

CONCEPTS

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ALEUT BASKETRY COLLECTION OF THE ALASKA STATE MUSEUM

by Bette Hulbert

At Unalaska in 1778, Captain James Cook reported "baskets of grass which are both strong and beautiful." Other early references by Veniaminov (1840), Dall (1874), Wyer (1929), and Hrdlicka (1945) also mention the functional aspect of Aleut grass weaving.

The Alaska State Museum has actively collected Aleut baskets and Aleut weaving since its establishment in 1900.

The majority of the State Museum's Aleut basketry collection dates from historic times. It consists of open baskets, cigar/card cases,

basketry belts, napkin rings, basketry-covered bottles and inkwells, mats, fish baskets, thimble baskets, and "May" baskets. The oldest documented baskets in this group were collected and donated by District Governor Swineford on his trip to the Arctic aboard the "Thetis" in 1888. Other nineteenth-century baskets dated 1898 and 1899 were gifts of Captain Francis A. Levis of the Revenue Marine Service. One of these (II-F-141) has an amazing 1053 stitches per square inch!

Aleut basket-making reached its zenith between 1850 and 1919. By



Figure 1. Left to right: Attu, Unalaska and Atka styles, II-F-299, II-F-301, II-F-135. The Unalaska basket is 4" high and 4 1/2" in diameter.

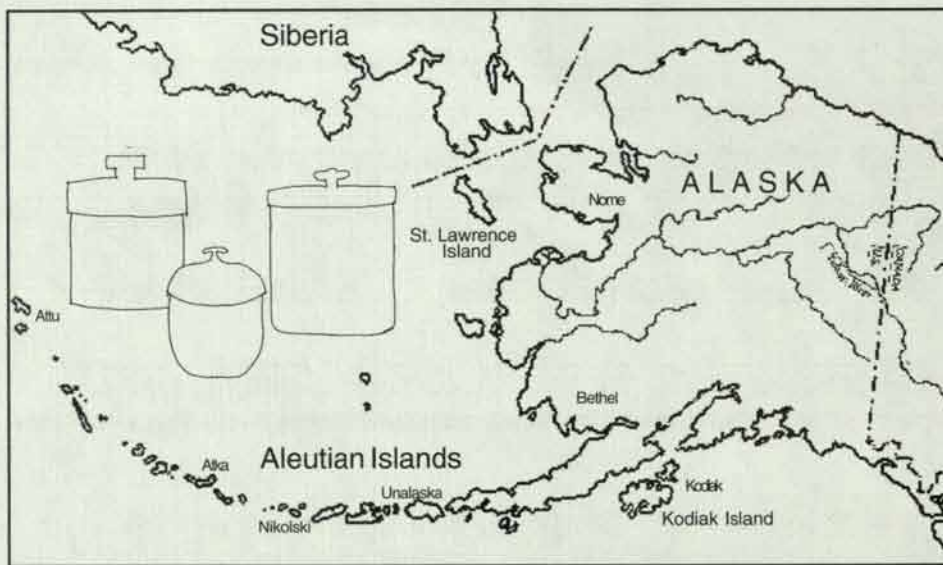


Figure 2. Left to right: Attu, Atka and Unalaska basketry shapes. The Attu shape has right angles at the bottom and a distinctive knob on a short, thick stem. Unalaska baskets have a slightly less angled bottom and a knob similar to the Attu but on a thinner stem. Atka characteristics are a non-angular bottom and a thin knob that tends to sag on its stem.

the 1880s, Aleut weaving flourished, stimulated by the prospect of cash sales or trade for imported goods. Several baskets in the Museum collection listed as donated between 1910 and 1915 were woven during the peak of this historic period. The 1919 flu epidemic struck down many village basketmakers, and a decline in production ensued.

Weaving Styles

The three major styles of contemporary Aleut weaving, Attu, Atka, and Unalaska are named for the islands where they originated. The Unalaska style basket is woven on all the other islands except Umnak.

Of the 144 (1999) Aleut baskets in the State Museum, forty are documented as follows: seven from

Atka, nine from Unalaska, and twenty-four from Attu. Twenty-nine additional baskets display distinct Attu characteristics but their

origins are not documented.

