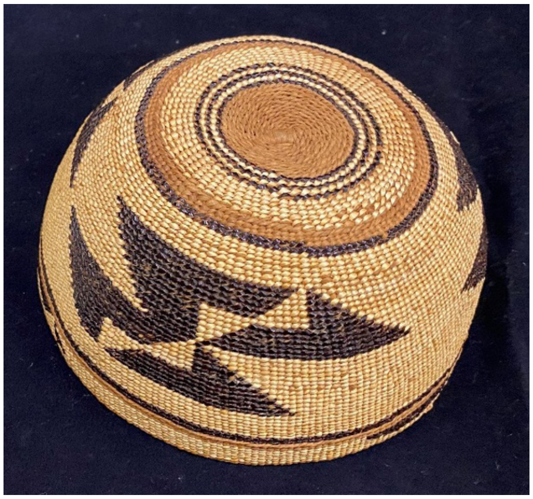
Many People, Many Baskets | Basket Cap



Xee-tr'at (basket cap), Collins Family Collection, CTSI Cultural Collections

Basketry has always been a very important activity for Indigenous people from across what is today Oregon, Washington, and northern California. It has played a central role in the ceremonial, expressive, and everyday lives of Tribal people since before the arrival of settlers and is still an important part of Tribal cultures today. Tribal people rely on baskets for many reasons: gathering food, fishing, storing food, taking care of infants, wearing as clothing, and even cooking! Let's explore an example of a ceremonial basket hat from the southern Oregon and northern California coast.

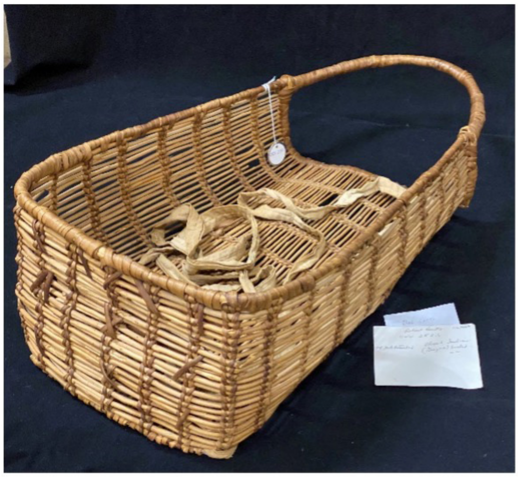
Basket caps are an important piece of *regalia*. They are one piece of the traditional clothing worn by women from southwestern Oregon and northern California for ceremonies and other important events. These ceremonial caps are sometimes loaned to other families as a sign of care and concern for the whole community. Ceremonial caps can take an experienced weaver 50–100 hours to finish. Everyday caps are less fancy, but weavers still carefully choose the best materials and plan their work to create a balanced and symmetrical design that fits the shape of the basket.

This entire cap, including the shiny dark part, is covered with an overlay. In this case, the shiny dark overlay comes from the stem of a delicate fern called maidenhair fern, a plant that grows on the steep hillsides and is harvested during the summer, while the white is created by an overlay of bear grass harvested up in the mountains.

This basket belonged to Ada Jim Collins, a skilled weaver from the Siletz Tribe. Even when she became blind as she got older, Ada continued to weave baskets. Ada's family roots can be traced back to Yuu-k'wi-che', also known as Euchre Creek, located on the southern Oregon Coast. Despite being in a small valley right by the ocean, it was once a big village with over 100 houses. The people of Yuu-k'wi-che' and their descendants speak Siletz Dee-ni, the Athabaskan language spoken in other villages along the southern Oregon Coast and the lower Rogue River.

Even today, expert weavers from the Siletz Tribe continue to make these caps. Ada's family says that this specific cap was made for her by friends in California, which shows the way that weavers like Ada maintained connections with distant relatives and ancestral homelands even after their families had been forced to relocate hundreds of miles away to the reservation.

