

SOME RE-ASSEMBLY REQUIRED: THE CONSERVATION OF A MAKAH TRINKET BASKET

CINDY LEE SCOTT UCLA/GETTY MASTERS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC MATERIALS

Project Background

The treatment of this basket, on loan from the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum in Palm Springs, CA, was undertaken as a part of a course on Conservation and Ethnography from January to March 2011. As such, a critical component of the treatment of this object was to work in consultation with the staff and Native consultants from the ACCM in order to devise a treatment that would satisfy both the conservation needs and cultural requests of all parties involved.



AGUA CALIENTE CULTURAL MUSEUM



Object ACCM 2007.108-017 (Before Treatment)

Cultural Context and Materials

The Makah Tribe is part of the Northwest Coast cultural group and lives near Cape Flattery at the Northwestern tip of the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State (Glinsman 2005). When a trading post opened in Makah territory in 1902, Makah weavers sold their baskets in exchange for food and other goods. The most common type of basket made for sale was the small, lidded trinket basket that was commonly adorned with images of small birds, ducks and banding.



Map of Northwest Coast showing territories of different tribal groups including the Makah (<http://thetextilesblog.blogspot.com/2010/04/basketry-of-makah.html>)

The baskets were typically woven from dyed and undyed bear grass twined over cedar bark warp using a wrapped twining technique found only on Makah and Nuu-chah-multh woven baskets (Glinsman 2005, 188). As early as the 1860s, Makah women were producing small trinket baskets; through time, the construction of the baskets changed – the bases and rims became plaited and the bar grass was replaced by raffia, which had become commercially available in the 1930s.



Detail of duck motif showing faded red dye on beak. Also visible are alternating light brown and yellow coloured bands, and green and yellow dyed bands on the bottom.

References Cited

Glinsmann, Dawn. 2005. "Baskets of the Plateau, Northwest Coast, Subarctic, and Arctic", in *By Native Hands: Woven Treasures from the Lauren Rogers Museum of Art*. Jill R. Chancey, ed. University of Washington Press (Seattle).

Conservation Treatment

One of the most concerning issues in dealing with the conservation of this basket was the damage caused to the rim. This damage appears to have occurred primarily from a singular event during which the rim and first few rows of horizontal elements from the top were violently crushed, causing the vertical warp elements in this area to snap into many pieces, and the horizontal wefts to come free from the broken warp elements in this area. The crushed area comprises nearly 2/3 of the circumference of the basket.

After dry cleaning, repairs to the damaged area proceeded via a number of steps including re-humidification, re-alignment, addition of new materials to replace those which were lost or too heavily damaged to support the basket after re-shaping and mending, and the creation of a number of supports, both temporary and permanent.

Step 1: Supporting the Damaged Structure

An internal support was created using Varaform, a product consisting of a cotton gauze impregnated with a thermoplastic polyester (polycaprolactone) that, when immersed in boiling water, can be cut and shaped to the appropriate size and shape.

Two 'C' shaped pieces were created that nest into each other along with a telescopic tube used to push the two halves outwards, forming an internal circle which supports the walls of the basket, allowing for re-humidification and external work. Prior to re-humidification a piece of Varaform was placed in a humidification chamber in order to ensure that it would not have an adverse reaction in a high humidity environment.



