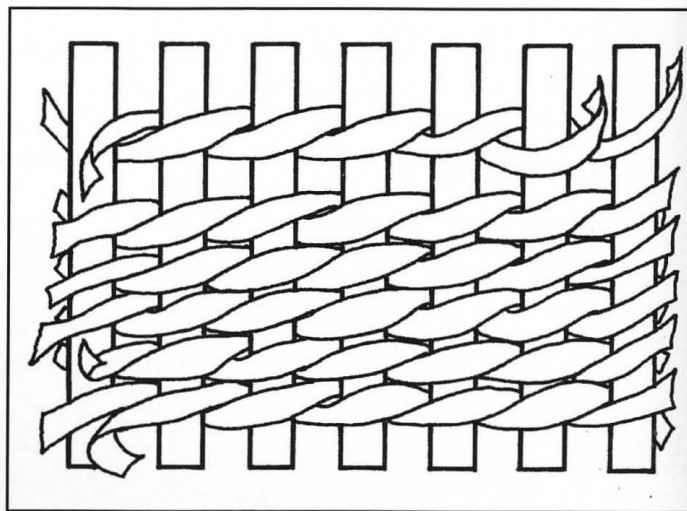


Figure 2. Close plain twining.

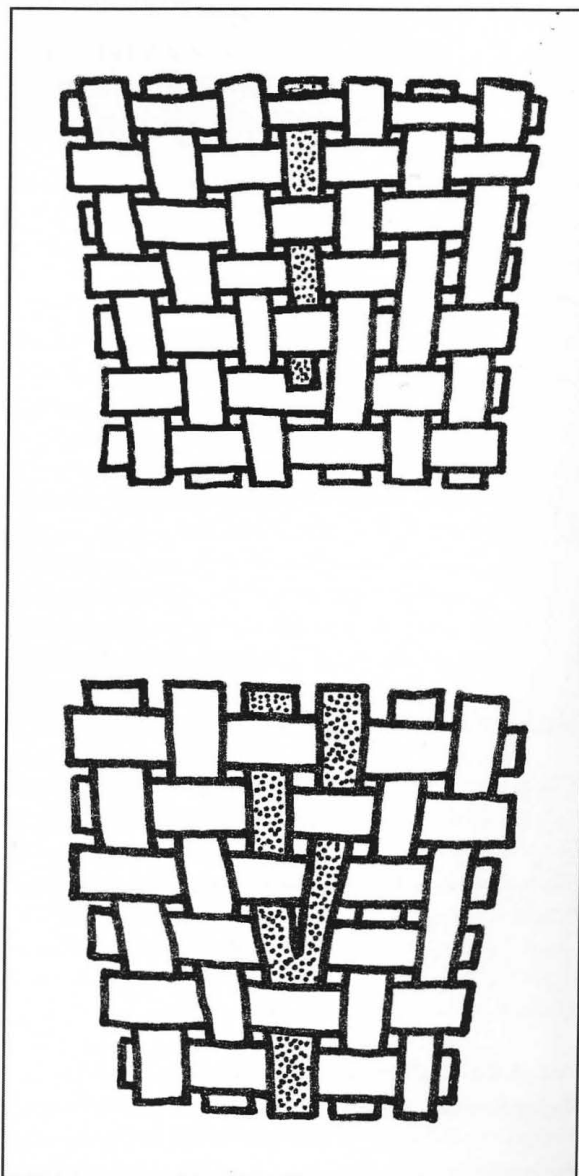


Figure 3. Two methods of expanding the warp.

row of plain twining. Then the warp ends are bent 90-degrees to the right and the resulting bundle, including the preparatory row of twining, is wrapped with a single flexible strand in a figure-eight pattern. Both sides of the bundle feature up-to-the-right (/) slanting stitches. The top view (equivalent to the lip of a ceramic vessel) has a chevron pattern that looks as though it were braided.

12. Identify the type and location of decoration, if any is present. On this specimen, the reinforcements are decorative as well as functional. Visually they comprise two narrow bands, one at the rim and another several centimetres below the rim. Each 2-cm-wide band features three rows of diagonal stitches, all slanting in the same direction (/). The plain twining between the bands is tighter than the twining lower on the basket wall, providing a subtle aesthetic effect though strictly speaking this is not decoration.

