ALEUTIAN BASKETRY

BASKETRY OF THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS. BY C. GADSDEN PORCHER.

To most basket collectors, the term “Attu Basket” means a beautifully woven, rather frail and very expensive basket, which comes from some indefinitely situated island somewhere near Alaska.

This island, Attu, is in reality almost a thousand miles from the main land of Alaska, as it is the extreme western island of the Aleutian chain, which extends in the arc of a circle, and in a westerly direction from the southwest corner of Alaska proper, forming the dividing line between the Pacific Ocean and Bering sea. Attu is the most westerly point of land of North America, and is, in fact, so far to the westward that it is actually in eastern longitude. The great distance of the island from the lines of traffic is the chief cause of the value of Attu baskets, although the limited supply is also a factor.

Although there are eight villages among the Aleutian islands, most of the baskets that reach the market pass under the name of Attu. Many a basket which has not been within hundreds of miles of this place, is sold as an Attu to the unsuspecting collector. This is not always because the dealer wishes to mislead, but because he does not know. In fact, it is often a very hard matter to decide where a certain basket is made; for natives moving from one village to another, take their methods with them. There is, however, usually something in the weave of a basket which indicates to an expert the locality from which it came.

In all of the eight Aleutian villages: Attu on Attu island, Atka on Atka island, Nikol-ski on Unmak island, and Unalaska, Makushin, Kashiga, Chernofski and Beorka on Unalaska island, the materials of basketry are the same, with the exception of those which are used in decoration. What is said of one as to the grass and its curing and preparation, can be said of all, except that more care and skill are exercised at Attu and Atka, than at any of the other places. The grass,—wild rye,—the only material supplied by nature for the making of baskets in these regions, grows profusely on all the islands, and all along the Western coast of Alaska. It is a coarse, heavy grass, with blades about two feet long by a little more than a half inch wide. It heads in the autumn, and looks somewhat like wheat; but the heads are generally light, and there is seldom any grain in them. There is always a rank growth of this grass along the water’s edge. In the villages, it grows everywhere, even on the tops of the barabaras, or sod huts, in which the natives live. The basket maker is very careful in the selection of her grass; long experience having taught her that the grass growing so rank in front of her door is coarse and weak, and that to get strong, tough material, she must go to the hillsides. Just before the grass begins to head, that is, between the first and the middle of July, the growth is at its best, and, at this time, women can be seen all over the hills gathering quantities of it for the winter’s work. This is no ordinary grass cutting; it is a slow and tedious process of selecting the good and of rejecting the unsuitable. Never more than three, and often only two blades are taken from the stalk. These are the younger ones, which are of a much more
delicate fibre and are much stronger than the older leaves. These two or three blades are broken off at the base, and, when taken home, are spread out in rows on the ground, where they are carefully watched and turned for about two weeks. They are kept out of the sunlight as much as possible since the heat tends to dry the grass too quickly for strength. It is true that the islands are very little troubled with sunshine. Some weather observations by the Russian missionary Veniaminof, covering a period of seven years, show fifty-three clear days, one thousand two hundred sixty-three cloudy days, and one thousand two hundred thirty days when it rained, hailed or snowed. This does not mean that the sun was seen only forty-three times in seven years, for it is not uncommon to see a dozen showers in a day with bright sunshine between, yet this would not be counted a clear day. When the grass has reached the proper degree of softness or wilt,—that is, in about two weeks, it is taken into the house and sorted. The blades are all separated, the coarse, the medium and the fine inner blade; each having its own pile. Those of the two coarser grades are split with the thumb nail into three parts; the middle piece with the heavy rib being discarded. The very fine, young blades are too soft and tender as yet for much handling, so they are dried whole. The different grades are now made in small bundles and hung out to dry on a sort of clothes line, made of braided grass. This must be done altogether on foggy and cloudy days, and the process requires about a month. During this drying, at a certain stage, each bundle is twisted or wrung, so as to separate the fibres and make the grass more pliable and tough. The drying is finished indoors. When they are almost dry, the bundles are separated into wisps about the size of a finger, and the ends braided loosely together, so that they will not tangle. A single piece can be pulled out, just as a woman pulls out a thread of darning cotton from a braid. When it is to be so used, the grass is split with the thumb nail to the desired fineness.