Many People, Many Baskets | Baby Basket



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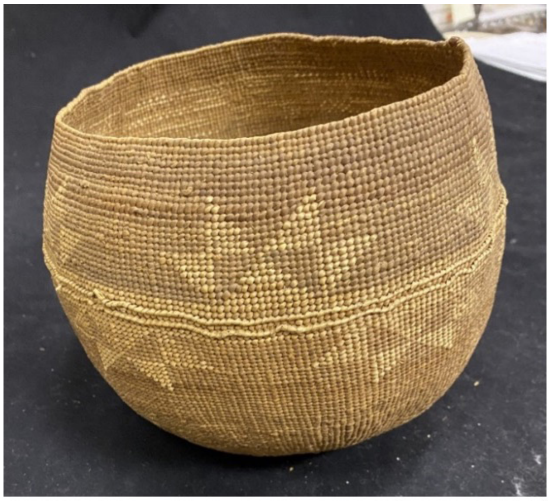
Families from the many villages of southwestern Oregon and northern California traditionally swaddle babies in a basket like this *gay-yu'* for the first years of their lives. Tight but gentle swaddling in the baby basket helps babies feel warm and secure for sleep. Baby baskets and other kinds of wooden carriers, called cradleboards, are a safe way for Native parents to bring their babies along while they do everything they need to do each day, just like modern strollers and baby carriers.

There are other words for baby baskets and cradleboards in other Siletz languages, but *gay-yu'* is the word in the Siletz Dee-ni (Athabaskan) dialects spoken in the villages on the lower Rogue River in southwestern Oregon and nearby along the coast. This shape of baby basket, with a flat rectangular seat, is particular to weavers from those villages. In other areas they might have a V-shaped or swoopy oval-shaped bottom, for example. Bands from villages north of the Coquille River tended to make cradleboards for their babies, which have the same purpose but look totally different.

It is very important that the materials of this basket are strong since a new baby is maybe the most important thing a basket can carry. This means that the warp needs to be light, even, flexible, and sturdy. Therefore, weavers use hazel, a large shrub that likes partly shaded or disturbed areas of forest. When they first come up, new shoots of hazel grow long and tall toward the sun without branches—this is the best time for weavers to gather sticks by the hundreds to peel, sort, and straighten for all their projects. A good hazel patch, even deep in the woods, must be kept pruned, or managed with controlled fire, to make plentiful new sticks each year. Without this connection to the land, weavers struggle to find enough sticks.

Today, many Siletz children start life out in their gay-yu' and Siletz weavers probably produce more baby baskets than any other type of basket. If you attend a Tribal event, you're likely to see several tiny Tribal members being carried by their families in baby baskets. Even as many ways of life have changed for modern Tribal people, this is one that families have maintained across generations. For many Siletz families today, baby baskets are both practical (as a safe and useful way to carry an infant) and deeply significant to give children a feeling of Tribal identity from birth.

Many People, Many Baskets | Cooking Basket



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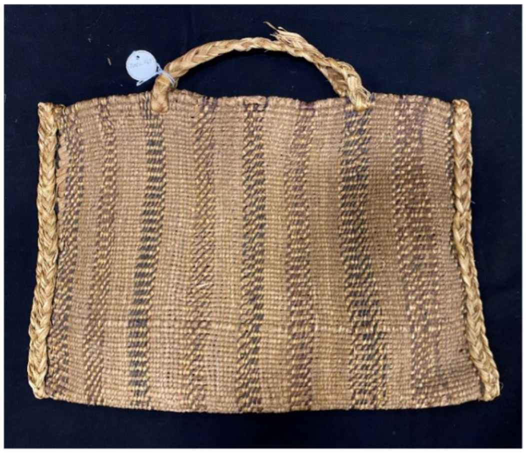
We do not know exactly who wove this basket, but the very neat *overlay* all made from a plant called bear grass points to a weaver whose family was Takelma or Shasta, like those removed to Siletz from the Rogue Valley in southern Oregon. Takelma and Shasta people had neighboring homelands but their languages are from completely different language families. Making a basket like this requires a lot of skill and practice. Not only is the weave super tight but the basket is also decorated on the outside with a beautiful design.

It is amazing that some baskets are woven so tightly that they can hold water. People often assume that weavers coat the bottom of cooking baskets with something to waterproof them, but that is not how they are made. The weave is just so tight that the basket can hold water once the moisture plumps up the natural fibers. Many people even use baskets like this to cook! To boil water in a basket, first you must heat carefully chosen rocks in a fire—rocks that won't crack or explode when they get hot and are round and easy to roll. Once the rocks are red hot, the cook carefully places them in the basket and stirs them with a small wooden paddle so that the heat doesn't burn the basket. As each rock cools, the cook replaces it with another from the fire. Before long, the water in the basket will begin to boil and you are ready to cook!

