Not Making It: Formalism, Cultural Significance and the Study of Native American Basketry[1]

Molly Lee

Curator of Ethnology and Professor of Anthropology, University of Alaska Museum of the North, Fairbanks, AK 99775-6960. ffmcl@uaf.edu

Abstract: During twenty-five years of studying of Native American basketry, friends, colleagues, and the lay public have often assumed that my interest stemmed from artistic urge rather than intellectual curiosity. Why should this assumption be so pervasive? The answer may lie in the state of Native American basketry studies, whose progress has been slowed by an emphasis on taxonomy and formalism. Why should this be when the study of other categories of indigenous objects has moved on more rapidly? In this paper I will explore this question, tracing the historical roots of basket studies and their source in the American Arts and Crafts Movement and the feelings of loss and nostalgia that permeated the study of Native American material objects generally at the turn of the 20th century. I will then focus on the hobbyist/collector approach that followed. Finally, I will consider more recent approaches to material culture to suggest ways of advancing Native American basketry studies more rapidly.

Keywords: Aesthetic theory, American Arts and Crafts Movement, Native American Basketry.

INTRODUCTION

On a Saturday morning in June long ago, as I slammed shut my car door and joined the crowd of early-bird buyers at a garage sale in Santa Barbara, California, I little dreamed that I was embarking on a journey that would propel me much farther than the length of the driveway of the large suburban house that stood before me. Earlier that week I had bought my first Native American basket – a small, unpretentious example from the Makah Indians of western Washington – which probably explains why my eye was immediately caught that morning by a globular, twined plant fiber basket resting among the other trash and treasures at the sale. It was straw-colored with a dark brown geometric pattern encircling its middle. As I handed over my 50 cents to the about-to-be former owner and sped back down the drive for fear she would change her mind, I felt the rush of excitement that has since become so familiar. Arriving home, I ran in the door to show my husband my new treasure. He took the basket from me, and turned it around slowly. As he followed the chocolate-colored design with his index finger, I watched his eyebrows rise, a sure sign of skepticism. "Hmm," he said, reading off the design, which turned out to be letters, "'Hecho en Mejico.' Some Indian basket!"

I still recall the mixture of incredulity and dismay that I felt before succumbing to hilarity. Like most collectors, I wanted to believe that my "Indian" basket had been made for Native use and had only found its way into non-Native hands by chance. In reality, perhaps 90% of the Native American baskets sold to outsiders over the past century were intended for external consumption, so why was it that I, like all the others, clung so doggedly to this misconception?

I have spent a good part of the intervening quarter century trying to answer this question, and also its corollary, the assumption that I, as a researcher with an interest in Native American baskets, would want to learn to make them. "Look here," a friend will say excitedly, pointing to the newspaper, "there's an Indian basket making class this coming Saturday." Try as I might, I have failed utterly to convince the well-meaning that I'd rather die than take a basket making class, even if I weren't hampered by having ten left thumbs for fingers. Clearly, "making it" is bundled together with the constellation of acknowledged proclivities associated with Native American basket aficionados and I am deficient in choosing not to learn how.

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My refusal to get involved in "making it" stems in large part from a rebellion against the formalist typological approach to Native American basketry research that has been the norm for most of the 20th century. There are many valuable insights to be gained from the meticulous attention to detail required by this kind of work (e.g., Cohodas 1976), and it is an essential first step in the more speculative and contextual investigations of today. As an end in itself, however, its uses are important for purposes of identification but somewhat limiting otherwise. For example, this was the approach in which I, as an art history graduate student in the 1980's, was trained in, and my first publication (Lee 1981), a study of a hitherto unknown Pacific Eskimo (Alutiiq) basket type, certainly fit the mold:

> The space occupied by design [on the Alutiiq baskets] is subdivided into primary and secondary design fields, wrote the dutiful graduate student. The primary design field, composed of three of four principal pattern rows, occupies approximately one-half to two-thirds of the upper basket walls. The secondary design field, which may or may not be completely filled in with encircling rows of decoration, is found on the remaining wall space below the primary design field (Lee 1981:67).

I have long since moved on, but others have not, and I continue to wonder why it is that the study of a magnificent art form like Indian basketry should be more about the description of design elements and pattern zones than its changing cultural context, which makes it a rich transcultural object to investigate This is the question I want to consider here by looking at the meanings non-Natives have ascribed to Indian basketry since it was first collected seriously at the turn of the 20th century.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF NATIVE AMERICAN BASKET COLLECTING

The American middle class welcomed the turn of the 20th century with a decade-long fad of Native American basketry collecting. The fad has received some scholarly attention (e.g., Bates and Lee 1991; Herzog 1996; N. Jackson 1984; Washburn 1984), though researchers' interests have usually been in its history. For that reason, I want to turn to the cultural matrix in which this dramatic phenomenon arose.

