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Danilo Matteini

# Chumash Indian Basketry

AT SAN BUENAVENTURA

By

Msgr. Francs J. Weber<sup>1</sup>

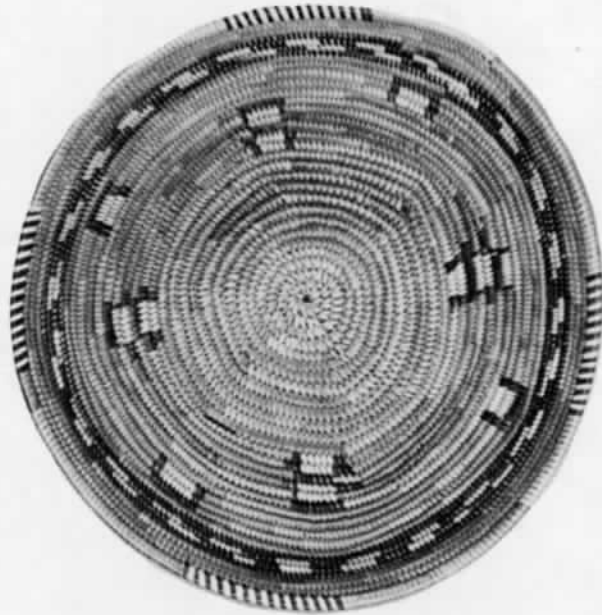
Excellence in the art of basketry has long been associated with the Indians of the Pacific Slope. Indeed, their outstanding skill in that handicraft prompted one authority to say that the baskets produced by the California Indians were far superior to those of any other people, in the fineness of weaving and beauty of decoration.

The basket industry was cultivated by the women who were ingenious in weaving grass, sumac, splints, rushes, cedar, tule, yucca stems, kelp thread, willow roots and sea plants into mats and baskets. Their finished products varied in sizes and shapes from flat, basin-shaped coiled weave bowls to the large pointed cones which the women carried on their backs when digging for roots, picking berries or gathering acorns.

The pliable baskets, some of which had lids, were woven (rather than coiled) from vegetable fibers often on a warp of willow strips. By adding pitch or some other resinous substance such as asphaltum, baskets were made waterproof. They could then be utilized for such purposes as cooking, trapping fish and carrying water. Moreover, basket-work was employed in fences, houses, shields and for harvesting.

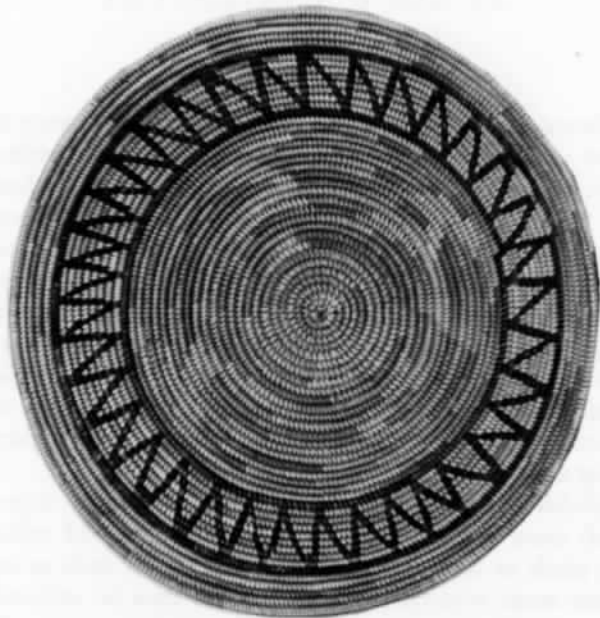
It is generally agreed that the Chumash Indians were among the most sophisticated of all the native Californians, in terms of both their material and social culture. At the time of European penetration, there may have been between 10,000 and 15,000 Chumash living along the 6,500 square miles of coastline between present day San Luis Obispo and the Malibu.<sup>2</sup> If so, they constituted one of the largest groups of natives anywhere in western North America.

The early chroniclers expressed a particular fascination with the types of Indian basketry found at San Buenaventura Mission. Light, sturdy and attractive, the Chumash baskets were avidly sought out by the Europeans. Those fortunate enough to acquire baskets sent them back to New Spain, Peru and Spain. With the advent of the merchant ships, the baskets also found an eager market in London and Paris. At present the British Museum has one of the largest collections of Chumash baskets. Those baskets fashioned by the



The dark background is in the tradition of the Santa Ines region of the Chumash culture.

(diameter: 8 inches; foundation: Juncus; stitch type: non-interlocking; sewing material: Juncus; stitches per square inch: 60; coil ending: simple taper)



The principal band in the design is unusually wide; rim ticks and body designs are lacking.

