

Building a Collection

Native Californian Basketry at the University of Pennsylvania Museum

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Can you show me a collection with as much description [?]
Henry K. Deisher to George Byron Gordon; UPM, 8/1/1906



The collector and some of his favorites.

FIG. 1. "THE COLLECTOR AND SOME OF HIS FAVORITES." Henry K. Deisher (1867–1951) with some of his California Indian baskets now in the University of Pennsylvania Museum. No other museum collection of Deisher's era contains so many Native Californian baskets for which the artist's name is known.

Courtesy of State Museum of Pennsylvania, Archaeology Department, Harrisburg, Pa. UPM acc. nos. of baskets (l. to r.): NA 7871, NA 8206, NA 7850, NA 7920, and NA 8016

One afternoon in April of 1905, a Pennsylvania Dutch mill owner named Henry K. Deisher stopped by the University Museum for an appointment with the curator of the American Section. Being a collector of Native American basketry (Fig. 1), Deisher hoped the curator would show him such "Indian baskets" as were not on exhibit in the public galleries.

As it happened, the American Section curator was at that moment in the market for a basketry collec-

tion. He was sufficiently intrigued by the description of Deisher's that he traveled to view it several weeks later to see if it might be suitable for purchase by the Museum. This trip initiated negotiations over the collection that dragged on for 13 years.

What the Museum at long last purchased can today be recognized as one of the premier collections of Native Californian basketry. It is notable because of its quality, good preservation, and especially its unparal-

FIG. 2. GEORGE BYRON GORDON, Curator of the University of Pennsylvania Museum's American Section, 1903–1910, and Director of the Museum, 1910–1927. Gordon negotiated with Deisher for 13 years over the purchase of Deisher's basket collection.

UPM neg. no. S4-141710



leled documentation. The last includes a detailed catalogue of the baskets, and photographs and names of a number of the weavers—a rarity at any time, but particularly for Deisher's era (see also McLendon, this issue). The Deisher collection is not just an assemblage of beautiful art objects; it is also an important primary source of ethnographic and ethnohistoric data, particularly for the Pomoan area (see McLendon 1981).

GEORGE B. GORDON

The curator whom Deisher had come to see that day, George Byron Gordon, is a key figure in the history of the Museum (King and Little 1986). One of the first to receive a Ph.D. in archaeology from Harvard, Gordon had been hired by the Museum in 1903 in the wake of the departure of the previous American Section curator, Stewart Culin. In 1910 Gordon became Museum Director, a position he held until his death 17 years later (Fig. 2).

Though he never distinguished himself as a scholar, Gordon's role in building the Museum's ethnographic collections is unsurpassed. Gordon was interested not just in increasing the overall number of objects; he sought to achieve comprehensive coverage of all areas of the world, as well as of all types of material culture within any given society.

Like many of his day, Gordon believed Native American societies to be rapidly changing if not vanishing altogether, and so valued "old" objects that had been authentically produced for traditional purposes. He was also very interested, however, in the aesthetic aspects of ethnographic objects, and always looked for the most beautiful and well-made examples of an object type. Gordon's ideal was to situate the Museum in the middle ground between Science and Art. "Between the two," he wrote, "will be the museum of Human History, the special business of which will be to fill the gap separating [them]" (Gordon 1912:61–62).

These notions shaped his collecting strategy for over 25 years. Museum funds were never adequate for his purposes, however, and Gordon racked up huge deficits in the Museum's budget, to the extent of precipitating financial crises for the institution. He trolled constantly for donations from the wealthy Philadelphia elite. For a period he used his own money to acquire specimens, which he then loaned to the Museum until funds became available for outright purchase. He maddened dealers and private collectors by holding onto goods lent to him on approval for months, even years, while he searched for better and less costly pieces. He often tried to beat the price down, and then kept the seller waiting for long and exasperating months for the reduced payment—often because he was searching for a



FIG. 3. GRACE NICHOLSON BUYING BASKETS AT THE BENSONS'. William Benson, a talented Eastern Pomo artist in his own right, bends over the phonograph behind his wife, the well-known Central Pomo basket weaver Mary Knight Benson. Grace Nicholson is seated at center, surrounded by other listeners. Nicholson maintained a warm friendship and close professional relationship with the Bensons for many years.

Photograph by Carol Hartman, 1908.

Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California; Grace Nicholson Papers, Photo Album "A", p. 96 (3)

wealthy donor willing to buy it for the Museum. His negotiations with Deisher were more protracted than most, but otherwise typical in many respects.

