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CHUMASH BASKETRY

Chumash basketry is a unique facet of our local cultural heritage. Baskets have been made in this region since ancient times. No baskets of great antiquity have survived, but we know of them from clues in asphalt, stone, and bone: very old chunks of tar with basketry imprints on them, asphalt-covered pebbles used long ago in waterproofing baskets, and rings of asphalt on ancient stone mortars where basket hoppers once were fastened. Tar imprints and bone awls tell us that typical coiled Chumash baskets probably have been made for at least a thousand years.

Basketry was a life-sustaining, integral part of traditional Chumash culture. The pervasiveness of basketry in daily living in the old days is hard for us to imagine. The Chumash lived in basketry domes, usually made of lashed willow poles thatched with *tule*. They collected acorns, seeds, roots, shellfish, and other foods using woven seedbeaters, coiled burden baskets, twined sieves, and knotted carrying nets. The women leached acorns in baskets, ground acorns and seeds in basketry hoppers, winnowed seeds in basketry trays, and stored food in baskets. Parching trays and watertight boiling baskets were used in cooking. The Chumash ate and drank out of baskets. Water was carried and stored in asphalt-lined basketry water bottles. Basketry hats were also used for measuring in trade. Rabbitskin blankets, women's skirts, and dance costumes were made with basketry techniques. Baskets were used in ceremonies to collect offerings, to hold the sacred herbal water -- "tears of the sun" -- and to wet ceremonial deerbone whistles. For entertainment, Chumash women tossed walnut-shell dice on flat coiled trays. With these dice and gambling baskets, political leaders were sometimes chosen for life. The Chumash slept on twined mats, with rolled-up mats for pillows. Babies were kept in twined cradleboards. Special baskets were made for gifts and to hold treasured belongings. Baskets were burned in honor of the dead. When women were buried, baskets decorated their graveposts.

Early Spanish explorers were most impressed with Chumash basketry, mentioning it as early as 1587. In the 1790s a later visitor, Menzies, wrote in his journal:

> "They had... some curious wrought baskets which were much admired and eagerly purchased. ...Their baskets are...so closely worked as to hold water. ...They work in them figures of the most complicated kind; we have seen representations of animals, the arms of Spain, and long inscriptions worked in these baskets by the illiterate people with a degree of exactness that was really astonishing."
> (Menzies 1924: 315, 326)

Pedro Fages, a soldier in the De Anza expedition of 1776, expressed his admiration for Chumash basketry:

> "In their manufactures, these Indians...are more finished and artistic than those of...San Gabriel. ...The women weave nearly all their baskets, pitchers, trays, and jars. ...The tools of these skillful artisans are only two, the most simple ones in the world, the knife and the punch."
> (Heizer and Whipple 1971: 257)

The De Anza expedition bought so many baskets that several entire villages were sold out. These souvenir baskets were sent back to Spain, Mexico, and Peru, where some of them are to be found today. Later, French, English, Russian, and American adventurers similarly dispersed the baskets.

The onslaught of Spanish and American culture during the periods of missionization and secularization devastated traditional Chumash life. Considering the cultural disintegration that occurred, it is remarkable that Chumash basketry persisted at all. A few authentic

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baskets were still being made at the turn of this century. Among the last traditional basketmakers were Candelaria Valenzuela and Petra Rios, both of Ventura.

In the early 1900s John Harrington, an anthropologist with the Smithsonian Institution interviewed Candelaria, Petra, Fernando Librado and others, who generously and patiently shared what they knew of the once glorious tradition. Most of this information, however, was not disseminated until the 1960s, and much of it has still not been published.

In recent years, several Chumash women and men have continued to make well-constructed coiled baskets. Lacking access to traditional materials and techniques, they have used raffia, yarn, pine needles, and store-bought reed to make contemporary baskets. Today, by studying Harrington's notes and the surviving baskets themselves, by finding the plants which were used, and by experimenting with processes and techniques, we are recovering, to some extent, the craft of Chumash basketry. A number of Chumash people, anthropologists, botanists, students, and craftspeople are participating in the project.

Baskets made by Candelaria and Petra survive today, along with many older baskets which have been kept as family heirlooms, preserved in museums, or found in cave caches in the Cuyama Valley and the Santa Barbara back country.

Among the most beautiful of Chumash baskets are the exquisitely shaped, finely-coiled, globular jars with intricate, all-over designs. The most elaborate are the presentation trays with special designs including the arms of Spain and inscriptions. These and other coiled baskets, including the more coarsely-woven and minimally-decorated utilitarian types, are made with a three-rod foundation of juncus—or sometimes bundles of deergrass *(Muhlenbergia)* with stitching of split juncus rush *(Juncus textilis)* or splints of three-leaf sumac *(Rhus trilobata)*. Black-dyed sewing elements were used to make the designs in the coiled baskets, along with the natural colors of the materials, ranging from reddish brown to very light buff.

There also exist a number of twined water bottles, made of whole juncus stems or split and twisted *tule*, lined with asphalt. We have examples, descriptions, and mentions of several other basket types, including openwork twined sieves, twined basins, and twilled wickerwork seedbeaters. Chumash fiberwork includes cordage, netting, and twined matting.

Chumash basketry design is characterized by delicacy and restraint and an unusual, marvelous sense of balance. Most of the decorated coiled baskets have a principal band circling the basket, in from the edge a bit. Edges are often finished with rim ticking, blocks of alternating light and dark stitches. Typical design features are radiating spokes, horizontal bands, and small figures which break up larger light or dark areas. Finishes are neatly tapered.

No doubt there was more diversity in traditional Chumash basketry than we are aware of. Less than 300 known Chumash baskets exist today. The third largest collection in the world is at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. These baskets have not received the wide recognition they deserve, but are highly appreciated by those who know them. In workmanship and design, Chumash basketry ranks among the most outstanding in North America.

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