

Subsection label:

Curio Trade and Collecting

After the Gold Rush and the subsequent development of the transcontinental railroad, hordes of travelers visited the American West. Their desire to bring home souvenirs sparked the so-called curio trade in California baskets. The Arts and Crafts Movement, with its celebration of beauty and utility, the integrity of natural materials, and the creativity of individual artists, also fueled the fervor for collecting baskets.

This interest in their work led some Native women to achieve new heights in basket making, perfecting technique, scale, and design. Exceptional art baskets are distinguished by the fineness of strand size, tightness of weave, exactness of stitch, and aesthetic refinement of shape and woven designs.

One art-basket dealer, Grace Nicholson, was notable for her dedication and authority in the field. She kept copious records of her acquisitions, documenting the name of the community and the artist, materials, dimensions, and prices paid. Her cataloguing system has allowed researchers to identify specific basket makers and give these individual artists the credit they deserve.

Scees Bryant Possock (ca. 1858 – 1918)

The Ferns, ca. 1904

Washoe

Great Basin region

Willow, western redbud, bracken-fern root

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0752

Mrs. Dick Francisco (1857 – 1953)

Tray, ca. 1900

Yokuts

California region

Marsh-grass root, bracken-fern root, redbud

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0797

Yokuts weavers took great pride in their gambling trays, of which this example is one of the largest and best known. Women used decorated trays to play a dice game called *huuchuish*. This one incorporates images of human figures, flowerlike clusters, and diamond-shaped rattlesnake patterns. The pristine condition of this tray, which reflects Francisco's technical and design skills, suggests that a collector acquired the object shortly after its completion.

Elizabeth Hickox (1875 – 1947)

Basket, ca. 1920

Karuk

California region

Myrtle sticks, split willow or wild-grape root, maidenhair fern, dyed porcupine quills

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0815a-b

Louise Hickox (1896 – 1962)

Basket, ca. 1915

Karuk

California region

Myrtle sticks, split willow or wild-grape root, maidenhair fern, dyed porcupine quills

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0816a-b

For the Karuk, the plant fibers used in baskets were once spirit beings who invented human customs, including language and ceremonies. Elizabeth Hickox is a renowned Karuk weaver who made California's finest twined baskets; her work remains a standard for collectors and Native artists. Her daughter Louise became a distinguished weaver in her own right.

The dealer Grace Nicholson represented both women in her gallery in Pasadena, the epicenter of the basket craze that swept the country between 1890 and 1905, the heyday of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Nicholson's detailed records preserve the names and legacies of Native weavers, including Elizabeth Hickox, who otherwise would be unknown.

Basket, ca. 1895

Tubatulabal or Kawaiisu

California region

Willow or sumac splints, yucca root, devil's claw, deer grass,
woolen yarn, quail feathers

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0144

Salena Jackson (n.d)

Tray, ca. 1900

Maidu

California region

Willow, redbud

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0817

The Maidu were renowned basket weavers, and Salena Jackson was one of the most gifted. The popular three-lobed design she used here seems to vibrate with energy.

Dance Skirt, pre-1850

Hupa

California region

Deer hide, glass beads, abalone shell, maidenhair fern, bear grass (Cotton cloth ties are a later addition.)

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0137

Families prized and passed down the ornate buckskin skirts Hupa girls and women wore for special occasions. The garments wrap around the hips and fasten at the front, leaving a gap that is filled with a separate dance apron. The precious abalone shells and blue beads make musical sounds when they move.

Cap, ca. 1900

Hupa or Karuk

California region

Bear grass, maidenhair fern, porcupine quills, staghorn-lichen dye, spruce root, hazel sticks

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0487

Jump Basket, ca. 1900

Hupa

California region

Hazel sticks, spruce root, bear grass, maidenhair-fern stem, deer hide, pigments

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0511

During the Jump Dance of the Hupa World Renewal ceremony, each participant carries in his right hand a beautifully created basket, and wears an elaborate outfit that includes a headdress, necklaces, and a deerskin skirt.

Spoon, ca. 1900

Yurok, Hupa, or Karuk

California region

Elk antler

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0782

Spoon, ca. 1900

Yurok

California region

Elk antler

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0783

Men used elk-antler spoons to eat soup made from acorns, which were important at ceremonies and other events. The wealthy kept especially fancy sets for entertaining guests at feasts.