

## **Grass Roots: Native American Basketry of the West**

Denney Western American Art Wing, Frederick Sleight Gallery  
September 15, 2016 and ongoing

For centuries Native Americans have cultivated and harvested various native plants and roots, from the arid deserts of the Southwest to the wooded forests of the Northwest, weaving them into magnificent baskets. The complex mastering of the art of basket weaving was primarily the responsibility of women. In addition to great technical skill and artistic vision, it required weavers to develop an intimate knowledge of their environment, botanical expertise, and an understanding of cultural traditions. Historically baskets pervaded every aspect of Native life from collecting and processing food to supporting sacred practices and community events. Although born of necessity, basketry of the West embodies diverse and distinct cultural and aesthetic qualities well beyond their functional purposes.

This exhibition presents the elegance and simplicity of centuries-old utilitarian forms alongside the eye-dazzling intricate designs created by master weavers of the early twentieth century. This installation of over 150 baskets from the museum's permanent collection connects the viewer with the immense aesthetic and diverse cultural heritage that is unique to Native American basketry of the West.

This exhibition is funded by Mary Cone.

### **Theme Panels:**

#### **Designed for Necessity**

Basket weaving combined utilitarian application with simple, beautiful forms, allowing these baskets to fulfill a variety of functions. Some baskets supported sacred, ceremonial, and communal practices, while others fulfilled a range of practical tasks. From burden baskets designed for gathering and transporting resources, to winnowing trays for the processing of food, to ollas and water jars for storage, Native baskets were integral to daily life in both form and function.

Passed on from generation to generation, from grandmothers to mothers to daughters, subtle yet patent differences between various tribes developed throughout the western region. These variations are highlighted in the materials used to make baskets. The desert Cahuilla, for instance, used natural and dyed juncus, sumac, and deer grass native to the surrounding desert, while the Pomo of Northern California utilized conifer root, red bud, and willow, as well as bird feathers and shells. Specific techniques and styles reflected individual community-based traditions, embodying the diversity of native lands and its people.

## **Beyond Function: The Art of Basketry**

*I wish long life for the woman who always has a basket in her hands.*

--Emma Duskey Frank, Hupa, 1902, excerpt from a Hupa Basket Prayer Song

Native American basketry of the West embodies cultural values and aesthetic designs well beyond utilitarian purposes. A Pomo burden basket, for example, is made for transport and heavy use, yet the dynamic surface decoration of diagonal lightning bolts serves an aesthetic rather than functional purpose. The complex positive and negative forms of “Rain” and “Sun Eagles” in Cahuilla baskets are not only visually stunning but require sophisticated artistic and technical abilities.

When evaluating baskets, connoisseurs prize the overall balance between form, weave, and composition. Producing traditional forms and embellishing them with elaborate patterns is extremely labor intensive: it is estimated that a medium-sized cooking basket required the harvesting and processing of 3,750 deer grass stalks and six months to complete. Further, creating the decorative colored patterns from other plant materials such as red bud, juncus, or maidenhair demanded additional labor. Motivated by pride in local traditions, self-expression, and creative passion, the diverse Native peoples of the West created hundreds of distinct regional styles, a practice that continues today.

### **Master Weavers**

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, individual master weavers were being recognized for their keen ability and distinct imagination necessary to master the fine art of basketry. Fashioned directly from the weaver’s mind without the benefit of any drawing or written plan, the tightness and tactility of their weaves resulted in beautiful designs. The intrinsic qualities of their artistry, executed with each stitch, captured the attention of Natives and Anglo-Americans alike.

Prompted by a surge in Anglo-American collecting of Native objects between 1890 and 1940, many Native women increased their production of baskets to supplement family incomes and certain master weavers achieved great prominence. For example, Washoe weaver Dat So La Lee (Louisa Keyser) captured the attention of businessman Abe Cohn, who began promoting and selling her baskets. Dolores Saneva Patencio was regarded as one of the finest, most distinguished local Cahuilla basket makers. Around 1890, basket weavers began to introduce figural imagery into their designs, such as rattlesnakes and human forms, signaling a shift in artistic freedom that further solidified basketry as a highly aesthetic experience.

### **Influence and Innovation**

The artistic motivation to experiment with new forms and materials introduced from Europe is also a hallmark of Native American basketry. Around 1915, the Paiute incorporated an overall pattern of colorful seed beads into the weave of their baskets. About the same time, Inuit men of Alaska introduced lidded baskets woven with whale baleen topped with ivory carved finials. Pedestal bowls, vase forms, and baskets woven

tightly over glass bottles were also influenced by Anglo-American forms and the Arts and Crafts movement of the 1920s-1930s.