

No one really knows how long Aleut basket weaving has been practiced. The Aleuts have lived in the Aleutian Islands for 10,000-12,000 years. The Museum of the Aleutians in Unalaska has a beautifully woven fragment of an Aleut basket that has been carbon dated to 1,000 years old.

Aleut baskets, called *umgachiĭ* (basket) in Unangam Tunuu, were an essential part of life for the Aleuts in that they were used in daily living. For example, a large (12"x12" or larger) tightly woven basket was used for cooking by filling it with water and placing a hot rock inside. Baskets with handles were used for gathering berries or shellfish. These baskets had an open weave, which allowed sand and dirt to filter through while washing the berries or shellfish in the creek or ocean. Other baskets were used for gathering eggs, storing personal items, herbs, etc.

Baskets were woven by the women and young girls were taught how to make them before marriage. Elmus Mollis, beach grass, or wild rye grass were the main traditional materials used for weaving baskets, mats, bags, burial mats, room dividers, floor coverings, baby carriers, and seat covers for kayaks. Other plant materials were used to decorate baskets and mats, including gut, sinew, feathers and quills, strips of sea lion esophagus, dyes from plants and minerals, caribou hair, birch bark, and sea mammal fur.

There are three known variations of Aleut basketry, which are named for the islands where they originated. They are the Attu, Atka, and Unalaska styles. Attu baskets are the finest woven of the three styles and are recognized worldwide for their fineness and perfection in weaving.

Pre-contact, weaving a single basket could take up to a year because baskets were much larger than today and were used daily. Raffia has replaced rye grass in weaving, mainly because access to rye grass is not always possible. After contact, basket collectors wanted the prized baskets and therefore, they were made much smaller (4"x5" or smaller).

Some of the first and oldest baskets taken from the Aleutian Islands are in the St. Petersburg Museum in Russia. Aleut baskets can be seen in many museums around America and Europe. Basket weaving is still practiced today but by not too many weavers, as the weaving is tedious and requires much patience. Thankfully, the weaving of Aleut baskets is being revived more and more.

I learned to weave Attu baskets in 1983 and have been teaching in culture camps and other places so that the art of Attu basket weaving doesn't die like so many other parts of Aleut culture. That is also why I wrote a book titled "Learn to Weave an Attu Basket". When I learned to weave, there was only a handful of Aleut women who still wove Attu style baskets. Writing my book and teaching how to weave is my contribution to my people, the Unanga { , and to others who want to learn how to weave an Attu basket.

By Sharon Kay

