

Shapes and Uses of California Indian Basketry

Note: The sizes of the baskets illustrated here are proportional to one another.

Plant Food Gathering and Transport

Gift/Storage Basket. The gift/storage basket is presented as a gift and is used for transporting goods or plant foods. Typical size: ht. 30"; dia. across mouth: 25".



Gift/Storage Basket. Ht. 30"; Dia. 25".

Seedbeater. Using the seedbeater, edible wild seeds were harvested by knocking seeds off the plant and into the burden basket. Typical length: 20".



Seedbeater. Length 20"

Acorn and Seed Meal Wincwing, "Sifting" Baskets, and Trays. "Sifting," winnowing baskets, and trays are round or triangular. The baskets are deep while the trays are shallow or flat. Close-twined round or triangular "sifters" were used to separate fine, fully-ground acorn meal from the coarser meal which required additional pounding. Seeds were also sifted with these basketry implements. The fine meal was separated by a side-to-side shaking action. Both closed- and open-weave baskets and trays were used for winnowing. Typical dia.: 20".

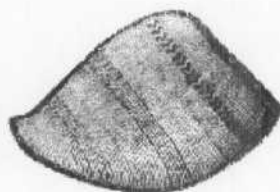


Deep Sifting Basket. Dia. 20".

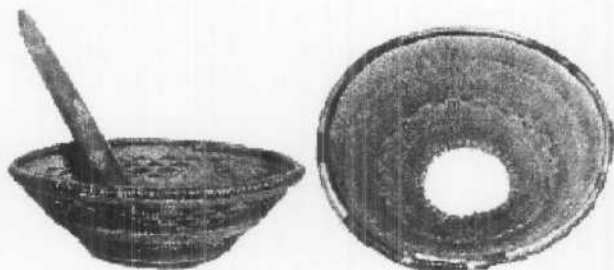
Openwork Wincrowing Basket. Dia. 20"



Triangular Basket. Length 20".



Mortar and Pestle. Acorns were the staple food source of the California Indians. These nuts were pounded into meal on stone mortars. The funnel-shaped mortar baskets, with a hole at the bottom, were used to concentrate the meal in the bottom of the basket onto the mortar rock. This prevented the meal from flying off the mortar during pounding. Typical dia. across the top: 14".

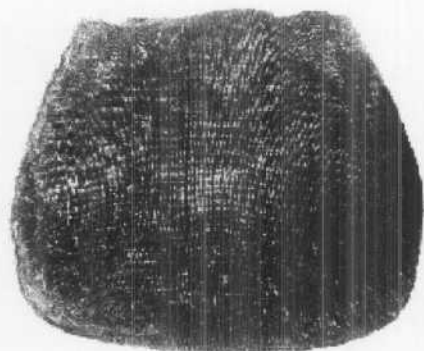


Mortar Basket. Dia. 14".

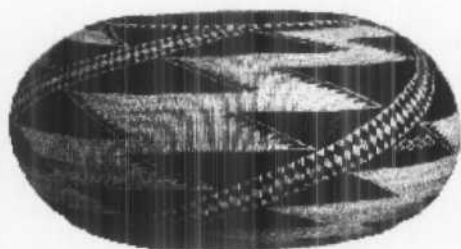
Mortar Basket and Pestle. Dia. 14".

Storage and Food Serving Baskets

Large Storage Baskets. Large twined storage baskets for acorns and other non-perishable foods often have sides incurving toward the top. In north central California the baskets are round or globular in shape. In the northwestern area of the state the large storage baskets are typically taller with a larger opening. Fancy or highly decorated gift baskets were used for storing different items. Typical dia. across largest area: 30".



Large Gift/Storage Basket from North Central California. Dia. 30".



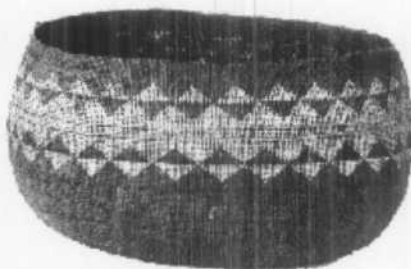
Large Storage Basket from Northwestern California. Dia. 30".



Food Serving Tray. Dia. 20".

Food Preparation and Serving Baskets

Cooking Baskets. Cooking baskets have flared, straight or slightly incurved sides. Red-hot rocks are repeatedly dropped into the basket until the acorn soup or mush is cooked. The large (24" or more) cooking baskets have flaring sides to make it easier to remove the cooled rocks. These large baskets would probably have been used to cook for the extended-family households typical in pre-contact times. Today feasts for community gatherings are prepared in the baskets. Small cooking baskets (12" or smaller) may have a slightly incurved profile but are more open (so that rocks can be removed) than the storage basket with strongly incurved sides.

