



Melissa Darden

Chitimacha River Cane Basket maker

The Chitimacha Indians of St. Mary Parish have long been counted among the most skilled basket weavers in the Southeast. Their single weave and double weave baskets of split river cane woven in centuries' old patterns are prized for their beauty and craftsmanship. Today only a handful of women and men continue to weave these cane baskets.

Melissa Darden is from Charenton, Louisiana and is the granddaughter of renowned Chitimacha basket maker Lydia Darden. Like her brother, John Darden and her sister-in-law Scarlett Darden, she is actively helping to preserve this traditional aspect of Chitimacha culture. As several of the master Chitimacha basket weavers passed on or became less active over the years, younger tribal members like Melissa realized that it was important for their generation to continue making river cane baskets in the traditional way. Melissa makes baskets for sale and demonstrates basket making at festivals, fairs, and museums.

She learned some of the basket weaving process at five years of age and began weaving baskets more seriously in January of 1992. She weaves with traditional techniques using a knife, her hands, and teeth. She first learned the basics from Lydia Darden and learned the traditional designs from studying as many other Chitimacha baskets as possible. She notes that she is, "always seeking for more of the older designs." About the tradition, she says, "I feel that this is a way of preserving the natural history of my culture." Traditionally, baskets were woven for use by the makers and as a source of income. This remains true today, she says, "My basket weaving provides a better living for my family."

The techniques, patterns, and materials of Chitimacha basketmaking have changed little over the last two centuries. Creating a basket is a time-consuming process. First, river cane must be collected and then split into the thin strips used for weaving. Today, commercial dyes may be used to create the distinctive red, black, and yellow hues of the baskets, but the ancient patterns like Alligator's Entrails and Snake Eyes remain unchanged. The most difficult baskets to make are the double woven baskets, in which one basket is woven inside another. Melissa makes double woven as well as single woven baskets.

Melissa's work has been featured at the Louisiana Folklife Festival, Jazz Fest., Festival Acadian, Red Earth, Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., The Louisiana

Native Crafts Festival, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, and the Prairie Acadian Culture Center in Eunice. In 1993, she received a Louisiana Folklife Apprenticeship grant teach basket weaving to apprentice Paula Darden, and she won first place in an art competition at the Red Earth Pow-Wow in 2000.

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