

# CONCEPTS

April 1995

Reprint of Technical Paper Number 3

## A PROPOSED GLOSSARY OF SPRUCE ROOT BASKETRY TERMS

By Peter L. Corey  
Curator of Collections  
Sheldon Jackson Museum

**T**he following is a proposed glossary of terms for Tlingit and Haida spruce root basketry. It has been compiled and designed to be technologically specific to the twined basketry of the Tlingit and Haida who wove the roots of the Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*). It is intended that the terms presented here will become an accepted nomenclature to lessen misconceptions and misused terms for individuals interested in the technology and its associated craft-art.

This proposed nomenclature is not intended to supersede or replace the complex vocabulary developed by the Native weavers over the centuries of the development of this intricate technology. Rather, it is an attempt to review and unify the best terms used by Emmons (1903), Gunther (1984), Shotridge (1921) and Paul (1944). These writers on Tlingit spruce root basketry have used overlapping terminology but there is confusing divergence also.

The totality of the terms proposed here describe a craft developed by Tlingit and Haida basket weavers to answer some of the utilitarian needs of their cultures. In the past, probably every woman was a weaver, with some more skilled than others, but all capable of producing the basketry items needed in daily life.

The efficiency of a basket is not enhanced by decorating its surfaces, but the creative spirit exerts itself to produce decorative methods and motifs acceptable to the culture. This adds an artistic



*Tlingit Spruce Root Basket, Alaska State Museum II-B-396*

dimension superimposed on the technical requirements necessary to produce an item that suits the cultural aesthetics. At all periods of northern Northwest Coast spruce root basketry production, there have been weavers who took creations beyond the craft stage and produced works of art.

The adaptations in the Tlingit and Haida cultures caused by the rapid influx of Euro-American cultures had a great effect on spruce root basketry. By the last quarter of the 19th century, weavers increasingly began to produce basketry items for consumers outside of the traditional trade routes. The sale of these items became a source of income

NOTE: The author is not well enough acquainted with the spruce root basketry of the Tsimshian and the Pacific Eskimo to include them in this glossary. It is felt that their work is similar and should be included after further research. P.L.C.



for a number of them. Some began to produce pieces foreign to their cultural aesthetics by trying to guess the aesthetics of the newcomers. This was a period of great productivity and experimentation which had a strong influence on the craft-art. It is from this florescence that most of the surviving Tlingit and Haida spruce root baskets come.

The author is proposing the following glossary of terms as the basis for a unified terminology for the technology. At this point, it is intended to cover those terms necessary to describe the physical structure of a Tlingit or Haida made spruce root basket. This does not include the standardization of design element names or basketry forms by function. It is felt that these are separate issues and should be dealt with at another time.

It is the intent of the Alaska State Museums to print one issue, annually, of "Concepts" devoted to some aspect of Tlingit and Haida spruce root basketry. The ultimate goal would be to collect these various monographs and print them under one cover in book form.

The author would encourage any constructive communication to improve this terminology. After a reasonable time for distribution, consumption and communication, another glossary will be released in a refined form if necessary.

Peter L. Corey  
Curator of Collections  
Sheldon Jackson Museum  
104 College Drive, Sitka, Alaska  
99835

or  
Peter L. Corey  
603 Etolin Street  
Sitka, Alaska 99835

## NOMENCLATURE

### ASCENDER

The vertical design element(s) which extend between the final design band and the rim. Usually\* used in 2 or 4 columns in conjunction with the same number of descenders. These may be a diagnostic determinant of age.

**see:** descender

**Emmons-**vertical design

**Gunther-**head piece

### BANDED

A general descriptive term (for the greater majority of Tlingit and Haida spruce root baskets) referring to the parallel series of horizontal bands of decoration.

**see:** design band, dyed weft background, narrow-wide-narrow, wide-narrow-wide

**Emmons-**encircling bands

### BASE

The bottom of a walled basket with warp spokes radiating out from the start to the turn; usually circular but can be oval. Whether the working surface of the base is on the inside or the outside of a basket may prove to be a diagnostic determinant of age and/or tribal origin.