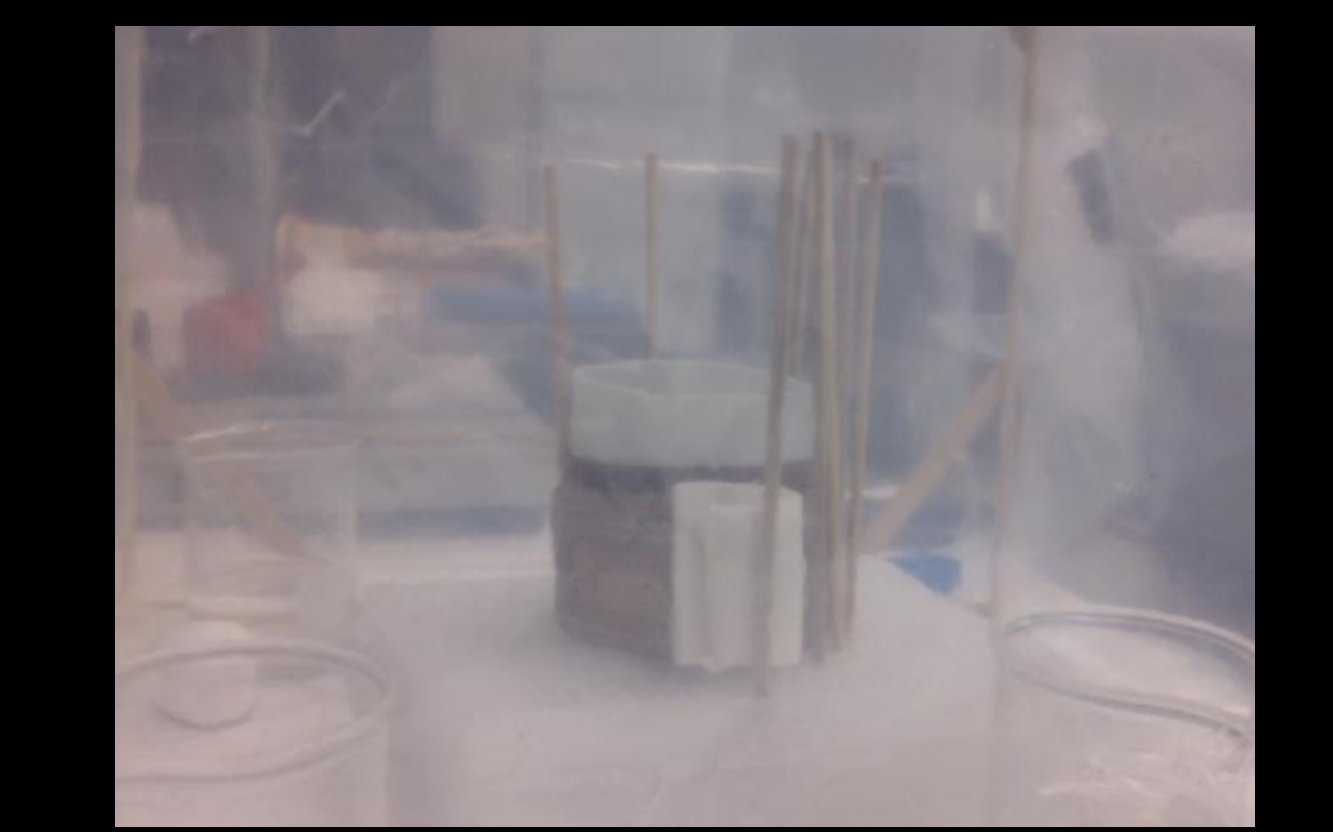
Step 2: Chamber Re-Humidification

Re-humidification was undertaken in order to reshape the crushed portion of the basket. A chamber was created using polyethylene sheeting over a frame constructed of bamboo skewers. A calibrated hygrometer and a cobalt strip were placed in the chamber in order to modify ambient humidity within the chamber.

Initially, 200mL of a 3:1 mixture of deionized water and ethanol was placed in the chamber, divided equally into four 50mL beakers. After 12 hours, it was noted that the RH had reached 85% and so one beaker was removed. After 24 hours, the RH seemed to stabilize at approximately 72%, which was the level sought for this treatment.

The object was placed inside the chamber for a period of three days. The RH was monitored daily to ensure that the chamber was stable. The maximum fluctuation from day to day did not appear to exceed +/- 3%. On the third day, the chamber was opened and the object remained inside until the RH in the chamber equaled the ambient RH of the room. At this point, the object was removed.

In addition to the internal support of Varaform, the object was placed on a thick piece of ethafoam, which allowed for the placement of bamboo skewers around the exterior that could be moved to reshape the basket as it softened. Adjustments were made daily.

