

The Evolution of Beaded Baskets

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The beading of baskets is a relatively new art form, uniquely American Indian, one whose birth and evolution span the twentieth century. In the early 1900s the joining of beadwork to basketry occurred, mostly with the Paiute in the Yosemite/Mono Lake area of California, and then spreading to the Washoe of Nevada and the Pomo of California. Beaded baskets proliferated from the 1920s to the 1950s mainly in Nevada and eastern California.

The origins of the distinct baskets of the Yosemite/Mono Lake area, baskets that eventually evolved into the beaded basket, lie buried in California's primeval past, yet parallel the evolution of America itself. It is a history that honors the traditional, while encouraging and accepting the new. It is a history influenced by society and economics. But primarily it is a history of the merging and blending of people, people of different backgrounds, people of different places. From our history of dichotomy has emerged a unique nation, and from these same components in the short history of beaded basketry has emerged a uniquely American art form. These baskets are a by-product, which blends traditional basketry with a new technique of beading. They are a by-product of the economic needs of the weavers, the indigenous people of the Yosemite area, and the demands and tastes of the buyers—the Euro-American tourists. They are a by-product of the blending of the people, as well as a blending of the basket traditions of the Miwoks of Yosemite and of the Paiutes of the Great Basin.

If duality defines the development of the basket, so too does it define the birthplace of the beaded basket. This birthplace consists of approximately 760,000 acres that comprise Yosemite National Park and the adjoining Mono Lake region of the Great Basin east of the Sierra Nevada. This area contrasts the rich bountiful pocket nestled on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada, home of the Southern Miwoks, with the arid desert on the down side of the Sierra Nevada, home of the Mono Lake Paiutes. The former occupied what is known today as Yosemite National Park—a lush area of great beauty which offered a generous supply of food and shelter for its inhabitants. However, the Mono Lake Paiutes lived as hunters and gatherers in a bleak, semi-barren environment.

To indigenous people, place is not simply where two points meet. It is not a region 150 miles east of San Francisco. This may have been place as defined by the Mariposa Battalion in 1851, when it stumbled on Yosemite while seeking native raiders of early mining camps. Likewise, it may also have defined place when in 1852 Lt. Tredwell Moore returned with gold ore after pursuing Chief Tenaya's band of Yosemite Miwoks into the Great Basin. But to native people, place is both tangible and intangible. Place is a dynamic world, a world which interacts with its inhabitants. Place is composed of features whose names reveal events of historical and spiritual significance. On the west lies the awesome beauty and wonder, the majestic mountains and the deep, grassy valley

of Yosemite—*Ahwhanee*—inhabited by Chief Tenaya and the 200 or so tribal members in 1851. To the east snow-capped spirals of glowing mountains interrupt the intense purple-colored evening sky of the Great Basin occupied by the Eastern Mono Paiutes.

The early inhabitants on each side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains saw, savored, and felt place. The *Ahwahanechee* not only saw the 620 feet of cascading water named Bridal Veil Falls, but they also experienced Po-Ho-No through legend. The cascading falls was the spirit of the puffing wind, "Po-Ho-No," lifting the water, and sometimes it was referred to as "Evil Wind." Either way, "The source of this stream was haunted by troubled spirits" (Clark 96). In each account place and legend merged, creating the mystical.

Shrouded in mystery is Half Dome. According to one legend, many years ago a young woman *Tis-sa'-ack* and her husband arrived from distant lands. She, supporting a conical burden basket, and he, shouldering skin blankets, were tired and thirsty after crossing the mountains. *Tis-sa'-ack* arrived at Lake *Ah-wei-yah* (Mirror Lake) first. Being very thirsty, she drank all the water. When her husband arrived to a dry lake, he, in anger, struck his wife with his staff. She, in turn, threw her burden basket at him. It remains to this day where she threw it, for "Half Dome is her husband. Beside the latter is a smaller dome which is still called Basket Dome" (Clark 89-90).

