

Late Period (1890-1970) Indian Baskets In Vermont: Part 1A



A selection of Vermont Baskets

by
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Decorative overweave, or "Cowiss"

Introduction

One of the main characteristics of this period of basketry is the use of decorative overweave. This technique adds a second splint over the main weaver. It can be twisted once or twice or looped before being put back under the next standard. The way that the secondary splints are twisted, and in what direction yields a delightful and whimsical series of surfaces to these fancy baskets. Indeed the basketmaker was occasionally so exuberant that the original surface disappears under a mass of curlicues. The Abenaki basketmakers call this class of decorative basketry technique "cowiss" (= pine), a reference to the rough yet regularly patterned surface of the pine cone.

Loop Cowiss

The simplest cowiss is the loop. One merely lets the overweave make a large outward curving loop and then put the weaver under the next standard. This is inelegant and often quite fragile, especially if the loops are quite thin as in Figure 14.

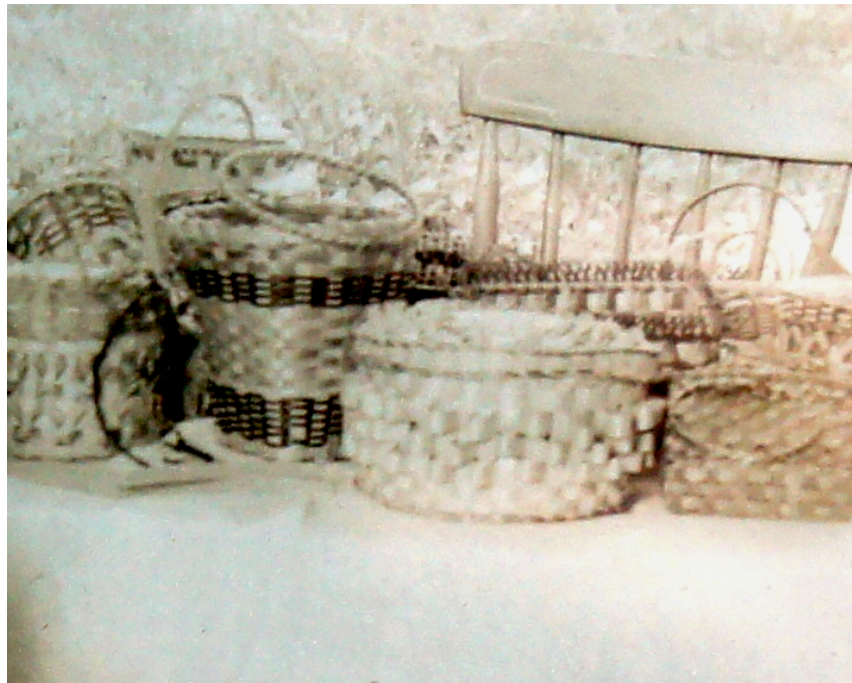


Figure 13. "looped cowiss" basket for sale in the 1920's."

