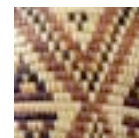


Baskets of Western Washington



by Arthur W. Erickson

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Western Washington is a maritime region with a long, often rugged coastline along the Pacific Ocean with Puget Sound forming a large sheltered body of water to the east of the Olympic Peninsula. Forming the eastern border of this region is the Cascade Range, a heavily forested mountain range with several large peaks (including Mt. Rainier, rising 14,410 feet above sea level), running from British Columbia in the north through Oregon to the south. On the Olympic peninsula in the northwest corner of Washington are the Olympic Mountains, rising steeply from the surrounding waters. The Columbia River forms the southern border, a powerful river system which drains the plateau region on the eastern side of the Cascades and the rivers of southwestern Washington. Other smaller river systems flow from the mountains directly into the Pacific and Puget Sound.

Before the arrival of the European settlers into this region, the lands from the mountains to the coastlines were thickly forested with fir, cedar and spruce. The rivers and their tributaries were filled with salmon and steelhead during their annual migrations from the sea to their spawning beds, often far up river. The shores and beaches along the

coast and Sound offered an abundance of shellfish. In late summer, huckleberry bushes ripened with small juicy berries in the high mountain meadows.

The indigenous people who inhabited this region were Salish and Twana-speaking groups settled in permanent villages along the rivers and coastal areas. Just as these lands fed and housed these native inhabitants, they provided the raw materials for their baskets.

Before the arrival of the Europeans in the late 18th and early 19th Century, the inhabitants of Western Washington relied upon their basketry to provide many of their specific needs.

They wove a wide variety of baskets: gathering baskets of various sizes with leather or fiber loops to tie their contents down or to attach tump lines for carrying; large storage baskets to hold their foods, clothing, medicines, sacred items, and personal belongings; sturdy open twined clam baskets whose spaces allowed the sea water to drain out; baskets to hold fishing and whale hunting harpoon heads; and watertight cooking baskets into which water and hot rocks could be combined to cook their meals. Over time, manufactured goods such as metal buckets, iron kettles, wooden boxes and trunks, and other items were substituted for many of these baskets of their own manufacture.

By the early 20th Century, many traditional forms of baskets were no longer being made and were only occasionally seen in use. Beginning in the early 19th Century, baskets became an item in the trade with European and American visitors to this region and by 1900 baskets were actively collected by knowledgeable collectors. The consequence of this was the development of a flourishing trade in baskets of all sizes, shapes and quality. The usefulness of the basket was no longer the dominant concern of the weaver. Many new and novel forms were made. Baskets were woven over bottles, floats, sea-

shells, deer antlers, canes and other items; baskets were given handles, pedestal bases, fancy rims; they became smaller, lower and wider. Often the quality suffered. New materials were adopted and bright aniline dyes were added to the traditional palette. At the same time, some weavers with superior skill and creativity took advantage of this opportunity to produce some extraordinary baskets such as the beautiful complex Nisqually basket, #1.



Among the basketry forms which disappeared from use by the early 20th Century is that of a small, long, narrow, oval coiled basket, an example of which is the Cowlitz basket, #2. These baskets are identified as Cowlitz, although neither their form nor the organization of their design elements is typical in Cowlitz basketry. This identifi-

cation may have occurred because “Cowlitz” is often the generic identification for Puget Sound imbricated baskets, much as “Klickitat” is often the identification given to Plateau imbricated baskets. In addition, the Cowlitz, who inhabited an area between the Columbia River and Puget Sound, are the most southerly people in Western Washington who wove imbricated baskets and were the first group early American and European travelers

encountered as they traveled north from the Columbia River. This form of basket is among the earliest examples of Western Washington basketry to have a documented collection history. One example, which is now in the Smithsonian Institution, was collected by the U.S. Naval Exploring Expedition in 1841 when some of its members were exploring the lower Columbia River area. These baskets vary in height. They are woven with small, fine imbrication with a different design on each side and often on each end as well. The example in the Clark County Museum collection is partially imbricated with a different design on each side against a fully imbricated background. The design on each end is an imbricated “fish net” pattern in two bands, but the background is not imbricated. It has small low woven loops along its sides to secure its contents. The start of the basket is a flat cedar slat over which the weaving is started. These baskets may have served a specific function which either has been supplanted by some other more modern form or became no longer relevant to the maker’s culture.