The people of the Great Basin also share a working relationship with the spirits. According to Israel Russell, the larger island of Mono Lake with its many hot springs drew its name from a legend of the Pa-vi-o-osi people, groups of whom still live in this region. According to legend, very small, long-haired spirits writhe in the rising steam of the hot springs. Thus, Russell named the island Paoha Island, for "the children of the mist that held their revels there on moonlit nights in times long past" (Russell 279).

In the days of initial contact, the indigenous people of Yosemite maintained their belief in the spirits found in the many faces of nature—the birds, the bears, the trees, the flowers, the waterfalls, the springs, the mountains. When captured by Major Savage during the Mariposa Expedition of 1851, Chief Tenaya spoke these words:

Yes, Sir America, you can now tell your warriors to kill the old chief.... Yes, Sir America, my spirit will make trouble for you and your people, as you have made trouble to me and my people. With the wizards I will follow the white people and make them fear me. You may kill me, Sir Captain, but you shall not live in peace. I will follow in your footsteps. I will not leave my home, but be with the spirits among the rocks, the waterfalls, in the rivers and in the winds; wherever you go, I will be with you. You will not see me but you will fear the spirit of the old chief and grow cold. (Muir, *Yosemite* 191)

The same relationship between Indian and the natural world exists over a century and a half later. Julia Parker, premiere basket weaver and present guide in Yosemite Village, confirms that many spirits reside in the mountains, the forests, the lakes. On a visit with the authors several years ago, she shared the story of Sona Hawk. According to

Parker, when one goes up Bloody Canyon, "so called perhaps because of previous battles or because the earth is red," one says nothing for fear of waking up the sleeping wind that blows off the mountains. She continues, the "Lady of Sona Hawk lives on top of the rock cliffs of Yosemite. She walks around at night. If babies cry all day, they will awaken the lady; she will then come down the trail and put the baby in a burden-basket and carry it to the top of the hill" (Personal interview, Summer 1997).

Spirits are not, however, confined to legend. Parker relates her experience on a recent pilgrimage across the mountain pass to Mono Lake (a pass where, according to Parker, the spirit of her deceased daughter lingers). Hot and tired and concerned for the other members of the party, Parker asked for help: "No sooner had I asked than the wind came through; I sat down so I would not get caught up in her. The wind brought clouds and cooled the air, allowing us to hike over the mountains to Mono Lake" (Personal interview, Summer 1997).

The Paiutes "believe everything on earth, both natural and artificial is endowed with an immortal spirit which is indestructible" (Clark 63). Perhaps these are the same spirits that lured and captivated John Muir, Galen Clark, and later Ansel Adams, one of America's greatest photographers. John Muir, mid-19th century explorer and writer, believed that "everything is hitched to everything else in the universe" (*Summer* 157). He sensed in the wilderness of Yosemite that "the sun shines not on us but in us. The rivers flow not past, but through us, thrilling, tingling, vibrating every fiber and cell of the substance of our bodies, making them glide and sing" ("Mountain Thoughts"). Like the Paiutes who occupied the deserts on the eastern side of the mountains, he, too "lived with the seasons and breathed their desert space with infinite oneness" (Fulkerson 3).

On his travels, Muir also found "*Inyo*, the Dwelling Place of a Great Spirit." The Paiutes gave the name *Inyo* to the mountains east of Owens Valley. Here dwells *Numunana*, "The People Father" (Bowen 72-73). The Paiutes conversed with *Numunana* and their other guardian powers who lived within all wild things, as they traveled the wilderness. From these spirits they drew strength. Perhaps the same strength Muir experienced: "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy" (qtd. in Bowen 28). In *My First Summer in the Sierra*, Muir echoes the sacredness: "The place seemed holy, where one might hope to see God" (49).

Not as generous in his description of the Great Basin, Mark Twain in *Roughing It* describes the region as a "lifeless, treeless, hideous desert" (Flaherty and Schlenz 32). However, Muir was far kinder, referring to this area as "A country of wonderful contrasts. Hot deserts bounded by snow-laden mountains, —cinders, and ashes scattered on glacier-polished pavements, —frost and fire working together in the making of beauty" (*Summer* 229-29). Thus, both to the east and to the west of the Sierra Nevada, one can witness the duality of life—the poor, arid environment of the Paiutes of the Great Basin and the rich, lush environment of the Miwoks of Yosemite.

