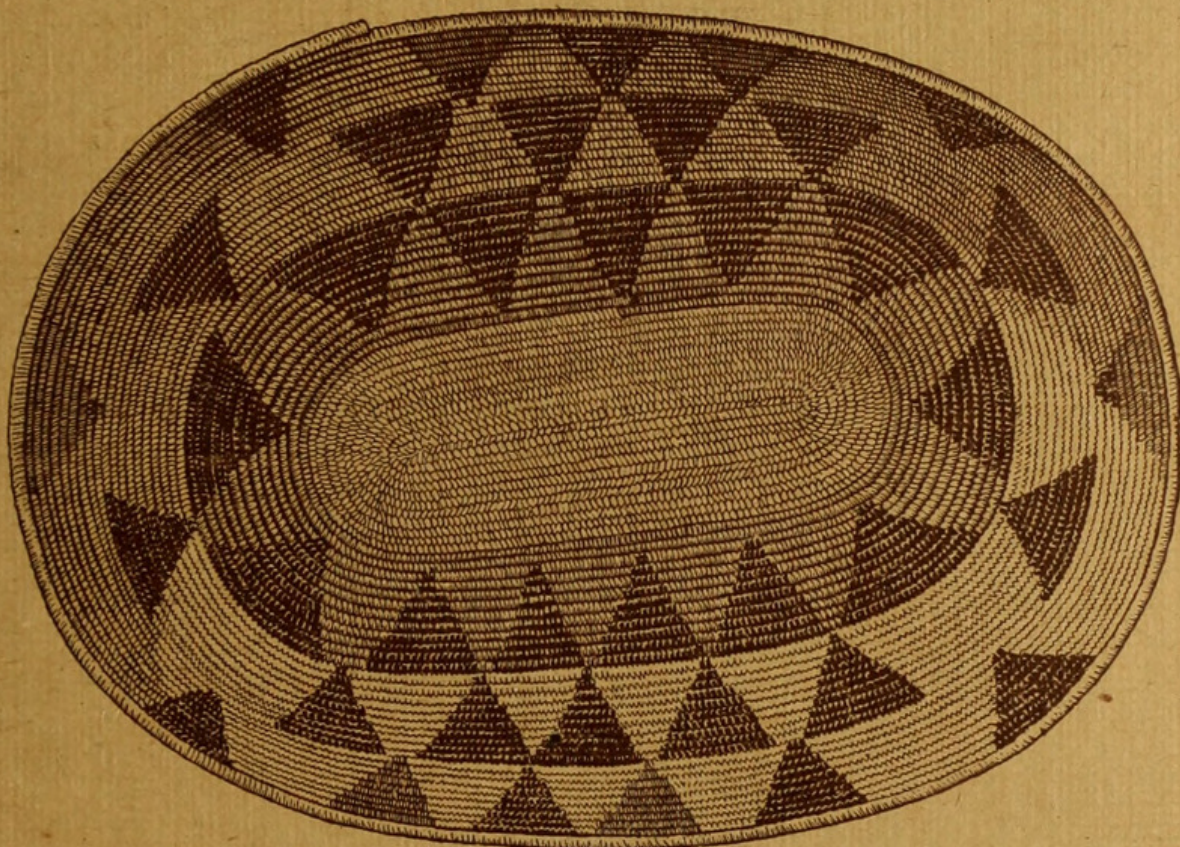


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AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

