



# Carriers of Culture

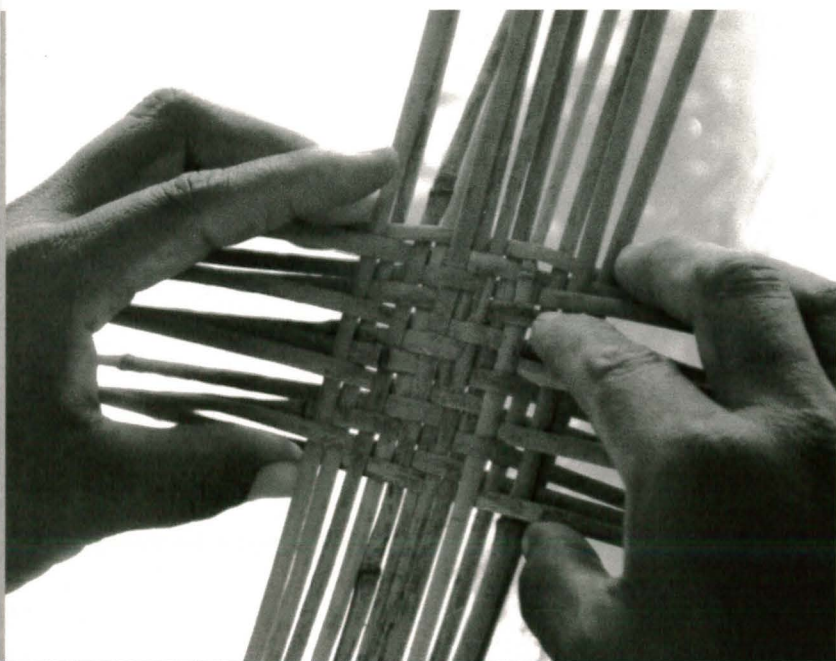
NATIVE BASKETRY IN AMERICA

C. Kurt Dewhurst, Marsha MacDowell, and Marjorie Hunt

Across North America and throughout the Hawaiian Islands, Native people are engaged in artistic activities deeply rooted in the everyday and ceremonial traditions of their communities. In the face of dwindling or inaccessible natural resources, loss of elders and their specialized knowledge, the profusion of cheap mass-produced goods, and the use-it and throw-away attitude of so many, Native artists are nevertheless gathering natural materials and weaving them into objects of profound beauty and meaning. The 2006 Smithsonian Folklife Festival program, *Carriers of Culture: Living Native Basket Traditions*, examines the contemporary state

of Native weaving in the United States and the ways in which Native baskets—and their makers—are “carriers of culture.”

One of the most important developments in indigenous basket weaving has been the formation of Native weaving organizations over the past fifteen years, bringing together weavers from diverse places to identify and examine problems, build a sense of shared experiences, foster communication and networking, share knowledge and skills, and begin to develop strategies to address some of the most critical issues they face. At local and regional gatherings held by these organizations and at workshops or symposia hosted by other supportive agencies, basket weavers began to find common voice as they articulated their concerns and experiences. We spotlight those voices here.



(Top) The Wa:k Tab Dancers perform a traditional Tohono O'odham basket dance. Photo by Marsha MacDowell, courtesy Michigan State University Museum

(Left) Choctaw basket weaver Norma Thompson of Bogue Chitto, Mississippi, makes a basket out of swamp cane. Photo courtesy Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians

(Right) Sabra Kauka, a Native Hawaiian basket weaver from Lihu'e, Kaua'i, makes a basket out of narrowly cut *lauhala* (pandanus leaf). Photo by Anne E. O'Malley







In 1999, Michigan State University Museum began a series of national meetings that brought together directors and/or board members of Native basket weaving organizations, curators of Native museums, individual Native artists, and a network of folklorists, historians, cultural anthropologists, tribal elders, educators, craft business owners, and other individuals involved in efforts to document, present, and support living basket traditions. Through those meetings, participants identified a number of issues concerning the current and future status of Native basketry across America and pinpointed strategies to bring national visibility to them. The Carriers

of Culture: Living Native Basket Traditions Festival program is one of those strategies, and a national curatorial council has worked to insure that those issues are at the core of the Festival program.

