THE JICARILLA APACHE

JICARILLA BASKETS SHOW THE RELATIONSHIP TO
those made by other Apaches—Mescalero, Chiricahua, or
Western Apache—but instead resemble those made at an
earlier time by their Pueblo neighbors. The Jicarilla Apache
migrated into the Southwest between A.D. 1200 and A.D. 1500, and
their history and basket making are closely associated with that of
the Pueblo Indians. The evolution of their basket making is vague,
as is that of the Pueblo before the mid-nineteenth century. When
the Jicarilla arrived in the Southwest, the importance of baskets
among the Pueblo was already in decline as they became more reliant on pottery.

HISTORY

The Jicarilla, along with the Navajo,
Western Apache, Mescalero Apache, and several other Apachean
groups, are Athapaskan-speaking peoples who migrated into the
Southwest from the north. Late arrivals in the area, they estab-
lished themselves in the mountains and adjacent plains of south-
ern Colorado and northern New Mexico (see map). These lands
included the headwaters of five major rivers: the Arkansas, San
Juan, Canadian, Pecos, and Rio Grande, in addition to high moun-
tain ranges with conifer forests, fertile valleys, upland plateaus,
and grasslands extending from the base of the Rocky Mountains
eastward.

Before obtaining the horse from the Spanish,
the Jicarilla Apache used dogs to help transport their belongings
between temporary camps while pursuing buffalo, and they prac-
ticed simple sedentary farming in semipermanent villages for part
of the year. It is likely this practice was acquired from the Pueblo
people, since they wintered near the Pueblos and traded with them
Tiller 1983, 440. The Jicarilla developed a lifestyle and material
culture that had affinities with that of both the Plains Indians and

Facing page: Jicarilla Apache weaver Dar is forma,
demonstrating at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri.
COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN,
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, NEG. T-1514.

Basket Dance at San Ildefonso Pueblo in 1920. The bask-
es are probably Jicarilla. Whifflord 1919. Photograph by
Sheldon Parsons, courtesy of the Museum of New Mexico.
the Pueblo. They used the tepee and travois like Plains Indians, while they practiced agriculture, irrigation, and pottery making and basket making like the Pueblos (Tiller 1983, 440; Whiteford 1988, 49).

Their semisedentary life-style was not changed greatly by early Spanish colonization along the Rio Grande Valley, but in the late seventeenth century a new threat did transform their culture. French fur traders pressing westward from the Mississippi River Valley began trading with the Comanche and furnishing them with guns. Raiding war parties of mounted Comanche accelerated their attacks on Jicarilla camps, as well as on Spanish and Pueblo settlements. Without guns the Jicarilla were no match for the Comanche. Pressured by the French in the East, the Comanche on the Plains, and the Spanish settlements along the Rio Grande, the Jicarilla were forced to retreat into the mountains of southern Colorado and northern New Mexico, venturing to the Plains only for brief hunting trips. As a result, they developed a close relationship with Pecos, Picuris, and Taos pueblos, and it was during this time they adopted many Pueblo skills, probably including basket making.

When Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821, Mexican citizens received large land grants on Jicarilla lands; later after the Mexican American War (1848), ranchers, farmers, and miners also moved into Jicarilla territory. Consequently, the Jicarilla joined forces with the Ute to fight the intruders. In 1855, they signed a peace treaty at Abiquiu, New Mexico, at which time they were to be given a reservation, but the treaty was not ratified. Left to their own resources until 1874, they were eventually given a reservation on the headwaters of the San Juan River. Two years later this reservation was taken away because of pressures from settlers already on the land and because the Jicarilla had not occupied it. In 1883, they were moved to the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation in southern New Mexico, where they remained for three years. Determined to return north, they were finally given their present reservation in northern New Mexico in 1887.

The Jicarilla Apache Indian Reservation straddles the Continental Divide at altitudes between 6,000 and 8,000 feet. Since the soil proved to be unsuitable for farming, the Jicarilla were forced to depend on government rations. Conditions were harsh in the early twentieth century. Livestock was introduced, and the size of the reservation increased to accommodate them. Tuberculosis was a serious problem, and a sanatorium was established to help eradicate the disease. Sheep ranching helped the economy throughout the 1920s but in 1932 a severe winter destroyed more than half the herd. In the 1930s, economic conditions began to improve with the discovery of oil and gas on the reservation. The increase of wage labor jobs available in Dulce (tribal headquarters) brought about a redistribution of the population, with more people moving to the urban center of Dulce. A lawsuit filed with the Indian Claims Commission for lands lost by the Jicarilla was settled in 1970, with more than $9,000,000 awarded to the tribe. In the mid-1960s, basket making was included in the Jicarilla Arts and Crafts Program supported by the tribe.