The result of the above method of curing gives a rich straw color to the coarser straw; while the finer straw is almost white. At Attu, they cure a grass still whiter by cutting it in November and hanging up the whole stalk, roots uppermost, until dry. But this material is used only to make white stripes in the warp of “drawstring” baskets; as it is very weak, having been practically weathered white before it was cut. There is still another shade procured at Attu, and sometimes at Unalaska. This is a very soft tea-green, obtained by keeping the grass near the houses, in the dense shade of the growth of weeds and grass, for the first two weeks of the curing. It is then taken out and dried, as in the first method, only it is kept more in the shade.

Beside the grass, the only materials used are for the decorations. At Attu, they decorate with colored silks, or worsteds, worked into designs, with vertical stripes of green or white grass, and, also, with the very white and papery skin taken from the throat of a fish of the sculpin family, called by the natives “Koloshka.” At other places, silks and worsteds are the only decorations, save that occasionally white eagledown is used by natives at Makushin and Beorka, and thin strips of seal-gut, colored with native paints, at Umnak. But these two last are seldom, if ever, seen now. At
one time, the use of the down of eagles and of other birds was quite common with all the natives, but this was long since discontinued. Worsted and silks are generally procurable from the traders and are more convenient to handle. Often, when the weavers cannot get these materials, they ravel out a scrap of cloth and use the ravelings.

By far the greater part of the basket weaving is done during the winter months and, therefore, indoors. Most of the natives in the western villages live in *barabarar* or sod huts. These are all alike and from the outside look like grass-covered mounds about six feet high. There is a little door at the side, near one end, and a small glazed window at the other end. The door opens into a room about four or five feet long by seven or eight wide. On one side is a fire place with cooking utensils and a pile of grass, roots, etc., called “chiksha,” for fuel. At the other side is a wooden partition with a door opening into the living room, which is from seven to ten feet square, with straw on the floor and a narrow wooden bunk on each side. The inhabitants are kept warm by not allowing any of the heated air to escape, and as the natives live chiefly on dried salmon, it is not hard to imagine the state of the atmosphere. On entering one of these huts, a novice will immediately back out to get a breath of fresh air, but if there is hope of a basket to be found, the collector cannot be kept away, and soon making a strong mental effort, he takes a long breath of air and dives in, not breathing again until he comes to the surface with his trophies. These must be aired before they can be stored away. How such fine and beautiful work can be done in such a place and in such light is hard to tell, yet here it is done. The weaver sits on the ground with knees doubled up nearly to her chin. Often some little girl, five or six years old, away in a corner, so quiet that one would never know of her presence, weaves away as if she had been doing it a lifetime, and she does surprisingly good work. There is a little girl six years old at Atka who can weave with either zigzag, straight, or crossed warp, and who does quite as good work as some of the women.

While the types of basket made in the different villages are usually distinct, in several instances, strange mixtures have been found, for when a basket-maker of one village moves to another, she generally mingles the methods of both places.

Starting with Attu, there comes first the burden-basket of the people, often known as the Attu “drawstring.” This is a collapsible basket, cylindrical in shape, with a height about equal to its diameter. The upper ends of the grass forming the warp, terminate in a braid which runs around the top, and continues on in a string or strap for carrying, about three times as long as the basket is wide. The weave which is
peculiar to Attu, although imitated in other places, is a plain twine, openwork weave, with a zigzag warp. At the bottom, the warp is straight and radiates to the sides, where these straws are split and extend up in a zigzag; each half being caught alternately by the woof with its other half and the adjoining half of the next straw, thus forming triangular openings. So as to give extra strength where the strain of carrying falls,—that is, at the place where the string is attached and the place where it is made fast, on the side opposite,—there are three or four pieces of grass twisted into cords. These extend to the bottom and form part of the warp. In their native climate, where the atmosphere is always damp, these baskets are surprisingly strong and carry safely as many salmon as they can hold, the largest of them from forty to fifty pounds. The same baskets in a steam-heated museum might be broken at a touch. The decorations on this type of basket consist of a border of worsted, or worsted and fish skin, just below the braid. It is sometimes said that these baskets are woven under water, but the straw is always so damp from the atmosphere that it does not have to be even dampened when worked.