Most exhibitions, festivals, or other public programs have centered on the weaving traditions of a specific tribe or region, or focused on baskets as either objects of history or emblems of cultures past. Typically, such documentation and presentation efforts have been planned and implemented with little or no involvement of Native weavers. The Carriers of Culture: Living Native Basket Traditions Festival program, by contrast, reflects the long-term involvement of numerous people and provides an unprecedented opportunity to examine contemporary issues across tribal and geographical lines. It also presents a timely opportunity to reflect on recent efforts by Native basket weavers and others to address these issues; the ways in which weaving traditions continue to be passed on; and the meaning weaving has for artists as people and as members of distinct tribal or Native communities. *Most importantly, through demonstrations and discussions at the Festival and in the artists' own words below—gathered at project planning meetings and in interviews over the last fifteen years—weavers themselves share these perspectives first hand.*

I've always loved basketry—the art of basketry. I love the stories that go with it—the gathering times, the families coming together. It helps identify you. It gives you a strong foundation.

—THERESA PARKER (MAKAH)



## On the Importance of Weaving...

I've been making baskets for 46 years. You might say it's in my blood. If they opened my veins they'd probably find them full of ash shavings. —SARA LUND (MIGMAC)

There is archaeological evidence that indigenous peoples in North America wove and utilized baskets over 8,000 years ago. Baskets have served in perhaps every aspect of Native life. While modern technology and materials have reduced some of the functional need for handmade woven clothing, fishing and trapping gear, household furnishings, or various containers, baskets are still important both for traditional everyday uses and for Native ceremonies and rituals. As weaver Sylvia Gabriel (Passamaquoddy) recalls, the process of making baskets provides an important mechanism to learn and pass on specific cultural practices and knowledge: "We grew up seeing my grandmother, mother, aunt—my whole family—make baskets. It's a part of our life. Not every Indian knows how to make a basket. It's a tradition that's handed down, perhaps like a family of lawyers or doctors. When you grow up in a family of basket makers, you just become a basket maker."

For some weavers, making baskets is an important emblem of their identity as a Native person and a vehicle to express their affiliation with a specific cultural tradition. "Weaving is important to Native culture," explains Linda Cecilia Thompson Jackson (St. Regis Mohawk), "because each weave, no matter what kind, is locked in by another weave to make it stronger and firmer—resembling the community." For some, weaving is a means to express experiences, feelings, and beliefs that are inextricably tied to both their Native past and current life. "The first hour of my life I was put in a basket," Vivien Hailstone (Yurok, Karuk, and Hoopa) recalls, "and we never got away from baskets. There were baskets for every occasion. There were baskets for cooking and for sifting, for drying, for ceremonial things.... They made baskets to give away. Say I became ill and somebody took care of my baby. When I got better I would make the best basket I could, and I would be giving a part of myself to that person." For others such as Gladys Grace (Native Hawaiian), basket weaving is the means to rediscover and nurture those connections: "Weaving *laubala* [pandanus leaves] is like weaving a relationship.... It is weaving together the older with the younger generation.... We are all connected through weaving." And for some individuals, weaving is simply in their blood and something over which they have little control: being a weaver is who they are. "It is a privilege to carry on a tradition, and to honor the memory of my grandmother. But, mostly, I weave because it is who I am, and what I carry inside of me," weaver Cynthia Kannan (Washo) concludes.