But the native populations of these regions began to change during the second half of the 19th century due to western expansion and the advent of tourism. At this time larger numbers of tourists were visiting Yosemite. Such visitors sought the finely woven baskets that had become so fashionable. According to Bates and Lee, "The first recorded sale of a basket to a non-Indian in Yosemite occurred in 1869 when Jeanne Carr purchased a basket from an Indian woman" (73). By the turn of the century, basketry in Yosemite had become a very lucrative business. As the non-Indian desire to collect these baskets escalated, the Indians identified the baskets as a source of income.

Prior to the arrival of the Euro-Americans, baskets were primarily utilitarian and defined Native life from birth to death. They served as cradle boards, as implements for the gathering, carrying, and storage of materials, for cooking, and for eating. Finely woven and sometimes adorned with feathers or other objects of nature, they also served in ceremonies, including mourning ceremonies, or as gifts. Baskets were woven of willow, redbud, bracken fern—all gifts from the earth. They sometimes followed traditional shapes and displayed traditional designs passed from generation to generation, or sometimes newly created designs were drawn from nature or from dreams. Many of these encoded symbols told stories—stories infused with tradition, stories whose meanings are often buried in the distant past.

According to Craig Bates, early basket collector Ella Cain maintained that beaded baskets developed from the efforts of E. W. Billeb, Superintendent of Mono Mills, to find an additional source of income for his Indian employees. He had long admired the baskets and beadwork that the wives of his Indian laborers produced. Aware of their talent as both expert beadworkers, beading belts and other items of clothing, as well as expert basket makers, in 1905 he ordered Czechoslovakian seed beads and distributed them among the Indian women. He suggested they try covering the exterior of their baskets with the beads. (Cain herself describes some of this in *The History of Early Mono County*.) After repeated attempts, they devised a netting technique that was successful. Using this technique, beadworkers applied two beads at a time around the upper rim, then added additional beads, usually one at a time, until the basket was covered. In the process beads were added or dropped to form a pattern. A successful basket resulted when the beading ended with a single bead at the bottom of the basket.

According to Bates, the new market brought changes, including closer attention to neatness, new shapes such as goblets and lidded baskets, as well as new designs: "eight-point stars, serrated diamonds, cross marks, arrows, and realistic 'arrowhead' patterns" (Bates 10). To increase sales, weavers created new designs to satisfy the taste of potential customers. Often traditional patterns were replaced or were incorporated into new creative designs. Inspiration for designs came from many and varied sources: crochet books for Lucy Telles, a highly regarded, early 20th-century beaded basket maker, and the Ahwahnee Hotel for her protégé Julia Parker. Parker related how she would go to the Yosemite hotel to study the geometric patterns on the curtains and on the walls, as well as the stained glass windows (Personal interview, Summer 1997). Bernie DeLorme, a Shoshone basketmaker (and creator of the only beaded basket housed in the Smithsonian) speaks of "nature and her array of colors" as a source of inspiration. She recalls how

upon seeing a butterfly, she tried to bead butterflies on her baskets (Personal interview, Summer 1997). Rebecca Eagle Lambert, an artist also working today, receives requests to do “scenes” on her baskets—one such beaded basket depicts the fauna and floral of Lake Tahoe.

But before one can bead, one must have a basket. Most beaders bead cover their own woven baskets, and beading is the last step in this time-consuming artistry. The process of making a basket remains a complex task, requiring skill, patience, and love. The first step in the process involves gathering and storing the materials. Most weavers collect their own materials, investing much time and labor prior to the weaving itself. One needs to know when and where to pick, for as Bernie DeLorme says, “Not just any plant will do.” Another highly recognized beaded basket maker Rebecca Eagle Lambert echoes, “You must have an eye for looking at willow” (Personal interviews, Summer 1997). Julia Parker says she begins “by becoming friends with the plants—knowing these plants are going to talk to you and they do. The plants talk to you; they let you know when they’re ready” (Personal interview, Summer 1997). Parker said when she began to make baskets, she listened to her elders: “Gather willow when the leaves turn yellow. Gather the shoots before budding in the winter or spring—March is best. If willow is gathered in March, the skin strips more easily.” The next step is striping the skin from the shoots. Parker smiles and says, “Strip the willow until it sings to you” (Personal interview, Summer 1997). Most importantly, however, she reveals the tradition, the spirituality of Native life as she recalls the advice of her elders: “Borrow, don’t steal the way of fellow basket maker friends; don’t forget the old way, Julia. Take from the earth and say, ‘Please.’ Give back to the earth, and say ‘Thank you’” (Personal interview, Summer 1997). Tradition and place dictate the gathering and storing of other materials used in the process.