BASKETRY DESIGNS

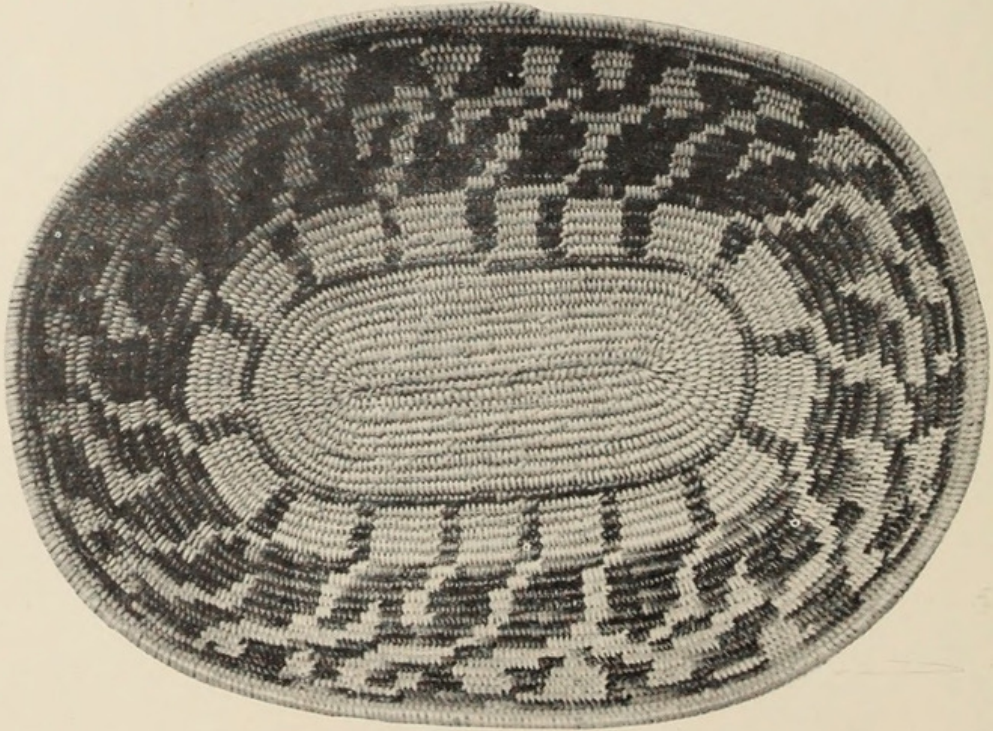
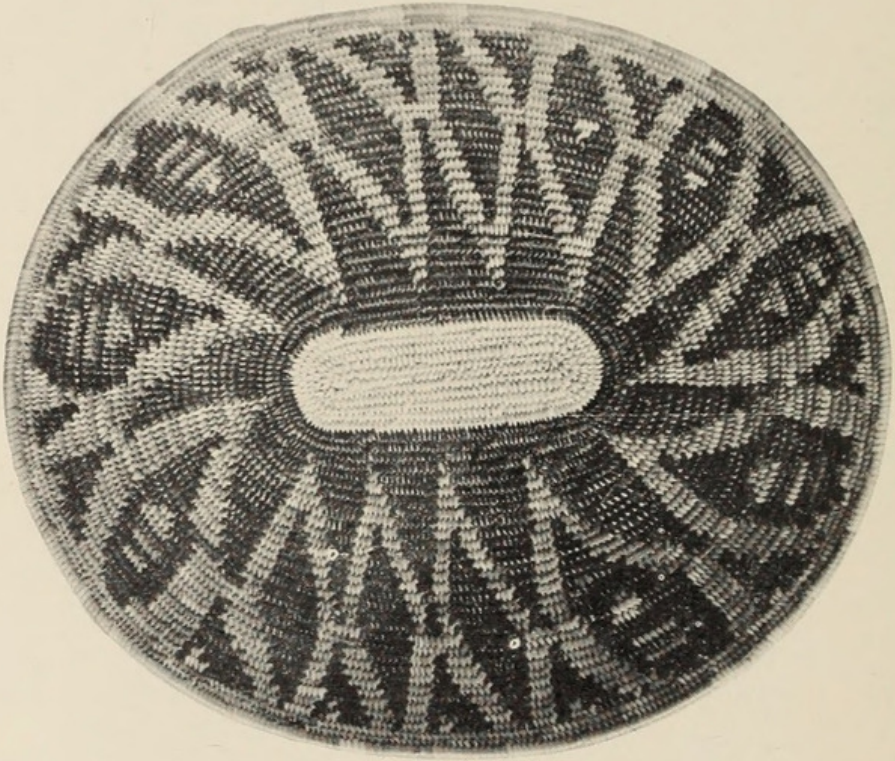
OF THE MISSION INDIANS



By A. L. KROEBER

GUIDE LEAFLET SERIES, No. 55

JULY, 1922



Two Handsome Mission Baskets

BASKETRY DESIGNS

OF THE MISSION INDIANS

By A. L. KROEBER
University of California



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MISSION INDIAN BASKETRY DESIGNS

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University of California

Visitors to a museum are often impressed by the degree to which basketry looms up among the exhibits illustrating the life of the Indians of California and many other primitive peoples. Not only are baskets relatively more important owing to the want of many implements of furniture and utensils to which we are accustomed, but they are absolutely more numerous, varied, and showy than among ourselves. In many cases it is the very lack of development of other arts that has led to the special development of basket making. Among the California tribes the best of mechanical energy and ingenuity was exercised in this one branch of manual dexterity. It is not that the Indian possessed some mysterious faculty, some inborn gift, through which he could surpass us; but that he manufactures so few other things that he is able or compelled to devote a disproportionate amount of his interests in this special direction. There is little doubt that civilized people, if they took up the matter seriously, would outdistance the savage at his own game, in basket making as in other undertakings. Yet, when it comes to the actual fact, baskets are a comparative side-issue to us, notably in comparison with other textile products, especially cloth. The result is that basket making remains a sort of starved stepchild of civilization, whereas it is the favorite son of many savage cultures.

This growth of basketry at the expense of other arts is particularly exemplified in aboriginal America by the tribes of California and the nearby regions. These peoples have always been reckoned among the most backward of American Indians in the general level of their attainments; but there is also a unanimity of agreement that their baskets excel those of most other tribes, in fact are probably preëminent on the continent, if not in the world. Living entirely in the Stone Age stage, the California Indians knew nothing of vessels of metal. The majority of them were ignorant of pottery making; and their wood working was so little developed that had they suddenly decided to replace some of their baskets by utensils of wood, they would have been very hard put to it to produce even partially adequate implements. People who build their houses of thatch, slabs of bark, or dirt thrown over a framework of sticks, and who navigate on rafts of rushes instead of in timbered boats, have obviously left their carpentering instinct undeveloped. It is a curious commentary on the mechanical limitations of these tribes that in spite of

the perfection of their hand woven textiles, they have been content to refrain from making the next step in the natural evolution of the industry, namely, to weave on a loom and thus produce simple fabrics.

It is perhaps significant in this connection that their basketry art is wholly in the hands of women, who spend a great part of their lives, probably an average of several hours a day, in this occupation. They seem better able than men to provide the steady patience which is called for. The work never becomes quite automatic—in the making of a really good basket the attention can not wholly wander from the work in hand, even if the weaver has many years of experience. At the same time there is no heavy strain on the attention, and no concentration of energy is called for. These requisites seem to be better satisfied by the feminine temperament. We have then this curious situation: the general industrial backwardness of the California Indians is exemplified by their leaving the most important of their industries to their women; but the women have so far advanced this industry, that the men have no hand in the peak of attainment of the native culture on its material side.