(diameter: 11 inches; foundation: *Juncus*; stitch type: non-interlocking; sewing material: *Juncus*; stitches per square inch: 105; coil ending: simple taper)

Ventureño Indians at San Buenaventura Mission were known for their fine workmanship, variety of forms and the manifold uses to which they were put.<sup>3</sup>

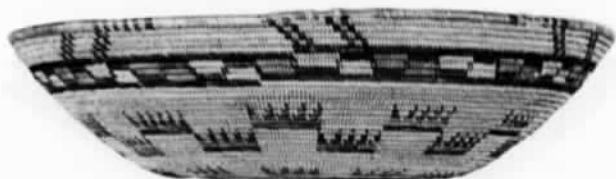
Observable regularities of techniques, form and decorative style make the design of Chumash baskets distinctive. This is partly due to the variegated rush materials from which they were woven. In addition to the established tradition of design, there were explicit rules of composition and space division in Chumash baskets. The principal band, for example, and its distance from the rim are generally the same width. Rim "ticks" are usual. The geometrical and symbolic designs in the body of the basket blend into a harmonious unity in the finished product.<sup>4</sup>

Ventureño women used a rush (*Juncus textilis*) for their baskets. After it was dried, the straightest stalks were split. The pitch was scraped out with the roughened edge of a clamshell and, finally, the strands were bundled according to need. Some were re-split, and others buried in the mud for color effect. After the initial "start" of shredded pieces was well stitched, whole *juncus* stalks were introduced, usually for a three-strand foundation. Stitching was aided by the use of a bone awl, and the stitches did not interlock with each other. It was necessary, of course, to keep the material damp while working with it.

Indian basket making was a skill that displayed patience, a sense of beauty and a feeling for symmetry and design. It was a highly symbolic means of expression, an art medium of considerable importance to the Indians themselves and to those who study their way of life.

There are 25 baskets on display in the Historical Museum at San Buenaventura Mission, some of which have been there for many years. The majority of the Chumash baskets originally belonged to Juan E. Camarillo (1867-1936) who was born in an adobe near what is now Main Street and Ventura Avenue.<sup>5</sup> Their provenance is interesting. Following the erection of Saint Mary Magdalen in the town of Camarillo,<sup>6</sup> Juan set up a small family museum in a wing adjacent to the church, where he proudly displayed the various mementos he had amassed in his tours around the world.

Chumash baskets were rare even in those early days and Juan E. Camarillo's outstanding collection received considerable attention as one of California's lost artforms. Of all his valued possessions, none was more carefully cared for than those treasures acquired



The balanced and subtle design of this bowl, which was probably used for food preparation and serving, has strong colors that add beauty to technical excellence.

(diameter: 15½ inches; foundation: Juncus; stitch type: non-interlocking; sewing material: sumac, dark Juncus in designs, black Juncus; stitches per square inch: 125; coil ending: simple taper)

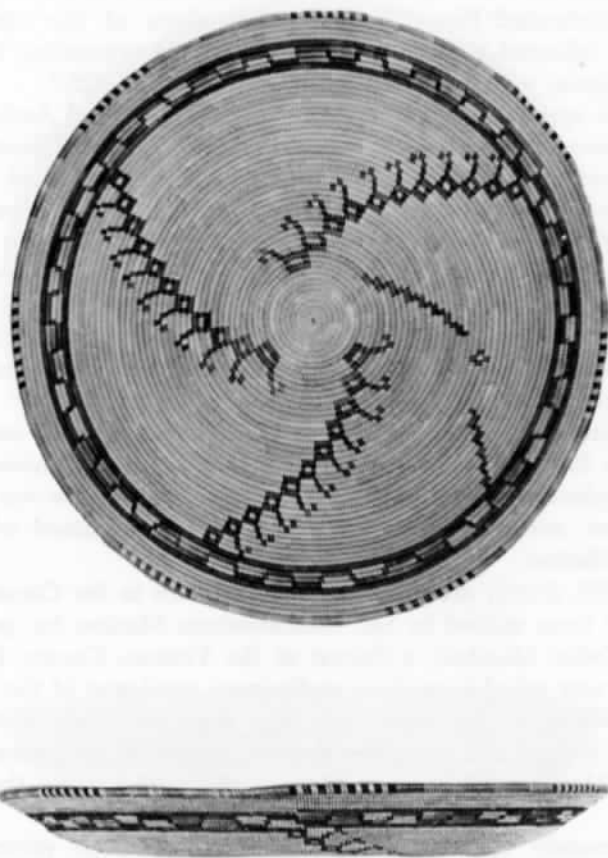
in his youth from elderly Indians at San Buenaventura. There is an oral tradition that one or more of the Camarillo baskets was woven by the celebrated Juana Basilia,<sup>7</sup> a neophyte of the mission, an especially talented woman. Juana's basket, incorporating the royal arms of Spain, was made for José de la Cruz in 1822.<sup>8</sup>

