

African Baskets -The Zulu Weavers

In the modern world, African baskets are a hot commodity with collectors and designers. The term itself is misleading to say the least. "African" denotes an entire continent and thousands of different peoples and nationalities. To say that a basket is an authentic "African" product is like saying that a French basket is authentic "European." The baskets of Africa are as varied and diverse as its people.

The people of the Zulu tribe who are located in South Africa have long utilized baskets for gathering as well as use in a number of religious ceremonies. The materials that are most commonly used for the basket itself are the Ilala Palm and Ncebe, which is the bark from the wild banana tree. The two are interwoven to make the basket more colorful, as the palm itself is naturally a plain cream color.

Certain berries, plants, roots, and other ingredients are used to create dyes for use in the Zulu basket. Brown and black are made from boiling tree roots for several days, while purple and blue are created by boiling Umdoni berries. Coral comes from the aloe plant, while orange comes from a small root of a plant being boiled. Maroon and burgundy is extracted from the bark of the Marula tree while pink and lilac are made from the leaves of a small bush. Yellow is extracted from a combination of wood ash and water while grey is made from plants that are soaked in mud for at least a week. Khaki green comes from even more unusual source-cow dung that is boiled with palm leaves.

Zulu basket makers also weave particular designs in the fibers of these containers that denote specific things. For example, a triangle pattern in a Zulu basket means "masculine" while a double triangle means "married man." "Feminine" is symbolized by a diamond and a double diamond means "married woman." A good luck and prosperity basket will have a design of squares or dots on it. Baskets are also woven especially for a bride on her wedding day. She will give this basket to her new husband to drink beer out of. A depiction of the marriage will be woven into the fibers to serve as a record of the event for future generations. Other historical designs that are popular on Zulu baskets include a series of diamonds which stands for "the shields of Shaka" and a zig-zag pattern that denotes "the assegais of Shaka."

There are several different styles of Zulu baskets. As mentioned before, there is a beer basket that is specially designed to be watertight. There are also open baskets that are used for gathering food.

While many of these baskets are still used for particular occasions and religious ceremonies, the Zulu basket weavers have found a prosperous outlet for their talent in the sale of their products. European and American consumers are willing to pay extravagant prices for these authentic "African" baskets. In many cases, this income may be the only money that the family has, so the basket weavers are more than happy to peddle their wares while maintaining the same quality that the Zulu basket weavers have carried on through the generations.

About the Author

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