

Southwest Indian Basketry

This is a very brief, very basic introduction to some of the American Indian basketry that we sell in the Heard Museum Shops. Although we will carry baskets from outside of the Southwest United States from time to time, this article limited strictly to the baskets that are currently being made by the Apache, Hopi, Navajo, Akimel O'dham (Pima) and Tohono-O'dham (Papago).

Basketry has always allowed the weavers some measure of individual, artistic expression while constructing utilitarian and ceremonial works. Baskets that would be covered in pine pitch to be used to hold liquid would generally have little in the way of design, while baskets that were to be given for ceremonial purposes might have taken a year to construct due to its complexity. The arrival of non-indigenous collectors in the late 1800's brought a healthy competitiveness to basket weaving, and the finest Southwest Indian baskets are considered to have been made from the late 1800's to the 1930's.

While most of the materials used by current basket weavers are indigenous, many will use many non-traditional tools such as awls, metal lids with holes in them (to shape the size of plant fibers uniformly), and metal rings used to form the rims of baskets. The most prominently used materials currently are yucca, bear grass, devil's claw (or martynia), sumac, rabbit brush, and cottonwood. These materials are gathered at different times of the year in very specific places to ensure the proper color and pliability that the weaver desires. After being gathered, there is a lengthy preparation of these materials as they are stripped into proper lengths and widths, bleached in the sun or dyed with vegetal or commercial dyes. The gathering and preparation of the materials almost always requires more time and effort than the actual weaving.

There are 3 different techniques of weaving basketry; plaited, wicker, or coiled. All of these baskets are started in the middle of the finished basket, the design being created as construction radiates outward from the center.

Plaited baskets are made with a warp and weft of about the same size, alternately overlapping every other stitch. This is the most difficult technique to express design elements because stitches change at a right angle. Consequently, the designs seen in plaited baskets tend to be quite basic. The most commonly seen type of this basket is the Hopi sifter.

The wicker technique will have a vertical warp of at least 4 spokes with horizontal wefts used to complete the design. The warps will usually be rods of rabbit brush, cottonwood, or mulberry shoots. This style of weaving can be seen in Apache burden baskets and Hopi wicker plaques and cradle boards.

The coil technique is the most time consuming, but allows for the greatest amount of design detail and flexibility. Coils are sewn together by piercing the warp and using the weft to secure the warp of the next coil. This is the most commonly seen style of basket weaving and can be seen in every tribes work; including Navajo wedding baskets, Hopi coil plaques and vessels, and almost all of the Tohono-O'dahm baskets.

Authentic handmade baskets can be purchased in our shops for as little as \$20. Antique baskets can sell for as much as \$100,000 or more.