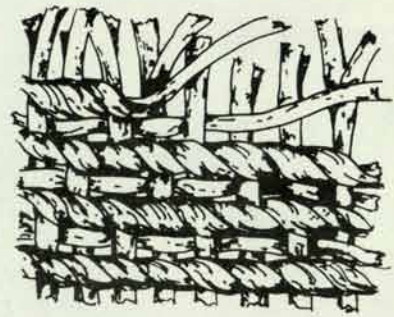
**see:** working surface, start, turn

**Emmons-**bottom, base

**Gunther-**base

**Paul-**bottom

## BETWEEN WEAVE



Alternating rounds of twining with rounds of single weft passing over and under alternate warp [wickerwork]. This may be a diagnostic determinant of age and origin of a basket. False embroidery cannot be done on this surface.

**Emmons-**weave 2

**Paul-**weave 2

### BORDER

Round or rounds outlining design bands; can be in various forms, e.g., "strawberry" weave, three strand twining, dyed weft or false embroidery.

**Gunther-**to close off

### BOTTOM

**see:** base

### CARDBOARD TEMPLATE/LINER

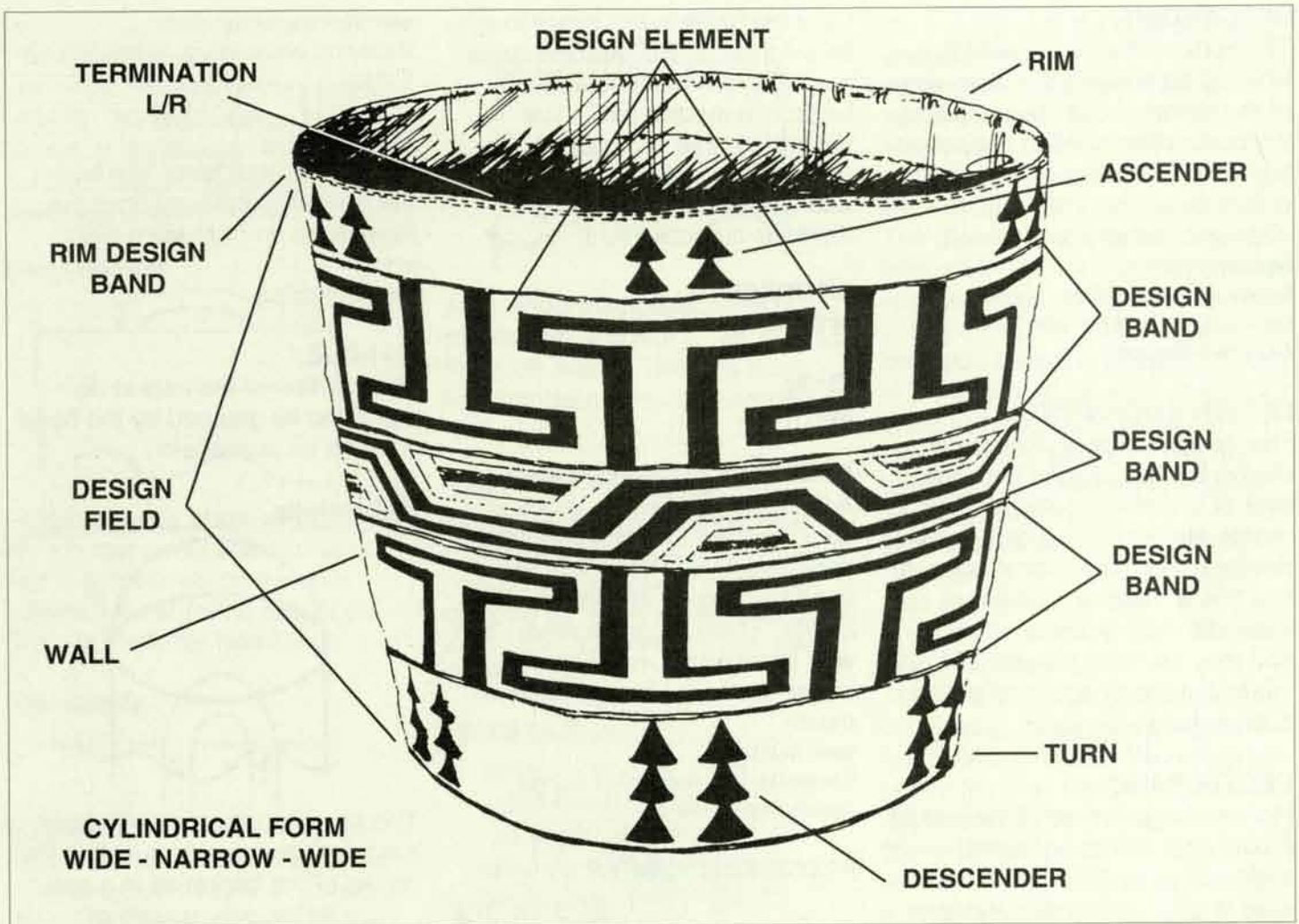
Cardboard circles are often found sewn onto the base of baskets, either on the inside or outside. Spruce root basket weavers have given two explanations: to keep the bottom flat and clean (when found on the outside) or as a pattern or guide to know when to turn (when found on the inside).