With the art of basketry in such flourishing condition in this region, it was inevitable that the imagination of the more gifted individuals should be stimulated and new inventions made. As the native population is cut up into a great number of local groups—more than a hundred tribes or linguistic units have been recognized in California—it might further be expected that newly devised methods would often spring up independently in separate localities, and that the final outcome would be a number of distinct arts in various parts of the area. This is exactly what has happened. Neighboring tribes, it is true, have often borrowed a new method of manufacture or a new style of decoration from the group that originated it; but on the whole, intertribal communication in aboriginal California had a limited range and such spread of new ideas remained restricted. The consequence is that we encounter about half a dozen quite diverse basketry arts in California; in addition, anyone whose interests lead him to closer study is usually able to learn to distinguish the particular style of many single tribes.

Among these independent styles one of the most distinctive is that evolved by the Mission Indians, as they are generally called, the groups that inhabit the coast and mountain regions of Southern California from Los Angeles to San Diego.¹ They derived their name from having been

¹Gabrielino and Fernandean; Mountain, Pass, and Desert Cahuilla; Juaneño; Luiseño; Cupeño; Northern and Southern Diegueño; and some of the Serrano. The Diegueño are of Yuman stock, all the others Shoshonean or Uto-Aztecan. The ware of the Chumash is closely affiliated but not identical.

brought more or less thoroughly under the influence of the Franciscan missionaries during the last third of the eighteenth and the first third of the nineteenth century. Their basketry is not as fine in texture as that made by some other California Indians; but they did, and do, good, even work when they wish to, and evince a peculiar originality and boldness in decoration that makes their ware of interest. This basketry may accordingly be described as reduced to the minimum on the technical side, but quite specially elaborated along certain ornamental lines; a quality that has often commended it to artists and collectors.

That a people should skimp technical aspects while evidently eager to develop the aesthetic ones, may seem unusual. Yet it must be noted that while the Mission Indian women do some poor work, their efforts on the whole are not directed so much to avoiding labor by fudging the manipulation, as to simplification of process. In other words, they seek a maximum of effect with a minimum of means; and this in itself argues a considerable accomplishment. Even if one aims at nothing more than a tolerable product, it takes some skill to achieve this with the mechanics of the work cut to the bone; and the best Mission ware is much more than tolerable.

This limitation of means in Mission basketry comes out in the matter of weaves. This is a complicated subject when followed out in detail; but it may be summarized by stating that the world over there are three principal types of basket weaving. The first, which includes checker work, wicker work, and twilling, is essentially a cloth weave made free hand in coarse materials. The basis of it is the simple *in-and-out* weave. That is to say, a single cross strand at a time is worked over and under the longitudinal ones. The second type is *twining*, which occurs in many varieties, all of which have in common the fact that two or more cross strands are introduced at the same time. This involves the fact that besides being worked in and out among the longitudinal elements, they must also be twined among each other; whence the name. The third process is that known as *coiling*, and, as has often been pointed out, is in strict accuracy a process of sewing rather than of weaving. The foundation elements are wrapped or lashed together, and this can be done only with the aid of an awl or needle. There is no set of parallel warps to serve as a basis, but the foundation strands or rods coil in a continuous spiral.

Now of these three processes, the first and simplest or in and out weave, was not used at all in Mission Indian basketry. This is the more remarkable because this weave is particularly rapid and satisfactory

where materials of the type of cane or bamboo are available, and Southern California is a country in which cane is native. The second, or twined process, was known to the Mission Indians but remained very much stunted. Their twined baskets served only the most ordinary domestic uses, and were coarse, irregularly spaced in open work, and undecorated. While we acknowledge their existence in passing, we may eliminate them from further consideration here. The coiling process was thus the only one of much consequence in this art, and it is significant that whereas coiling can be executed in a variety of ways, as on a foundation of one rod, two rods, three rods, rods and splints, etc., the Mission tribes restricted themselves, deliberately as it were, to only one variety: namely, a multiple foundation consisting of a bundle of grass stems. In this sole technique they worked a variety of forms and achieved varied pattern effects.

The limitation of materials is no less remarkable. There are several dozen plants growing in Southern California abundantly enough to have been available as basket materials, and some of these, such as yucca and willow, were actually used in baskets by tribes of other regions. Yet practically all Mission basketry is made in three materials only: a particular species of grass serving as foundation, and either sumac or a rush as wrapping.¹

Even in the matter of forms there is a greater restriction than is customary among the neighboring aborigines. Certain types of baskets were made everywhere in the California area except by the Mission tribes. We can account for their absence here by definite causes. Some centuries ago, the art of pottery making crept into southern California from Arizona and New Mexico, where it had flourished among the Cliff-Dwellers and Pueblos for thousands of years. Being rather settled in their habits of life, the southern Californians were able to utilize clay vessels to an extent which would have been impossible—on account of breakage—among a nomadic people. Their cooking utensils were therefore made of pottery, rendering it unnecessary for them to manufacture the watertight baskets in which the other California Indians did their cooking by means of hot stones. Then, a special burden basket, a deep, conical affair, shaped to sling on the back, such as the other tribes used for carrying loads, was dispensed with because the southern Californians had evolved the carrying net. This was a sort of small hammock, the ends connected by a rope or band passing over the forehead, while the

¹*Epicampes rigens*; *Rhus trilobata*; *Juncus* sp.

bag of the net passed around the shoulders and hung over the back. Into this net a comparatively shallow basket, or at least a flat-bottomed one, could be set without spilling. In this way the peaked burden basket of the other tribes was eliminated.

