



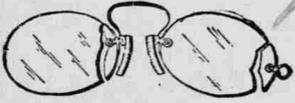
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# Art of Weaving Among Hawaiians

By JAMES W. GIRVIN.

The ancient Hawaiians belonged to that class of Polynesians which may be called tapa-beaters in contradistinction to weavers, yet the infinitude of uses to which they applied fibrous materials must be considered under the head of weaving. For some occult reason the knowledge of the loom was not brought with them in their migrations from the south or earlier still from India, Persia, Egypt and Syria whence the study of philology shows them to have originated. In New Zealand we find the natives using the loom for spinning the flax of the country, and their traditions show that they were descended from the Hawaiians. It is more than likely that the loom came in at a later date with a migration from the northwest which also brought with it a defined change in the language of the New Zealanders.

Weaving covers the minor arts of plaiting, braiding and netting and combined we will see they were of prime importance to a people to whom metals were unknown.

The very home of the Hawaiian was a complete conception of the weaving art, as, apart from the posts of the house, which were embedded in the ground, the whole was woven together with twisted cords of fibrous materials of which the tropical forest afforded an abundance. The plates (lohelau) were fastened to the posts (pou), the rafters (o'a) to the plates, and the battens (aho) to the posts and rafters by these same fibrous materials.

In the better houses the lining was made of dried, smooth banana stalks, rushes or cane leaves woven on to the battens in a very neat manner. Then the work of thatching was begun which consisted in weaving on the pili grass which rendered the whole impervious to the elements. Frequently the corners, hips and ridge were bonneted with the durable amannau fern, which, through its brown color, gave an artistic effect to the structure. The lintels and sides of the doors or other openings were platted to better resist the wind and which also added to their neatness and durability.

The earthen floors were covered with mats platted from the leaves of the hala or pandanus, which to the Hawaiians was one of the most useful trees of the forest. Not only were the floors covered but piles of these mats made the beds of both chiefs and commoners, the former frequently using as many as sixty layers, the upper ten of which being of the finest quality and covered with a counterpane woven from a fine rush called makalao. These makalao mats were frequently ornamented (pawehi) with an intricate pattern of maiden hair fern stalks. The Hawaiians were not much given to ornamentation in matmaking although frequently their crumb-cloths were platted with serrated edges.

In and about the courts of some chiefs the grounds between the main and outhouses were at times covered with mats made of green lauhala of the natural width.

The sails for canoes were platted from the young leaves of the pandanus, which were much more pliable than the older ones.

All the labor of collecting the leaves devolved on the women, and many good housewives kept rolls of these in store against such time as they were wanted. The men did all the collecting of pili grass, etc., for house building and attended to the agricultural work and fishing.

Among the ancient Hawaiians the art of weaving was employed more in the making of domestic utensils and housefurnishings than of clothing, as the latter was made from the felted bark of the paper-mulberry (wauke) and several other plants and trees. The most important utensils were baskets and containers of which they had many forms and which were adapted to a great variety of uses. Baskets used as containers were generally braided of lauhala and were more closely woven than fish-traps. Tough, wiry fern growths, or the ieie were generally used in making the latter, some of which were of giant proportions and funnel-shaped.

The fiber of the olona was much prized by the natives and was the material from which all their fish lines and nets were made. Some of the latter were of mammoth size, twenty fathoms in length by two in depth, floats of carved wiliwili (Hawaiian cork) and sinkers of carved stone being attached. The labor of making these involved months of application. The work of spinning or twisting this fiber which was done by rolling or twisting it on the thigh, devolved on the women and was one of the arts taught from childhood.

In an insular country like Hawaii the inhabitants were much dependent on the sea and its fauna and flora for a livelihood and they became adept fishermen. Their baskets for collecting the edible sea-weeds, of which they were acquainted with a great variety, were numerous and woven of many materials.

I have said that but little use was made of the weaver's art for the making of clothing. To this there is an exception as all the females wore pa-us made of woven leaves, probably an heirloom from Mother Eve. Also the helmets and feather cloaks of the chiefs were made by weaving the feathers of the oo, mamu, and iwi into a netted base of twisted olona fiber forming a perfectly smooth surface. This was the acme of the weaver's art and the infinitude of labor in collecting the material and completing the garment caused these articles to be very highly prized. Beautiful wreaths (leis) were also made of these bright-colored rare feathers

and with amulets and necklaces of shells were the sole ornaments to which the women were addicted.

The only foot-wear of the Hawaiians were sandals woven of tough grass and leaves at the making of which they were very adept. In a volcanic country, especially in the regions of aa flows the necessity for them was apparent. I have been told that after horses began to multiply it was not unusual to see the roads over some of these flows thatched for miles to protect their unshod feet.

Necessity is the mother of invention, and probably the absence of metals compelled the use of the plethora of fibrous materials which the forests afforded. Their stone axes, made of flint or some of the better volcanic rocks, were bound to the handles by tough cords and there were many forms of slings for carrying heavy weights. An army was always accompanied with a body of men carrying the food supplies, which they did by means of sticks (mama) carried on the shoulders. One of the objections to Captain Cook was the great hardship his long stay at Kealakekua imposed on these burden-bearers who had to carry all the foodstuffs from Waipio and Hamakua, nearly a hundred miles, much of it across aa flows.

With more time and farther research into the uses of fibers by the Hawaiians a most interesting disquisition could be written, but I think I have shown sufficient to arouse the curiosity of your readers.

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