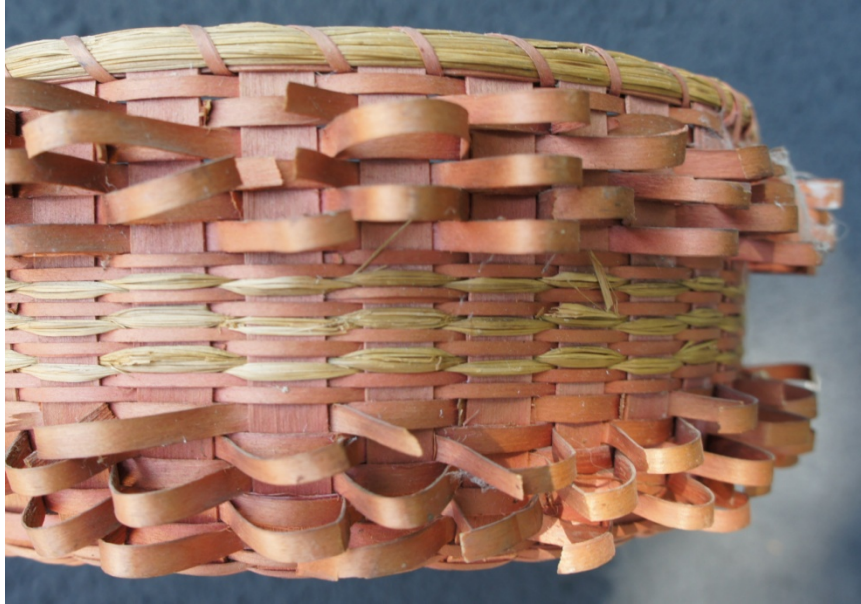


Figure 14. Detail of the "looped cowiss."

Periwinkle Cowiss

The next most complex overweave is to take the overweave strip and instead of just putting it back under the next standard, give it a single twist, then put it in. This makes a little cone shaped "wart" on the surface. It is often called a "periwinkle" overweave. Depending on how far out you let the curlicue go, and how tight the tip is, you can make a couple distinctive variations.



Figure 15. Detail of the "long periwinkle style cowiss."



Figure 16. Detail of the "short periwinkle cowiss."

Standard Diamond Cowiss types

If you take a weaver twist it once around and then instead of putting it back into the original course, put it in the one above (or below); this creates a diamond shaped design (the "standard diamond") that stands out from the surface of the basket. This is stronger than the looped cowiss variety. This is probably the most common form of cowiss that we will see in Vermont baskets.



Figure 17. Detail of the "standard diamond cowiss."

A variation is to have two overweaves working against each other, creating two opposing diamonds lying one over the other. This makes a beautiful cross design (Figure 18.).



Figure 18. Detail of the "crossed diamond cowiss" with single offset

A much rarer variation is achieved by inserting the overweave splints or splints through a standard (upright) in a vertical pattern. To make a good strong decorative overweave, the splint "skips" one of the rows of weavers, making a double offset pattern. This technique results in a series of "X's" on a vertical axis (Figure 19).

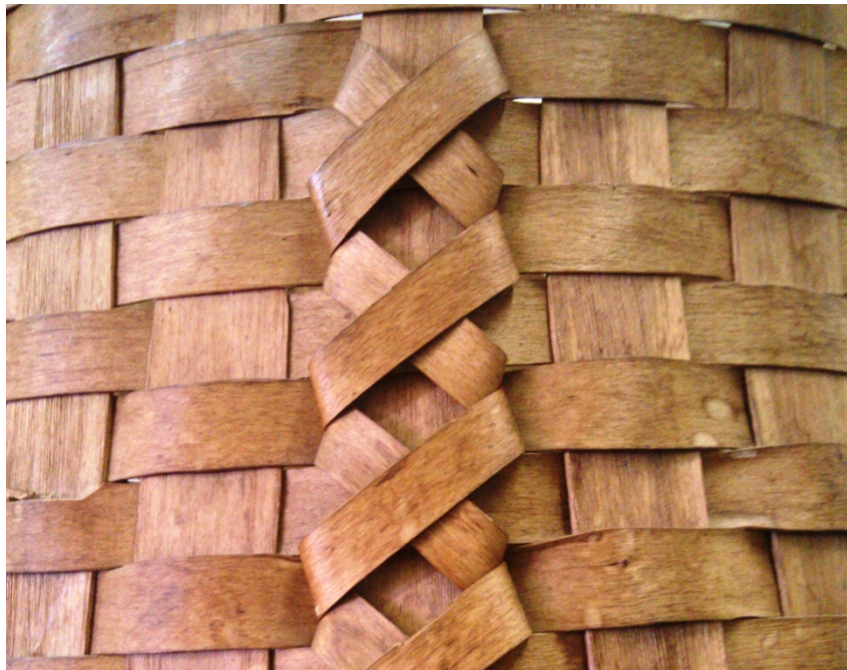


Figure 19. Detail of the "crossed diamond cowiss" with double offset.

