

THE WHITE ROCK MUSEUM BASKETRY COLLECTION

In 2000, the University of Victoria (UVic) received a Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) grant by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, in a new initiative to encourage collaboration between universities and other sectors of the community. Under this grant, which was awarded to the History in Art Department at UVic, projects were undertaken in partnership with community heritage organizations to research and document little known but historically important collections. The following articles about Pacific Northwest basketry are a product of the preliminary research by UVic students, under the direction of Jennifer Iredale.

WHAT A BASKET HOLDS: BASKETRY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

by Faith Whiting

According to archaeological evidence, baskets are among the oldest form of manufacture by humans (Dodds Schlick 1994). Among Pacific Northwest peoples, baskets provided the main form of storage and were used for transportation of goods, as well as for cooking and bathing purposes. Based on the materials available regionally, unique styles of weaving were developed and perfected over time by separate Native cultures across British Columbia. The variation that appears both culturally and regionally in basketry denotes unique and separate lineages surrounding the evolution of this art.

However, basketry was heavily impacted by the colonization of the Pacific Northwest. Major shifts in techniques and materials occurred between 1775 and 1875, when European influence began to show itself. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a clear degeneration of the craft as people were relocated to reservations and European goods began to replace the need for baskets (Turnbaugh and Turnbaugh 1986). At this time there was a significant switch to basketry for ornamental and collection purposes.

Systems of Management of Basketry Materials: The Sexual Division of Labour

In the Interior Plateau region of British Columbia, between the Rocky Mountains and the Coast Mountains, there existed a

sexual division of labour wherein the men of a society fished or hunted, while the women gathered and processed plant and animal materials and foods. Women gathered plants throughout the growing season, from early spring to late fall. The work of both genders was judged of equal importance (Ackerman 1995). The same trends were noted in the study of women's roles in Tlingit society.

As observed by Teit in his writings on his research from the North Pacific expedition "only women and girls occupy themselves with this work" (Teit and Steedman 1930). Although men helped with the heavy work involved in material collection, traditionally basketry was a woman's craft. On the other hand, Laforet suggests that Haida spruce root hats



Figure 1(a-d). White Rock Museum Collection: 978.49.525, 978.49.526, 978.49.469, 978.49.561. Coiled cedar-root basketry likely of Nlaka'pamux, Stl'atl'imx, or Stó:lô origin. The imbrication that appears is Bitter Cherry bark (*Prunus emarginata*), both in its natural red and dyed black colours, as well as a grass material, which is likely Reed Canary Grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*).

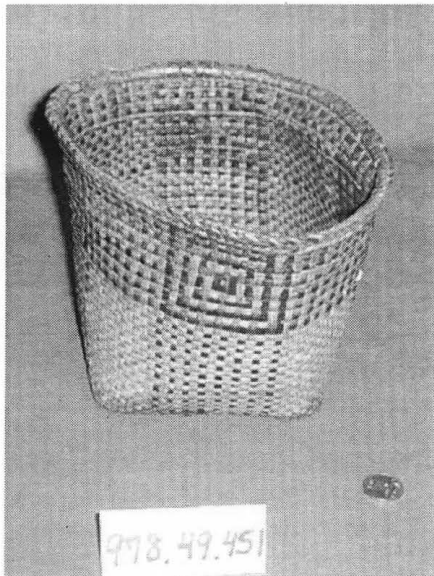


Figure 2. White Rock Museum Collection: 978.49.451. A plaited Western red-cedar-bark (*Thuja plicata*) basket. This basket is likely of Tsimshian origin based on the geometric style present.

represent a conjunction point in Northwest material culture between men's and women's art (Laforet 1985; Lamb 1972; Mason 1902).

That basketry was considered women's work has had effects on the way it has been documented and viewed through time. It is rare that the name of a basket maker would have been recorded along with a basket at the time of collection. Thus, there is little or no information available on individual weavers, which, in turn directs the study of basketry to focus on regions.