This article discusses the three major contemporary Aleut weaving styles and illustrates some of their distinguishing characteristics. All the baskets pictured here are documented and in the Alaska State Museum's collection.

Attu

The term "Attu" has regrettably evolved into a generic description for Aleut weaving. This makes identification of an Attu basket questionable until one has the opportunity to study the style and the weaving. To further complicate research, some Attu basketmakers were evacuated to Southeast Alaska during World War II and later relocated on Atka after the war. Therefore, some baskets collected on Atka are actually woven in the Attu style. Attu baskets are identified by style, weaving technique, and their very fine weave.

The Attu technique, associated with Attu Island weavers, refers to the way of holding both the warp and the weft to maintain tension and produce a finer weave than other Aleut styles. An Attu basket is held upside-down during the weaving process; the weaving is done from left to right while the basket is rotated clockwise.

The resulting finely woven basket has vertical rows that slant more than those done by the Atka or Unalaska method. This slanted feature, plus a three-strand corner row, a right-angle corner, a distinctive knob characterized by a



Figure 3. Three Attu baskets by Mary Snigaroff. The two smaller are called thimble baskets. The upright thimble basket measures 1 1/4" high and 1" in diameter. LEFT TO RIGHT: II-F-336, II-F-337 and II-F-334.

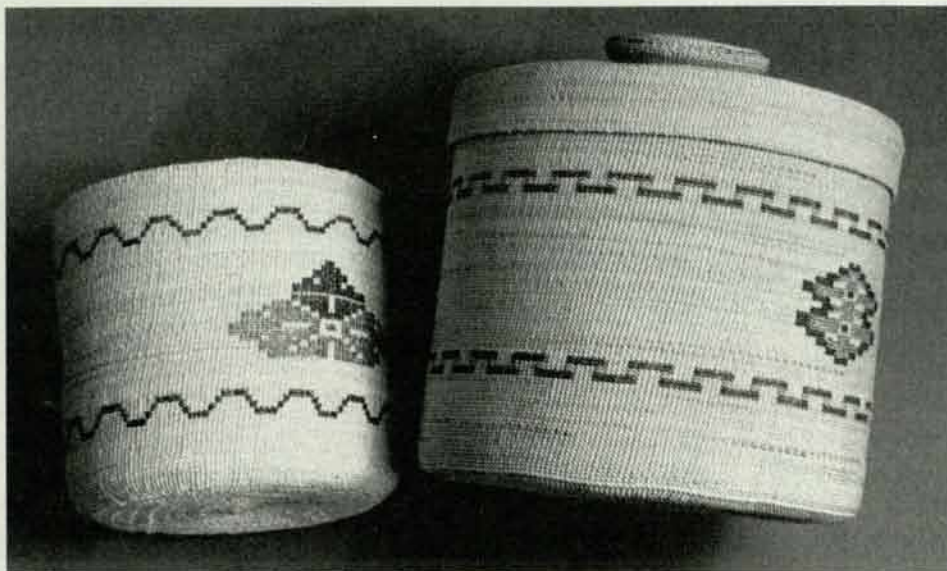


Figure 4. Bottom corners of the Atka (left) II-F-135 and Attu baskets are different. The third strand weft of the bottom corner row on the Attu basket is pronounced. Also note the slanted weave of the Attu basket. Attu basket II-F-299 is 3 5/8" in diameter and 3 1/4" high.