When now we consider the effect of the technical limitations on the ornamentation, we find its results apparent in three directions.

First, the invariable coiling on a bundle of grass stems produces a certain thickness of texture. Through the fact that it must be a bundle, the group of stems cannot well reduce below a certain diameter, say a sixth of an inch. This means that the wrapping stitches which are sewn around and through the bundle must also be of considerable length, and tend naturally to be of some breadth. Small, delicate designs could consequently be worked only with difficulty: they would quickly reveal themselves as inadequate in effect. The Mission tribes therefore took the other tack, frankly made most of their designs large and heavy, and developed a good deal of feeling for the impression which can be obtained by patterns of blocks or gross masses, instead of depending on intricacy of arrangement of small elements.

Secondly, the coarse stitches could scarcely be made to look as even as fine ones. This circumstance cultivated in the mind of the weaver a disregard for sharp edges and nicety of pattern. She must often have had difficulty in bringing out the two sides of a design element exactly even, especially when she was carrying it around the curvature of the vessel. The outcome was, in some cases, an indifference to exact balance; whereas more daring workers met the situation by plunging deliberately into designs which avoid symmetry. This is a rather rare condition in basketry, and must be looked upon as one of the salient traits of the pattern decoration of Mission ware.

In the third place, the color scheme was affected by the nature of one of the basket materials to which the southern California Indian women had become addicted. The *Juncus* rush which is one of the two materials showing on basket surfaces, comes in a great variety of colors, from a cream white to a dark brown, with intermediate shades of yellow, reddish, olive, and gray. In fact, the stems vary so much that considerable care is required if it is desired to give a basket a background of uniform color. Here again there are two avenues open, and both were followed. One was to be discriminating, and to match as closely as possible the stems that were worked into one basket. The other was to renounce the attempt at uniformity and openly strive for a patchy color effect. A great many Mission baskets are mottled almost like a mackerel

skin, and the effect is distinctly pleasing. In some cases the pattern is emphasized by shading the background in contrast with it. If the pattern is dark, the stitches and the background immediately in contact with it are carried out in specially light shades of the rush, as if to relieve the design.

Then, this variable rush which made dyes practically unnecessary—the only color artificially produced in Mission ware is black—stimulated the color imagination as such. The result is that, although Mission designs are basically built up of simple and often crude elements, they are in many cases worked out in two colors. There is an illuminating contrast on this point with tribes that employ other materials and techniques. The ware of the Pomo region, for instance, is far more delicately made, and the designs lighter and more intricate; but the pattern is always of one color only, either red alone or black. In short, the Pomo weavers suppressed whatever impulse they may have had in the direction of color elaboration and specialized in the development of forms; whereas the Mission Indians were generally content to compose their patterns without much complexity of design, but to add to their liveliness by variety of color.

Like many primitive peoples these Indians were very little inclined to turn their basket patterns into pictures. The decoration remains geometric and can nearly always be analyzed into fundamental elements of triangles, quadrilaterals, or bars. It is true that basketry, like cloth, does not lend itself readily to free-flowing lines and curves; but that such effects are not impossible is shown by the ware produced in some parts of the world and occasionally by the Mission Indians themselves. On the whole, however, we can commend the aesthetic feeling which led the weavers to avoid such attempts; which from the very nature of the technique can never be preëminently successful as pictures, and which usually lose in decorative effect ten times as much as they gain in realistic representativeness. Most of the few Mission designs that can be recognized as being pictures of something—rattlesnakes, birds, human beings, or the like—occur in comparatively modern pieces made after the weavers discovered that many white people take more interest in even a poor picture than in a beautiful geometric design that carries no meaning to them.

We are so accustomed to think of the Indian as backward and child-like that it is a great temptation to feel pleased, as it were, over his failures. The more crudely he does a thing, the more typical it is likely to seem to us, and the more eager we are to seize upon it. Of course this

crudity of his is especially emphasized when he attempts to imitate ourselves. In this matter of designs the Indian quite generally knew his limitations, and, left to himself, at least in many tribes, did not attempt to decorate by pictures, reserving these for his religious communications. He had however, like all human beings a sense for the beautiful; and dumb though he might be in expressing this in words, he instinctively knew the difference between an object having aesthetic value and one lacking it.

We must remember too that, owing to the very poverty of his life as compared with ours, the Indian was conservative, so that when a given style had once grown up it tended to flourish for centuries. This permanence would sooner or later make it probable that even in small communities artistically gifted individuals would be born who would add their contribution of quality or talent to the prevailing style. They would thus set up a standard of attainment which would serve as a model and could be pretty successfully imitated by the mass of weavers who set to work with less creative imagination but with much willingness to do their best. To every Indian group, however small, art consequently represents a truly national tradition. The best that many preceding generations have had to offer has gone into it. This is why such arts, whether they manifest themselves in basketry or pottery or beadwork or carving, almost invariably possess a genuine aesthetic merit no matter how limited they may be. Those among ourselves who possess artistic impressionability find little difficulty in entering into the spirit of such primitive arts. Possibly sometimes we are even more keenly alive to their values than the natives themselves. On the other hand the civilized person who prefers the childish and halting efforts at picture making in Indian textiles or beadwork, is characterizing himself as lacking in feeling for the best that native art really has to offer. He is gratifying a superficial or sensational taste which is not artistic at all.