LARG BOWL WITH (LAT BOTTOM TOP) BY JICARILLA APACHE WEAVER TANZANITA PEAYA, MADE CA. 1957. 68. The animal, plant, and geometric shapes are harmoniously integrated in the piece. Dia. 18 1/2", H. 8". Jicarilla weaver Loretta Romero reproduced the basket in 1998 using a plaque shape of approximately 24" in diameter by 1" high. Collection of the Jicarilla Arts and Crafts Museum.
Large bowl made by Tanzanita Pesata in 1966. The central rings in this piece show the ticking she frequently used. She had a true artist's eye for combining geometric and animal designs into a unified whole. Dia. 21 1/2", H. 8 1/2". Collection of the Jicarilla Arts and Crafts/Museum.

Deep bowl by Mattie Quintana shows three different patterns repeated four times around the sides. The careful placement of each design element provides balance, unity, and simplicity. Dia. 16", H. 5". Collection of the Jicarilla Arts and Crafts/Museum.
Coiled baskets made for trade with the Pueblo were being produced by the Jicarilla as early as the 1880s. The Pueblo relied on Jicarilla baskets for the women's basket dance (page 53), for winnowing wheat, and for serving food on feast days. Although little information is available on Jicarilla basket making prior to the 1880s, in 1836, a government agent at Abiquiu reported they were making willow baskets (Teller 1983, 57). Both George Wharton James (1902) and Otis Tufton Mason (1902) published extensive books on American Indian basketry of the time without mentioning anything about Jicarilla basketry, a strange omission considering the fact that many collections include Jicarilla baskets made during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Whiteford 1988, 49). Nevertheless, Jicarilla basket making skills were recognized enough by 1904 for Darci Tafaya, a Jicarilla weaver, to demonstrate at the St. Louis World's Fair (page 52).

The Jicarilla also made baskets for trade with Hispanics, Anglos, and the Navajo. As Navajo baskets became more associated with ceremonial rather than utilitarian uses, greater taboos were placed on Navajo weavers, and the Jicarilla began producing a type of tray with a wedding design and ceremonial pathway for them. Interestingly, this pathway, or break, in the design on Navajo baskets can also be seen on old Pueblo baskets (Ellis and Walpole 1959, 197).

Hispanic and Anglo settlers living in the area also provided a ready market for Jicarilla basketry. These large, sturdy baskets produced for this market were essential items in most frontier households of the area. Some made in large cylindrical shapes with lid and handles were used as cloth hampers, while others with loop handles or openings on both sides functioned as laundry baskets. As tourism increased, the Jicarilla became creative and adept at developing baskets with a variety of shapes and striking designs to attract buyers. As the history of the Jicarilla shows, they are survivors, having turned many obstacles that confronted them to their advantage.

In the first half of the twentieth century, there was a gradual decline in Jicarilla basket making caused by a combination of developments. First, as the Jicarilla began to lead a more settled existence, they traded less with neighboring Indians. Second, the use of metal containers for cooking and carrying became more common the demand for baskets decreased. Finally, due to the reservation's isolated location, dirt roads, and few visitors, weavers had little opportunity to sell their work other than trading at the Mercantile in Dulce for groceries and supplies. Although this was a period of extreme poverty and hardship, with tuberculosis also taking a toll, a few women nevertheless continued making baskets.
Three rod bowl made in 1980 by Jicarilla weaver Mildred Monarco showing a fret design with a ceremonial pathway similar to those found on Navajo baskets. Tightly sewn, it has nine stitches per inch. Dia. 11 7/8", H. 2 1/2".
In the late 1950s, Barton Cox and Fred Carson bought the Apache Mercantile from Don Christianson. The only store on the reservation, it provided a number of services from cashing dividend checks to buying cattle, sheep, and wool to selling dry goods and groceries. Cox says there were very few active basketmakers when he took over the store, a conclusion confirmed by Ellis and Walpole in their 1959 study. Both men encouraged basket making and purchased all the baskets brought to the store, an average of one a week, for which they paid between $25 and $30. They sold these high-quality baskets, which included the work of Tanzanita Pesata and Grace Maria, to collectors and the few tourists passing through Dulce. Tony Reyna, a Taos Pueblo businessman and trader, bought many of them. Taos Pueblo and the Jicarilla have had an exceptionally close relationship that dates back at least to the early part of the nineteenth century.