Basketry descriptions can be enhanced with illustrations. Photographs of construction details are always a good idea. In this case, Martina Steffen, the Royal BC Museum Archaeology Collections Manager, arranged for the museum photographer Kim Martin to provide a terrific set of images. Such artifacts are not easy to photograph, so be sure to take advantage of any professional services that might be available.

Moving beyond describing an artifact to interpreting its age, cultural affiliation, and use, can be done at home or in a library (depending on what reference sources you have on hand). A major source for archaeological interpretation involves comparison with specimens reported from other contexts. The particular selvage type (figure-eight wrapped false braid), method of decoration (a narrow band of two-strand wrapped reinforcements at the rim and another several centimetres lower), up-to-the-right twining pitch, and wood-splint materials identify the DgRn 9 specimen as a Marpole age (ca. 2,000 years old) basket from the Coast Salish area. Radiocarbon-dated specimens with this combination of diagnostic characteristics are documented from the Water Hazard site (DgRs 30) in Tsawwassen and also from other locations in the lower Fraser River region. As for function, the fragmentary condition of

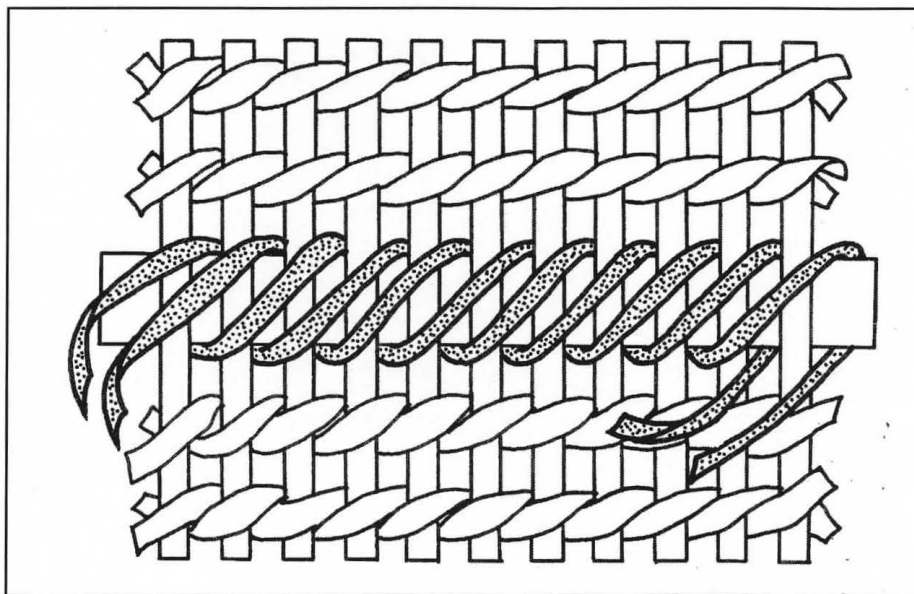


Figure 4. Two-strand wrapped reinforcement.

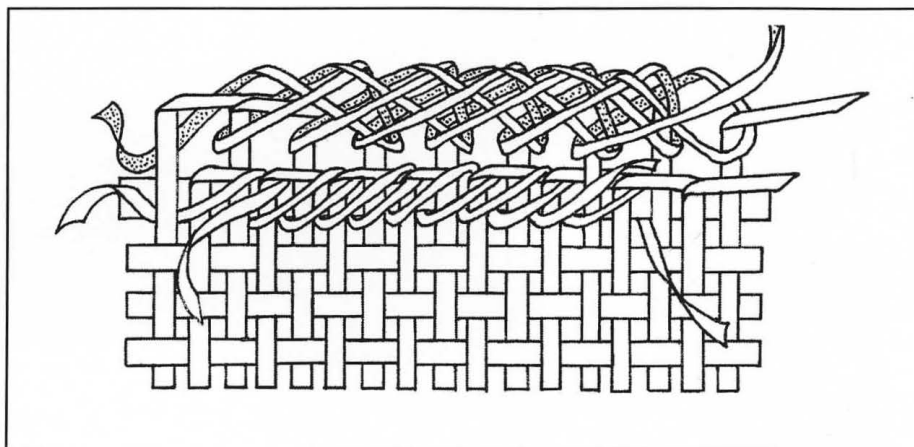


Figure 5. Figure-eight wrapped false braid selvage.

DgRn 9:2 and lack of context limit interpretation to the obvious—the basket was used to put things in. It would not have held liquids.

Acknowledgements

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For Further Reading

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