On the whole the Mission tribes, like many other Indians, are sufficiently imbued with feeling for their own aesthetic products to adhere rather firmly to the tribal styles. The disturbing effect of trade influences is perceptible in this ware, but has not yet cut very deeply. In some respects it has even proved stimulating. The baskets with mottled surface or subtle color effects find a readier sale than those of a severer color scheme. The result is that proportionally more of them are being made, and bolder effects being carried out on them than formerly. It is true that there are fewer Mission Indians than there used to be. Many of the younger generation have gone to school, and the mode of life is

each year coming to conform a little more to our own. There can thus be little doubt that ultimately this art will die out. It is far from dead, however; and on many of the little reservations that stud Southern California it is not only the old but also the middle aged women that still produce fine baskets. Even a returned school girl, innocent though she may be of such matters when first coming home, is likely to take up the industry as a means of providing herself with pin money, as soon as she discovers that if she can turn out competent ware in her idle moments, it will bring a satisfactory price at the trader's or from the tourist. In this way, while civilization is on the one hand tending to destroy the integrity of this basketry art, it is on the other helping to keep it alive and is even stimulating it to new developments.

ANALYSIS OF DESIGNS

Figures 1-42

The cross (figs. 1-8) is a native design, as shown by its fundamental form: four blocks surrounding a rectangular space, as in figs. 1, 3, 4.

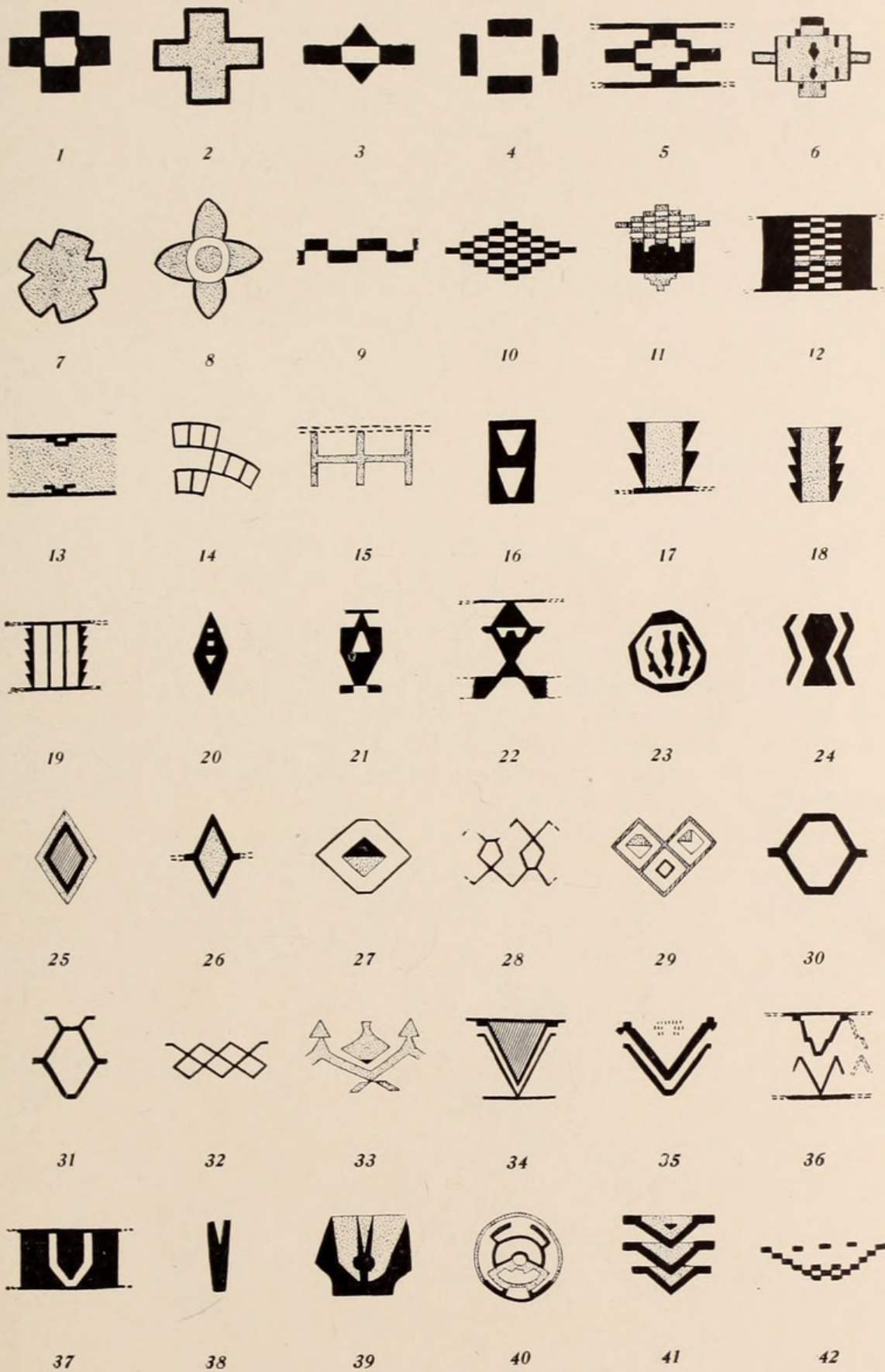
An elongated checkerboard arrangement occurs in bands (fig. 9), masses (figs. 10-12), and related rectangular forms (figs. 13-16).