In the spring of 1964 the departments of Art and Anthropology of the University of California sponsored an exhibit of Chumash artifacts at their Santa Barbara campus. The occasion resulted in bringing together from all parts of the country a major segment of the known 200 Chumash baskets. In the process of gathering together the 85 specimens, the Pastor of Saint Mary Magdalen Church was asked if the Camarillo baskets might be included in the exhibit. Msgr. Dennis Falvey readily acquiesced; and when the exhibit was dismantled, he agreed to extend the original loan agreement so as to allow them to remain for a while at Santa Barbara.

Unfortunately for his successors, he seemingly left no written memos on the subject. The archeology section of the university was equally neglectful. In the next decade the senior professor was changed three times; and but one member of the staff remained who knew of the exhibition.

In 1976, shortly after the historical artifacts in the Camarillo museum had been moved to San Buenaventura Mission for permanent display, Delee Marshall, a docent at the Ventura County Historical Museum, was asked to make a preliminary catalogue of the few baskets remaining in the collection. She then asked about the other Chumash baskets. It was a revelation for neither the present Pastor of Saint Mary Magdalen Church nor the writer knew there were others.

Fortunately the Camarillo treasures had been photographed while on exhibit in Santa Barbara. And in 1965 pictures and descriptions of nine appeared in print.<sup>9</sup> Enlisting the assistance of Director Richard Esparza of the Ventura County Historical Museum, Mrs. Marshall was able to determine that six baskets were still on display at Santa Barbara. This writer notified Donald E. Brown, Chairman of the Department of Anthropology, on December 8, 1976 that the loan agreement was now terminated. Dr. Brown referred the matter to Dr. Michael Glassow in archeology who made arrangements for returning the baskets. On January 20, 1977 Mrs. Marshall and the writer journeyed to Goleta and recovered the six baskets. They were temporarily stored in the vault of the Ventura County



This utility basket has a foundation of coils fashioned from three stems of *juncus* rush. The stitches are very small and even, with split stitches showing in the base. The three part design in the body zone of this basket is unique.

(diameter: 17 inches; foundation: *Juncus*; stitch type: non-interlocking; sewing material: sumac, dark *Juncus* in design, black *Juncus*; stitches per square inch: 95; coil ending: simple taper)

Historical Museum until adequate facilities could be provided for them at the mission.

During the summer Robert O. Browne and William Kirk began to build a specially outfitted display case in which all the baskets belonging to San Buenaventura Mission could be exhibited, a project that was completed in late November. Mrs. Marshall then arranged the 25 specimens in place, providing explanatory panels about the procedure, design and traditions of the basket weavers. New labels were made and the old ones updated. The exhibit was opened to the general public on January 22, 1978.

#### Notes to the Text

1. The writer wishes to thank Delee Marshall, a knowledgeable person on California Indian basketry, for her many useful and penetrating observations about this essay.
2. These figures are those of Allen G. Pastron and C. W. Clewlow, "The Chumash Indians of California" in *Pacific discovery*, XXX, 1, 19.
3. See Eugene N. Anderson, Jr., *The Chumash Indians of southern California* (Banning 1968) 9.
4. For an excellent treatment of Chumash baskets, see A. L. Kroeber, "Basket designs of the Mission Indians of California" in the *Anthropological papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, XX, 177-183.
5. Juan's father came to Alta California with the Hajar-Padres Expedition in 1834. When San Buenaventura was incorporated as a city in 1866, he was a member of the first Board of Trustees. Nine years later the Camarillo family acquired title to the Rancho Calleguas, a land grant conveyed to José Ruiz in 1837.
6. Dedicated July 4, 1913, the church was built by Juan E. Camarillo as a memorial to his mother.
7. Juana Basilia (1782-1838) was a native of the Rancheria of Sumuahua. She was baptized at San Buenaventura Mission on February 7, 1806. See Zephyrin Engelhardt, *San Buenaventura, the mission by the sea* (Santa Barbara 1930) 154-160.
8. See Zelia Nuttall, "Two remarkable California baskets" in the *California Historical Society Quarterly*, II, 341-343.
9. See Lawrence Dawson and James Deetz, "A corpus of Chumash basketry" in the 1965 *Annual report of the University of California, Los Angeles, Department of Anthropology* (Archaeological survey, 195-212, 24 plates).