The basketry produced in this region, though distinctive, is often difficult to accurately identify as to where the basket was woven. Traditional coiled baskets are often misidentified as Plateau baskets from Eastern Washington or Salish baskets from British Columbia. Coiled baskets, which usually are not identified as such, were made in the 19th Century by the Quinault and Twana, who are generally recognized only for their twined baskets. Because of easy travel, communication and trade among these peoples, some





basket designs are seen on both coiled and twined baskets from different groups whose homelands are significantly apart. In the museum collection, the same design element is seen on the twined Skokomish basket (#3) from the Hood Canal area, and on the coiled Cowlitz basket (#4). A variation of it is seen on the Quinault coiled raffia basket (#5) from the coast, and on a twined Wasco sally bag (#6) from the plateau region east of the Cascades.

Following are some general guidelines for the identification of Western Washington coiled baskets, but these are subject to a wide range of exceptions. Unlike the typical cone-shaped Klickitat-style coiled baskets of the Plateau with loops or “ears” spaced along the rim, Western Washington coiled basketry does not have an easily recognized shape. In general, the identification is much more subtle.

If the basket has an oval base, has an

oval start and finishes with a round form at the rim, it is probably from Western Washington.

If the base is round, starts with a “watch-spring start” and finishes with a round form at the rim, it is more likely of Plateau origin.

If the base has either imbrication or beading on it, it is more likely from Western Washington (see #1 and #4).

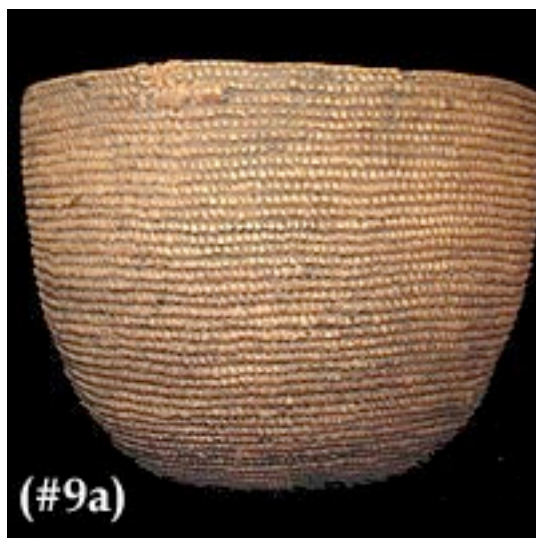
If the basket is oval in form and generally wider than it is high, it is probably of Western Washington origin (see #6 and #7).

If the basket has a section of horizontal bands of imbrication or beading directly under the rim and the main design elements occur under this section, it is probably a Western Washington basket (see #8 and #10).

Small openings under the rim (see #2) or continuous loops either on the rim or under the rim (see #11 and #12) are more characteristic of Western Washington coiled baskets than those of the Plateau. The use of continuous loops on or under the rim is somewhat common on later Canadian Salish basketry as well.

Reflecting their proximity to the Salish in British Columbia who wove rectangular baskets with slanted flat sides, the Skagit and other groups in the northern Puget Sound





area produced tall, square-shaped coiled baskets with straight sides. A similar form also appears in the northern Plateau region as well.

In addition, cherry bark is sometimes used in imbrication in the northern Puget Sound area, a material commonly used in Canadian Salish imbrication.



A group of the Museum’s collection of coiled baskets from Western Washington illustrates the variety of forms being woven in this region in the late 19th Century and into the mid-20th Century. Cooking baskets, such

as #9a, are a form whose function was supplanted by metal kettles, and therefore tend to date from the early 20th Century or earlier. One example, #9b, is quite interesting because of the very old repairs made to its base and to breaks in its rim to extend its useful life. Several of these baskets, from various areas in Western Washington, were used to gather huckleberries (see #6, #7, #8, and #10). They have leather loops along their sides to attach ropes or tump lines to secure them while picking the berries. Basket #10 still retains an attached braided cotton tump line. The small, fully imbricated basket, #4, is

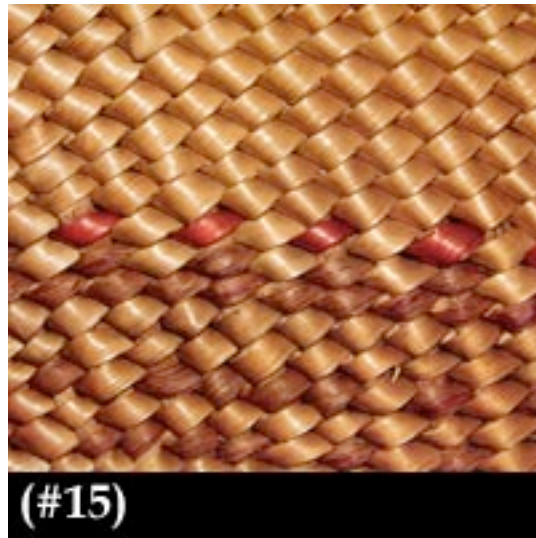


an example of a basket which was woven to sell rather than to use, although it is traditional both in shape and in materials.