Our work, like our people, is rooted in the ash and coastal sweetgrass.... Our Creation says that from the ash came the first people singing and dancing. —THERESA SECORD (PENOBSCOT)

(Left) Makah basket weaver Theresa Parker is the educational curator of the Makah Cultural and Research Center in Neah Bay, Washington. Photo by Fritz Dent, courtesy Washington State Arts Commission

(Above) Penobscot basket maker Theresa Secord of Old Town, Maine, is the founding director of the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance. Photo by Jennifer Neptune, courtesy Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance



## On Learning to Weave...



I learned to weave in 1931 when I was 11 years old. As a child, I wanted to play, go swimming, and ride my horse. But my mom wanted me to learn to weave *hala* [pandanus], and she took my horse away for three months until I finished a hat. I kicked and cried. My mom took me to an orchard to learn how to pick *hala*. She taught me to wipe the *hala*, soften it with a damp cloth, how to roll it, how to pull it out of the water to drip, and how to strip it. We had a stripper: my pa put phonograph needles on a board and we cut one strip at a time. At the end of the three months I got my horse back.

—EMMALINE KAAUALAULOAGAPALO (NATIVE HAWAIIAN)

I learned to make baskets when I was nine by carefully watching my mother. I started using *ye'ii* and *ye'ii bicheii* [Night Way] designs because my mother used to weave them in her rugs. And when the *ye'ii bicheii* come during a ceremony, they give you a blessing. —SALLY BLACK (NAVAJO)

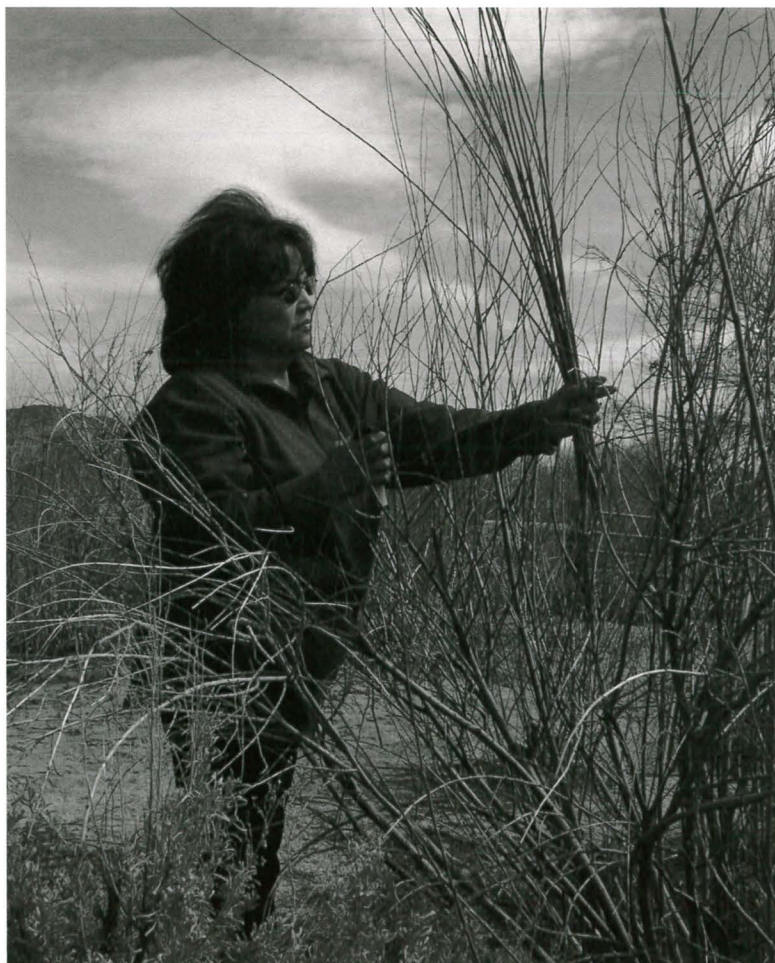
Native basket makers point out that learning to make a basket starts with knowing where, how, and when to gather and prepare the materials. Only after those are mastered does one begin to learn to weave. Learning in Native culture means having respect for the plants you gather, for your teacher, for the traditions of your tribe, and for your ancestors' knowledge that has been passed along from generation to generation.