### CONSTRUCTION

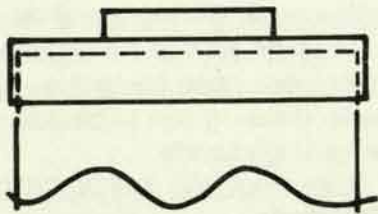
The weave or combination of weaves of which a textile (basket) is composed.

\* In this glossary the words usual, usually, common or commonly are used with the understanding that there are exceptions.





### COVER



The basketry covering that spans the mouth of a basket and has walls which overlap the rim. This type of mouth closure appears in the majority of Tlingit and Haida baskets.

see: lid, rattle chamber

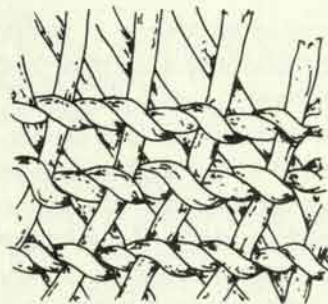
**Emmons**-cover

**Gunther**-cover

### CROSS WARP TWINING

Alternating warp elements are drawn at an angle from their normal vertical orientation, slanting

either to the right or left, and crossing each other in regular series. The angled warps are entwined by the weft strands just above the point of crossing.



**synonym:** eye hole weave

see: open twining

**Emmons**-weave 4, crossed-warp

**Paul**-weave 4, "eye-holes"

### CYLINDRICAL

A form of relatively consistent diameter from the turn to the rim.

see: flaring

**Gunther**-cylindrical

### DECORATION

Any of various methods of ornamentation which include structural decoration integrated at the time of construction, e.g., false embroidery, weft variations (strawberry weave, "outside of the cockle clam"), three strand twining, twill twining, feathers and post-structural decoration added after the construction is completed, e.g., painting, addition of shells and/or beads and some forms of handles.



## DESCENDER

The vertical design element(s) which drop below the bottom edge of the lowest design band toward the base; often used in conjunction with ascenders usually in two or four columns. This may be a diagnostic determinant of age.

**see:** ascender

**Emmons**-vertical lines of design conventionalized pictures"

**Gunther**-dropper

## DESIGN ALIGNMENT

The design element in an outer design band is aligned vertically over or under its corresponding design element in the other outer design band. The indications are that this is more of a personal aesthetic than group aesthetics and may be more prevalent for tourist pieces, possibly reflecting outside taste.

## DESIGN BAND

Horizontal band around the wall of a basket or on the horizontal surface of a cover or lid. It may be solid in color as with the Haida or contain repeated design elements as with the Tlingit.