In 1963, Cox and Carson sold the Apache Mercantile, and it was relocated down the street with a new name: Big D Shopping Center. The new trader, Joe Brooks, and his wife, Mary Gene, appreciated the basketry, entering pieces in the New Mexico State Fair and encouraging the women to continue bringing their work to the store to sell. Since the quality was always good, they bought all the baskets offered, which included work by Margarita De Dios, hazel De Dios, Telchah Piaz Largo, Mattie Quintana, Beloria Tiznado, Columbia Vigil, Mattie Vincent, Louise Atule, and Tanzanita Pesata. Brooks states that the weavers always set the prices for their work.

Tanzanita Pesata (1885-1968) is recognized by many as the finest Jicarilla Apache basketmaker. Not only were her technical skills outstanding but she continually explored new dimensions in design. In comparison with the finest Native American baskets from California and the Southwest, her baskets stand out because of their unique bold designs and technical precision, yet she always worked within the parameters of traditional Jicarilla basketry.

She learned to weave from her mother at a young age and later taught basket making to her daughter, Mildred Monaro, daughter-in-law Louise Pesata, and granddaughter-in-law, Lydia Pesata Herold 1978, 28). A photograph of Tanzanita shows a tall, slender, dignified woman with beautifully sculptured cheekbones, long braids, and a blanket placed casually over her shoulder.

She sold her work in Pagosa Springs, Colorado, and in Dulce at the Apache Mercantile and later at the Big D Shopping Center. Tanzanita spoke very little English so she usually sent her son, John, into the Big D Shopping Center to sell her baskets. Brooks remembers that after the transaction was completed, he would go out to the parked truck to acknowledge Tanzanita, although on a couple of occasions he traded directly with her. Shortly before her death, she made two special orders for him, both kidney shaped fishing creels with lids.

Tanzanita’s baskets showed great technical skill. She used a loop start on her baskets with a three-rod foundation for smaller, finer work and a five rod foundation for larger pieces. She made large cylindrical shaped wastebaskets and covered cloth hamper, large, deep bowls, shallow trays, and water jugs. The water jugs were made in the Jicarilla fashion with hot piñon pitch applied to the inside and a white clay rubbed on the outside.

Tanzanita’s innovative designs ranged from combinations of geometric shapes to animals and, later, flowers, feathers, and trees (Herold 1978, 31). They were usually carefully placed to create a sense of symmetry. These pieces reflect some of her finest technical work and artistry. A distinguishing characteristic of her work is an encircling band of ticking (alternating black and white stitches) shown on page 56, a technique her granddaughter in law, Lydia Pesata, also used on the start of a basket she made in 1994.

Materials and Construction

Coiling is the only method of construction used by the Jicarilla. They employ the branches of both willow and sumac. Willow shoots are gathered and peeled for the foundation rods and used in combinations of three or five, depending on the size of the basket. They are also utilized for the sewing strands but do not hold the dye as well as sumac so are used only for white backgrounds or for tan elements. The tan color is created by using willows that are harvested in the fall and then split three times into sewing strands. The bark is left on the strands, and they are bundled into a coil, which is boiled in water until the desired tan color is achieved. Finally, the strands are peeled and sized for use.

Sumac is the predominate material used for both foundations and sewing splints. In preparation for use as sewing strands, it is split into three parts by utilizing the teeth and both hands, then peeled, pithed, and smoothed with a piece of leather before being colored with either synthetic aniline dye or vegetal dye. Although aniline dyes are used more frequently, the colors in vegetal dyes are more muted than those in commercial dyes. The sewing splints are boiled in the dye solution for several hours and then soaked for three or four days to set the color, according to the desired hue. Both sumac and willow are harvested in the late fall after the first frost or in early spring, depending on their intended use. The long, slender shoots that sprouted from the ground during the past growing season are the ones selected since they lack branches.