One of the most common foods prepared in cooking baskets like this is acorn mush—a thick soup made from ground acorns and water. Acorns were and are an important food source for many Siletz peoples, especially those living inland in the Willamette, upper Umpqua, and Rogue Valleys where giant grandmother oak trees are a common sight even today. Acorns remain an important part of ceremonial meals and gatherings for Siletz people, and many families continue to eat acorns in their homes on a regular basis. Gathering, processing, and cooking acorns requires many different types of baskets. Along with cooking the mush, people weave baskets to collect and store acorns and even special "hopper baskets" to use while pounding whole acorns into the fine flour that you need to make acorn mush.

Many People, Many Baskets | Purse Basket #1



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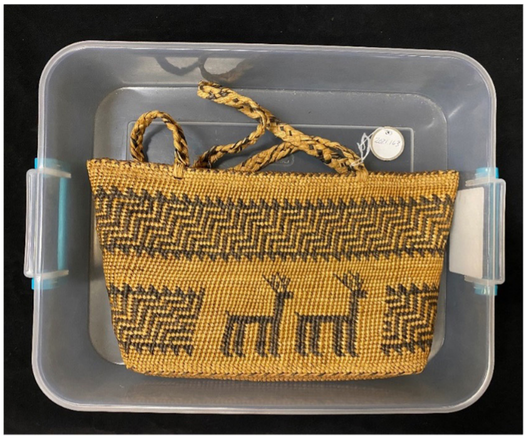
In the Hanis and Miluk Coos languages, this type of bag is called a *daasəts'*. It is made using cattail leaves that have been processed until they are very thin and flexible. The bags made by weavers from the region around Coos Bay often have vertical line patterns like the one we see in this bag's design. The dark bands are likely made from a type of seaweed called eelgrass. This decorative bag is used to store valuable items. There is a larger purse bag called a *gwəni* in Hanis Coos that is used for storing food.

This specific bag belonged to Annie Miner Peterson, a woman from the Hanis and Miluk Coos Tribes. Annie spent part of her childhood at the Alsea subagency (a government headquarters) on the Coast (Siletz) Reservation, located near the present-day town of Yachats. When she was around 15 years old in 1875, the subagency closed. This forced Annie and her first husband, an Alsea Tribal man named William Jackson, to move to remaining part the Coast (Siletz) Reservation, where their daughter Nellie was born. In her later years, Annie primarily lived back in her family's ancestral lands around Coos Bay, but also lived in Portland—where she met her last husband, Carl Peterson.

In 1933 and 1934, a linguist (someone who studies languages) named Melville Jacobs from the University of Washington visited Annie to work with her. He wanted to study the Hanis and Miluk languages (which together are often called "Coos" or "Coosan") because Annie was one of the few people who could still fluently speak both. The work they did together resulted in two books that have been incredibly helpful in reviving and using these languages among the Coos people. These efforts have benefitted Hanis and Miluk descendants at Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw Indians, and the Coquille Indian Tribe.

Many People, Many Baskets | Purse Basket #2



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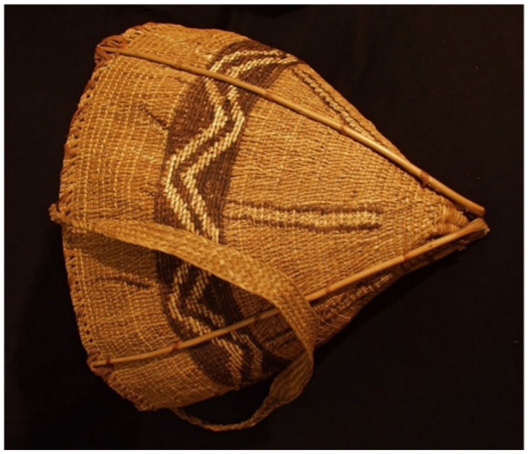
North Coast people, including many bands who spoke closely related dialects of Salish, called Tillamook today, were connected to a larger regional culture that encompassed the lower Columbia River and coastal areas of Washington. They used many of the same materials as weavers from further south. However, baskets from the North Coast embody their connections with people living to the North. Tillamook weavers often incorporated images of people or animals along with complex geometric patterns in their designs. If you examine them closely, you can spot realistic figures and intricate geometric patterns intertwined in the basket.