When Gordon arrived in Philadelphia in the fall of 1903, the Museum's Native American basketry collections were meager. The Museum had no Pomo baskets at all.

Gordon soon began shopping for baskets, but serious purchases of California baskets, especially Pomo baskets, required substantial sums of money (see McLendon, this issue). In 1904, Gordon spent over a month at the St. Louis Exposition purchasing collections from all over the world—except North America. He found the prices of nearly all the exhibited "Indian articles," including the baskets, too high. His first significant purchases of California basketry were made from a young female entrepreneur named Grace Nicholson, who had recently established a shop in Pasadena from which she sold Indian baskets and other art objects.

GRACE NICHOLSON

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Grace Nicholson moved to Los Angeles in 1901, at the age of 23, and almost immediately entered the business of buying and selling Indian baskets (Apostol 1976:22). Once she opened a shop in Pasadena, Nicholson had access to

the rich visitors who wintered there, and she ultimately became a major dealer in Asian as well as Native American art. She seems to have held a special appeal to the very wealthy women who came to her shop, as a number became her regular clients.

Nicholson obtained some of her goods from other dealers and private collectors, but she also mounted summer field trips to California Indian communities, where she bought baskets directly from weavers. She maintained personal relationships with the weavers and their relatives, corresponding with them and in some cases hosting them in her house. Nicholson was also a self-trained ethnographer who collaborated with the Eastern Pomo artist William Benson (McLendon 1990). She took photographs and at times kept detailed notes about the baskets and their makers, as well as about other ethnographic objects she purchased (Fig. 3). It is sometimes possible to associate baskets purchased from Nicholson with Nicholson's own documentation, and these baskets constitute, outside of the Deisher collection, the largest pool of California baskets from this era for which the weavers' names are known.

Gordon bought a collection of Nicholson's in March 1905, after some heated bargaining between them. This collection consisted of over 30 objects of which nearly all were baskets, and nearly all of those from California. A third were Pomo baskets from



FIG. 5. PART OF THE PLIMPTON COLLECTION. C.P. Wilcomb, a museum collector who had also hoped to acquire Plimpton's baskets, told Gordon that he became acquainted with Plimpton in the early 1890s, and had assisted him "in acquiring some of his best specimens" over the ten years of their acquaintance. Overall, Plimpton's collection reflects a stage of the basketry market prior to that embodied in the Deisher collection. This photo is one of a set that Plimpton sent to John Hudson probably in the late 1890s (see Smith-Ferri, this issue).

Plimpton Collection. Courtesy of the Grace Hudson Museum, Ukiah, Cal.

FIG. 4. FRED. S. PLIMPTON, CA. 1898. At the time of his death in 1903, Plimpton was general manager of a San Diego lumber company. He had arrived in California by at least the early 1880s.

From the pamphlet Plimpton Collection of Pacific Coast Indian Basketry. A Collection Numbering 260 Baskets and Representing 84 Tribes and Localities (West Newton, Mass, n.d.)



FIG. 7. SCHOOLGIRLS SCRUTINIZE SOME OF THE BASKETS OF THE PLIMPTON COLLECTION in a gallery of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, ca. 1912.

UPM neg. no. S4-141709



FIG. 6. A PLIMPTON BASKET IN THE DEISHER COLLECTION. At the turn of the century the world of basket connoisseurship was small, and collectors and dealers often crossed paths. As Meredith informed Deisher, "This basket was in the famous Plimpton collection for a number of years and was willed to a friend, from whom it was bought. It is hard to find an equal for beauty and workmanship" (UPM, Deisher Catalogue, no. 318).

UPM no. NA 7911. Photograph by F. Sarin

Mendocino County. Some were indeed "old"—that is, produced for traditional use rather than for the commercial market—and thus "scarce" by that date. At least one, however, Nicholson had purchased new on her 1903 field trip.

This acquisition began to fill some of the gaps in the Museum's holdings. Gordon still did not have a large, representative collection of California basketry, however, and Nicholson's prices, though competitive in the larger market, seemed too steep to allow for any large purchases. Henry Deisher's arrival at the Museum, scarcely three weeks after Gordon had concluded his transaction with Nicholson, was for Gordon's purposes well-timed. It allowed him to begin shopping. Over the next year Gordon compared price, selection, and quantity of several collections, including Deisher's and two or three others.