The Attu covered baskets are always small and made from finely split grass. The weave is a plain twine with a straight warp and closely drawn woof, making a flexible but almost watertight basket. In weaving, the woof is drawn close at once, as is the case with all fine work of these natives, and is not driven down afterwards, as is sometimes supposed. The decorations in these baskets are done with silk or worsted threads; the figures being scattered all over the sides and top. There is also a pleasing variation made by working two or three rows with crossed warp, thus forming small hexagonal openings.

It is in cigarette cases that the climax is reached, for there is nothing in basketry to compare with their fineness. These are made with straight warp, plain twine weave, the same that is used in the small covered baskets, but much finer. Some of the finer cigarette cases have as many as fifty meshes to the inch. In weaving, to keep the work smooth and straight, the weaver has two round pieces of wood, one a little greater in

Figure II. Plain twine weave, with straight warp and closely drawn woof (enlarged)

Figure III. Cigarette case (enlarged), showing hexagonal openings in the plain twine, crossed warp weave
diameter than the other, over which the outer and inner parts of the case are woven. They are then drawn off, finished at the tops, creased at the bottoms and slipped one inside the other. The decorations are of silk, very often with several rows of open work, done with the crossed warp. They are almost always charming in both color and design.

Beside the baskets above mentioned, the Attu natives make mats of the same weave as the "drawstring" baskets, and cover bottles with the close weave used in the covered baskets.

At Atka, the most usual product is a large covered basket of straight warp, plain twine weave; the woof running in rows, more or less separated, leaving rectangular openings. The sides bulge out like a barrel and are larger at the top than at the bottom. The pieces are decorated all over the tops and sides with worsted or silk. Here the small covered baskets are similar to those made at Attu, only, as a rule, the work is finer.

The Atka burden-basket is the strongest of all the Aleutian baskets; being made very heavy and in a wrapped twine weave, differing from the plain twine in having one element of the woof running horizontally outside the basket. Though roughly finished, this basket is quite attractive. However, it is seldom seen away from the island, as it is made for daily use, and not for sale. There is no decoration; but around the top there is a heavy braid to which a strap or rope is tied, by which to carry it. These natives also make mats in the straight warp openwork, and cover bottles with a great waste of beautifully fine work.

The baskets made at Nikolski are, for the greater part, a coarse imitation of the Attu "drawstring." They are of bad shape and have no string. However, a basket is sometimes found at this place which is different from any found elsewhere. It is a straight warp, plain twine openwork weave. The bottom is very coarse, but beautifully flat and evenly made. The sides come up straight, but the diameter is greater at the top than it is at the bottom. Near the bottom, the weave is coarse and the warp heavy. At every row or two of the woof, the warp is split and the weave becomes finer and finer.
The natives of Makushin and Beorka make a very good covered basket of the same weave as that used at Attu in covered baskets, with the difference that these, though of smooth and regular weave, are much coarser and heavier, making a more serviceable basket and one that holds its shape better than the finer ones. At the present time, these are decorated with

weave is the plain twine with straight warp, the rows in the woof being separated by intervals as great as half an inch. They are decorated all over with worsted and are in a way attractive and rather savage in their coloring. There also is made a poor imitation of the Attu "drawstring," coarse and irregular, with no braiding or string at the top.

worsted, but until quite recently, the ends of the down, stripped from eagle plumes, were woven in, so that the little plumes stand out about an inch and give a pretty feathery effect.

