

Basket Making



Where Is She Going With That Many Baskets?

Baskets have been made to sell or trade by the Haudenosaunee since the late 1700s. They were and continue to be an important economic asset for the Haudenosaunee. Originally baskets were made by Haudenosaunee or Iroquois for such purposes as storage, food preparation, and transportation.

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Various social changes such as loss of land, changing male and female roles and Christianity affected the Haudenosaunee economic system and made basket making and trading an important economic benefit in some communities. Many of the first baskets made for trade were work baskets. While many of these were strictly work baskets, some of the storage baskets were ornamented with painted or stamped designs. By the latter part of the 1800s, fancier baskets were made incorporating sweetgrass and special weaves. These baskets could be sold to tourists at such places as Saratoga Springs, Niagara Falls, or to trading posts.

Basketry at Akwesasne grew considerably at the turn of the century due in large part to the St. Regis trading post. By standardizing the basket styles and sizes, the trading post was able to produce a catalog and market the baskets throughout the country. During the 1940s and 50s, few continued to make baskets, but by the late 1960s basket weaving was becoming more important at Akwesasne. A few women hung out signs indicating that they made baskets, and a cooperative was formed to market the baskets.

For many years during the 1970s the Mohawk Basket Fund was a steady outlet for the basket makers. Today, the Akwesasne Museum and North American Indian traveling College are outlets on the reservation. While basket making flourishes at Akwesasne, it has not been sustained in other communities. Only at Oneida, Ontario and Kahnawake are baskets made by a very few individuals. At Akwesasne, many families are involved, including young people, and some classes help to encourage others to become involved.

The making of a basket is a complicated process, involving a number of people. First the black ash tree must be selected and cut down. The bark is then stripped from the tree. Pounding the length of the log with the back of an ax head causes thick splints to separate at the annual rings. These splints are made thinner initially by splitting the top of the splint with a knife and then pulling it apart. The thin splints must then be smoothed and cut to size for weaving. If a basket is to be colorful, splints must at this point be dyed.

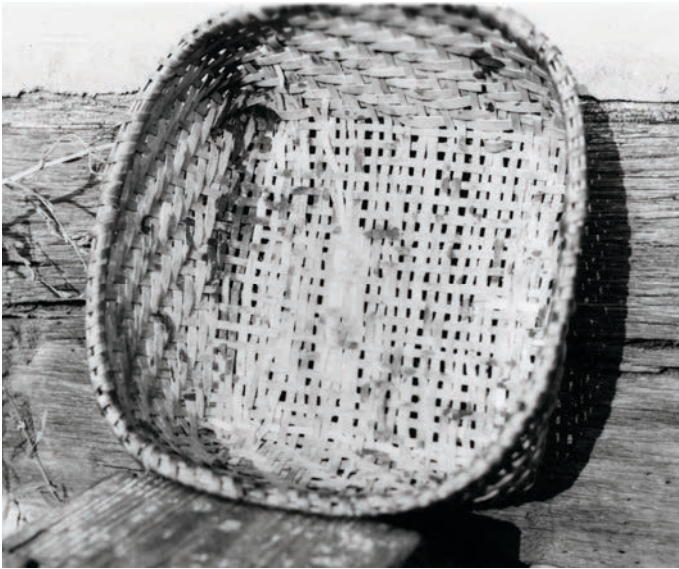


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When sweetgrass is used, this too must be gathered, cleaned, and sometimes braided for extra texture. If a basket is to have a handle, either hickory handle is carved or one is braided from sweetgrass. Once these materials are gathered and prepared, the basket is ready to be woven. Various weaves are employed. The tightness and evenness of the weave contribute to a well-made basket.

http://www.iroquoismuseum.org/basket_making.htm

Corn Processing Baskets



Tuscarora Corn Washing Basket



**Corn Sifting basket by
Nette Watt, Seneca**



Corn Washing Baskets are made so that the nature of the weave helps to remove the outer hulls of corn kernels, and allows the water to flow freely through the basket.

Storage Baskets



Pack Basket





Pack Basket by Jake Arquette

Mohawk View:

Because of its special qualities, black ash is the tree of choice for Northeast Native Americans, including the Akwesasne Mohawks, for producing splint basketry. Black ash growth rings are easily separated by pounding with the back of an axe; the splints produced are flexible when moistened and become very strong once woven into a basket and dried. Mohawks produce baskets both for utilitarian purposes and as art. Many people are familiar with the pack baskets crafted with sturdy, tightly woven black ash splints that are used by hunters and trappers. Collectors prize the “sweet grass” basket that makes use of finer, more delicate splints (some brightly dyed) interwoven with braids of an aromatic grass.