**see:** narrow-wide-narrow, wide-narrow-wide, banded

**Emmons**-zone, encircling bands, ornamental band

**Gunther**-band of design, design area

## DESIGN ELEMENT

A single unit of a design which may or may not be repeated serially or alternately, in a band horizontally or, infrequently, vertically on the wall of a basket.

**see:** ascender, descender design band

**Emmons**-motives, design, pattern

**Paul**-pattern design

**Gunther**-running design, unit design, simple unit

## DESIGN FIELD

The total area of the wall or cover of a basket which is decorated.

On most baskets this refers to a broad area on the wall, the major part of which falls above the horizontal median axis. The decorated area of a basket, primarily the wall.

**see:** wall, horizontal median axis

**Emmons**-decorative field

## DROPPER

**see:** descender

## EDGE

**see:** rim

## DYED WEFT BACKGROUND

A band of dyed weft to serve as a color background for false embroidery design elements; can be used as a border for design bands. Upon more research dyed weft background may serve as a diagnostic factor for age determination.

**see:** border

**Emmons**-narrow colored bands, colored-root field

## FALSE EMBROIDERY



A decorative technique in twined basketry whereby a supplemental weft element, usually prepared grass or maidenhair fern stems, is wrapped over the weft strand as it passes over the warp element on the outside surface of the basket. It never passes to the inside and cannot be seen on the interior of the basket. The slant of the false embroidery strand is opposite that of the basic twining. Despite its name, it is a structural technique, that is, it occurs during construction.

**see:** twining, stitch slant

**Emmons**-embroidery, overlaying with threads

## FLARING

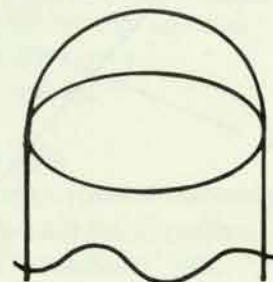
The basket wall flares gradually, but markedly, outward from the turn giving an increasing diameter.

**see:** cylindrical

## HANDLE

That portion of the basket designed to be grasped by the hand or used for suspension.

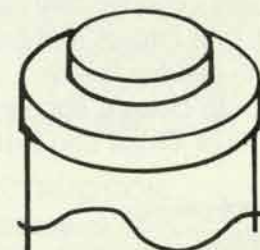
### Bail Handle



The semi-circular (sometimes free swinging) handle which spans the mouth of the basket as in a pail, kettle, etc., usually of plaited spruce root sewn to the wall of the basket; post-structural. Mostly found on baskets made for non-Native use, the major exception being the saltwater drinking cup or basket.

**Emmons**-single handle

### Knob Handle

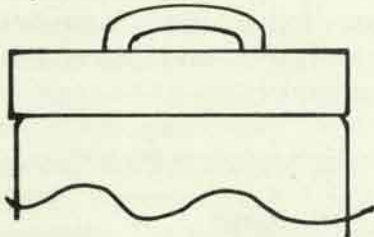


The projection from the top surface of the lid or cover can be large and flat or small and button-like; below the plane of the cover surface, even with it, or above it;



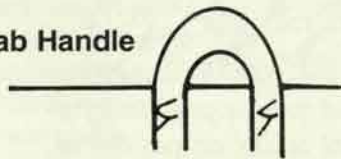
may be chambered and contain noise-making elements, or unchambered (not having a base). Usually\* the top surface, the rondel, is decorated. Knob handles are structural elements.  
**see:** rattle chamber, rondel

### Loop Handle



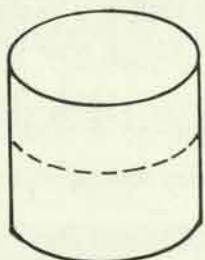
Length, usually short, of plaited spruce root sewn onto the lid or cover; sometimes on the wall; post-structural; found mostly on baskets made for non-Tlingit use.