Upright rectangles flanked by rows of right-angled triangles are characteristic (figs. 17-19).

An erect diamond with little light window-like spaces in it is shown simple in fig. 20, elaborated in 21-22, distorted in 23-24.

Simple diamonds are frequent, both in patterns and standing free (figs. 25-33). Note the characteristic asymmetries and irregularities in figs. 27-29.

One of the most typical Mission basket designs is a V or pair of spreading horns which are used free, in pattern repetition, and to elaborate other designs. Figs. 31 to 50 all contain this motive recurring through a series of designs of the greatest variety.



Figures 1-42

ANALYSIS OF DESIGNS

Figures 43-84

Figs. 45-47 are notable as three variants on the identical basket, 45 being standard and 47 the extreme of asymmetrical simplification.

Designs deliberately thrown out of balance appear in figs. 57-78. The asymmetry may be barely discernible, as in 66, 67, 68; prominent but yet superimposed on an underlying symmetry, as in 65, 73; or fundamental, as in 60, 62, 76.

Fig. 64, representing a church, is a modern variant of the old native pattern seen in 52 and 53. See Plate I, fig. 1.

Triangles are the basis of designs 79-84. Figs. 81 and 82 evince a pleasing imagination.



Figures 43-84

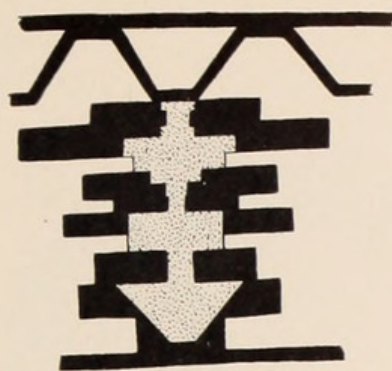
ANALYSIS OF DESIGNS

Figures 48, 49, 75, 77, 78, 84

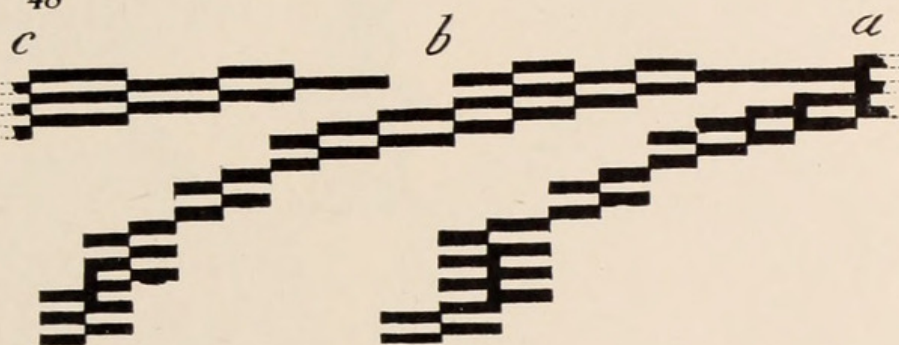
These six figures illustrate some of the more complex basket pattern elements. Figs. 48 and 49 are built on the V or "spreading horns" concept, highly elaborated but nevertheless substantially regular. Fig. 75 is a step pattern, simple in motive, but tantalizingly irregular even within the two and a half repetitions shown. Figs. 77 and 78 are masterpieces of decorative invention repaying the most careful analysis. It should be remembered that designs like these are not outlined in advance but slowly evolved as the basket is built upward. On a small scale, the aesthetic process is similar to that operative in a richly decorated mediaeval Cathedral growing through several generations without an architect's plan.



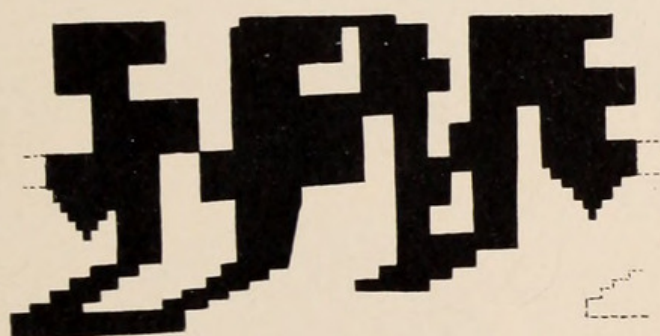
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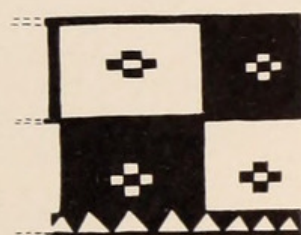
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75