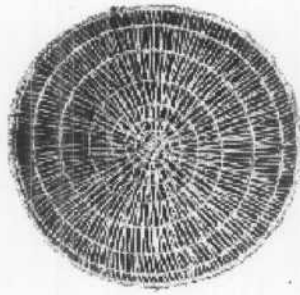


Large Cooking Basket. Dia. 24".



Large Cooking Basket. Dia. 24"

Food Serving Platters. In many parts of northern California, openwork twined platters were used to serve roasted fish or meat. Typical dia.: 12-15".



Food Platter. Dia. 15".

Food Serving Baskets. Small coiled or twined gift baskets with flaring sides were used for individual servings of acorn soup or mush, and for dipping and pouring water. Typical dia. across mouth: 3" to 6".



Small Serving Basket. Dia. 6".

Specialized Baskets

Shell money and other valuables were often stored in small, necked gift baskets whose shapes are reminiscent of pottery. Typical dia.: 7".

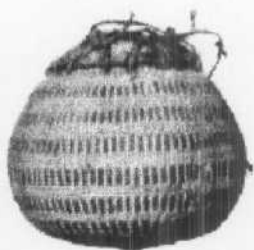


Shell Basket. Dia. 7".

Lidded "Trinket" Baskets were a post-contact innovation in northwestern California. They were made primarily for sale to European collectors. Typical dia.: 6".

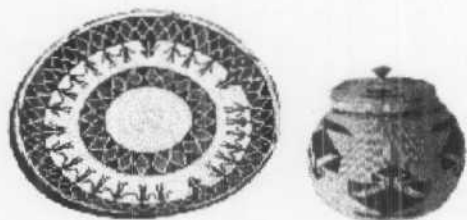
Basketry Tobacco Pouches were also made in northwestern California. Typical dia.: 3".

Gambling Trays, shallow, round woven basketry were used by women while playing gambling games. Typical dia.: 20".



Tobacco Pouch. Dia. 6".

Gambling Tray. Dia. 20".



Lidded Trinket Basket. Dia. 6".

Fancy Gift Baskets

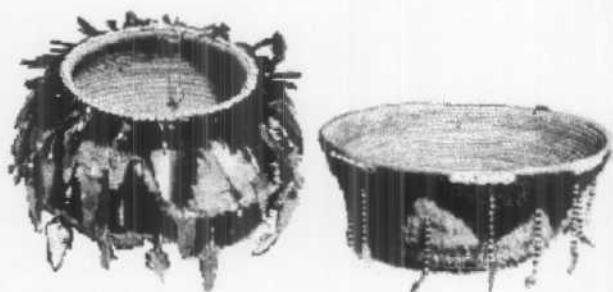
Elliptical or Boat-Shaped Baskets. These baskets had various uses. Small ones (typically 5" long) were often used to store valuables. Shaman and native doctor's paraphernalia were stored in medium-sized baskets (typically 14" long). The very large elliptical baskets (typically 30" or more in length) were used to store dance equipment and regalia.



Elliptical Basket. Length 5-30".

Treasured Gift Baskets. The Pomo tribes are famous for their elaborately decorated coiled-baskets used as gifts to store small valuables. Such "treasure" baskets were (and are) more valuable than the items stored in them. The baskets are decorated with beads or feathers. Sometimes they are completely covered with red woodpecker feathers ("sun" baskets), or with a combination of brightly colored feathers. The feathers were tightly stitched into the basket weave. Such valuable baskets were presented as gifts to friends as well as for wedding gifts. They are also used as sacrificial item when a person who owned the basket dies. These elaborate baskets are also made for sale to collectors. Typical dia.: 7".

Feather Basket. Dia. 7".



Sun Basket. Dia. 7".

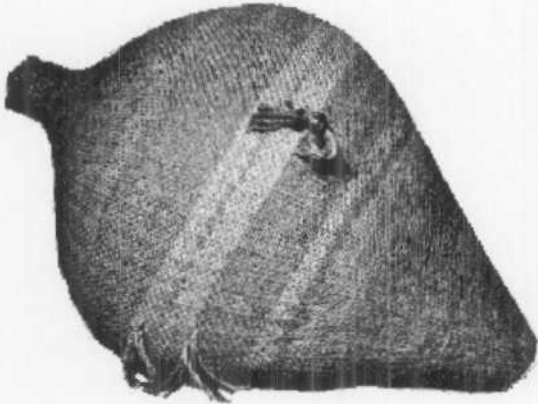
Miniature Baskets displayed the basketweaver's skill. They were given as a gift or sold, and sometimes were used in doctoring ceremonies. Typical dia.: 1/4" - 2".