### Tab Handle



Handle added to the wall of the basket (either inside or, more commonly, outside) after construction. The older style is of leather thong sewn on or woven back into the wall. The later style is of cloth sewn to the wall. Common style of handle on berry baskets.  
**Emmons**-loop-like handles, loop handles

### HORIZONTAL MEDIAN AXIS

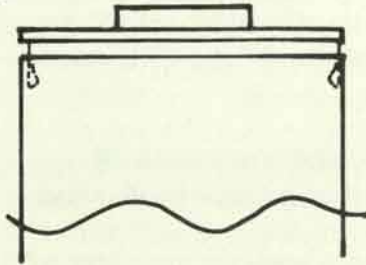


An imaginary line which divides the wall of a basket into two horizontally equal parts.

### JOG

**see:** termination

### LID

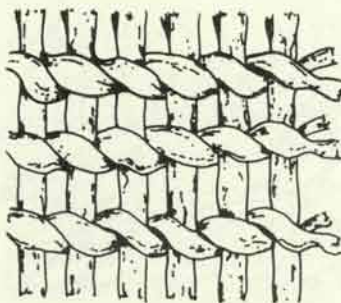


A covering which spans the mouth of a basket and has a flange which fits down into it. This is a much less common type than the cover.  
**see:** cover

### NARROW-WIDE-NARROW

Design field composed of three bands wherein the first and third (two outer bands) are narrower than the center or medial band.  
**see:** wide-narrow-wide, design field, banded.

### OPEN TWINING



Twined technique with regulated spaces left between the rounds of weft and exposing the warp elements.

**see:** twining, diagonal twining  
**Emmons**-weave 1  
**Paul**-weave 1, variation

### RATTLE CHAMBER

The chamber on the cover of a woman's work basket which contains material to make a rattling sound when shaken. The chamber is produced in two parts; the upper or rondel portion, twined with low sides and a regular basket start, or base, are joined when of equal diameter by overlapping the warp and continuing

the twining until the desired cover diameter is reached.

**synonym:** rattle lid, rattle top or treasure basket

**see:** knob handle

### RIM

The physical edge of the basket wall which may or may not have a special twined finish. This can be simply produced from the warp and weft elements already present in the wall or it can be a composite finish with elements added to those already present. The rim treatment is a diagnostic feature and should be noted.

**Emmons**-rim, edge

**Gunther**-top

**Paul**-rim, edge

### RIM DESIGN BAND

The solid or broken rounds of decoration, immediately adjacent to the rim. On hats, this would be above the rim. On Tlingit baskets, this seems to be an older trait characterized by one to several rounds of false embroidery usually in one color without design factors. On Haida baskets, this would refer to the design band often consisting of many rounds of twill twining or three strand twining.

### RING

The doughnut-shaped basketry appendages appearing above the crown on Tlingit and Haida headgear of high rank. They are usually woven in one piece with the constricted joining area hidden by the walls of the doughnut. They can be a structural part of a spruce root hat or added as they are on wooden hats. They were twined around a wooden form. The presence of the form should be noted. Three strand twining is the usual technique used to construct the walls.



**synonym:** sgil.

**Emmons-**khuke, cylindrical ornaments  
**Paul-**cylinders cylindrical disks, jointed top, kookh (k'oox' - Dauenhauer in Paul, 1981)

### RONDEL

The slightly concave to domed surface of the chamber of the knob handle.

**see:** knob handle

### ROUND

A single complete circuit of the basket in any weave; always horizontal to the base.

**synonym:** line, row, pass

**Emmons-**single line

### SIDE

**see:** wall

### SPLICE

The insertion and securing of a new warp element or weft strand during the twining construction. This is done on the non-working surface and is a diagnostic feature which should be noted.

**synonym:** bind, piecing in, adding, tie, let in

**see:** working surface, warp, weft

**Paul-**let in, add, enter

### START

The starting point or initial placing of the warp elements and weft strands in a twined basket. Starts are standardized and are diagnostic determinants of tribe and/or individual weavers and should be noted for research purposes.

**Emmons-**center

### STITCH SLANT

The pitch of the weft strands around the warp elements in twining. The direction of the slant of the twining stitch can be referred to as "Up-to-the-right" / and "Down-to-the-right" \. This indicates the direction of the stitch as one looks at the basket wall.

