



Rose Valley Fine Arts

Presents

Baskets from Africa

Bolga baskets come from Bolgatanga, (northern) Ghana, West Africa. They were originally woven round without any form of handle. The ends of the straw were left untrimmed and it was used as a sieve in the brewing of a local alcoholic beverage called Pito.

The straw comes from the "Veta Vera" grass (also known as "elephant grass") that grows along banks of rivers, streams and swampy areas. The original basket evolved into wonderful shapes adapted for a variety of practical purposes.

All baskets are handmade, therefore, no two are exactly alike.

By purchasing a basket you are helping to allow the poor rural women of Ghana in earning decent incomes from the fruits of their labors, in order to care for their children. Northern Ghana is the most deprived region of the ten regions in Ghana.

Our baskets are produced in and

around the village of Bolgatanga. Bolgatanga literally means "soft soil, rocky land". This region is not fertile enough for extensive agricultural activities. Coupled with an erratic rainfall pattern and generally harsh weather conditions, handicraft activities such as basket weaving is undertaken mostly by the women to supplement their incomes from the subsistence of farming activities. Women and children often become the worst victims of the vicious cycle of poverty in poor African Countries.

It takes approximately three days to complete a standard Bolga basket.

THE STRAW

Straw is the main raw material used, obtained from a tropical plant locally known as elephant grass (veta veta). The grass grows along the banks of rivers, streams and swampy areas. The straw is not simply cut from the grass, which grows tufts just like wheat, forming a broomlike flower at the top. The straw is instead carefully harvested by holding a stem with the left hand, grasping the husk that encloses the straw with the right hand, and pulling it down, leaving the husks on the grass for further tufts. The flower at the top of the straw is pinched off near a nib using the forefinger and the thumb. This is done to every single piece used for weaving. The straw is harvested wet, then sun-dried, and is then ready to go through the splitting process.

SPLITTING

The straw is first split into halves by biting it in the middle at one end with the teeth to open it into two. The first half is held by the teeth and other half is pulled down with one hand. About half an inch to the end of the straw, the process is ended. This process is done to every single piece of straw that is to be used in the basket.

TWISTING AND UNTWISTING

The split straw is wrapped together in a wet sack to keep it moist and prevent it from breaking. The split piece of straw is then twisted by rolling the two halves together. The two pieces are then separated again. The ultimate process depends on the type of basket the weaver intends to make. Untwisted straw is used for weaving double

weave baskets and the twisted straw is used for single weave baskets. Our round baskets are mostly done in the double weave.

DYEING

Various methods are used in preparing the straw for dyeing. Some women wrap small amounts of fibers into rings, while others tie together large bundles. A pot of water is brought to boil and the dye is added. The straw is then pressed down and submerged by stones, and heated for 15 to 20 minutes. For brightly colored baskets, the straw is first dyed yellow, allowed to dry, and then dyed again with the preferred color. The dyes are primarily from plant extracts and do not run or stain.

STARTING THE BASE

The actual weaving process starts with the basket base. Several pieces of twisted straw are used in the first line-up, brought together by another straw, to form a spider-like arrangement. The leg-like strings make up the vertical ribs of the basket. The weaving is accomplished by passing the horizontally placed straw in and out around the ribs to build the sides.

THE RIM

Once the body of the basket is completed the rim is added. First, the "legs" are tied into a knot at the top of the weaving. Next, the remaining pieces of the ribs are laid flat around the rim and trimmed to size. A piece of straw is used to systematically tie the ribs down into a uniform ring around the mouth of the basket.

THE HANDLE

There are several styles of handles, but for our round baskets, the usual handle is two-legged at both ends across the mouth of the basket, fusing into one in the middle to serve as the hand-grip. Treated goat hide, obtained from abattoir discards, is used to complete the handle. Some baskets have loops on

either side of the handle - these can be used to hold the neck of a wine bottle if you're using your basket for a picnic!

TRIMMING

Trimming involves the cutting off the remaining ends of the straw body of the basket both within and without.

CARE OF YOUR BASKET

When you first receive your basket it may not be in the exact shape you desire. Reshaping your basket is easy! Simply soak your basket for a minute or two in water (or place in the shower), carefully mold the basket into your desired shape, and allow to dry.

USES FOR YOUR BASKET

You'll find dozens of uses for your basket: use it to carry produce from your garden, hold cut flowers, use it as a picnic basket, use it to hold household tools (the optional loops on the handle hold a hammer!), to take towels to the beach, to hold newspapers, to carry books, to make a gift basket for any occasion, for arrangements in your home - you name it!

***Size variances:** As these baskets are completely hand made by a variety of artisans, each basket will vary slightly in size and dimensions as well as pattern, color and quality and tightness of weave.

Rose Valley Fine Arts
Cam Buckley & Jo Ann Urban
RR2 Box 34
Waynoka, OK 73860