At Unalaska, where natives from all the different islands come from time to time, the influence of the whites is strong, and the baskets take all manner of fantastic shapes
and show all sorts of combinations of weaves and designs. There are some very good baskets of the Attu "drawstring" type, the only noticeable difference being in the string, which is either shorter or omitted altogether. There are also some good covered baskets of the Makushin type, but the great majority of Unalaska baskets are crude and nothing about basketry, as the great majority of customers are of this class.

As was said above, the chief reason for the high valuation placed on Attu and Atka baskets is that these places are so inaccessible, and so far from the beaten track of vessels, that it will not pay to send a vessel out solely for the purposes of collection.

Communication with the outside world occurs twice a year, once when a schooner, owned by a trader living at Atka, goes out early in the spring, and a little later at the arrival of the revenue cutter, which is sent out each year to look after the welfare of the people. The owner of the schooner takes out supplies for the year, and, in turn, brings away baskets and furs. The natives
are wholly dependent on the trader for these supplies, while he practically owns the population, keeping it in debt most of the time. He never fails to get out early in the spring, knowing how few baskets would be left if the cutter should chance to arrive first. But the natives know that the cutter will soon arrive, and they keep hidden all the baskets that they dare.

These people are pleasant to deal with and speak English well enough to be easily understood. They are inclined to favor the officers of the cutter, and, as a rule, never make them pay more than twice as much as the trader, unless they are bad at a bargain. Like all natives, they are good merchants, and appear utterly indifferent whether they trade or not, and, in fact, act as if they were doing a favor, when they bring out a basket which they are really longing to sell. It is slow work dealing with them, and impossible to get all the baskets they have to sell, in less than three or four days, as they never bring out more than one at a time, and as each one wants to see what kind of bargains the others are making. However, they do not object to having their barabaras rummaged, and as this is by far the quickest method, it is usually employed, for after the basket is found, there is never any trouble in making a purchase.

**RUSKIN AS MASTER OF PROSE**

To prove my assertions regarding Ruskin, I take a well-known piece of his early writing, the old Tower of Calais Church, a passage which has haunted my memory for nearly forty years:

"The large neglect, the noble unsightliness of it; the record of its years written so visibly, yet with-out sign of weakness or decay; its stern wasteness and gloom, eaten away by the Channel winds, and over-grown with the bitter sea grasses; its slates and tiles all shaken and rent, and yet not falling; its desert of brick-work, full of bolts, and holes, and ugly fissures, and yet strong, like a bare brown rock; its carelessness of what any one thinks or feels about it; putting forth no claim, having no beauty, nor desirableness, pride, nor grace; yet neither asking for pity; nor, as ruins are, useless and piteous, feebly or fondly garrulous of better days; but useful still, going through its own daily work—as some old fisherman, beaten gray by storm, yet drawing his daily nets: so it stands, with no complaint about its past youth, in blanched and meagre massiveness and serviceableness, gathering human souls together underneath it; the sound of its bells for prayer still rolling through its rents; and the gray peak of it seen far across the sea, principal of the three that rise above the waste of surfy sand and hillocked shore,—the lighthouse for life, and the belfry for labor, and this—for patience and praise."

This passage I take to be one of the most magnificent examples of the "pathetic fallacy" in our language. Perhaps the "pathetic fallacy" is second-rate art; the passage is too long; two hundred eleven words, alas! without one full stop, and more than forty commas and other marks of punctuation—it has trop or choses—it has redundancies, tautologies, and artifices, if we are strictly severe—but what a picture, what pathos, what subtlety of observation, what nobility of association—and withal how complete is the unity of impression! How mournful, how stately is the cadence, most harmonious and yet peaceful is the phraseology, and how wonderfully do thought, the antique history, the picture, the musical bars of the whole piece combine in beauty. A wonderful bit of word-painting—and, perhaps, word-painting, at least on a big canvas, is not strictly lawful—but such a picture as few poets and no prose-writer has surpassed!