Many weavers recount growing up with baskets, even being surrounded by them at times, learning to weave by watching and imitating the skills and practices of community and family members, then applying their own creativity and talent. One such weaver is Kelly Jean Church (Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians), who recounts: "I began black ash weaving at the age of 33 after three years of 'trying to figure it out on my own' after watching demonstrations by my dad and cousin... I am a fifth generation basket maker. If you asked my grandma she would call it an 'unbroken line' of basket makers."

Learning to weave is not simply learning to weave: it is also learning to live. The knowledge imparted by elders, the skills one gains through practice, and the care one puts into the work all contribute to the weaver's development as an artisan and as a member of family and community. "You have to develop the skill on your own," explains weaver Joseph "Mike" Sagataw (Hannahville Potawatomi). "It's like a dancer who is taught the basic steps of dance," he continues, "That's what basketry is really all about. You learn the steps and then you develop your own technique... To make a good basket, with fine splints and the right shape, just takes practice."

The latter part of the twentieth century saw a decline in weaving in many communities for a variety of reasons. Today, thanks to the

establishment of new programs for structured formal and informal learning, there has been a revitalization of Native weaving. Programs offered through Native organizations, tribal governments, museums, and state and national arts agencies include classes with master weavers and traditional arts apprenticeship programs. Weaver Marques Hanalei Marzan (Native Hawaiian) first studied in one such program: “I first learned weaving from Minewa Ka’awa at the Bishop Museum. My inspiration to learn came from my great grandmother’s weavings that my family cares for. The weavings made me want to bring back and awaken that knowledge in my family. Minewa Ka’awa was the beginning of my journey.” These programs are ensuring the transmission of weaving culture and contributing to a renaissance of Native weaving within many Native contexts in the United States. A new generation of young weavers is emerging, determined to “keep the chain” of traditional weaving unbroken.



I wanted to learn when I looked around the reservation where I grew up and realized there were only a handful of weavers left. I didn’t want it to die. —SUE COLEMAN (WASHO)

(Far left) Navajo basket weaver Sally Black, the eldest daughter of Mary Holiday Black, splits sumac, locally known as willow, in preparation for making a basket. Photo by Carol Edison, courtesy Utah Arts Council

(Left) Washo basket weaver Sue Coleman gathers willow to use for making baskets. Photo by C.J. Coleman, courtesy Sue Coleman





## On Transmitting Weaving Skills and Knowledge...

My *kumu*, Auntie Gladys Grace, says that for a weaver to be good, you also have to give back. She wants us to take in the knowledge that she's passing on to us, but she also wants to pass it on to the next generation in a traditional way of learning.—MICHAEL NAHO'OPI'I (NATIVE HAWAIIAN)

Native basket makers not only recall how they learned to gather and weave but also speak often about the importance of their revered teachers. The words of mentors guide weavers, and their names are invoked with great respect for the knowledge they have shared.

Recent years have seen a growing awareness in Native communities that weaving practices and related indigenous knowledge systems are at risk. Weavers and cultural leaders have stepped forward to ensure that weaving knowledge is passed on to the next generation of weavers. Deborah E. McConnell (Hoopa, Yurok, and Quinault) is one who has taken on this duty: "Weaving has become a way of life for me and is always on

my mind," she explains. "It keeps me balanced and makes me feel like I have a place in the world. I especially like teaching basketry to youth because it is an integral part of our culture and who we are as people."



Basket making has been a large part of my people's past. It provided a means of survival for some families but not enough recognition was given to this art. I want to make sure it remains strong in the present and in the future by teaching my daughters and granddaughters this great tradition.—SHEILA RANSOM (ST. REGIS MOHAWK)



Regional, state, and tribal gatherings of Native weavers over the past fifteen years have brought new opportunities for master teachers to share information within and across tribal and geographic lines. The California Indian Basketweavers Association is such an opportunity, explains weaver Jennifer Bates (Miwok): "This is what CIBA is all about: helping weavers find support and understanding; not being alone in what you do; finding out that you don't have to feel isolated, there are others like yourself out there weaving and keeping the traditions alive... We as an organization, and we as people coming together, should be very proud of the time, effort, teaching, laughter, tears, song, and sharing that we once again accomplished through this gathering." Both weaving education and mastery of weaving have at times been taken for granted within communities, but they are now more valued as symbols of Native identity.

