



Basket Tray

Unknown O'odham artist

ca. 1935

D: 1.5"; Diam: 8"

T0473

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/1109/basket?ctx=248ca250f99dc99d1b49112eb05f8d6841fb30d7&idx=0>

By Anya Montiel, PhD
University of Arizona



During an Arizona summer, it is common to see a tall column of dust whipping across the desert floor. These whirlwinds, sometimes called dust whirls and dust devils, are weather phenomena that occur when wind passes over a heated area of the earth causing a swirling pressure system of air and dust. It is no wonder that the design on this basket is known as a whirlwind, with its radiating spokes emanating from the center eye. While the person who created this basket is unknown, the artist is O'odham, an Indigenous nation spanning from central Arizona south into northern Mexico. Formerly called the Pima and Papago, the name they call themselves is O'odham, meaning "people." Most O'odham basketmakers are women, but there are male weavers as well.

According to the catalog record, this basket dates to the 1930s, a time when O'odham basketmakers sold their arts to tourists and non-Native residents. [1] By selling their arts, many Native women provided for their household, purchasing food, clothing, and other necessities. Trays, like this one, became a popular basket form among tourists, because the basket could be hung on a wall, displaying the entire design from afar.

Basketry is a long-practiced art form; twined and coiled baskets have been found in archaeological sites such as Ventana Cave in southern Arizona dating to 2000 years ago. [2] This basket tray employs the technique of the closed coil method, whereby the foundation is hidden by the outer stitching materials. The black basketry material is called ihug in the O'odham language, known in English as *Proboscidea parviflora* or devil's claw. The lighter-colored material is *che'ul* or willow (*Salix nigra*). [3]

The artist begins the coil method by gathering a bundle of the foundation materials, often *che'ul* or *udawhag/cattail* (*Typha angustifolia*). The outer basket material or the stitching materials will be wrapped around the foundation. The closer the wrapping, the more the foundation will disappear. The artist begins at the center of the basket and moves outward, coiling like a snake. The artist also uses an awl to pierce holes in the previous row of coils, allowing the stitching material to attach securely.

While ihug or the black basketry material contrasts nicely against the *che'ul*, it serves a practical purpose as well. Ihug is a strong material, and it provides stability and reinforcement to the areas of the basket that receive weight and strain, in this case the center and rim of the basket. [4] The maker of this basket created a whirlwind design with four main dragging lines followed by smaller ones connecting to each main line. This design fills the basket's surface and provides a sense of motion. One could imagine the design spinning rapidly like a dust whirl.

In the past, anthropologists would have classified this basket as made by the Pima or Akimel O'odham (River People) due to the use of *che'ul*, which is more commonly found in central Arizona. Baskets made with *takwi* or yucca would be viewed as made by the Papago or Tohono O'odham (Desert People). Scholars now acknowledge that the O'odham always intermarried and traded basketry materials among those living in both the desert and river regions. [5].

The Thaw Collection of American Indian Art has several other O’odham baskets. As a professor of Native American art history at the University of Arizona, I always seek out the O’odham baskets in museum collections, especially those held in institutions far from O’odham homelands. Through examining this basket and others in the Thaw Collection, I see the artists’ creativity, resilience, and adaptation. O’odham artists have maintained artistic techniques passed down more than one thousand years ago to create baskets to sell in the modern marketplace. While there are similar designs, like the whirlwind, found among various baskets, each artist infuses her unique touches and preferences in each one.

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1. Ruth Murray Underhill, *Papago Woman* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1936, 1979), 6.
2. E.W. Haury, *The Stratigraphy and Archaeology of Ventana Cave* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press; Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1950), 401.
3. For more information about the scientific names of O’odham basketry materials and other Indigenous plants, see Amadeo M. Rea, *At the Desert’s Green Edge: An Ethnobotany of the Gila River Pima* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1997).
4. Mary Lois Kissell, *Basketry of the Papago and Pima* (New York, NY: Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, 1916), 202.
5. DeWald, 29; Clara Lee Tanner, *Southwest Indian Arts and Crafts* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1975), 30.

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- DeWald, Terry. *The Papago Indians and Their Basketry*. Tucson, AZ: DeWald, 1979.
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