



**Title of Book:** Essential Art: Native Basketry from the California Indian Heritage Center  
**Author of Book:** Brian Bibby  
**Year of Publication:** 2012

### **Summary:**

*Essential Art: Native Basketry from the California Indian Heritage Center* features the basketry collection of the California Indian Heritage Center (CIHC). The CIHC Collection falls under the stewardship of California State Parks, and while the basketry and ethnographic collections have traditionally offered on a limited basis, scholars, tribal elders, and basket-weavers have increasingly used the collection to study traditional and contemporary basketry techniques. The CIHC Collection contains more than thirty two hundred basketry pieces from the cultures of Native California. The collection also features basketry from native cultures from across North America. With a mixture of history, ethnography, plant biology, as well as photography, *Essential Art* expertly details the collection of the California Indian Heritage Center and provides a comprehensive guide for basket weavers and scholars interested in the California Indian basketry.

### **About the Text:**

*Essential Art* describes in detail the different traditions, styles, histories, and plant materials of Native California basketry. The book is separated into six different chapters with two appendices. The chapters relay information about the history of the baskets, the culture surrounding basketry, art market and gift basketry, modern changes in basketry, selected works from the CIHC collection, and information on twentieth century basket weavers. The book contains relevant information on a variety of different aspects of



basket weaving such as the usage of particular types of weaving such as coiling and twining, the history of the CIHC and the California State Indian Museum, and the different religious and commercial connotations surrounding California Indian basketry.

While there is much to praise about the book there are a few flaws with the text. First, the layout of the book is not easily accessible for readers. For example, there is a wealth of information about basket caps with different regional techniques described and quotes from contemporary artists about caps included. The cradle basket section, however, is merely a one page synopsis of one item in the CIHC collection. A more elaborate study of cradle baskets would be beneficial for readers interested in this basketry technique. Including biographies of living, contemporary basket weavers such as Kathy Wallace and Julia Parker alongside such departed greats as Mabel McKay and Mary (Knight) Benson would further broaden understanding of California basketry techniques for contemporary readers. Overall, however, *Essential Art* provides a comprehensive and in-depth look into the basketry of the California Indian Heritage Center and makes the collection more accessible to the public.

### **Make sure you read**

While all the information in the book is pertinent and beneficial, for the purposes of basket weavers, and those interested in California Indian basketry, information found in the chapter, “A Culture of Baskets” is most useful. This chapter concisely places the history of particular types of basket styles, such as caps, winnowing trays, trinket baskets, etc, and evaluates each form within specific Native California cultures. The chapter features quotes from contemporary basket weavers, such as Kathy Wallace (Yurok/Karuk, member of the Hoopa Valley Tribe), and provides in-depth information on the usage and cultural value of different



basketry forms within the context of the CIHC collection. For example, the book gives a nice overview of the usage of the Jump Dance basket from the Hupa, Yurok, Karuk, Wiyot, and Tolowa perspective and describes how the basket represents a unique technique not found in other areas of California.

### Did you know?

#### Quick Facts from *Essential Art*:

- 1.) The three zones found on basket caps represent the three phases of a woman's life-childhood, adulthood, and elderly-Kathy Wallace (pg. 54)
- 2.) Work caps and dress caps differ in appearance. Dress caps typically feature a full overlay of bear grass (cream/white) and/or woodwardia fern and work caps feature a bear grass overlay that forms the design. (pg 53)
- 3.) The Jump Dance basket is unique in shape. Rather than a rounded shape it is cylindrical in form. This type of basketry is not found in any other Native California culture. (pg 68)
- 4.) The use of Glass beads in basketry began by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the art market for Native basketry grew as Europeans arrived in California. Glass beads on basketry, as well as the development of square baskets, attached pedestals, oval forms, and baskets woven around glass bottles, perpetuated the creation of market basketry and supported many Native weavers and their families in a changing world (pg 77-78).
- 5.) A small basket found in the Charles B. Wilcomb Collection features a rare example of basketry that is valuable for research. The basket, collected in Inyo County around 1900, is one of the oldest examples of Western Shoshone basketry (pg. 15).



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