F.S. PLIMPTON

In February of 1906, while Gordon was ruminating over Deisher's baskets, he learned of a collection to be sold in order to settle the estate of the late owner. The collection had belonged to a Fred S. Plimpton (Figs. 4, 5), and was well-known to collectors and connoisseurs, having been mentioned in Otis Mason's 1904 monograph on Native American basketry, as well as supplying a good number of the illustrations in George Wharton James' 1906 publication.

Gordon went to see Plimpton's baskets in June of 1906, but was not yet ready to decide between the various collections he was considering. Only when the March 1907 deadline set by the estate administrator was upon him did Gordon finally act. He chose the Plimpton collection. He paid \$1250 for 225 baskets, the

remaining 35 or so going to the heirs as “keepsakes” (Fig. 6). Gordon thereby acquired a prime basket collection at an astounding cost of \$5.55 per basket, an absolute steal for the time (compare with the price of the Hudsons’ collection, Smith-Ferri, this issue). This was almost half what Deisher was asking.

Little is known about the history of Plimpton’s collection. What is most striking about the baskets, however, is the exquisite aesthetic sense behind their selection. There are many beautiful baskets in UPM collections, but Plimpton’s consistently stand out for their perfection of technique, shape, design, and color sense.

THE HEYE COLLECTION— HERE AND GONE AGAIN

The Plimpton and Nicholson purchases satis-

fied Gordon’s California basketry needs for a long time (Fig. 7). After 1907, his collection practices changed significantly. The reason was an arrangement he secured with New York businessman George G. Heye. Heye agreed to deposit the bulk of his vast collection of Native American artifacts at the University of Pennsylvania Museum in exchange for its conservation, curation, and exhibition. Though no written contract was drawn up, Gordon expected that the association would be permanent (King and Little 1986:31–32).

As Gordon’s goal was comprehensive coverage without excessive duplication of any given object type, he now carefully planned North American acquisitions to fill the weak areas in Heye’s materials. During this period, Gordon seems to have considered the Museum’s holdings in California basketry, taken together with Heye’s, to be sufficient.

In 1915, however, Heye’s mother died, leaving him the money to build his own museum. The next year, Heye officially founded the Museum of the American Indian (now the National Museum of the American Indian) and informed the UPM he was removing his entire collection.

The Museum never made up for the loss, although the flurry of North American accessions made after this date reflect Gordon’s scramble to cover the gaping holes left in his careful collection strategy (King and Little 1986:44–45). By 1916, Gordon was once again interested in acquiring baskets. Over the next three years, he was fortunate to secure three large collections: one was a gift, one a bequest (see box on Anne Meirs and Patty Jewett), and the third, Deisher’s, a purchase. Together they totaled nearly 1000 baskets, over two-thirds of which had come from California.

DEISHER AND THE REVEREND MEREDITH

The Museum’s loss of the Heye material allowed Deisher, who had been the unbelieving loser in the competition with the Plimpton collection, to command Gordon’s attention once more. Henry Deisher’s origins lay worlds apart from the privileged lives enjoyed by the wealthy collectors of the sort who frequented Grace Nicholson’s shop. Born on March 12, 1867, he grew up in rural Pennsylvania with ten siblings, speaking Pennsylvania Dutch as his first language. Deisher began collecting as a boy, picking up stone points and blades on his family’s farm, and by 1878 had won a prize for his collection at a state fair. Deisher later commented that he had been one of the “pioneer” collectors in Pennsylvania.

Anne Meirs, Patty Jewett, and Nicholson Once Again

FIG. 8. PATTY STUART JEWETT was, like Grace Nicholson, a transplanted Philadelphian. Patty Jewett married the owner of a Colorado gold mine, and the couple divided their time between Colorado Springs and Pasadena. Close family friends at Penn included the dean of Penn’s law school, her brother-in-law, and Charles C. Harrison, Penn Provost and president of the Museum’s Board of Managers from 1917–1929.

Courtesy of the
Colorado Springs
Museum



In 1919 Anne Weightman Meirs, a wealthy member of the Philadelphia elite, officially transferred her entire Indian collection to the Museum as a gift in memory of her recently deceased husband. There is little information about how Meirs acquired her rather large collection of Native American art. It includes around 220 items, over two-thirds of which are from California. Over a quarter of the total, around 60, are Pomo baskets, most of which are finely woven specimens likely made for the art market (McLendon 1993:50).