It is an important tribal diagnostic feature. The stitch slant is not an indication of right or left handedness.

### STRAWBERRY WEAVE

Plain close twining using two different colors of weft strand which appear on the surface alternately, creating a checker pattern.

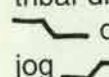
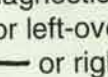
**Emmons-**weave 6, variation of weave No. 1

**Paul-**variation of weave 1

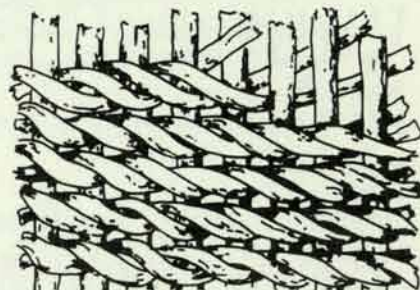
### TERMINATION

The actual terminus or binding off of the weft strands onto the rim.

The jog created is an important tribal diagnostic feature. Tlingit jog

 or left-over-right (L/R). Haida jog  or right-over-left (R/L).

### THREE STRAND TWINING



A twined construction using three weft strands. Usually\* found at the turn and often found in single rounds or in bands on the bases of older utilitarian baskets. Commonly used as a rim finish. Sometimes used as a design field or design band border. Two colors were sometimes used to produce a striped effect. Usually\* found on hat crowns and the walls of hat rings. The placement of three strand twining should be noted for its possible diagnostic utility.

**see:** twining, open twining, twill twining, turn

**Emmons-**weave 5, braided twining

**Paul-**weave 5

### TURN

The point at which the warp turns from the base and becomes the wall; the change of warp direction (orientation) from horizontal to vertical. This also corresponds to the change of warp on the cover from top to the wall overlap. In Tlingit and Haida spruce root basketry this is usually\* delineated and reinforced by a round of three strand twining.

**see:** three strand twining, wall

**Emmons-**periphery of the bottom

### TWILL TWINING



A twined weave producing a diagonal or zigzag pattern or texture by modifying the rhythm of the twining. The two weft strands twine around pairs of adjacent warps. By shifting the warp pairs in successive rounds a diagonal effect is produced on the surface. Not commonly worked among the Tlingit and Haida as a solid surface but used to produce a skip pattern producing geometric designs noted above. Usually used on hat brims. Use of twill twining on the wall of a basket is diagnostic of tribal or area origin and/or age.

**synonym:** diagonal twining, skip stitch.

**see:** open twining, twining, three strand twining

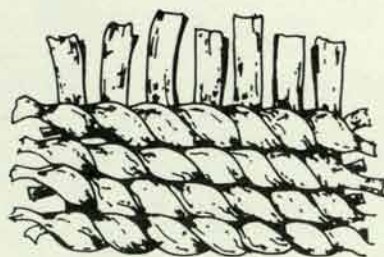
**Emmons-**weave 3, skip-stitch, frog-back

**Gunther-**third strand of twining

**Paul-**weave 3



## TWINING



A major construction type where flexible horizontal weft strands are twisted around a set of relatively passive vertical warps. In plain twining, the succeeding weft rounds enclose the same warp elements. The weft round may be spaced tightly together as in plain twining or openly, leaving intervals as in open twining.

**synonym:** plain twining, simple twining, close twining

**see:** open twining, twill twining, three strand twining

**Emmons-**simple twining

**Gunther-**twining

**Paul-**weave 1

## WALL

The vertical portion of the basket extending from the turn to the rim, the face of which serves as the design field.

**see:** turn, rim, design field

**Emmons-**walls, sides

**Gunther-**walls, side

## WARP

The relatively passive, usually vertical elements in twined basketry enclosed by the active weft strands. The warp is not directly visible in close twining. Warp elements may be single or paired.

**synonym:** weaves

**see:** weft, twining

**Emmons-**warp-strands

**Gunther-**warp

**Paul-**warp splint

## WARP ALIGNMENT

The warp element where the turn is made and where borders, or design bands begin and end as

well as where the basket terminates; the warp spline where structural and decorative features begin and/or end. There is some evidence that this may be either a cultural or individual weaver's trait.

