



Bowl

Unknown Gabrieleño (Tongva) or Cahuilla Artist

ca. 1910-1920

H: 4 ½" h; D: 6 ½"

T0507

<http://collections.fenimoreartmuseum.org/node/5356>

By Felicia Garcia (New York University)

During my time at the 2017 Otsego Institute, I had the opportunity to study a basket that has been attributed to either the Gabrieleño (Tongva) or Cahuilla tribe. As a member of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians, I had originally hoped to study a basket from my own community, but the few Chumash baskets in the Thaw Collection were already on display in the gallery. I am always so eager to see Chumash baskets because we have so few historical examples within our community, as many live in institutions far away from our home in Central/Southern California. However, both the Gabrieleño (Tongva) or Cahuilla tribes share a geographic region with the Chumash and, therefore, also share the experience of being “Mission Indians.” Further, both tribes utilized similar basket weaving techniques and natural materials, so I was extremely grateful for the opportunity to study a basket from one of these communities.

In any examination of California basketry, one should be aware of the complex history of this region's colonization by Spanish missionaries. Between the years of 1769 and 1823, twenty-one missions were constructed by these missionaries along the California coast. With the help of soldiers, these missionaries carried out their goal of forced religious conversion of the Native American groups they encountered. In addition to religious conversion, missionaries forced these Native communities to give up their entire way of life, including their cultures, economies, and social structures. Moreover, little thought was given to the preservation of cultural objects or practices. Through the use of corporal punishment, missionaries exploited Native American labor and forced them to work in agriculture and ranching, as well as in the production of leather, textiles, and various other goods to support the mission economy.<sup>1</sup> As a result of the widespread forced acculturation that occurred through missionization, many California tribes presently relate to one another through their shared experience as "Mission Indians."

The basket, object number T0507 and called a "Bowl," was made between 1910 and 1920. From the mid-1800's through the early twentieth century, there was a great demand for California basketry among collectors of Native American Art, and many of the baskets collected during this time period were made specifically for the art market or at the request of a particular patron.<sup>2</sup> There is little wear on the basket, and it was created after missionization, so it was most likely made to be sold. Additionally, the information on provenance indicates that it was owned by prominent fiber artist and collector, Claire Zeisler, and was later purchased from the Morning Star Gallery in Santa Fe.

The basket was woven using a traditional coiling technique with a light brown shade of juncus and a foundation of bundled deer grass. The pattern consists of a simple repeated diamond shape covering the entire basket with a solid ring around the top and bottom rims--both the rings and diamond pattern are made using black-dyed juncus. The center row of diamonds is filled in with a darker shade of brown juncus. This slight color variation in the juncus is most likely natural, however the black may have been achieved by burying the juncus in humus-rich soil or by soaking in a mixture of this soil and rusted iron.<sup>3</sup> The catalogue does not include any information about the pattern, however, the bands of repeated diamond shapes have been a common motif among basket makers throughout Southern California, and are often said to represent the rattlesnake.<sup>4</sup> There is also a circular geometric pattern made from darker juncus on the bottom of the basket.

In every encounter I have had with this basket, I have recognized its beauty and the skill necessary for its construction. However, initially this object also caused some sadness for me. First, as was typical, the artist's name was never recorded, and second, because these baskets that were sold to collectors, are often the only objects that are utilized by museums to represent the Indigenous peoples of California. However, in my reflection during and since the seminar, this basket has taken on a new meaning. This basket represents the resiliency and agency of generations of Native American women in the face of colonization. During a time of economic distress, weavers became the economic backbone of their families and communities. Further, they did so primarily on their own terms through the use of traditional materials, designs, and techniques. Though her name was never recorded, the artist represents so much more than herself as an individual. Additionally, though pieces such as this were produced during a time of exchange between Europeans and Native Americans, I consider this piece to

represent “adaptability” rather than “hybridity.” Weavers adapted to their situation by learning to cater to European tastes in order sustain the practice and support themselves financially.

To speak to the point about museums employing a single type of object to represent California Natives--while I wish there were more comprehensive representations, baskets have always been such an essential and central part of our cultures. In addition to being prized for their aesthetic value, baskets were used for gathering food, cooking, holding children, ceremonies, and they were given as gifts. While many other material representations of our culture were stripped from us in the process of missionization, basketry survived and continues to serve as a testament to the resilience of Native peoples. Though I do not think the complexity of Indigenous identity can be represented by a single object, the cultural and historical significance of basketry extends far beyond the exchange between Native Californians and collectors. The experience of studying this basket and the skills that I developed at the Otsego Institute will continue to inform my work as a Museum Studies Master’s student, as well as my future pursuits at my community’s museum and cultural center.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Howard Jackson and Edward Castillo, *Indians, Franciscans, and Spanish Colonization: The Impact of the Mission System on California Indians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 135.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Timbrook, “Six Chumash Presentation Baskets,” *American Indian Art Magazine* 39, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 50-57, 50.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Bibby, *The Fine Art of California Basketry* (Crocker Art Museum/Heyday Books, 1996) 55.

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