Although most of the Salish in Western Washington produced some twined baskets, the most distinctive examples come from the western part of Puget Sound along Hood Canal and along the Pacific coast and its rivers. (Baskets such as the large clam basket [#13] were produced by several coastal groups both in Washington and up the coast in British Columbia and are not easy to identify as to their origin). The three major groups who wove a distinctive twined baskets in this region of Western Washington are the Twana along Hood Canal on the western shore of Puget Sound, the Quinault on the coast near Taholla and the Chehalis who are south of the Quinault and inhabit both the coastal area around Grays Harbor and up the Chehalis River.

The Skokomish are the best known of the Twana basket makers and Twana basketry is usually referred to as Skokomish, as it is here. The Skokomish produced a medium to large, tall, flexible





basket with a cattail foundation and a design woven in plain twined overlay. Most of their twined baskets had two distinct design fields: a horizontal band below the rim with either animal or bird figures woven around the basket, and a large design field below this band, usually with either a vertical or diagonal pattern or sometimes a large “V” pattern. The design pattern most commonly associated with these baskets is a vertical pattern of one or more large concentric rectangles. However, they wove numerous other design patterns including that on basket #3. Their baskets often had braided loops along the rim, as #4 did at one time.

Historically the most recognizable Quinault twined basket was woven with spruce root warp and weft, which created a sturdy, somewhat stiff basket, unlike any other twined baskets woven in this region. These baskets had a slightly rounded shape from the base, were of medium size and were usually taller than their width. They often had braided loops along their rims. The design elements were usually in vertical or diagonal patterns, often with a horizontal band with, most commonly, a geometric pattern, beneath the rim. By the early 20th Century, these stiff spruce root baskets were seldom made and

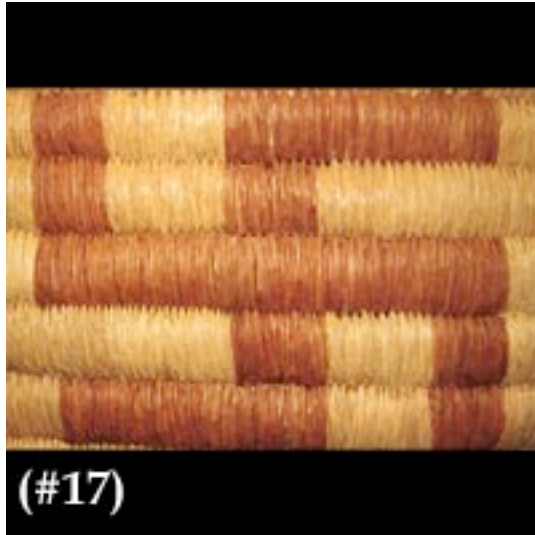
in their place the Quinault wove thick coiled baskets and smaller twined baskets with foundations of rushes and grasses.

The third group to produce a distinctive twined basketry was the Chehalis (see basket #14). Although they produced a number of simpler plain-twined baskets, they are best known for their finely woven wrapped-twine baskets. These Chehalis bas-

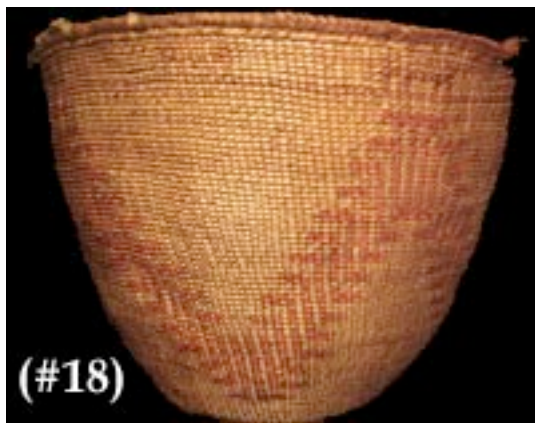


kets tended to be smaller than the Quinault and Skokomish, often with a low rounded bowl shape which was wider than it was tall. The design elements were most often in horizontal bands, but they wove diagonal patterns as well. The designs were often in geometric bands of various widths, including very thin bands of one or two stitches in width (see basket #15). The weavers often wove a band directly under the rim, some of which had animal or bird forms. Their use of the wrapped twine technique, and their choice of design, often reflect more the basketry of the Tillamook and Clatsop on the Oregon coast than the Quinault and Skokomish to the North.

