

Beautiful Baskets

A basket is a container that is traditionally constructed from stiff fibers and can be made from a range of materials including wood splints, runners, and cane. There are four main types of basket making. I'm not sure if I could categorize all of the baskets we own into these four types, but I do get the basic differences.

- “Coiled” baskets are created by arranging or winding something long and flexible in a joined sequence of concentric circles or rings. Often used to produce cooking baskets, eating bowls, gift baskets, etc.
- “Plaited” baskets are created by joining three or more pieces of string-like material by putting them over each other in a special pattern and then coiling or otherwise joining them to form the basket. Hair braids are plaited hair.
- “Twined” baskets are created when the threads are twisted in twos or threes and twined around the standards or enclosing them. It's often used to produce burden baskets, cradle baskets, storage baskets, etc. whereas coiling results in a tighter weave and more detailed patterns.
- “Wicker” or “splint” baskets use reed, cane, willow, ash, etc. They are generally large and carried by a beast of burden or on a person. We all know that wicker methods are also used to make furniture. They're the oldest furniture making method known to human history.

Basket making/weaving is a “rural craft” and a very widespread craft in human history. Rural crafts are traditional craft activities carried on simply for everyday practical use, generally in the agricultural countryside. It is difficult to say how long it has been done, because most baskets are made from natural materials that can decay when exposed to the weather. There is little doubt that much has been lost over time. Baskets will keep for a long time in sheltered locations like modern homes, but not so long if left outside.

Baskets are made by people all over the world of course. People from every part of the world have basket types they are known for. In India basket weaving with palm materials has been a long tradition. Chinese, Japanese, and Taiwanese bamboo weaving goes back centuries. Basketry is a traditional craft in the Pacific islands using hibiscus, coconut, and flax. In Australia many aboriginal women have practiced basketry for a long time. Many baskets in Victoria, Australia were used for carrying the short-finned eels that were farmed by the people in that region. Europe, Africa, and South America also have many traditional basket types.

Indigenous people of North America are renowned basket makers. Each tribe has its own distinctive style and techniques that have been passed down through generations. They use mainly pine needles, dried grass, yucca leaves, corn husks, etc. They have even used baskets as musical instruments, and for spiritual and ceremonial functions such as offerings to the spirits or ancestors. Native American baskets date back thousands of years. Some of those that we know the best are Apache, Popago, and Black Ash Baskets, Examples shown in these slides.

Bill and I have collected baskets over the years and have many in our house. He would likely say that I collect or hoard them, but he has been involved in some of the best acquisitions we have made. When we travel to Arizona to visit relatives, we often return home with at least one basket, mostly made by southwestern indigenous people.

We have many baskets made by the Popago people. They are strong, finely woven, and excellent for storage of implements used frequently. We have one on the table near where we sit to watch TV at night that contains a nail file, nail clippers, Q-tips in a box, etc. Things that it's nice not to have to get up for in the middle of a show. Another is near where we sit in the atrium for the same reasons.

One very special basket acquired in Arizona is an Apache made craft basket. Ours is quite old, and no longer very strong, so we have it mounted on a stand and displayed in the living room out of reach or accidental bumping. These were actually made more for sale to tourists as works of art. They even have special mounting racks made specifically to display these baskets. Some are very expensive, thousands of dollars each. Ours, purchased in 2000, was \$175.00 from the Old Territorial Shop in downtown Scottsdale, AZ. Bill remembers better than I do and tells me that the (Caucasian) owners of the Old Territorial Shop worked very closely with the Native Americans in the region acquiring many baskets to sell to tourists. At times the makers would come back to request the use of some of their baskets for ceremonies or spiritual functions, and he would loan them back happily.

Recently we met a woman at an event at the History Museum in the Castle. She is a member of the Ho-Chunk Tribe and lives in Baraboo, WI. Her name is Kimberly Crowley and I have contact information if you would like it. She makes handmade Black Ash Baskets and sells them online and at many events. Black Ash Baskets are made by many indigenous tribes. Potawatomi, Ojibwe, Ho-Chunk, Iroquois, and others. They are made of strips of wood processed from black ash trees. A

significant problem for black ash basket makers in Wisconsin is the emerald ash borer, which is killing ash trees throughout the state, including 18 in our yard.

We've acquired baskets everywhere. Art fairs, craft shows, my parents' houses, local shops, etc. I've been trying to accurately count those that we have and it's not a trivial task. Right now I think there are 146 in our home. Many are used for some task as the Popagos described above. Some are waste baskets, one is where the recycling papers are stored until put out. Some are displayed as art, used for laundry, hold magazines until we get to them, hold fruit on the kitchen counter. One is just for dessert treats on the kitchen counter. Lots of other uses for baskets.

Here are some pictures of the baskets in our home.

Here are a few baskets we own that are strong enough to pass around, Please don't try to squish them, but appreciate their beauty. And next time you come to our home (for the Torch Summer Party for instance), feel free to ask for a basket tour if you want.