Basketry was so entwined in female Aboriginal culture that it held a role in the ascension of a young girl into womanhood. In documentation of basketry in the Puget Sound region, it was noted that when a young girl began menstruating (her *t'aq'wicad* period), she was removed to a hut located away from the village for a period of one to eight months. During this time an elderly female tended the girl and often instructed her in basket making. Basket making was symbolically linked with a transition into womanhood and held great importance as a woman's craft (Thompson and Marr 1983).

This spiritual connection between the basket maker and her materials was the primary foundation of an ethic based on respect for the materials and their harvest.

Although there is little record of actual management systems of basketry plants in British Columbia, management was of utmost importance as a "use ensures abundance" ethic was adopted.

The old assumption that materials were merely gathered randomly from nature may well be inaccurate. These materials were essential to the existence and economy of First Nations people and there needed to be a predictable and accountable supply. Walker suggests that "knowledge about materials—when to gather them, where to find them, how to work with them, requires 'knowing' about the environment in a profound way,



Figure 3. White Rock Museum Collection: 978.49.461. A basket constructed from the bark of the Paper Birch tree (*Betula papyrifera*). The stitching probably is of red-cedar root (*Thuja plicata*), with a wooden rim possibly of Saskatoon wood (*Amelanchier alnifolia*). Its cultural origin is unknown.

through direct experience built up over time" (Walker 1999). Thus physical, ethical, and spiritual methods of management were incorporated to ensure a healthy supply of materials were in place, as well as to create sustainable systems based on use.

Analysis of a Collection: The White Rock Museum

The White Rock Museum was bequeathed an elaborate collection of baskets by Mrs. Irene Maccaud Nelson following her death in 1978. She was an avid collector of Native artifacts, and

although little is known of how she acquired her basketry collection, it contains a large number of baskets encompassing a wide range of styles and periods in British Columbia. Her collection is invaluable in the study of basketry and much information can be gained from its investigation.

The majority of the collection is coiled cedar-root baskets from an Interior Salish, Halkomelem, or Stó:lo origin. Figure 1 shows some representative samples of this type of basketry. Coiled basketry differs from a twined technique, as coiled baskets are manufactured by sewing roots over a foundation of splints or fibres. Twining involves the weaving of materials. The Interior Salish people (the Nlaka'pamux and Stl'atl'imx), and the Mainland Halkomelem, who are Coast Salish people, were the leading manufacturers of coiled basketry in British Columbia. It is believed that the direction of diffusion of this art form was from the "interior toward the sea" (Haeberlin, Teit, and Roberts 1928). Other examples of baskets in the collection that show techniques such as twining, coiling, and plaiting are featured in Figures 2 through 4.

Haeberlin, Teit, and Roberts observed that all of the coiled basketry of the Interior region was fashioned of cedar roots

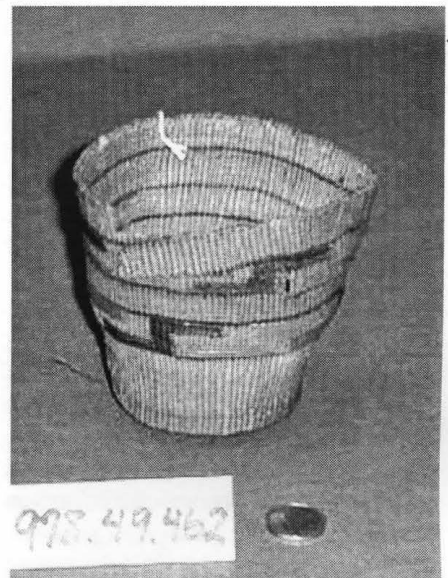


Figure 4. White Rock Collection: 978.49.462. A twined spruce root basket. This basket is likely of Tlingit origin, based on pattern. Thus, it is probably constructed of Sitka Spruce (*Picea sitchensis*). Aniline dyes were used to colour the decorative materials.