The 20th Century saw a dramatic change in much of the traditional basketry of these three groups. The impact of the replacement of traditional baskets by manufactured goods, the shift away from using their own basketry to that of selling their baskets, and the introduction of aniline dyes and new weaving materials (such as imported raffia) dramatically changed traditional basketry in these three groups. Over time basket making declined in general as fewer women practiced the art. The impact on the Skokomish was



the least dramatic. They wove fewer of the large baskets with complex designs. The later baskets were smaller and the designs less complex.



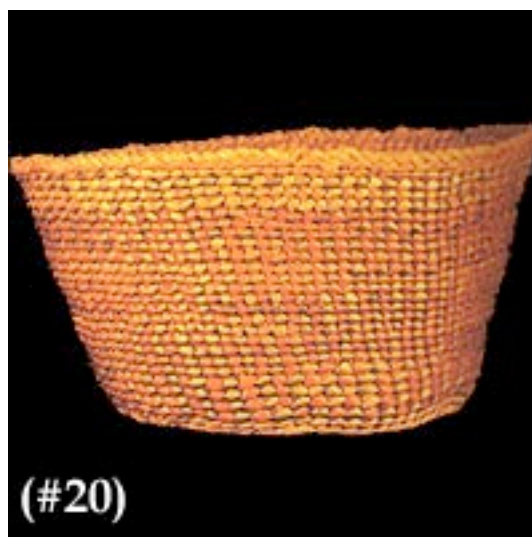
The impact on the Chehalis and Quinault basket makers was more far-reaching, particularly for the Quinault. The Quinault began weaving small wrapped twine lidded and open baskets, similar to Makah work, and plain twined baskets which look more like some of the Chehalis baskets. They incorporated raffia into their twined weaving. They also began to weave a style of coiled basket with a thick bundle coil

stitched with raffia, a material which does not withstand much use, as demonstrated by the fraying of the raffia on basket #16. These coiled baskets were round or oval, usually low, often with a high, thick handle. The swastika design on basket #17 is an example of a non-traditional design that was popular in the early 20th Century, disappearing in the mid-1930's.

The Chehalis basket makers were also impacted by the changes which occurred. They introduced raffia into their basketry. They wove fewer baskets with wrapped twine surfaces, and often when they did only the design elements were in wrapped twine. They

also wove more plain twine baskets with simple banded designs. Often their baskets are hard to distinguish from the later twined baskets woven by the Quinault.

Other than the classic Skokomish overlay twined baskets, the twined Quinault cedar root baskets, the Quinault coiled raffia baskets and the finely woven Chehalis baskets with their horizontal bands of design, it is often difficult to identify the origin of a Western Washington twined basket with any certainty. The design of the basket or how the design is organized may not be the key to accurate identification. It often requires an understanding of the materials and the weaving techniques as well as the shape and design to make an accurate identification. A good example of this is the Skokomish basket #3. The primary design pattern in this basket does not aid in its identification as the organization of the design is horizontal rather than the much more typical vertical or diagonal pattern organization preferred by the Skokomish weavers. It is the technique and materials used in this basket’s construction, its form and the horizontal band of figures below the rim that indicate its origin. The Quinault basket #18 is an example of a basket in which the design, form and technique do not establish its origin. It has a horizontal band of animals below the rim and the design field is in half-twist plain-twined overlay, both of which are identifying



characteristics of Skokomish baskets. But the flared shape is not typical for Skokomish and the basket is constructed with spruce root making it a stiff basket unlike the soft, flexible construction of the Skokomish baskets. It is this element which leads to the identification of the basket as Quinault. The identification of some other Western Washington twined baskets will only be tentative, an educated guess, and it may be best to call such a basket a “Western Washington twined basket.” Baskets #19, #20, #21 and #22 are examples of baskets which are either Quinault or Chehalis, but defy a clear basis to call them with absolute certainty one or the other. Based upon the weaving techniques, the materials used, and to some extent, the designs, the identification made was deemed the more likely.

