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Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation - Grace Nicholson: Notes and Photos, 1903-1968

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TWO INDIAN ARTISTS WHO MAKE POMO BASKETS

In the mountains of northwestern California live William and Mary, two remarkable basket makers who are carrying on the ancient craft of their people, the Pomo Indians, who have produced some of the finest and most beautiful basketry ever made. Not many of these skilled Indian craftsmen have persisted in the art of basket weaving, which their ancestors developed to a degree of beauty and perfection that has never been surpassed. The products of this industrious couple have brought high prices from collectors.

Miss Grace Nicholson, a Pasadena art dealer and connoisseur has done much to foster the skill of William and Mary. Indeed, she has made it possible for the artists to continue their work and to keep it at the highest point of perfection. It took Mary six years to make one of the small, exquisitely woven baskets in Miss Nicholson's collections. At the collector's request she made the basket twice as fine as she had been accustomed to weave and she received twice as much money in payment. The plan became a permanent arrangement. For baskets twice as fine as the ordinary ones Miss Nicholson paid Mary and her husband twice as much. She also provided them with money to live on, so that the basket makers could work patiently away at their mountain cabin, gathering fibers, sorting, splitting and scraping them for a delicate task of weaving. They have been saved from the temptation to speed up the processes and to the cheapen and commercialize their wares, a temptation which has led to the deterioration of much of Indian art.

The Materials and Their Preparation

All Pomo baskets are made on a framework of slender willow shoots and, except for the coarser baskets called "shakans," these shoots are peeled and cured carefully. The Pomos call the willow shoots "bam," and apply the name to various baskets. "Bam-tush" means evenly woven and "bam-shibu" means three bams. The willow tree is "bam-kelle" or bam tree.

The thread is obtained from the bark of shrubs and the roots of various trees and grasses and is woven over the framework of bams. A sedge with slender, grassy leaves and a long running root grows in moist soil in the Pomo country. The basket makers split the tough roots with their teeth, coil them in bundles and dry them. This fiber is a pale cream color when cured but it deepens with age into the rich brown that is so beautiful in old Pomo baskets. "Tsu-wish" is the Indian name for the brown root of a grass-like plant that is very important in Pomo basketry. The color is deepened by placing the roots in a mixture of mud, ashes and charcoal for from one to three days. The best of the fiber is then nearly black.

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