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SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM AUGUST ARTIFACTS OF THE MONTH

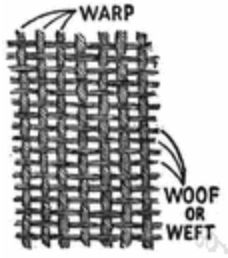


SITKA – The Sheldon Jackson Museum’s August Artifacts of the Month are three finely woven, polychromatic, Tlingit spruce root baskets (From left to right: I.A.693a,b, I.A.627, I.A.665a,b). The three baskets differ in their design patterns, size, and shape. All three illustrate the woosh-tuhk-ah-gee or “close together work” weave (Emmons’ Weave 1) and have a segment or segments in shuck kuhk or strawberry weave (Emmons’ Weave 6) and reveal a superb sense of proportion and symmetry on the part of the weaver.¹

The covered basket on the left (I.A.693) in the adjacent photograph has a base of solid twining and strawberry weave. The walls are solid twining up to the rim. Inside the basket is a cardboard circle sewn to the bottom with white commercial thread.² The sides of the basket have two rows of “box around the cross” (the word “box” being the same for coffin”) in orange, red, and brown false embroidery done in alternating patterns. The basket’s cover is in solid twining with a knob with a fern frond pattern in red and brown. The false embroidery bordering the top in brown and orange may be a rainbow-pattern variation. All of the bands are outlined at the top and bottom with a single round of strawberry weave in brown. The rim of this basket terminates in Emmons’ border #1. This piece was woven by master weaver Jimmie (Annie) George of Yakutat and was

¹ The strawberry weave is not truly a weave but a variation of the regular twined weave, Emmons’ Weave 1.

² Cardboard circles are frequently sewn onto the base of baskets (inside or outside) and can help keep the bottom flat and clean or act as a pattern guide to know when to turn while weaving.



collected by Marjory Major when she was a nurse for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. This is a more modern basket though the exact date is unknown.

The largest basket of the three baskets (I.A.627.) is cylindrical, open, and has a solid twined base and wall. Two small rows of strawberry weave are visible in the bottom base. There are three bands in the design field of this basket – a wide-narrow-wide pattern including one band with a Raven’s tail double war axe and footprint pattern repeated in the wider bands and a narrow band in the stepped pattern and tying weave. In one area on the outside wall is a small remnant of blue-green cloth which may have once held a cloth liner in place. It was likely used for food gathering, perhaps berry gathering, or storage. The geographic origin and maker of this basket is unknown but it was donated by the Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum in 1991.

The urn shaped basket (I.A.665) has a base with “between weave” (Emmon’s Weave 2). The base and cover rim bands are done with false embroidery in yellow and black drop, a pattern that is a variation of the head of the salmonberry pattern. The cover has a purple knob and a false embroidery pattern of fireweed in black and orange. The center and widest pattern is a butterfly pattern in black, orange, and tan. The pattern made of dark brown with a spiral-like effect above and below the butterfly pattern is done in a strawberry weave. The rim on the cover and basket is Emmons’ border #1. This basket was also donated by the Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum. Its geographic origin and maker is unknown.

The Tlingit had six styles of weave, not including the fish trap, checkerboard plaiting or mat making, the embroidery in grasses and plant stems, and several plaited border edges.³ The styles were all twined weaving, in which a regular series of warp strands are enclosed by a cross-twining of the weft. In all weaving, the progress of work is from left to right and the outer woof thread crosses from up, down, and around.

The gathering, preparation, and weaving of spruce root was women’s work. In the spring and fall, women went into the woods with digging sticks (kart) usually made of alder or hemlock and sharpened and fire-hardened at both ends.⁴ Elders selected a tree and the ground around the roots would be prodded at a right angle until a desirable lead was located. Using the digging stick and hand, the root was followed up to its end and sections ranging from three to twenty feet in length were made into small coils and tied

³ Note that since the Strawberry weave is not an actual weave, but a variation of Emmons’ Weave #1, it is also correct to say that there are five kinds of weave. See *Spruce Root Basketry of the Alaska Tlingit* by Frances Paul.

⁴ Grasses and plant stems were also gathered when young and during the summer and fall, sometimes dyed, and woven over the woof strands for overlay or false embroidery. Grasses used include Fowl manna grass, Blue joint grass, Tufted hair grass, Slender reed grass, Alaska brome grass, Beach rye grass, Maidenhair fern, and Marsh horsetail. Stains or dyes in basketry include Alder and hemlock bark boiled in urine for red; Salmonberry leaves for pink; Huckleberries, bog cranberries, and blueberries for purple-blue; and yellow tree lichen or wolf moss for yellow. The stem of the maidenhair fern was boiled, dried, and then split to produce colors ranging from a reddish to a blackish purple. Much of the older Tlingit basket embroidery was done with this plant stem.

around the middle. Within a day of gathering, the bark on the roots was removed by placing the coils over hot coals one side at a time until the exterior was slightly charred. The coils were then straightened and passed through an eena, a rough stick stuck in the ground with a v-like formation at the top, the left hand regulating pressure on the root while the right steadily drew it through the split. The coils were then soaked in water before any sap on its surface could dry. Generally, the root would be left for several months to season in storage and splitting and weaving would commence in the winter.

Splitting the root was a process unto itself. Prior to splitting or handling, the root was re-soaked or moistened to make it pliable. The root strand was then split with sections for warp and weft separately maintained. Each strand is known as khul katst (“split”) and has three parts. The outside layer has a smooth polished surface next to the bark called khart ku’h-khe (“root outside”). The “root outside” is the most valued and supplies the woof or weft strand that makes the exteriors of baskets look polished. The next layer is called khart thla’r-tu (“root inside”) and has a fibrous, uneven surface but is of good color and strength and comprises the warp of the basket. The inner section of the root is called khart tu-qwu’t-see (“root thrown away”) and, as implied by its name, is discarded.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum is home to nearly three hundred spruce root items including baskets, mats, cups, cigarette cases, wallets, and spoon bags. These baskets will be on exhibit until August 31st. The museum’s summer hours are 9am to 5pm daily. Closed holidays. General admission is \$5 for adults, \$4 for seniors, and free for those 18 and under and Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum or Friends of the Alaska Alaska State Museum.

Emmons, George Thornton & (Ed.) De Laguna, Frederica. *The Tlingit Indians*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1991

Emmons, George Thornton. *The Basketry of the Tlingit and the Chilkat Blanket*. Sitka: Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum. 1993

Paul, Frances. *Spruce Root Basketry of the Alaska Tlingit*. U.S. Indian Service. 1944

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