Porcupine Cowiss

Probably the most complex single overweave design is the "porcupine weave," in which one of the weavers is looped around twice before being put under the next standard. This is a complex and delicate overweave that produces a very startling pointy design. Unfortunately, many porcupine decorated baskets are severely damaged today.



Figure 20. Detail of the "porcupine cowiss" at the bottom of this basket."

The most complex overweave never went under any standards. This unnamed cowiss is seen as the top row in the detail in Figure 20. This was composed of two splints twisted one over the other, and then sewn to the body of the basket with a third splint.

Lace edging

Related to the overweaves are various types of "lace" edging to certain types of baskets. These can be made of patterns of loops or twists of thin splints. Often these were handkerchief baskets, fans or other decorative items, since the "lace" would not stand up to any kind of jostling.



Figure 21. Detail of "lace" edging

Basket Handles and hinges

The earliest basket handles were used on utility baskets and carved from solid pieces of ash wood, made with a long leading point at each end and a flange cut onto one side at the end of the taper to the point (Figure 22.). The assembly was then soaked in water and bent into a "U" shape and then dried over a mold. This shape allowed the handles to be carefully slipped through the rim of a completed basket; with the flange catching below the rim to lock it into place. These handles are very sturdy and were used on some utility baskets meant to lift several pounds of dead weight. As time went on, a smaller and lighter version was developed for the open work basket, which has two small loop handles on each side of the basket (Figure 23.). Another mid-19th century style handle is an "ear" shaped loop of carved wood affixed to the side of upright baskets (Figure 24.).

The tool used for this detail work was the crooked knife (Figure 25.), an aboriginal tool, probably descended from ancient bone handled knives that carve or cut on a pulling motion rather than the common pushing motion used with Euroamerican blades. Crooked knives seem to have become very common in the 19th century; there are no known examples of 17th or 18th century crooked knives. They are often made from a file or razor blade, ground down and often with a "crook" at the end to allow it to carve out bowls and spoons. The distinctive "L" shaped handle has an extension for a thumb-rest that gives the knife its distinctive shape and name. These tools are often quite decorative, with carved, incised, inlaid or painted designs added to the handle.



Figure 22. Detail of attachment of bail (over the top) handle, Maine, ca. 1850.



Figure 23. Detail of attachment of loop-style side handles ca. 1870.



Figure 24. Detail of attachment of "ear" side handle, Maine, ca. 1850.



Figure 25. The basket knife, maple wood handle, steel blade and copper wire binding.
Lake Morey, VT, Ca. 1900-1930; Lake Champlain Maritime Museum Collection

However, sweetgrass fancy baskets often had more decorative and delicate handles. The first of these is the ring handle, made from a loop of ash splint rather than a piece of ash wood, wrapped with a thinner splint, and the whole attached loosely to the basket body so the handle swings free. On fancier baskets the attachment point may have auxiliary splint loops to give it a more flower-like look (Figure 26.).



Figure 26. Detail of loop handle

A third type is the braided sweetgrass handle. These are usually sewn rigidly to the body of the basket, often with a decorative twist and loop design called a "frog" by basketmakers. The details of the frog or allied mounting systems are good keys to the origin of sweetgrass baskets, and can even be tied to certain individuals and families.



Figure 27. Detail of a short "frog handle." on the lid of a sweetgrass basket

Basket lids are usually separate, but glove boxes and other flat lidded baskets have hinged lids. Usually the hinge is a simple loop of ash splint or even sweetgrass bundle, but occasionally one will see more sturdy solid wood hinges. Like the "U" handle, these are carved out of a billet of wood with the crooked knife, then soaked and looped into a cotter-pin shape. After engaging the loops to make the hinge, each piece is lashed down to the basket and lid by loops of splints (Figure 28.).



Figure 28. Detail of a wooden hinge connecting a basket and its lid.