

Traditional Arts in King County: Hmong Basketry

The Craft of Basketry

Basketry is the craft of making objects from fibers, such as grasses, twigs, bamboo, or other such materials. Usually baskets are containers of some sort, but clothing, furniture, and even shoes can also be made with basketry techniques. Almost everywhere in the world, except in snowy areas where there is no plant material, people have developed baskets from the plant fibers that grow in their region. There are some commonalities among baskets from areas with similar climates, since plants growing in rainy tropical areas lend themselves to a different type of basket than plants growing in dry climates or in temperate climates.

Baskets are made by twisting fibers together in different ways. The fibers are stiff enough to be worked without being held by a loom, so the skills involved are different from weaving. Some baskets are made entirely from one type of fiber, such as bamboo, while others are made from a combination of fibers, to make contrasts in texture or color. When basket makers use more than one type of fiber, they often use a stiffer one to make the basic form of the basket, and then use a softer fiber to wind in and out of the spokes, holding the basket together.

Southeast Asia and East Asia are famous for bamboo baskets that are strong, light-weight, and can be quite delicate or intricate.

Hmong Basketry in Laos: Baskets Are Used for Just About Everything

Hmong people in Laos would grow crops in an area they cleared within the forest, and then move on to another area. Since they moved regularly, they needed baskets to store items and move their clothing and food with them. Here are just a few of the uses of Hmong bamboo baskets:

- Fish traps—fish would swim into them and not be able to back out again
- Creels—to hold the fish caught in the traps
- Winnowing baskets—like a sieve, to separate the edible grain from the grass or chaff
- Rice sifters, food baskets
- Baskets for chickens—cages, nests and houses for chicks. “If a nest was too small, the hen would let him know by complaining loudly. He would then reweave it a little larger.”
- Bamboo furniture and houses: tables that could be used by a family of 12, chairs, dustpans, toys
- Most important of all, backpacks—to carry vegetables home from the fields.

Most men could make basic baskets, but a few men were known for their skill and the artistry of their baskets, and could sell their work easily.

Hmong Basketry in King County

An exceptional Hmong-American basketmaker, Nhia Yia Heu, lives in King County. He moved to Washington with his family from Laos in 1975. [\[See information about Nhia Yia Heu in the](#)

[Folk & Traditional Artists of Washington searchable database](#)] Bamboo grew over much of his area in the highlands of Laos, and it was used for making buildings and furniture, as well as containers. He was known as a master basketmaker in his village and made a good living, but his family had to flee from the war in their country. While his family walked across Laos in hiding to seek safety in Thailand, Nhia was able to make and trade baskets for food along the way. After five years in a refugee camp in Thailand, his family was able to immigrate to Seattle.

The urban environment of Seattle was strange and unfamiliar to Nhia's family, and for a while they lived in an empty room. Nhia did not see any bamboo growing outside, so was not able to make furniture or baskets for their new home. After six years in Seattle, he and his wife Chong began to grow vegetables on a leased two acre plot of land, and sold them at the Pike Place Market. He also discovered that he could take apart bamboo window shades to make baskets, and then met basketmaker Michelle Berg, who helped him acquire materials and look for fresh bamboo. Slowly Nhia's work became known and appreciated in King County, as he gave demonstrations and showed his baskets in galleries and exhibitions.

Sources

"Basketry." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica online. February 2008 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9108352>>.

Michelle Berg with Dave Berg, "Hmong Master Basketmaker: Part I: His life and his way of life are threatened," *Basketmaker*, Spring 1988, and "Part II: His life in the United States," *Basketmaker*, Summer 1988.

Other Resources:

"Yangster's Hmong New Year," website created by three Hmong students.
<http://library.thinkquest.org/trio/TTQ02193/>