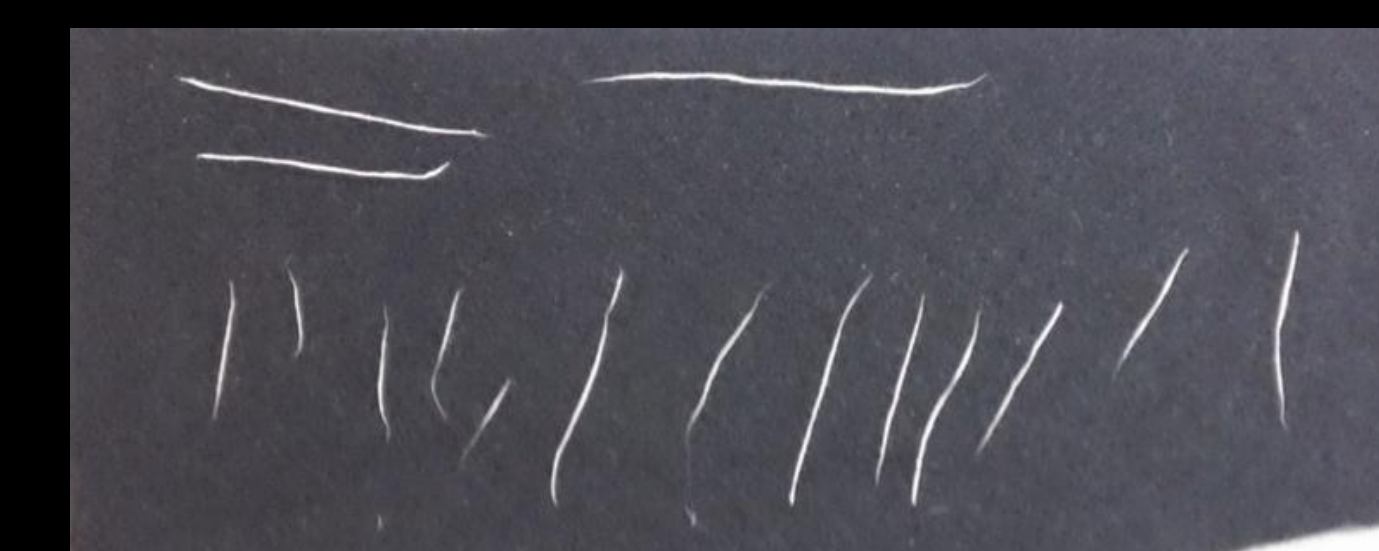


Step 3: Mending and Re-Alignment



Mending of the crushed areas was conducted on both the interior and exterior of the basket. Wherever possible, the wefts were looped back onto their original warps. In areas where the warps were missing, slivers of bamboo skewer were inserted to replace these missing elements and to lend further structural support to the repaired areas, in addition to aiding in the realignment.

In general, it was possible to first realign and mend the bottom four rows at the break as a single unit, and the top three rows as a second unit.



Materials:

- Komo Kashmir Japanese Tissue Paper
- 2% w/v Methyl Cellulose in deionised water
- Bamboo skewers

Step 4: Joining the Tear

After aligning and mending the three rows at the top of the tear and the four rows under the tear, the two mended areas were joined using more 'frankensteins' on both the interior and exterior faces of the basket.

For those 'frankensteins' bridging the two units, a 1:1 methyl cellulose and wheat starch paste mixture was used, as it has stronger adhesive qualities than methyl cellulose alone and is more easily reversed than wheat starch paste alone.



Step 5: Toning the Frankensteins



After the adhesive had dried, the external frankensteins were toned using a mixture of liquitex acrylic paints, thinned using deionized water in order to minimize their appearance. The colour was chosen to be close but not identical so that from afar, they are invisible, but from near, they can be clearly discerned as new materials.

Step 6: The Storage/Display Support

A permanent internal support that is minimally visible was created for storage and exhibition. The support was created by soaking split bamboo skewers in deionized water overnight and then wrapping them around appropriately sized glass beakers and allowing them to dry. Because of the tendency of bamboo to split, especially under tension, the shaped skewers were wrapped in white Teflon tape and two finger-holes were attached to each support (a bottom and a top) to facilitate insertion and removal. In order to minimize the visibility of the support, the Teflon was then toned to a colour similar to the basket using Liquitex acrylic emulsion paints.