77



84



78

Figures 48, 49, 75, 77, 78, 84

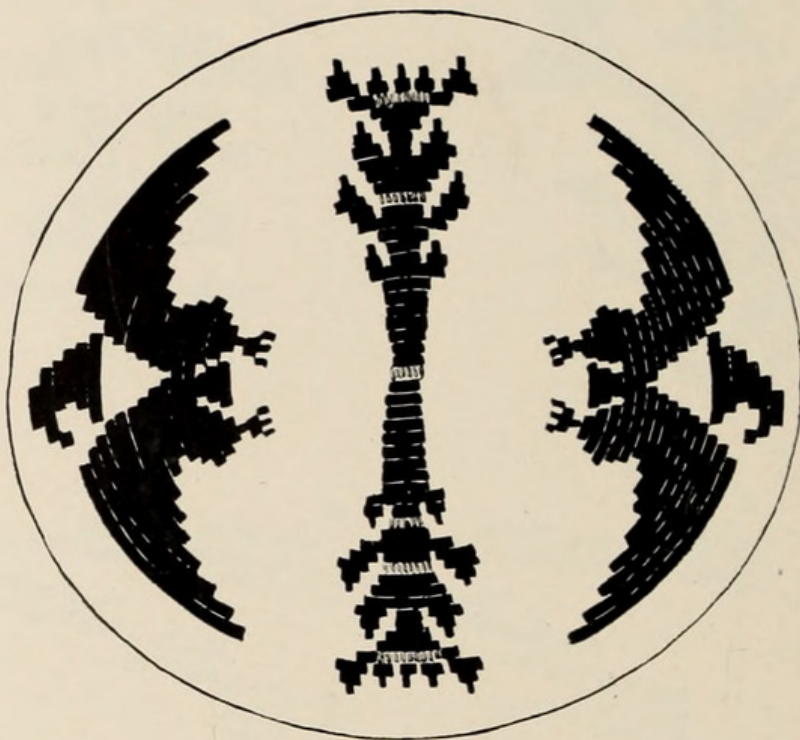


Figure 85

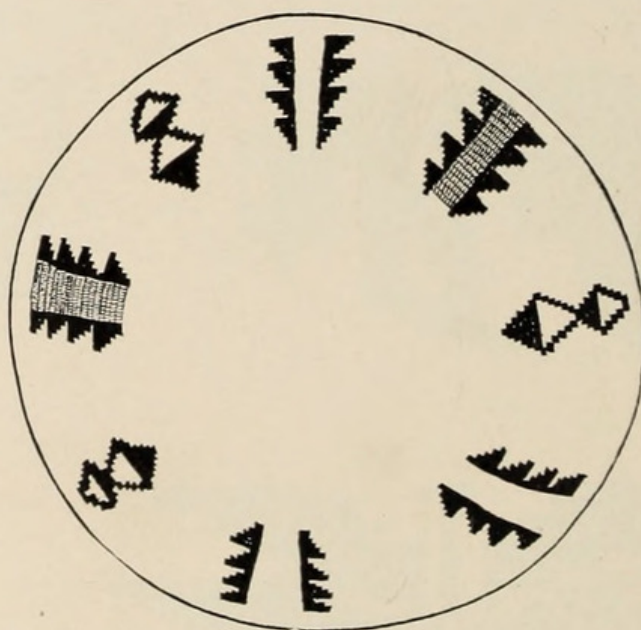


Figure 86

Fig. 85. The entire design on a flat basket, unusual in its semi-realism, yet handled with definite decorative feeling.

Fig. 86. Designs 18 and 83 are here shown as they actually appear on the inner surface of a shallow basket. The elements occur at uneven distances; they are introduced 5 and 3 times respectively, instead of 4 and 4; and one of them is worked both with and without contained color.