Due to the abundance of cedar trees in their surroundings, the North Coast people were renowned for their skilled carving, including the construction of enormous canoes for ocean travel. They also made baskets and clothing from cedar bark. Weavers from the North Coast also used various other materials to create their baskets, including cattails, rushes, hazel, maidenhair fern, bear grass, and eelgrass. As new materials became available, some weavers also started incorporating dyed raffia, which is a type of imported fiber made from a certain kind of palm tree, into their designs. Purse baskets like this one were likely used to hold valuable items. This basket has both a bear grass overlay to create the light background and an overlay of dyed raffia to make the design.

Many People, Many Baskets | Pack Basket



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Before there were things like cars and trains, people relied on baskets to carry things like food and firewood to their homes. Strong and sturdy baskets like this pack basket were used to carry important items and helped people survive. Pack baskets came in different styles and were made from various materials, but those from western Oregon had a similar shape and were carried in a very similar way. Unlike backpacks that have two straps, pack baskets have only one strap, called a tumpline, which is worn against the forehead. Carrying a pack basket this way requires a lot of strength and balance. The carrier has to lean forward so they can support the load along their whole back and lift with their legs to go up and down trails and terrain. People from all over the world carry heavy loads with tumplines. It can be tough for people nowadays who aren't used to carrying heavy loads like this.

This basket was woven by a skilled weaver from the Upper Umpqua or southern Willamette Valleys. Many people from this region spoke the Kalapuya language. Before settlers arrived and changed the rivers into one single channel, the Willamette River crisscrossed the valley—creating many marshes and small channels that would flood every year. The weaver used soft reeds called juncus to make this basket. Juncus grows well in wet places like marshes and thrived in this wetland environment. By itself, juncus is soft and flexible, so the weaver used a stick frame made from willow tree branches on the outside to give the basket its shape and structure.

One important food that this basket might have carried is called camas. Camas is a root plant that was important for people across western Oregon. After harvesting camas, it needed to be cooked for days in a pit oven before it could be eaten. Even though it took a long time to cook, it was worth the wait! Cooked camas is sweet and chewy—a nutritious treat.

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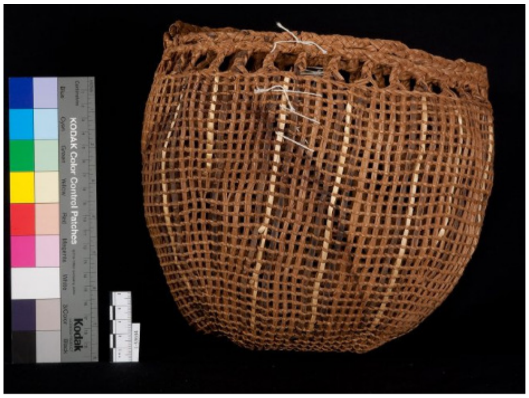
[1] Image courtesy of the University of Oregon Museum of Natural and Cultural History: **https://uoregonnaturalhistory.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/F39631B3-3568-4B14-A827-458319470810**

Many People, Many Baskets | Clam Basket



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Baskets are important tools that Tribal people from Oregon have relied on to gather and transport food for centuries. Weavers choose both the shape and materials of baskets to best fit the task and environment. This clam basket is a good example of that connection between form and function. Gathering clams is wet and muddy work that requires tough and durable materials. The spruce and cedar root used on this basket are perfect for the job. Both are tough and flexible and can remain in wet and damp conditions for weeks, and even longer, without getting damaged. The "open work" design of clam baskets, with gaps between every row, lets mud and water drain through. With a tough basket that drains easily, a clam digger can rinse out a heavy haul of clams and pack them home all with one tool.

This basket eventually ended up in a museum at the University of Oregon. Somewhere along the way a small tear was repaired with cotton thread. Baskets are tools, and throughout history weavers have repaired them with many materials. Thread is one example but sometimes weavers have used yarn, slats of wood, and even wire to repair or strengthen baskets. It's impossible to know if this basket was repaired at the museum or by its maker but either way, the need for the repair shows the importance of baskets and their everyday use.

This basket was woven by an Alsea weaver sometime around the turn of the twentieth century. The homeland of Alsea people stretched across much of the territory that was included in the original Coast (Siletz) Reservation. Although Alsea people weren't forced to remove from their homelands, they did have to figure out a way to live with the thousands of different peoples crowded onto their homelands when the reservation was created. Today, many Siletz Tribal members continue to gather clams in areas near where this basket was originally made and used.

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[1] Image courtesy of the University of Oregon Museum of Natural and Cultural History: **https://uoregonnaturalhistory.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/7454B4EF-7F91-4471-801F-891034336770#gallery-1**