Aleut Weavers Represented in the Museum Collection

| Name | Cat. # | Date Made | Location Made |
|---|----------|------------|---------------|
| Goly, Sousiapatra | II-F-116 | 1915 | Unalaska |
| Golley, Jennie | II-F-128 | ca.1943 | Killisnoo |
| Golley, Martha a.k.a. "The Belle of the Aleutians" | II-F-335 | 1940-41 | Atka |
| Gould, Irene Hubley | II-F-304 | ca.1914 | Unga |
| | II-F-305 | ca.1914 | Unga |
| | II-F-306 | ca.1914 | Unga |
| | II-F-307 | ca.1914 | Unga |
| Krukof, Jennie | 98-24-1 | 1959 | Nikolski+ |
| | 98-24-2 | 1959 | Nikolski |
| Lokanin, Mrs. Chief Michael (probably Parascovia "Pari" Horosoff Lokanin Wright) | 91-30 | ca.1940 | Attu |
| Neseth, Eunice | II-F-283 | ca.1976 | Kodiak |
| | II-F-303 | 1979 | Kodiak |
| Pletnikoff, Sophie (Sophia) D. | II-F-123 | 1962 | Unalaska |
| Prokopiuff, Vassa Maggie a.k.a. "Rock of Ages" | II-F-299 | ca.1934-35 | Attu |
| Shapsnikoff, Anfesia(?) | II-F-279 | 1950s | Attu(?) |
| Snigaroff, Agnea(?) | II-F-138 | 1930 | Atka |
| Snigaroff, Mary Prokupeuff (Mrs. Andrew) | II-F-126 | ca.1944 | Killisnoo |
| | II-F-135 | ca.1944 | Killisnoo |
| | II-F-334 | 1941 | Atka |
| | II-F-336 | 1940-42 | Atka |
| | II-F-337 | 1940-41 | Atka |
| | II-F-338 | 1940-42 | Atka |
| Zoachny, Mrs. Agrafania(?) | II-F-138 | 1915 | Atka |
| Zoachney, Tatiana | II-F-302 | ca.1970 | Atka |

three-weft corner row and a short, thick stem help to identify the true Attu basket and lid (see figures 1 and 2).

The traditional lidded Attu basket usually includes openwork or false embroidery border designs near the bottom and the top and a wider design of false embroidery woven in the middle. This design is repeated on the lid—but not on the knob. The height of an Attu basket usually exceeds the diameter and, frequently, the distance from the bottom border to the top of the knob will equal the diameter of the base (see figure 3). In *How to Attu* by Virginia Samuelson and Eunice Neseth, the authors state, "The size of all baskets, as well as any design work, was entirely at the whim of the weaver." Mrs. Neseth proved just how whimsical a basketmaker can be when she made and donated to the State Museum an Attu basket in the size and shape of an Avon Cream Supreme jar. Eunice identifies this as a 1979 "Kodiak innovative Attu" basket.



Figure 5. Unalaska basket II-F-280 shows the characteristic thin stemmed knob. Its diameter is 7" and height 5 1/2".

Atka and Unalaska

The Atka and Unalaska basketmakers employ a different holding technique than the Attu weavers. Less tension exerted on the weft strands produces straighter vertical rows. Of the two, the Atka baskets are usually more finely woven and display a pronounced curve at the bottom (see figure 4). The Atka knobs are woven very thin and tend to sag on their stems. (Figure 1). The Atka knob does not have a three-strand corner; the circumference in relation to the diameter of the lid is greater than that of the Attu knobs.

The characteristics of the Unalaska style, are, generally, a coarser weave, a bottom corner that is closer to a right-angle than the Atka (but less than the Attu), no corner row on the knob, a knob as



Figure 6. Unalaska fish basket II-F-333 donated to the State Museum by Ruby Magee, a former teacher on Atka. It is 7" in diameter and 6 1/2" high.

heavy as the Attu but, usually, with a longer and thinner stem. Figure 5 shows a typical Unalaska knob. The Unalaska method tends to encourage the production of larger baskets and more of the fish basket and/or open-weave type (see figure 6).

With more information and some comparative analysis, probably more baskets could be identified. For example: were Sousiapatra Goly, Martha Golley and Jennie Golley related? Did one teach the others? Was Mrs. Agrafania Zoachney related to Tatiana Zoachney? These and other unanswered questions would fascinate Sherlock Holmes. There's a little sleuth in every Curator of Collections.*

* See "Concepts" Technical Paper Number 8, "Aleut Weavers" by Martha G. Murray and Peter L. Corey

Bette Hulbert was Curator of Collections at the Alaska State Museum from 1973 to 1984. She then became the Museums Director of the Michigan Division of Museums. She retired in early 1999.

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