Old Jicarilla baskets are usually easy to identify because of several characteristics. They have large coils, frequently five rod, with flat bottoms and straight sides flaring outward to create a deep tray. Other shapes include large cylindrical cloth hamper with lids and wastebaskets made for non Indian households. Frequently, rectangular openings on the sides or raised coils on the rims provided handles for winnowing or carrying. Designs, which often employ natural tan colored willow, are often simple, massie, and include V shapes, elongated diamonds, crosses, and frets.

In some ways Jicarilla Apache basketry resembles Pueblo basketry, as suggested by a 1950 study conducted by Florence Ellis and Mary Walpole. Studying several pieces that had been made at Zia and Santa Ana Pueblos early in the twentieth century; they concluded that a similar type had been produced among all the Keres speaking pueblos and possibly others for the last 1,600 years. They also noted a second type, heavier in construction, which was
still occasionally made at Santa Ana, Jemez, and the Tewa speaking pueblos. These pieces were of a more recent derivation (1100-1300) and showed a similarity to Jicarilla baskets; both used a triangular stacked foundation, thick coils, and false braided rims. Since contact between the Jicarilla and the northern Pueblo goes back hundreds of years, it would appear that the Jicarilla learned basket making from the Pueblo and possibly in turn influenced the construction of Pueblo baskets.

Jicarilla Apache baskets resemble Navajo, San Juan Paiute, and Ute baskets in the materials used. Woven right to left from the work surface and finished with a herringbone rim, they lack the fine coiling found in early Navajo baskets, which were constructed with two rods and a bundle foundation. Jicarilla pieces made for trade with the Navajo are often mislabeled as Navajo in private collections and museums. Adding to the confusion is the fact that when Navajo weavers stopped making baskets in the early twentieth century, the San Juan Paiute and Ute supplied their needs. In virtually all aspects these pieces resembled the type of baskets the Jicarilla were manufacturing for the trade also. Unfortunately, many old pieces of all four tribes have faded so badly it is difficult to see the designs. Over time, aniline dyes on sumac or willow fade unless kept out of the sunlight, although vegetal dyes retain color better.

The Revival style baskets presently made by the Jicarilla are much smaller in size than earlier ones and usually have a three rod foundation rather than the five-rod one more commonly used in the past. The types made are flat or shallow trays with bold designs of zigzags and other geometric elements, as well as a few small water jugs. Aniline dyes are still commonly used along with some vegetal dyes. Designs of plant and animal forms, popular earlier, are now seldom if ever used.

WEAVERS AND THEIR BASKETS

The Jicarilla Apache have focused extensively on preserving traditional arts and crafts over the years. The tribe has funded a work program to preserve and teach basket making and beadwork for more than twenty-five years. While other tribes in the West and Southwest have at various times also provided monies and instruction, none has made such a long-range commitment as the Jicarilla.

In the early 1960s the tribe established an Arts and Crafts Program that offered classes in bead- and leatherwork, employing twenty full-time people (Tiller 1992, 210). The women worked with beadwork and buckskin, while the men tooled leather belts and wallets in addition to making saddles.

Brenda Julian was appointed director of the Jicarilla Arts and Crafts Program, a position she has continued to hold until the present time. When the program first started, she explains, a large
Jicarilla Apache basketmaker Lydia Pesata at Dulce, New Mexico, in 1995. She won the New Mexico Governor's Award in 1988 for her work in preserving traditional arts and crafts.

Facing page: This basket originally was made by Alma Natsinneh and is part of the collection of the Jicarilla Arts and Crafts Museum. In 1984, Cecilia Harina duplicated the basket for the author while working there. Dia. 16", H. 4 1/2".
number of women applied, and in order to employ everyone interested, a schedule was developed that allowed for the women to work alternate two-week periods. Five experienced basketmakers—Columbia Vigil, Mattie Vincenti, Hazel De Dios, Florence DeJesus, and Mildred Monroe—taught those first students.

Brenda oversees an operation that includes anywhere from eight to fifteen women who are employed full time at an hourly wage doing beadwork and baskerery. When a basket is completed, it becomes the property of the crafts center and is priced for sale at the Jicarilla Arts and Crafts Museum or at the state fair or other art shows. The women gather their own materials (sumac and willow and strip, split, and dye them. They use Rit dye for most of their colors with the exception of some tans, reds, yellows, and greens produced by vegetal dyes. The basketmakers select the shapes and designs of the baskets unless they are commissioned.