(1928). There were spruce baskets, but these were not considered to be as finely made. Of the Interior Salish group, there are general differences between the basketry of the Nlaka'pamux (Thompson) and Stl'atl'imx (Lillooet) people. The Nlaka'pamux tended to make baskets that were of excellent craftsmanship. Haeblerlin et. al suggests that the good climate, plentiful food, and time for leisure allowed them adequate time to develop their art (1928). The larger "burden-baskets" were used traditionally for carrying things on the back. The really large ones could be used for bathing. The Stl'atl'imx were also known for a type of false embroidery where a continuous strip of grass stem is passed alternately under and over stitches (Teit 1900). It is the inner stem of the grass that appears on the outside of the basket for the purpose of imbrication.

Conservation Problems and the Future of Basketry

The history of basket making in the Pacific Northwest is, indeed, a history of the people of this region. A basket is not merely a container for storage, but a container that embodies the beliefs and values that a people share regarding their land within its framework. The story of the First People of British Columbia can be told within the changing patterns, shapes, and materials used to construct their baskets. This story, however, is in danger of being altered in present times, for the story that is being told today is one of threatened loss.

Within present societies, baskets do not hold the utilitarian significance that they once did, and less and less time is being focused on such an art. With each successive generation, basketry is threatened with the loss of valuable information and knowledge. Revival in both interest and practice is essential in order to educate those of European and other cultural descents in the beauty and richness of the culture of the Aboriginal people of this land in order to facilitate a relationship of respect and understanding. Basketry has historically embodied great meaning and value; today it can do the same in a new context.

References

- Ackerman, L. 1995 Complementary but Equal: Gender Status in the Plateau. In *Women and Power in Native North America*, edited by L.F. Klein and L.A. Ackerman, pp. 75-100. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- Dodds Schlick, M. 1994 *Columbia River Basketry: Gift of the Ancestors, Gift of the Earth*. University of Washington Press, Seattle.
- Haeblerlin, H.K., J.A. Teit and H.H. Roberts 1928 Coiled Basketry in British Columbia and Surrounding Region. *41st Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*. Government Printing Office.
- Laforet, A. 1985 *Isabella Edenshaw's Basketry*. National Museum of Man, Ottawa
- Lamb, F.W. 1972 *Indian Baskets of North America*. Riverside Museum Press, Riverside.
- Mason, O.T. 1902 Aboriginal Indian Basketry. *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution June 1902*. The Rio Grande Press Inc., San Antonio.
- Teit, J.A. 1900 *The Thompson Indians of British Columbia*. Knickerbocker Press, New York.
- Teit, J.A., and E.V. Steedman 1930 *Ethnobotany of the Thompson Indians of British Columbia*.
- US Bureau of American Ethnology, 48th Annual Report. Washington, DC.
- 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.
- Walker, M. 1999 Basketry and biodiversity in the Pacific Northwest. In *United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*. Intermediate Technology Publications, Nairobi

Faith Whiting is a student from the University of Victoria (UVic). This article is an abridged version of a paper prepared as a directed study for the White Rock Museum. It is a part of the research that was conducted from a CURA grant that was awarded to UVic's History of Art Department.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY BRANCH IS MOVING!

Effective Tuesday, May 27, 2003

New fax and telephone numbers, mailing and location addresses will take effect as follows:

Reception telephone number:

250.952.4300

Fax number:

250.952.4188

Mailing address:

PO Box 9375, Stn Prov Govt
Victoria BC, V8W 9M5

Location address:

3rd floor, 3400 Davidson Ave
Victoria, BC V8Z 3P8

New staff telephone numbers:

Justine Batten	250.952.4305
Beth Dangerfield	250.952.4178
Alan Riches	250.952.4179
Candace Ledger	250.952.4300

Archaeological Permitting:

Ray Kenny	250.952.4306
Steven Acheson	250.952.4385
Dave Hutchcroft	250.952.4389
Al Mackie	250.952.4063
James Pike	250.952.4064
Jim Spafford	250.952.4067
David Suttill	250.952.4144
Jane Warner	250.952.4169

Archaeological Registry:

Doug Glaum	250.952.4174
John McMurdo	250.952.4175
Mario Tello	250.952.4176
Doris Lundy	250.952.4177