Once materials were gathered, prepared, and stored, the weaver approached the second step, the actual weaving of the basket. Most baskets in this region were made by two methods, twining or coiling. In twining, wefts or sewing strands were wound around stationary rods forming the warp. Warp rods were most frequently made of willow which was readily available. The wefts were often of willow shoots, oak shoots, or buckbrush (Bates and Lee 43). Most of the baskets used for beading were made using the second method, coiling. Coiling started by forming a tight circle or oval of the foundation rod, then the foundation rod was actually stitched row after row with an awl to form the container. Coiled baskets in this region were usually made of one or three rods of willow; however, grass foundations were sometimes apparent. Designs in black were created by using the root of the bracken fern whereas red was produced by using split shoots of redbud. (For more detailed information see Bates & Lee 39-71.)

In the Yosemite area traditional designs formed geometric patterns (lines, bars, triangles, and rectangles), either red or black but rarely both until the advent of Euro-American tourist market. As Bates again notes, “They were filled with meaningful designs, symbols, even stories, after tribal traditions. Beyond tradition, weavers exercised artistic freedom, leaving their individual marks” (56). Mike Rogers, A Paiute artist, offers this view: “Designs are personal; no two are the same; just as religion is personal. Many

people look to Nature; the Bible is out there; so too is inspiration" (Personal interview, Summer 1997).

Place was soon to broaden, as the art of beaded basketry spread rapidly to surrounding areas. Thus, like oral tradition that "is a living body ... in continuous flux ... to accommodate itself to the real circumstances of a people's lives" (Allen 224), place too was fluid, malleable, changing to incorporate the home of the Paiutes of Pyramid Lake as well as Lake Tahoe, home to the Washoe. Eventually, place extended east to Walker Reservation in Nevada and south to Bishop, California. Regardless of the areas included, the beauty and spirit of the areas and of their people would define place. For all, place existed in the spirit of the individual, a spirit that guarded the basket maker and the beader, a spirit who would reside in the basket (Interview with Norm DeLorme, Summer 1998).

The earliest collected beaded basket, tagged 1911, is found in the Ella Cain Collection located in the Mono County Museum in Bridgeport, California. Ella Cain was a well-known basket collector who bought directly from the Paiutes and other tribes early in the 1900s. Thus, her collection includes some of the earliest known, identifiable Paiute beaded baskets, but identifiable only as Paiute—not one basket has been identified, or catalogued by individual artist. The Yosemite Park Natural History Museum retains a large documented collection of beaded baskets thanks to the efforts of curator Craig Bates. Here one can find the work of some of the premier beaded basket makers of the 20th century.

Another individual who has amassed one of the most extensive collections of American Indian beaded baskets in the world is George Bernheimer of Mansfield, Massachusetts. He has collected over 300, mostly Paiute, beaded baskets. His collection, however, is important not only for its sheer quantity, but also for its quality. Outstanding artists of the past are represented in works attributed to Edna Foster, Mary Wilson, Maggie Howard, Lucy Tom and premier beaded basket artists such as Lucy Telles, Carrie Bethel, and her sister Minnie Mike. In addition, the collection also contains examples of highly respected contemporary artists, such as Bernie DeLorme, Julia Parker, and Becky Eagle Lambert. Furthermore, this diverse collection incorporates both the rare (Mono Lake and Pyramid Lake baskets and early 20th-century baskets) and the exemplary (baskets representing the many diverse techniques of both basket weaving and beading). Bernheimer's collection reflects the complete history, the profound evolution of a unique art form that is exclusively American Indian and exclusively 20th century.

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