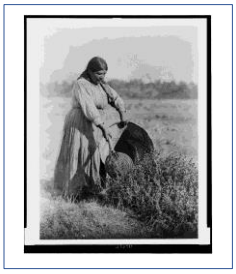
More About Ohlone Basketry

—*Mary Ruddy*

California's native peoples have long been considered the most skilled of all basket creators. Their diverse functionality and beauty made those baskets desirable to 19th-century Russian traders along the Mendocino and Marin coastlines. To this day, the best of all California Native American baskets, including Ohlone ones, are in Russian museums. In California after European contact, colonization, disease, loss of plant habitat, and loss of Ohlone territory and autonomy meant that the baskets of peoples like the Ohlone were lost, their art and function no longer valued by those in power. Today the closest we can come to admiring the lost Ohlone baskets is to see the baskets of their nearest neighbors, the Pomo from beyond the northernmost Spanish missions.

Those few Ohlone baskets that survived into the 20th century were carefully stored in museum cases or basements, the antithesis of how the people who made and used them saw their place of honor in their culture. Mabel McKay, a most famous basket weaver and spiritual healer among her Pomo people, was once asked how best to care for those museum baskets. Her answer was to take them out of the cases, hold them and talk to them… because they were alive and needed to thrive.

Families would have had two dozen or more baskets that would be moved with them in the seasonal migrations. Among the many kinds there were seed-beater baskets, basket traps for fish, fowl, and small mammals, storage baskets, burden-carrying baskets, seed-roasting baskets, cooking baskets, and baby cradles. The plants used were, for example: sedges, redbud bark, dogbane, ferns, nettles, bear grass, bunch grasses, milkweed, iris fibers, hemp, tule reeds, hazelnut branches, willow bark, and even poison oak. Typically, one weaver would need 10,000 shoots in a year of weaving, all harvested after careful long-term planning and gardening in an area of only 3 square miles! The work done before the first knots were tied could represent up to 3 years of gardening by the whole village.



Cecilia Joaquin, a Pomo woman, using a woven seed beater to gather seeds into a burden basket
Edward S. Curtis, 1924

—*Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress*

Baskets were used in all facets of life: food collection, preparation, storage, hunting, fishing, traveling, and clothing, and were held in esteem as status symbols as well as used in medicinal and religious rituals. They were also made as gifts and peace offerings, and each was an artistic and wholly integrated part of its weaver.

Suggested Reading

Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources by M. Kat Anderson. University of California Press, 2005.

California Indians and their Environment by Kent Lightfoot and Otis Parrish. University of California Press, 2009.

Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream by Greg Sarris. University of California Press, 1994.