

Late Period (1890-1970) Indian Baskets In Vermont: Part 2



A selection of Vermont Baskets

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PART TWO: BASKET TYPES REPRESENTED IN VERMONT

Introduction

It seems that no two baskets found on a weekend antiquing trip are alike. But in reality there are but a few major basket types that dominated the trade in the last century. The arm basket and the work basket were the mainstay of the basket trade and are the most common types found today. In the section below, we will enumerate the main types of fancy baskets found in Vermont.

Multi-purpose work and arm baskets

Arm baskets

Probably the simplest basket from our area of interest is the so called "Arm Basket," (Pelletier, 1982:11). They are also by far the most common Indian basket found in Vermont today, showing that the production must have been humongous in the past. In Quebec, they are called galletes. They are thin but wide round baskets, usually with sweetgrass weavers, but almost always without any cowiss. Maine basketmakers have said that they were designed to fit under the arm when moving about the house or when traveling to a neighbor's. They came in many sizes, from small 4" examples to some as over a foot



Figure 29. Arm Basket

in diameter. Several of these have been found still containing vintage sewing materials, giving us a good view of their main use in the past. We can envision women traveling to a neighbor's on a cold winter evening with the arm basket firmly under the arm; ready for a sewing bee.

Plain Covered Work Baskets

As common as the arm basket in area antique shops is the "covered work basket." Almost always round, and having a tight cover, they were made of ash splint standards with braided, twisted or straight sweetgrass weavers. Later ones were often a mix of sweetgrass, especially towards the center of the top, and Hong Kong cord around the periphery. Most of the smaller baskets did not have a handle, but when the basket reached eight or so inches diameter, it may have a ring handle, and larger ones would have braided sweetgrass handle with decorative loops where it attached to the lid, making the "frog" design.



Figure 30. Small deep covered workbaskets

The three to the left in Figure 30 are completely plain, while the two on the right have or had handles, the second from the right still has a simple ring handle and the far right one has the remains of a "frog" handle (Pelletier, 1982:14).



Figure 31. Medium Deep Covered Workbaskets Pelletier, 1982:14.

The larger work baskets we see in Figures 31 and 32 usually had handles as well as a row of decorative overweave to give them a little more "bling".



Figure 32. Large and medium covered Work Baskets



Figure 33. Medium covered Work Basket (missing its cover) with loop cowiss decoration

Pincushions

Many of these work baskets were used for sewing tools and materials, and often included a small splint and sweetgrass pincushion. These are extremely simple and everyone made them (Pelletier, 1982: 28,29). The smaller 'cushion on the right in Figure 34 was labeled as made or sold by the Laurents of the Intervale, NH. It is often interesting to see the antique pins and needles still stuck into the velvet covering.



Figure 34. Sweetgrass-decorated pincushions

Open Work Baskets

An old mid-19th century design (Figure 3.) that was so useful and perfectly adapted to domestic use that it persisted through our period of interest was the open work basket. Of different sizes and shapes, they always have a plaited bottom and usually have a round rim.



Figure 35. Medium open Work Basket with rigid handles.
Swanton, VT ca. 1910

The earlier ones had "U-shaped" wooden handles and were unadorned, except perhaps with a band of dyed splints around the body. The "Fancy" work basket had some more decoration, including sweetgrass bundled rims (Figure 35) and cowiss overweave decoration (Figure 36). The overweave seems to be just the robust standard diamond or "short periwinkle." These overweaves were sturdy and would not be heavily damaged by the presumably more rugged use these baskets would receive. They were made at Odanak (Pelletier, 1982: 18-19) and everywhere else. Our examples are probably Vermont made, at least the first one is, and the second one was used in Swanton before being collected by town historian Ben Gravel.



Figure 36. Medium open Work Basket with periwinkle overweave rim decoration.
Swanton, VT ca. 1900

Fancy Work baskets

This is the most complex and "fancy" class of fancy basket. Unfortunately they are hideously flimsy with terribly delicate overweaves -- because their creators focused almost completely on decoration rather than function or sturdiness. They were apparently made to be admired as sculpture or fiber art, and not used to any extent. And so our examples are in typical poor condition. However these majestic ruins can give us an insight into the virtuoso work of the best regional basketmakers. In general, the fancy work baskets of the early 20th century do not use any sweetgrass or Hong Kong cord, but instead use myriads of tiny splints instead. These baskets are often cherished by the descendents of their first owners and even in some cases are given names. As pointed out above, they are the closest approach that Native people came to what Euroamericans would consider "art." However, their poor survival rate has prevented any significant appreciation by the elite arts community.

Probably the most ornate, almost "baroque" feeling basket in the Wôbanakik Heritage Center Collections is one made in Chittenden County by "local Indians," according to the museum accession card. It was made by a consummate craftsman and possibly represents the zenith of the fancy basket in Vermont (Figure 37). Unfortunately, it was damaged over the years but was cherished through the generations in its South Burlington home. Like most fancy work baskets there is no sweetgrass or cord in its construction, only ash splints. Both the lid and sides are adorned with Porcupine cowiss. The lid has two opposing lines of cowiss, a unique feature. The lid rim has a unique twisted splint detail, sewn to the lid with a thin ash splint.



Figure 37. The "Chittenden" Fancy Work Basket with porcupine cowiss decoration



Figure 38. The "Bell Family" Fancy Work Basket with porcupine and periwinkle cowiss decoration

Another fancy work basket of the same size and overall shape as the Chittenden Basket was collected in Swanton, VT by local historian Ben Gravel (Figure 38.). A slip of paper in the basket said that it was from "Mrs. Bell," a wealthy Swanton resident. While not as exuberant as the first example, it nevertheless has the remains of at least two lines of teal-dyed cowiss on the lid (which is hinged to the body), probably executed in the "periwinkle" overweave pattern. The side of the basket has two overweave fields, each two or three bands wide; the upper of which has both porcupine and periwinkle, and the bottom has a line of teal-colored periwinkle and two lines of natural periwinkle overweave.

The last fancy work basket in the Heritage Center collections is also the same size, but this one has a domed rather than a flat lid. It is also exuberant and almost completely covered with periwinkle cowiss (Figure 39.). This one is unnamed, and was given to the Wôbanakik Heritage Center by a Swanton VT resident who had no memory of how it was obtained, only that it "had always been in my parents' house."



Figure 39. An exuberant periwinkle decorated Fancy Work Basket

Pedestal Baskets and allied forms

A small variation of the "fancy" fancy basket seems to be associated with the Maria Reserve in New Brunswick. They have a tapered body ornamented with porcupine cowiss arrayed at the base, and then another line of overweave at the rim of the cover. They tend to have ring handles on the cover (Figure 40.).



Figure 40. Pedestal basket with porcupine cowiss and ring lid handle.

However, we have another related one shown in Figure 41 that does not have a cover; with large handles on the sides of the body. That particular style may have been made elsewhere. Like the fancy work baskets described above, both of these baskets are also very fragile due to the extensive porcupine overweave, and so must have been purchased for beauty rather than utility. but since they are relatively small and not at all imposing, they must have been purchased as tourist curios, meant to rest on a shelf or in a curio cabinet to be seen rather than used.



Figure 41. Open pedestal basket with porcupine cowiss and ring side handles.
Probably Maria Reserve, NS.