For the most part, turn-of-the-century basket devotees shared a common attitude toward Native Americans and their art forms. It echoed the prevailing outlook of anti-modernism that informed the American Arts and Crafts movement, a social, political and artistic interest group that arose in protest to the growing industrialization that increasingly characterized North America. Typical Arts and Crafts adherents were women of the educated, democratic-minded, upper middle class, who sought to combat their mounting alienation by the promotion of communally-based handicrafts. For them, American Indian cultures served as models of the close relationship between art and life espoused by the Arts and Crafts, as it was known (Boris 1986; Lears 1981). Some, such as Helen Hunt Jackson, author of *Ramona*, surely the best known novel with an Indian basket maker as the main character (H. Jackson 1926), sought refuge in the idealized past by writing about Native American women. Others lived out these ideals by amassing vast collections of baskets. A third, smaller group, consisted of women who actually replicated Indian baskets, out of raffia, to the later consternation of unknowing collectors, museum curators, and eBay dévotées (James 1970:48-83).

For Arts and Crafts adherents, the appeal of baskets rested on a fortuitous blend of practicality, aesthetics and ideological happenstance. They appealed to basket-loving tourists to the southwest or Alaska because they were handmade, but also because they were small, light, easy to pack, and relatively cheap (at least in the early days). As souvenirs, the baskets' handmade qualities, which contrasted dramatically with the ubiquitous stamped-out pots and pans of the Industrial Age, made them appealing gifts to take back to those at home.

As part of molding the narrative of national angst around the Indian basket and re-contextualizing it as a symbol of anti-modernism, collectors endowed it with an aura of sacredness.

> When the art of basketry was at its height, wrote one collector, ... the same [basket design] meant one thing to the Indian on the mountains and another to him who roamed the deserts. Thus[,] a zigzag design may mean waves, [or] a prayer for preservation from shipwreck to one who dwells on the coast and ... a prayer for protection against lightning [to an Indian] inland (Wilkie 1902:3).

In reality, Native Americans regarded their baskets as largely, if not exclusively, utilitarian. Most ethnic groups took the names of basket designs from the natural phenomena they associate with it. Among the Alaskan Tlingit, for instance, common pattern names included "half the head of a salmonberry," "fern frond" and "shark's tooth"

(Emmons 1902). While it is true that some Native Californians burned baskets in funeral ceremonies, this was in keeping with the widespread custom of destroying the personal possessions of the deceased and not out of any association of the basket itself with spirituality. Anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, who worked for many years among the California Indians, fought an uphill battle against the presumed sacredness of Indian basket designs. His irritation is clear in the following excerpt:

> [Among the Pomo Indians], a typical pattern name ... [an animal part combined with a descriptive term, e.g., "deer-back arrowhead crossing"] is exactly descriptive, he wrote. ... Such a practical purpose, and not any religious or symbolic motive ... seems to at the base of these designs and pattern names. If there is a difference between the Pomo and ourselves, it is that among [them] these conventional figures give no evidence of ... ever having had a symbolic significance (Kroeber 1909:25).

Why did collectors so consistently misinterpret Indian basket designs as sacred symbols? One likely explanation is that it was an outcome of the American middle class's quest for spiritual connection brought on by the waning power of Protestant Christianity. By the late 19th century, the rise in industrialization, immigration, and urbanism had dealt a severe blow to the Protestantism that formerly had been the backbone of rural pre-industrial American life (Lears 1981:13). Quite probably, collectors projected the loss onto their Native-made baskets, reading into them the perceived spirituality and closeness to nature that they themselves increasingly lacked.

The search for authenticity in the increasingly inauthentic, mass-produced world that MacCannell describes so well (MacCannell 1999) was a prime impulse of the Indian basket-collecting craze. Spurning the garishly decorated, aniline-dyed tourist baskets, collectors went to unimaginable lengths to ferret out any that remained in Native hands. "There is not a basket [in my collection]," boasted one, "which the Indians supposed, when it was made, would ever be owned by whites" (Brown 1898: 54-56). Especially prized were those baskets showing signs of wear, or those bearing traces of Native food or burns from the hot stones used to heat them for cooking.