I hope to continue to honor my teachers by passing on the art of Cherokee basketry. Teaching Native basketry is now more important to me than actually weaving baskets. What I hope my students remember is that their past is as important as their future, and what they do now affects seven generations to come. —PEGGY BRENNAN (CHEROKEE)

(Upper left) Navajo basket made of willow by Sally Black of Mexican Hat, Utah. Photo by Pearl Yee Wong, courtesy Michigan State University Museum

(Left) Sheila Ransom, a St. Regis Mohawk basket weaver from Akwesasne, New York, holds one of her award-winning fancy baskets made of black ash and sweetgrass. Photo courtesy Sheila Ransom

(Above) Cherokee basket weaver Peggy Brennan of Edmond, Oklahoma, teaches students about Cherokee traditional art and culture. Photo by Michael Vore, courtesy Union Public Schools, Tulsa, Oklahoma



## On Weavers as Indigenous Botanists...



To harvest red cedar I travel two or more hours up the mountain to elevations of two thousand feet or higher. The cedar grove I am searching for has a few alder trees in it and the grove is somewhat lacking in sunshine. The sunshine causes many limbs to grow on the tree. I am looking for the tree with limbs beginning twenty feet or higher so I will get a nice long piece of bark without limb holes. The tree must be healthy, straight, and the bark not twisting. The outer bark gives the tree nourishment and protection from disease. Pulling the bark off a tree with twisting bark will girdle the tree and the tree will die. You may strip one third of the perimeter of the cedar bark without harming the tree, I choose to harvest only one quarter of the bark to be safe. —LISA TELFORD (HAIDA)

You have to really dig hard, but the best place is along the river, where the spring waters have come down into Yosemite Valley and washed the sand away. The bracken fern loves to have its feet in water and near the wet soil, and so the soil is very soft and damp, and you'll pull away the soil. —JULIA PARKER (KASHAYA POMO AND COAST MIWOK)

Native weavers are indigenous botanists. To gather and prepare their materials, they must have extensive knowledge in many domains: where plants grow, when and how to harvest them in ways that will insure their sustainability and provide the proper materials needed for particular baskets, how to manage the land to sustain plant growth, and how to prepare materials for weaving. Joyce Ann Saufkie (Hopi) offers one example: "The material I use for weaving is yucca—we pick from the inside part of the yucca. And the yellow, green, and white are natural. We pick yellow in winter, when things freeze. We split it and dry it out in the sun, and when it's been snowed on, the sun makes it yellow. You pick white in summer, in July and August." It is not uncommon for weavers to begin to learn basket making by first spending time—sometimes weeks or even years—learning how to gather and prepare materials. "The most important part is picking the right material, having the eye to see what you are looking at," explains weaver Wolf Sanipass (Micmac). "I can walk in there and find trees. Looking at the bark tells you a lot; straight, very straight grain tells the whole story." Through their artistry, the skilled weavers transform simple natural materials into objects of beauty, as Judith L. Jourdan (Oneida) observes, "I am impressed with what can be done with a natural resource.... What is remarkable is that the week before, the basket was just a tree in the swamp."