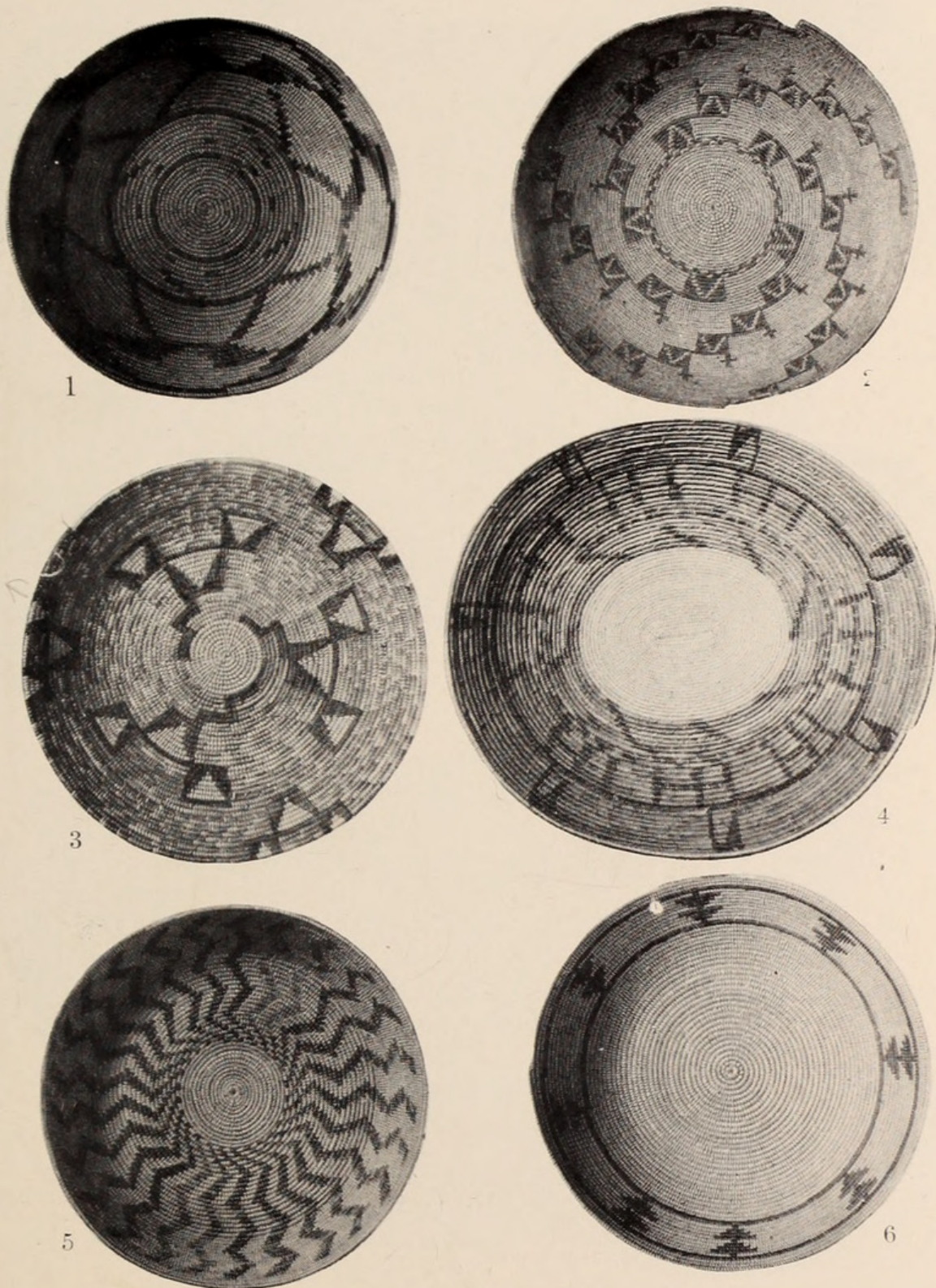


Plate I.

Pattern arrangements on flat and shallow Mission baskets—banded, radiating, spirally diagonal and crossing or zigzag. In fig. 3 the elements are unevenly spaced; in 4 they are irregular; 3 and 5 show varying shades in different parts.



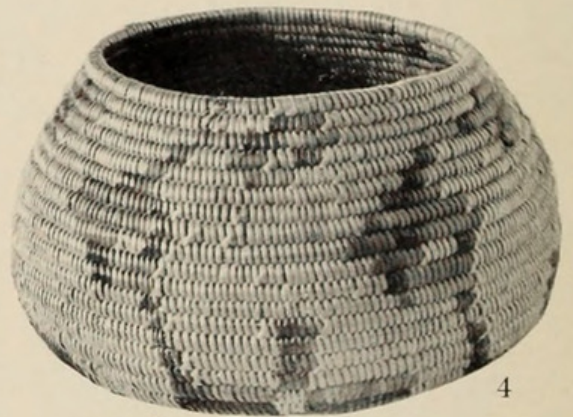
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2



3



4



5



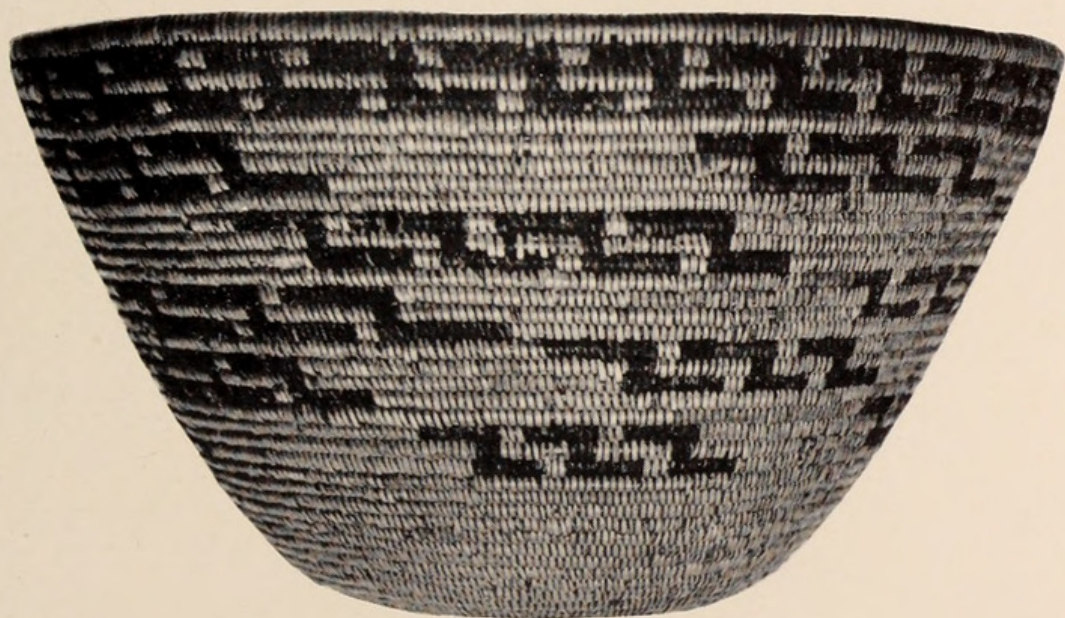
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Plate II.

In deep baskets the design elements tend to run grosser than in flat ones: compare especially 1, 2, 3 with Plate I. The design in 4 is saved from crassness by the way its tints slide subtly from light to dark.



1



2

Plate III.

Fig. 1 shows in detail the characteristic pattern mottling, and fig. 2 typical irregularities in repetition of the design motive.



Kroeber, A. L. 1922. "Basketry designs of the Mission Indians." *Guide leaflet* 55, Page 1-22.

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