
Basketry: A Living Tradition

Siletz Basketry in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Removal to the Coast (Siletz) Reservation represented an enormous disruption to many Tribal traditions, including basketry. Removal deprived weavers of access to traditional gathering areas where they cultivated the best and most productive weaving materials. Federal officials restricted people's movement, sometimes making it impossible to access materials from home that didn't naturally grow on the reservation. At the same time, efforts at assimilation disrupted Tribal teaching and learning. The government established boarding schools, forcing students to live away from home while they studied, in an explicit effort to separate children from their families and make it difficult to pass on the cultural knowledge—like how to weave.

At the same time, the move to the reservation stimulated the development of new styles and baskets. One big influence was also the growing collector trade. In the early twentieth century, a Native art movement swept the nation and eager collectors rushed to reservations to purchase baskets, *regalia*, and other work produced by Native people. Tourists visiting the coastal towns that sprang up in what had been part of the Reservation bought baskets in large numbers. In response to the basket trade, Siletz weavers adjusted patterns and marks to be more recognizable to non-Native people—sometimes even including lettering in baskets. They also experimented with the shape of baskets, creating entirely new styles, like flower baskets with hourglass figures and wavy rims that would not have been practical for traditional uses.

The most distinctive innovation at the Siletz reservation was the double-handled baskets that began to emerge in the late nineteenth century. These double handles are one of the most reliable indicators that a basket was produced at Siletz and have become part of the artistic tradition for modern weavers. This double-handled basket was woven by a basket weaver named Carrie Streets. Carrie was the daughter of Ida Bensell, another famous Siletz weaver. Carrie and her sister, Gladys Muschamp, played an important role in passing down the tradition of Siletz basketry to generations of weavers today and did a lot of work and teaching to make sure that the tradition of basketry continues to survive and thrive at Siletz.



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Siletz Basketry Today

Today, baskets remain an important part of the way that Native people from western Oregon gather and process food, dress for ceremony, and care for their babies. Basketry also helps connect these Native peoples to their pre-Removal roots and preserve traditions. Different weavers from Siletz continue to make the types of baskets that you've learned about today as do other weavers from neighboring Tribes in western Oregon, northern California, and southern Washington. Siletz weavers continue to be recognized across the region for their intricate work and fine detail and participate in regional gatherings and organizations like the Northwest Native American Basketweavers Association. Each weaver often develops their own personal style that can set their individual baskets apart upon close examination. Many experienced weavers today can recognize each other's work, or the work of past weavers, just by looking at a basket. These small signatures are just one of the things that tie the work of Siletz weavers today to tradition stretching back since time immemorial.



Siletz Tribal Member Chantele Rilatos works on a gay-yu' at the 2023 Siletz Culture Camp

At the same time, weaving is a communal activity that helps hold Tribal people together. Gathering materials for baskets takes a lot of work—too much work for one person. Experienced weavers, who create many high-quality baskets, rely on their family and other Tribal members of all ages to help gather and process materials—from cutting and peeling sticks to digging roots. Experienced weavers take time to pass down knowledge in classes and individual lessons while younger Tribal members help gather and process the materials needed to make baskets. The Siletz Tribe also hosts weaving classes for Tribal members. They work to make sure that Tribal members have access to areas to gather the materials that they need to weave and opportunities to care for the places that they depend on for sticks. Siletz Tribal members, no matter where their ancestors come from, are all basket people.

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“Our people making and proudly wearing ceremonial caps, carrying our children and grandchildren in our baby baskets, wearing bark capes and dresses, using traditional mats, and cooking and eating from baskets is preserving the very core of our collective tribal existence. It is our responsibility to make sure that we teach in turn what we have been taught, and always give thanks for what the Creator has provided us. In this way, we continue to become closer and stronger as a people and as a community, sharing and practicing our traditions and beliefs.”¹

– Alfred “Bud” Lane III, CTSI Tribal Council Vice Chairman, elder, and weaver

¹ “Teachers Guide to The Art of Ceremony: Regalia of Native Oregon.” Hallie Ford Museum of Art. <https://hfma.willamette.edu/pdf/teacher-guides/art-of-ceremony.pdf>