> During my two visits to the village of Yakutat, wrote one collector, I especially sought for specimens of the basketry of olden time. A vigorous search produced three old baskets, two of which were then in actual use ... and the third had been cast away as worn out... They ... seemed to speak more of the people's life than did the bright and beautiful modern baskets (Meany 1903:213).

If obtaining baskets still in use proved impossible, collectors settled for traditional types replicated for the market, spurning those "faked after meretricious color, designs or shapes" (quoted in Washburn 1984:60). Little did they realize that Native weavers often re-adopted aboriginal forms and organic dyes after years of making more commercial varieties, not out of aesthetic preference, but in response to growing non-Native market demand (Washburn 1984).

NATIVE AMERICAN BASKETRY STUDIES AND THE TAXONOMIC APPROACH

After World War I when the craze for Indian baskets had dissipated and, before the resurgence of interest in indigenous art forms of the 1960's, basket making, which had virtually disappeared among Native American groups, was kept alive by non-Native American Indian hobbyists/collectors. An outgrowth of the turn-of-the-century, back-to-nature, Boy Scout movement, their main focus was the replication of ethnographic objects (Parezo and Hoerig 1999) though many were also serious collectors (e.g., Chandler and Lanford n.d.). Consequently, the goals of replication and identification were uppermost in their minds. In 1954, Norman Feder founded *The American Indian Hobbyist,* a magazine that published how-to articles on making Indian artifacts. Instructions for replicating Indian baskets occasionally appeared in its pages (Powers 1996) .

In 1975, the taxonomic approach to Native American objects was further popularized by the founding of *American Indian Art*[2] magazine, a glossy, dealer-driven publication for which Norman Feder served until his death as principal editorial adviser. Operating largely within the confines of the identify-and-describe approach, *American Indian Art,* now in its 28th year, has drawn an extensive and devoted readership among collectors. Recently, the magazine has modified its conservative editorial policy

[2]Interestingly, unlike the collectors from the Arts and Crafts Movement, many Native American basketry devotees from taxonomic/hobbyist period were men. This is probably explained by the close association of the Boy Scout movement with Native American crafts (see Powers 1996, for example). According to Thompson (1985*)*, male takeover of art forms, once they become legitimized is predictable. George Wharton James, who began writing about Native American basketry in the 1920's probably represents the first cross-over.

and has begun to attract a more varied coterie of authors. For scholars, one attraction is the magazine's wide readership; another is that it publishes lavish numbers of color photographs with its articles, a benefit generally unavailable in academic journals.

CONCLUSIONS

From the fetishistic engagement of the early 1900's forward into the 21st century, the study of Native American basketry has been dogged by essentialism. The descriptive approach still characteristic of conservative historians of Native art and many archaeologists attests to its ongoing influence. The rise of Structuralism in the 1980's and the cultural politics and material culture approaches that have replaced it have pointed the way toward more innovative forms of analysis, and within these fields. The research of Pierre Bourdieu (1993), Alfred Gell (1998), Fred Meyers (2003), and Nicholas Thomas (1991) offer tantalizing prospects for breaking its stranglehold (e.g. Bates and Lee 1990) Among indigenous groups in Alaska, California, and the Pacific Northwest, furthermore, Native American basket making itself is undergoing a heartening revival. If my current research on the cultural context of Yup'ik Eskimo grass basketry can count as an example, the study of these living art forms as commodities and commemorators of earlier ways of life is ripe with promise. Yup'ik baskets, for example, are made solely for sale to outsiders, yet my research suggests that through the medium of the beach grass, they commemorate the earlier uses of grass as well as the annual grass harvest women continue to enjoy today. At present, these same baskets are among the most widely sold Alaska Native art form. As a result of this visibility, and because beach grass grows throughout most of rural Alaska, Yup'ik grass baskets are frequently adopted as political symbols in the struggle over Native priority on public lands (Lee 2004).

In the course of this work, I must confess that I have had to learn to "make it." It would have been irresponsible not to. The interpretive analysis of any art form must be grounded by a good, solid description of its variants through time and space. The basketry "traditions" I have studied – from southeastern Alaska north around the Pacific Rim and as far east as Labrador and Greenland – usually include technical and descriptive information. So if I had to, I could probably stumble through the rudiments of coiling or twining a basket. Rather, I am adopting this extreme stance here as a means of pointing out the dampening effect that research based solely on technique and history has had on the study of Native American basketry. I have no wish to buy another "Hecho en Mejico" basket, though I would never rule out the prospect of studying one. And if I were to do that, I would prefer to look into the many implications of the curiously calligraphic design encircling it than to settle for its mere description.

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