

# TRADITIONAL CRAFTS WORKING WITH PLANT FIBRES

Traditional culture has used plant and animal fibres for many basic needs. Various braiding techniques with palms, esparto grass, wool, hemp, flax, cotton and other materials have been used to produce dresses, footwear, transport containers and many other objects with diverse functions.

In this area, the palmetto palm and esparto grass have been the most widely used plant fibres. Both are native and abundant, simple to harvest and straightforward to handle, and have provided rural society with the means of producing baskets and bags, hats, espadrilles (flat shoes), fans and many other everyday objects.

The palmetto or margalló (*Chamaerops humilis* L.) is the only native European palm tree. It is found on the coasts of the Iberian Peninsula, in Italy, northern Morocco and Algeria, and the islands of the Western Mediterranean. The palm leaves were collected mainly during July and August, at the time of the new moon. The young, as yet unopened, leaves were pulled out from the bud at the very centre of the palm tree, and these were the parts actually used. These palm leaf shoots were dried in the sun for about 20 days and then treated with sulphur, which both whitened them and made them more flexible. This was done in an enclosed area (usually in a large bowl) where only the young leaves came into contact with the smoke of the burning sulphur.

Before being used, the palm leaf buds had to be unfolded and the young leaves opened out by hand, and their fibrous strands separated, a process called to 'embrinar'. Once this had been done, the width of the strands had to be evened out, using a long needle to separate the esporguims, the filaments, which were kept and used to make paint brushes and brooms.

Any loose palm leaves were bundled up and rolled up in a cloth. To make the palms more flexible they were dampened with water. Then began the work of the "llata" which consisted in plaiting or braiding the strands into various widths depending on their proposed use: a 'seven mesh' or 'nine mesh' etc. depending on the number of strands. In this way rolls of braided fibres were produced, which were then sewn into the required shape, either freehand or by using a mold.

Esparto grass (*Stipa tenacissima*) has also been used to make "llata" and other types of braided textiles. The leaves were torn off in the summer, when the filaments were round in cross-section. Then they were dried in the sun and, if possible, soaked in sea-water for a few days. The esparto grass was useable at this stage if it was going to be plaited. If it was to be made into cord it was now crushed with a heavy stick

Espadrilles were made with this cord. They consisted of a sole, toe and heel. First of all the sole was made, formed by seven or eight circuits of cord stitched together with an espadrille needle. Afterwards the heel and the toe, which could be of esparto grass or cloth (in which case they were called "careta") were attached.