Constructed in 1983, the building houses the arts and crafts workplace and also the museum. An unassuming light green metal structure surrounded by trees and lawn, inside it is a long, narrow room with glass cases from floor to ceiling containing a dazzling display of over a hundred Jicarilla baskets. The older ones are usually large, deep trays or large cylindrical baskets made using five-strand construction with burnished geometric, floral, and animal designs muted with age. Recently made Revival style baskets in the museum are for sale. Usually smaller with designs of vibrant reds, greens, blues, and yellows, they are displayed in cases in the center of the room, along with an impressive array of beadwork. The women work in a large, well-lit back room. Besides the five weavers who worked and taught in the early years at the old Arts and Crafts Program Center, Louise Atole, Louise Pesata, Bertha Velarde, Cecilia Harina, and Lydia Pesata are some of the other noted basketmakers who have worked there. Weavers working at the center during the winter of 1994 to 1995 included Grace Maria, Ella Mae Amarilla, Floripa Manwell, Iris Howe, Ardella Veneno, and Loretta Romero.

Lydia Pesata (page 62) is the best known contemporary weaver among the Jicarilla Apache. She was born near Cuba, New Mexico, to Jicarilla parents, Anna Tafoya and Cevero Caramillo. Since her mother did not weave, it was not until after she married
Melbourne Pesata at age twenty that she became interested in basket making while watching his grandmother Tzanzita Pesata prepare materials. She says it was her determination and perseverance that enabled her to perfect the skills needed. The first basket she made was a large tray executed with an all-black design, while her second basket had a design taken from a Tandy book on beadwork patterns. The latter basket is housed in the Jicarilla Arts and Crafts Museum. She estimates that she has made two hundred baskets during her lifetime.

Not long after she started to weave, Lydia Pesata became interested in exploring the methods and materials needed to make vegetal dyes, which create more muted colors than aniline dyes when used on sumac. Since commercial dyes had been the accepted method for so many years, she found very little information available on the process. Nevertheless, with the little information she could obtain from older weavers she began experimenting with different leaves, barks, and flowers. Red, yellow, and tan were the only natural colors used then by Jicarilla basketmakers, and this remains the case today. The following are some of the plants used by Lydia to prepare her dyes: hollyhock flowers, currants, mountain mahogany bark, and chokecherry for reds; dandelion roots and stems for lavender; elder bark for orange; barberry root and Oregon grape for yellow; Indian tea for gold; sumac berries for gray; and sumac bark for black (Whiteford and McGraw 1994, 49).

As Lydia readily admits, experimenting with natural colors is the aspect of weaving that is her greatest passion. She hopes that one day they will again be used with greater frequency by other Jicarilla basketmakers, although she acknowledges that preparing them is time-consuming and hard work.

For a number of years, Lydia ran the Cultural Resource Center program in Dulce, where she taught traditional arts, beadwork, and basket making. This program was not affiliated with the museum. Several of her students who learned weaving at the center, including both her daughters, have since been employed by the Jicarilla Arts and Crafts Center. In 1988, Pesata received the New Mexico Governor’s Award for her contributions to the preservation of traditional Jicarilla arts and crafts.

Loretta Romero, opposite presently works at the Jicarilla Arts and Crafts Museum. She worked with Pesata during the 1980s at the Cultural Resource Center, where she learned to weave before beginning her present job in 1992 because she wanted to continue making baskets. Loretta works quickly and with confidence, producing about one hundred pieces a year. She always uses three- or five-rod foundations on her baskets, many of which are sold through the crafts center.

The future of Jicarilla basket making looks promising if the tribe continues to support the art as it has in the past and the arts and crafts program can keep finding markets for the baskets produced. While the women weaving there receive a salary, their challenge will be to maintain the quality of their products. To do so, they must have a clear vision of the characteristics that have made Jicarilla baskets so unique and outstanding in the past while encouraging individual creativity and experimentation.

Baskets presently made are usually ten to fourteen inches in diameter and are shallow trays with three-rod foundations. However, the use of bright colors on repetitive isolated designs (one of the trademarks of Jicarilla baskets) appears to have a more dramatic effect when executed on larger baskets with five-rod foundations. Although in recent years the majority of weavers have been older women, it is very probable that many of the younger generation will become interested when they are older.