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National Museum of the American Indian Archives Center

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

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in the decorative designs and lavished the richest treasures of the hunt, together with his precious money and the brightest abalone shells from distant seashores, on the gift baskets which marked the culmination of his art. Gift baskets were the owner's proudest possessions and the envy of his friends. They were given to visitors or at weddings as the highest possible token of esteem.

Protected by their isolation, the Pomos worked out their art ideas undisturbed. As Carl Purdy observes: "With every incentive for excellence they had reached a height in basketry when the Americans first disturbed them which has never been equaled, not only by no other Indian tribe but by no other people in the world of any age. These stolid Indian women have a knowledge of materials and their preparation, a delicacy of touch, an artistic conception of symmetry of form and design, a versatility in varying and inventing beautiful designs, and an eye for color which place their work on a high plane of art. They alone of all races adorn their baskets with feathers."

With their materials ready for use, the basket makers require few tools. A very sharp knife, an awl, and a dish to hold water are all that they use. In primitive days the knife was of obsidian or "bottle rock," fastened to handle with sinew and the awl was a small bone from the deer's leg. No model, no pattern in design, guides the hand of the weaver.

Pomos decorate many of their finer baskets with the polished bits of abalone shell that served as money, and with various bird feathers. With the advent of the white man beads were sold to the Indians and naturally found a place in basket ornamentation.

It should be remembered that the Indian baskets are not plaited, as are those of most races, but woven. The willow bams are the warp and the fiber thread is the woof. There are said to be 11 different Pomo weaves. Feathers are caught, one at a time, into the firm, water-tight weaving, and form a velvety surface over the outside of the treasured gift bowls. The feather basket represents an infinite amount of skill and care and patience.

While fine weaving was done at the various California missions in the days of Spanish supremacy, the finest and most beautiful baskets were made by the independent weavers living, Indian fashion, free and undirected in their ancestral mountain or valley homes. So when the Spanish padres wanted a particularly handsome basket to be given to the King, to some other royal personage or a high church official they sent to one of these remote native weavers outside the mission. The best of the surviving specimens of ancient basketry come from such untrammelled Indian craftsmen rather than from those who worked under the dominance of the padres.

-3-

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