With their intimate and extensive knowledge of plant ecology, Native weavers are also among the first to notice changes in plant habitat and be affected by them. “I am extremely concerned about the lack of access to weaving materials,” basket maker Leah Brady (Western Shoshone) remarks, “and environmental issues—such as pesticide spraying and toxic chemicals that are used by agricultural and mining companies in our area that affect the air and water quality—also affect our willows.” Environmental changes may be decades long and due to long-time encroachment by non-Natives on

land that was once the home of Native peoples. For example, Robin McBride Scott (Cherokee) explains the impact of pioneer settlement in Indiana: “Finding sources for harvesting river cane is a great concern to Cherokee weavers. Only a few patches of river cane still reside in Indiana. Southern Indiana once was the home of cane breaks. Now due to the early pioneer settling, farming, and raising cattle and pigs on the land, the river cane in Indiana has almost been eradicated.” The changes may also be more recent, as in Hawai‘i, where “finding *laubala* [pandanus leaves] on O‘ahu is extremely difficult,” according to Gwen Mokihana Kamisugi (Native Hawaiian). “In the past, it was abundant on the windward coast. You have to climb mountains to get it now. Cities and counties in the state are planting *laubala*, but it’s next to the freeways so it gets soot from the cars.”

The use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, construction of developments where certain plants have long been harvested, and introduction of non-native and often invasive species have had profound effects not only on basketry but also on the health of the weavers themselves. Kelly Jean Church discusses one current threat and the responses of Native weavers: “In the summer of 2002, a foreign bug called the Emerald Ash Borer was brought into Michigan by a ship from China. This proved to be devastating to our people. The bug eats the inside of the black ash tree, and bores its way throughout the tree, eventually killing the tree altogether. We share what we learn with other Native communities in hopes of saving our black ash trees from dying out, which would also take away our chances of teaching many future generations basket weaving with our native trees.”



We cannot weave without *launiu* [coconut palm leaves] or *laubala* [pandanus leaves] or *makaloa* [sedge], or the aerial roots of the ‘ie‘ie [frey-cinetia]. We cannot practice our art without those plants. We are related to these plants. Our legends tell us that when certain of our plants disappear, we, too, will disappear.

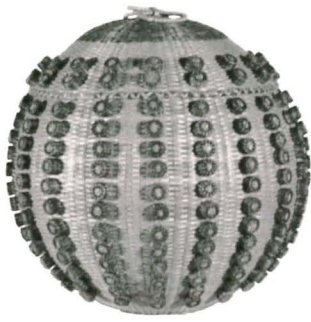
—SABRA KAUKA (NATIVE HAWAIIAN)

(Left) Julia Parker, a Kashaya Pomo and Coast Miwok basket weaver from Midpines, California, demonstrates grinding techniques in Yosemite National Park where she works as a Master Cultural Demonstrator. Photo by Denise Guidi, courtesy National Park Service

(Above) Sabra Kauka, a Native Hawaiian basket weaver from Lihu‘e, Kaua‘i, makes a basket out of *lauhala* (pandanus leaves).

Photo by Anne E. O‘Malley





## On Stewardship of Resources and Knowledge...

We try to take care of the plants, to take care of the land, always remember that our people were the first caring for the land and remember that always, no matter what other people do, our duty is to take care of the plants. —THERESA JACKSON (WASHO)

Native weavers are careful and concerned stewards of plant resources. They have deep and abiding respect for the land and extensive knowledge of how to harvest and care for plants in order to sustain healthy growth and insure the availability of these precious resources far into the future. “I never pick more than needed and leave the area looking the same as upon arrival,” explains Deborah E. McConnell. “I don’t

gather in another tribe’s area unless invited. If the land is managed by public land managers, I believe that it is the right of the original people to say it is okay to gather there.” Similarly, weaver Gladys Grace emphasizes the importance of stewarding not just plants, but the knowledge of how to gather and use them: “We need to be aware that we need to protect the *laubala* [pandanus leaves] and the weaving,” she notes. “We need to be careful who we teach.”