**synonym:** master warp, register

**see:** turn, border, design band, termination

## WARP ELEMENT

An individual warp usually derived from the interior portion of the spruce root.

**see:** strand, warp, weft

**Emmons-**strand, splints

## WEAR PATTERN

Signs of wear or use which help to determine the function and/or approximate age of a basket.

Careful attention should be paid to the wear patterns when examining and cataloging a basket.

## Sheen

The polish or patina on the exterior of older, well-used spruce root baskets. This is an enhancement of the natural weft and grass false-embroidery sheen which is inherent in the materials.

## Residues

Particles of materials found in the interstices of the fabric of the basket, usually on the interior. While an analysis of these residues might help to determine the basket's use, the history of the piece would help to determine if the residue was evidence from aboriginal use or from something which came after it left Native hands.

## Stains

Permanent discoloration not intended by the maker (\*usually distinguished by randomness of placement).

**see:** residue

## WEFT

In twining the paired horizontal strands which enclose the warp elements by alternately crossing front to back.

**synonym:** woof, an old term not favored in contemporary use, weavers

**see:** warp, twining, stitch slant, three strand twining

**Emmons-**woof

**Gunther-**woof

**Paul-**weft strand

## WEFT STRAND

An individual weft derived from the exterior portion of the spruce root.

**see:** spline, warp, weft

**Emmons-**strand, threads

## WIDE-NARROW-WIDE

Design Field composed of three bands wherein the first and third (two outer) bands are wider than the center or medial band.

**see:** narrow-wide-narrow, design field, banded

**Emmons-**broad zone (central band-narrow)

## WOOF

**see:** weft

## WORKING SURFACE

The surface which faces the weaver. The warp and weft splices are made on the opposite side.

---

*I would like to thank Joanne Segal Brandford for reading this glossary and recommending changes based on her intimate familiarity with the textile arts. Her advice is greatly appreciated.*



---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adovasio, J.M.

1977 *Basketry Technology: A Guide to Identification and Analysis*. Aldine Publishing Co., Chicago.

Baumhoff, M.A.

1957 *Introduction to Basketry: A Proposed Classification by Helene Balfet*.

Douglas, Frederic H.

1935 *Basketry Construction Techniques*. Denver Art Museum, Department of Indian Art, leaflet 67, Denver.

---

1935 *Basketry Decoration Techniques*. Denver Art Museum, Department of Indian Art, leaflet 68, Denver.

Emmons, George T.

1903 *The Basketry of the Tlingit*. Memoirs, Vol. 3, Pt. 2, American Museum of Natural History, New York.

Gunther, Erna

1984 *Design Units on Tlingit Baskets*. Sheldon Jackson Museum, Sitka, Alaska.

Paul, Frances

1944 *Spruce Root Basketry of the Alaska Tlingit*. Bureau of Indian Affairs, Lawrence, Kansas  
(Reprinted by the Sheldon Jackson Museum, Sitka, Alaska 1981).

Shotridge, Louis

1921 "Tlingit Woman's Root Basket," *The Museum Journal*, Vol. XII, No. 3, September 1921, the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (Reprinted by the Sheldon Jackson Museum, Sitka, Alaska 1984).

Weber, Ronald L.

1986 "Emmons' Notes on Field Museum's Collection of Northwest Coast Basketry: Edited with an Ethnoarcheological Analysis." *Fieldiana Anthropology*, New Series, No. 9, Field Museum of Natural History Publication 1366, Chicago.

Weltfish, Gene

1930 "Prehistoric North American Basketry Techniques and Modern Distribution," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 32, No. 3.

*The Concepts series publishes information on the preservation of Alaska's material heritage and recent research on the collections of the Alaska State Museum, Juneau and the Sheldon Jackson Museum, Sitka.*

Alaska State Museums  
Division of Libraries, Archives  
and Museums  
395 Whittier Street  
Juneau, AK 99801