Around the same time, the Museum also received a bequest from Patty Stuart Jewett (Fig. 8). Jewett may have acquired her interest in Indians through her father, George Stuart, a Philadelphia businessman and social reformer involved, among other causes, with abolition and Indian rights. She acquired the wealth that allowed her to collect large numbers of California baskets through her husband, William Kennon Jewett. At some point the Jewetts joined the wintertime pilgrimage of the wealthy to Pasadena, and Patty Jewett became one of Grace Nicholson’s customers.

Over the years Patty Jewett had acquired Navajo blankets, Plains beadwork, but most of all baskets. Nearly all of her collection came out of Nicholson’s Pasadena shop. Nicholson wrote Gordon that she had “worked to have the [Jewett]

collection as fine as any in the country” (UPM, 4/10/1918). The Jewett collection totalled 238 specimens, valued in 1918 at \$12,000. Of more than 150 baskets, nearly two-thirds are Californian. Fifty of the total are Pomo baskets, a high percentage of which are the expensive, solidly feathered kind. There are also a number of small, finely woven miniatures. Patty Jewett’s is an art-basket collection *par excellence*.

Though she had close family connections to Penn, Patty Jewett seems to have made no formal bequest, and Nicholson was instrumental in convincing Mr. Jewett that the Museum was indeed the proper recipient of his wife’s collection. Nicholson also personally catalogued the collection before it was shipped to Philadelphia, filling in her own inventory numbers. As a consequence, it is possible to associate a significant number of the Jewett baskets with documentation in Nicholson’s papers (McLendon, pers. comm.).

Of all the baskets that came to the Museum through Nicholson, the name of the weaver can be determined for at least 11. Nine of these are Pomo (Fig. 9). The documentation also allows fairly precise dating of some of the baskets: it shows, for example, that a number of Jewett baskets were purchased new during Nicholson’s 1911 field trip. Jewett probably began buying her baskets around 1906.

FIG. 9. ADA ANDERSON DISPLAYING HER BASKETS FOR GRACE NICHOLSON. Anderson, who belonged to a family of expert Habematolel basket weavers (see McLendon, this issue), was a teenager in 1911 when this photograph was taken. Nicholson purchased the four finely woven art baskets in the photo during her field trip of that year. She sold two (on the left and bottom center) to Patty Jewett, through whom they came to the University of Pennsylvania Museum in 1918. A third, at far right, is now at the Field Museum in

Chicago (FM #103359). The whereabouts of the fourth, top center, is unknown.

Photograph by Grace Nicholson or Carol Hartman. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California; Grace Nicholson Papers, Photo Album “C”, p. 48 (1). UPM acc. nos.: NA 8241 (left) and NA 8256 (bottom center)



In 1890, at age 23, Deisher borrowed money to buy a knitting mill in the small community of Kutztown, about 60 miles north of Philadelphia. Initially the venture was profitable, and broadened both his resources and his collecting scope. At some point he branched out from stone tools into Native American beadwork, blankets, and baskets. By 1909, he had acquired more than 22,000 Native American implements. He operated a room of his house as a "home museum." In 1914, Deisher told Gordon that because he had no more room for his collections, he was selling them off. In reality he was experiencing financial difficulties. By May of 1915, Deisher had lost his mill and was in the hands of his creditors.

Deisher re-opened negotiations with Gordon over the baskets in 1914, but they haggled for four more years. Gordon still balked at the price and size of the collection, and wanted to take his pick—mostly the rare, large, "old" cooking baskets—while Deisher hoped to keep the collection together. Then Heye removed his collection from Philadelphia, leaving Gordon in need of quantity as well as quality. Finally, in May of 1918, Deisher and Gordon agreed on a price of \$3500 for the entire collection of around 440 baskets. This was an average price of \$8.14 per basket, substantially less than the \$13.72 Deisher had originally demanded. Deisher was forced to accept these terms because of the constraints imposed on him by his creditors.

Deisher's response to the beauty of his baskets was a personal, emotional one. "I love them next to my family," he wrote Gordon (UPM, 7/18/1906). To choose among them would be as difficult as for "a father were he to give up one of his children." One of the reasons he endured the endless negotiations with Gordon was that, as he repeatedly and somewhat wistfully stated in their correspondence, he hoped to have them in an institution close to home, so that he could go see them occasionally.

Yet Deisher articulated a scientific rationale for his approach to collecting, and his frequent comments to Gordon about the uniqueness of the collection were not just the boasts of a doting father. Deisher, the manufacturer of ladies' knitted underwear, had seized upon the importance of detailed documentation years ahead of professional scholars. As he wrote Gordon:

Although I did not collect them personally . . . yet I have all but a few *direct* from the field col-

lector, *with* considerable data *and a number of valuable photos*.