## On the Interrelationship of Basketry and Ceremonies, Language, Stories, and Other Practices...

When I start to make my baskets, I like to burn sweetgrass and I always talk to my late grandmother, my mother (who was proud of me for doing baskets carrying on the tradition), and my godmother, and thank them for my skills—and when my basket is complete I thank them again.” —SHEILA RANSOM (ST. REGIS MOHAWK)

The production and use of baskets are intrinsically linked to an array of other aspects of cultural knowledge, beliefs, and practices in Native communities. Baskets often figure prominently in creation stories and trickster tales, and in some communities the Basket Ogre or Basket Woman is a being to be treated with respect, caution, and even fear. Traditional stories and clan symbols are woven into basket designs, as weaver Peggy Brennan (Cherokee) recalls, “The clan symbols woven into mats and baskets identified who we were. When we attended a council meeting, our mat with the clan symbols hung above us and we sat on a mat with our symbols. By keeping the designs alive in our baskets, we are remembering our past.” Native beliefs often determine the shape and form of the baskets. “Baskets must always have an opening in them—the spirit line,” explains maker Agnes Gray (Navajo). “For traditional ceremonies it’s to let the bad stuff out. Story baskets need spirit lines too.”

Basket dances incorporate choreography that mimics the motions of weaving, and the dancers hold special baskets or wear woven hats and clothing. Among the Northern Paiute and Washo, Norm DeLorme explains, “Traditionally the Basket Dance is taken from our traditional Spring Ceremony when Indian foods and seeds are offered and scattered back to the land... In the spring my family has a Spring Ceremony to bless family baskets.” In other cases, as weaver Karen Reed (Chinook and Puyallup) describes, songs and dances are part of the weaving process: “When I first learned to weave from Anna Jefferson, I was taught to place my plaited bottom on the floor and to dance on it and sing to it. I sing a song that came to mind and have sung it ever since.”

Baskets are used as gifts or payment in weddings, purification ceremonies, coming of age ceremonies, initiation rites, seasonal ceremonies, or any ceremony where an object of value is required. They are also used in some communities to hold the bones or ashes of the deceased. Indigenous languages are maintained in the Native terms for plants, weaving processes, and finished objects, as well as the songs sometimes sung while gathering or weaving, or when thanking Mother Earth for her materials.



Every ceremonial basket has a story. There are many basket stories. If we stop making the baskets, we lose the stories. —MARY HOLIDAY BLACK (NAVAJO)

(Upper left) Striped gourd basket woven from sweetgrass and black ash by Akwesasne Mohawk basket weaver Florence Benedict with help from Rebecca and Luz Benedict of Rooseveltown, New York. Photo by Pearl Yee Wong, courtesy Michigan State University Museum

(Left) Robin McBride Scott weaves a Cherokee mat out of rattan. Photo by Gwen Yeaman, courtesy Robin McBride Scott

(Above) Navajo basket weaver Mary Holiday Black of Mexican Hat, Utah, received a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1995. Photo by Carol Edison, courtesy Utah Arts Council



## On Weaving and the Marketplace...

It's really hard to say how much time you've got into that basket. And you charge \$25 or \$30 for the basket and my God, they fall over. They don't realize how much time went into that basket. So when an Indian sells a basket, he shouldn't feel bad if he gets a good price for it. —AUBREY TOMAH (MALISEET)

Making baskets for sale has long provided an important source—and sometimes the primary source—of income for many Native weavers. Basket maker Peter Park (Native Hawaiian) recalls how his family depended on basketry: “When I was 10 years old, my grandmother taught me to make baskets for coffee picking. When I was a child, if you wanted to play, you had to weave first, because that’s the way our life was. We took our woven hats to the store to exchange for food, not money. A hat probably went for less than 30 cents. Every day after school I had to weave one *ipu* [container], and on Saturdays, I had to weave six *ipu* before I could play.” Park’s experience—and the price of his hats—is echoed by Harriet Shedawin (Ojibwa). “We used to go down to Richard’s Landing to sell baskets. Imagine 25 cents for one market basket!” she remembers. “I had to make baskets when I wanted clothes. I never had new clothes. Trading baskets for clothes—this was my way of dressing. Some of them were made over. I still buy clothes off what I make from baskets. I’m still clothed by my baskets.”