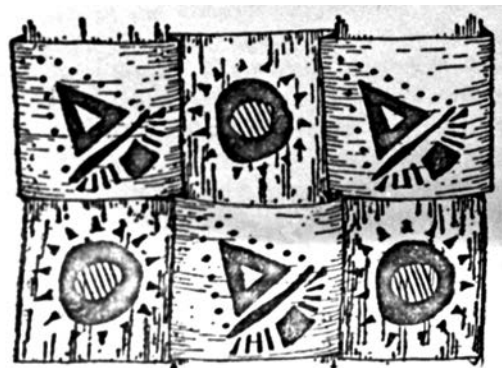
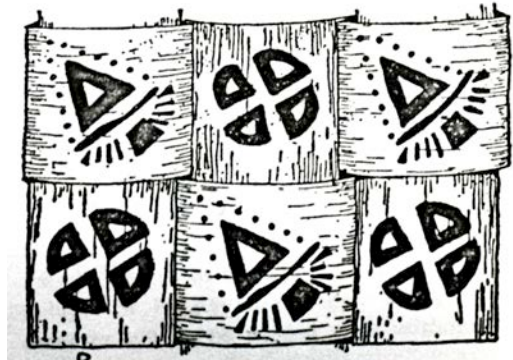
From a cultural standpoint, black ash provides a foundation for the cultural identity of the Akwesasne Mohawks through unique designs in artful expression, such as the “strawberry basket,” which is woven into the shape of a strawberry, another important cultural plant. In addition to cultural expression, families and community are literally woven together, with traditions passed on through storytelling and interaction while log gathering, log pounding, splint cleaning and basket making

(Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe Environment -
http://www.srmtenv.org/srmtbrownfields/Area_2.html)

Basket Designs



Splints were dyed or painted and additional designs were added, using paint or a stamp made from a potato.



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“Basket making is an interactive way of learning about ones culture that you could not get from reading a book.”

Sheree Bonaparte



Mohawk Basket

“Akwesasne is known as the Haudenosaunee community with the strongest continuous tradition of basket making. More than a utilitarian craft, basket making is a cultural process, a way of learning about the cycles of nature and the right way to live in balance with the land by careful gathering of materials.”

Sue Ellen Herne (Mohawk) & Lynne Williamson (Mohawk Descent)



Oneida Basket



Mohawk Basket

Fancy Baskets



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Mary Adams, Akwesasne Mohawk

Meet the Masters: Akwesasne Basketmakers

In a recent survey, 105 Mohawks, mostly women, identified themselves as active makers of fine ash splint and sweetgrass baskets. Prized through the generations as much for their fragrance as for usefulness and fine quality, most of their baskets have been conventional in form and decoration, made primarily to satisfy the demands of the souvenir trade. A few of the women at Akwesasne are recognized within the community as "the best," and have been instrumental in teaching the art to dozens of the younger generations. In recent years—proclaimed as "artists" by writers and galleries elsewhere—these women have been experimenting with innovative designs and new techniques. A number of the basket makers now regularly travel—to colleges, museums, or international powwows—to demonstrate and show their work. Today, examples of their work are owned by major museums, including the Smithsonian Institution and the Vatican.

- ❖ The basketmakers of Akwesasne were the subject of this January 24, 2000 profile jointly produced for radio by Traditional Arts in Upstate New York and North Country Public Radio. [Listen](#) 🎧 (Real 5:28)
- ❖ Mary Adams explains how she created the fancy basket she calls "the Pope basket." [Watch](#) 📺 (QuickTime video 3:26)
- ❖ Governor Cuomo presents the NYS Governor's Arts Award to the Akwesasne Basketmakers in 1988. [Watch](#) 📺 (QuickTime video 4:15)
- ❖ Mae Bigtree recalls how Mohawk baskets were sold when she was a child. [Listen](#): 🎧 (Real 0:58)
- ❖ How Mae is inspired to create new designs or try new techniques. [Listen](#): 🎧 (Real 0:25)
- ❖ Mary Adams hopes others carry on basket making at Akwesasne after she is gone. [Listen](#): 🎧 (Real 1:15)
- ❖ <http://www.northcountrypublicradio.org/upnorth/masters/akwesasne/akwesasne.php>

Our Homeland

Located in northern New York, along the Canadian border, the Akwesasne Mohawk people live in an ecologically rich environment. The people are closely tied to their homelands and the resources they've used for centuries.

<http://nmai.si.edu/environment/akwesasne/Homeland.aspx>

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