The collection is the work of 9 years for himself and the choice of his collections for 3 yrs more, with almost continual contact with the Indians . . . I have avoided chunk [sic: junk] shops and second hand shops . . . they have them from everywhere—and nowhere. The *identity* of the exact *locality* and *maker* is all lost, very important you know.

. . . I am confident my collection is well and authentically made by a man who was right among the Indians and knew what he was doing . . . *Most collections* are made up . . . more for adornment of a room or den—not with a *scientific view* a thing which I always had in view. . . . (UPM, 7/18/1906)

The "field collector" who had provided most of Deisher's baskets was a Methodist minister named Henry C. Meredith (see McLendon, this issue). Meredith had begun collecting soon after his arrival in California, and had acquired some of the baskets he sold Deisher as early as 1894 (Fig. 10). Information in Deisher's catalogue and letters indicates he probably began buying baskets from Meredith in 1903 and had acquired around three-quarters of his collection by 1905. His purchases ended when Meredith entered the hospital in 1907 shortly before his death.

Deisher had maintained through the course of the negotiations with Gordon that his asking price was barely sufficient to cover his costs. Gordon claimed that Meredith had overcharged Deisher in the first place, but Meredith's prices do not seem particularly high in comparison with what other dealers were asking, a fact of which Gordon was perfectly well aware. Deisher wrote Gordon, "[Meredith] assures me (as a Minister) that he is giving me goods cheaper because I have nearly all his work of 12 years collecting and that he prefers building up a grand collection rather than scatter abroad. My heart is so in this work that I feel the same way" (UPM, 3/19/1906).

Note the implication that Deisher had been Meredith's primary customer from the beginning. Deisher also said that Meredith always gave him the right of first refusal on any basket. In fact, Deisher must

"Most collections are made up . . . more for adornment of a room or den—not with a scientific view a thing which I always had in view"

[Deisher writing to Gordon]

have been a windfall for Meredith, who had no shop and lived in a small community 16 miles from the nearest railroad. If Deisher's price list is accurate, over the course of about four years he had paid Meredith at least \$5000 for baskets and several thousand more for archaeological collections.

One of the ways in which Meredith marketed his baskets under these less-than-ideal circumstances was to send photographs that depicted the weavers with their baskets, together with "descriptions," written on the photos or scraps of paper, that often related a brief story about the weaver or the history of the basket. Deisher copied these descriptions into his catalogue to preserve them as scientific data (see McLendon, Figs. 1b, 9, 10b, this issue):

Known to be a three generation basket. Made by the mother of old Minnie now living at Carters, Cal. and given to her son from whom it was obtained. Minnie's father was a Cherokee Chief [i.e., at Cherokee, Cal.], ruling at Cherokee, Bald Rock and Knights Ferry. He married a Mono woman and at the time of the Indian war of 1853 fled to the Monos among whom he died. (UPM, Deisher Catalogue, no. 132)

Baskets with such "descriptions" appeared more frequently in Deisher's purchases as time passed, suggesting that if this was a marketing ploy by Meredith it was a successful one, and increasingly resorted to. Perhaps as a consequence, by far the largest number of baskets which have a weaver's name or portrait photograph associated originate in the Pomo communities near the town of Lakeport, where Meredith was living in the final years of his association with Deisher (see McLendon, this issue).

Although Deisher was especially proud of his "fine old and rare" baskets, only a few in his collection are genuinely old, documented to the 1830s and 1840s. There are a number of baskets that are not so much antique as well-used in the service of food collection, preparation, and consumption. Many other baskets of the same types, however, seem to have been for sale, as they have seen little if any use. Most of Deisher's Pomo baskets are of the decorated gift-basket type that was made in great numbers for the market (Fig. 11).

In all, there are 84 out of nearly 160 Pomo baskets in the Deisher collection for which Deisher preserved the name and/or a photograph of the weaver. These baskets are the work of nearly 40 weavers from eight Pomo communities. The collection contains 36