Miniature Basket. Dia. 1/4" - 2" .

Other Specialized Basket Types

Water Bottle. A water-proof twined weave was used for these baskets from the central area of eastern California. Typical dia.: 10".



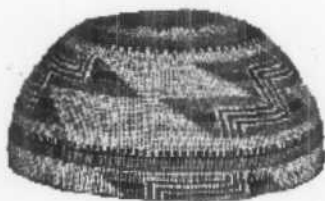
Basketry Water Bottle. Dia. 10".

Basketry Cradle. Basketry cradles were used by all northern California tribes. The baby was fastened into the cradle which was carried on the mother's back. Typical length is 30" although a variety of sizes were made to correspond to the age of the infant.



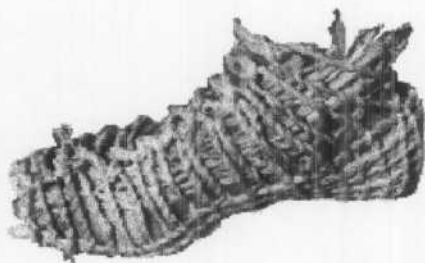
Basketry Cradle. Length 30".

Basketry Cap. Basketry caps were worn in the northwest and areas of eastern California. Plain, everyday caps were worn by both men and women. Fancy dress-up caps of the finest quality twined weave are still made and worn by the women today. Typical dia.: 8".



Basketry Cap. Dia. 8".

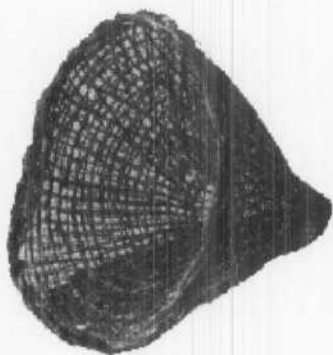
Basketry Moccasins. Some tribes also used basketry techniques to weave foot-gear or moccasins out of tule rushes or other plant materials.



Basketry moccasins. Length 10".

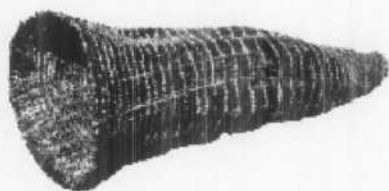
Traps

Birds and fish were the principal animals caught with traps. In California, salmon and certain other migratory fish were second only to acorns as a food staple. Basketry traps were made in three main forms. A "plunge" trap was used to scoop up fish. "Invaginated" traps had a narrow, funnel-shaped opening leading the fish into a second chamber from which they were unable to exit. A third trap type is long and funnel-shaped. Upon entering the trap, the woodpecker, quail or certain fish became wedged into the small end. The size, structure, and weave of each trap varied according to the specific animal. Three types of traps are illustrated: the Pomo invaginated fish-trap, typical dia. at the mouth: 18"; the Atsugewi basketry fish-trap, typical dia. at the mouth: 12"; and the Pomo woodpecker trap, typical dia. at the mouth: 4".



Invaginated Fish Trap. Dia. 18".

Fish Trap. Dia. 12".



Woodpecker Trap. Dia. 4".



Basket Weaving Methods

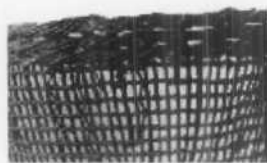
A basket was worked, and formed of grasses, twigs and fibers into a piece of artistic design-- sometimes only to be admired for its artistry, but usually created to serve a further purpose. Baskets were made to serve all the container needs of the early California peoples who had no pottery. Not merely handwoven, they were filled with meaningful designs, symbols, even stories, following tribal tradition. Beyond tradition, weavers exercised artistic freedom leaving their individual marks. Three types of basket weaving is illustrated below.

Coiling. A flexible rod, or cluster of 3 rods, is coiled and continuously bound to the preceding level. This method produces a strong but quite stiff basket or tray.



Coiling.

Simple Open-Work Twining is used for traps and some winnowing trays. As in cloth weaving, a horizontal weft goes under and over the vertical warp. Two or three pieces of horizontal weft material may also be twisted around each other.



Simple Open-Work Twining.

Tightly Woven Twining. This weave is used for cooking baskets, caps, water bottles, and for other items where waterproofing is required, or where flexibility is essential. The weaving includes a variety of complex and difficult techniques and designs.



Tightly Woven Twining.