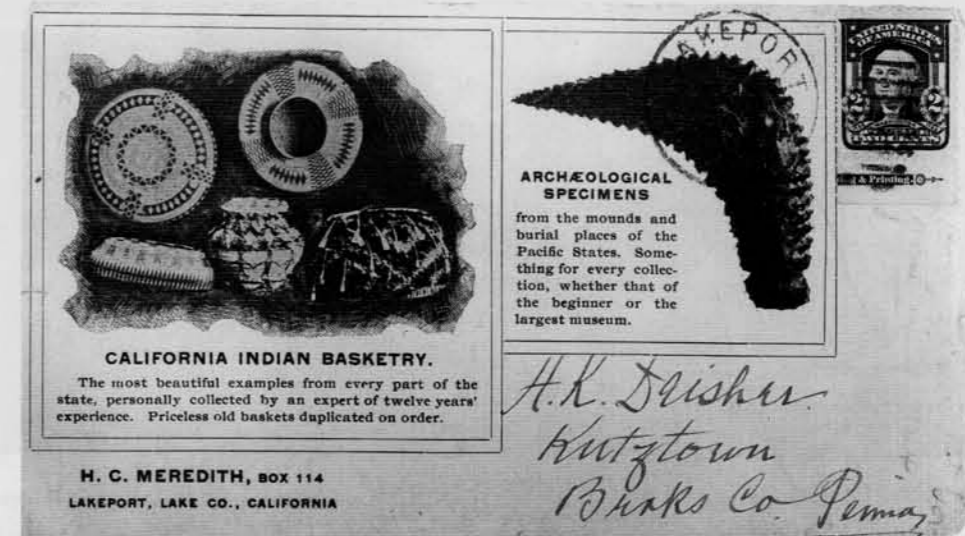


FIG. 10. AN ENVELOPE ADDRESSED TO DEISHER SHOWS HOW MEREDITH ADVERTISED HIS GOODS.

The statement "Priceless old baskets duplicated on order" suggests that Meredith employed local Pomo weavers for this work, and indeed, Deisher's catalogue indicates that Mary Posh and Rosa Smith may have been among those he hired (see McLendon Figs. 1a and 8, this issue). The cost of first-class postage is another indication of the great change in prices since this era.

UPM neg. no. S4-142636



FIG. 11. PART OF THE DEISHER COLLECTION showing a number of Pomo baskets of the types used in food collection, preparation, and consumption. Deisher used the photographs of his collection as an aid in marketing it to museums. Another set of these photographs is at the Smithsonian Institution. For a closer look at three of these baskets, see McLendon Fig. 7b for the middle basket in the middle row, and McLendon Fig. 11b for the basket on the far right, bottom row. The basket 2nd from the right (bottom) in the middle row appears in Fig. 6 of this article.
 Photograph by Charles Snyder, Kutztown, Pa., ca. 1908. UPM neg. no. S4-142634

other baskets, nearly all from California, for which the name of the weaver is recorded. This includes baskets from Mono, Sierra Miwok, Plains Miwok, Patwin, and Wailakki weavers, among others. Even when Deisher's catalogue does not give the name of the weaver, it often gives the particular Indian community in which the weaver was living. There is no other collection of California basketry with so many documented baskets.

Even more striking is the number of baskets by weavers who are related to each other (see McLendon, this issue). Nearly all of these baskets, not surprisingly, are from the Pomo communities near Meredith's final home on Upper Lake. This fact demonstrates one important difference between the documented baskets from Meredith and from Nicholson: Nicholson's collecting field trips yielded a cross-section of the baskets being produced at a given time. Meredith's purchases reflect a depth of acquaintance with the community and thus reveal stylistic similarities within families, as well as change between generations.

It is hard to know what value Gordon placed on the documentation Deisher had received from Meredith. It certainly did not motivate Gordon to obtain the collection regardless of cost. He made no effort to secure the documentation from Deisher—it was Deisher who insisted on preserving the documentation as well as the integrity of the collection. Nor did

Gordon include the information in the Museum's own catalogue. On the other hand, Gordon did not throw out the documentation, either. He may have thought that filing Deisher's catalogue and photographs away in his collection records was sufficient to preserve it for future research—as in fact proved true.

Today it is clear that a museum ethnographic collection does not represent the material culture of a group in any simple way, as Gordon hoped it could. It is as much the result of the compounded philosophies, tastes, and circumstances of all the dealers, collectors, and curators through whose hands it passed as it is the achievement of its original creators.

Deisher's collection is unique in many other respects, but not in this. This collection is not just a body of representative work by Native American basket weavers. It is also the outcome of Meredith's personal relations with the weavers, of what he was able to purchase in a competitive market, and of the way in which he advertised the baskets to his chief customer, Deisher. It is the result of Deisher's selection of those baskets, his determination to preserve his collection and its documentation, Gordon's role in bringing it to the Museum, and, finally, the way in which the collection and its documentation have been stored, catalogued, and curated within the Museum—which is still changing. 21

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