Even today, however, Native artists rarely receive a fair market value for the special skills and knowledge and the hours of collecting, preparing, and weaving that their work represents. The issue of fair compensation continues to deter people from weaving, but efforts are being made to assess market value more fairly and to expand sales opportunities through both non-Native and Native agencies, including cooperatives, museum stores, festivals, powwows, and even on-line marketing channels. “It’s no picnic being a basket maker,” weaver Donald Sanipass (Micmac) explains. “It’s not what you call a good risk thing. But we get by—we keep the wolf man off the door.”

The marketplace has long influenced the forms and designs of Native baskets. In order to appeal to new markets, Native artists have created new products and designs, sometimes resulting in work that seems very disconnected from traditional forms. The ability to adapt and respond to market influences has enabled weavers to use their products as a means of vital income. For weaver Teri Rofkar (Tlingit) and others, basketry serves as a primary occupation: “I’m a full-time artist,” she notes. “I have been selling my work since 1986. I often describe myself as a ‘Basket Case’... I weave all the time, and the rest of the time I am out in the forest harvesting materials.”





## On Tradition and Innovation...

I like to experiment with new ideas that you normally don't see on baskets.... I almost always sketch out my designs before beginning, even though this is not traditional. My baskets are made from yucca and bear grass. I use devil's claw and yucca root to make the patterns. I sign my baskets on the bottom with my initials, although this is not traditional either. Sometimes I have trouble pricing my baskets because my stuff is so different. —ANNIE ANTONE (TOHONO O'ODHAM)

Tradition and innovation are often seen in opposition, but many Native weavers who work within their own cultural traditions also explore new directions. While tradition is both resilient and persistent, weavers experiment with new forms, materials, and ideas. Sometimes, as for Eraina Palmer (Warm Springs, Wasco, and Hoopa), limited access to natural resources encourages creative improvisation: "We can't make the root bags with Indian hemp [dogbane], because we can't get it anymore, so we use twine and cotton linen, and I even make my baskets out of t-shirts—old tie-dyed t-shirts—and this one is out of a Pendleton blanket. I just try anything and everything I can get a hold of." For others, experimentation is embedded in their identity, as weaver Pat Courtney Gold (Wasco and Tlingit) explains: "I enjoy experimenting with new fibers and trying variations on old designs. I'm sure if my ancestor basket weavers were transplanted into this century they would be inspired to do the same." Culture is never static but always changing, and so too are the baskets made by Native weavers in the United States. "Craftsmakers come up with new models every year, and so will we!" Lorraine Black (Navajo) emphasizes.

Weavers look for inspiration in both traditional and new sources. "Today, my own baskets—both contemporary and traditional—often emerge from the dream process," explains maker Terrol Dew Johnson (Tohono O'odham). "New designs and styles haunt my sleep, calling me



(Upper left) After the hard work of harvesting spruce roots for use in making traditional Tlingit baskets, Teri Rofkar triumphantly shows off the fruits of her labor. Photo courtesy Teri Rofkar

(Left) A basket made by Wasco and Tlingit basket weaver Pat Courtney Gold of Scappoose, Oregon, and a twined burden basket made of willow by Ardith Read, a Mewuk basket weaver from Flournoy, in California's Yosemite Valley. Photos by Pearl Yee Wong, courtesy Michigan State University Museum

(Above) This basket, made out of old ethnographic film by Onondaga and Micmac basket weaver Gail Tremblay, is titled "Homage to Wild Strawberries." Photo by Pearl Yee Wong, courtesy Michigan State University Museum



to weave them into the waking world, one stitch at a time, until they have taken on a life of their own." Some weavers use their art to make political statements and offer social commentary, for instance incorporating old ethnographic film of Native American life in their baskets or including cell phones and Game Boys in woven pictorial scenes. Art becomes a vehicle for communication and advocacy.

Inventive work often mixes old and new, and results often challenge stereotyped notions of basketry as an old-fashioned,

ordinary, and static craft. In fact, exciting, innovative work is being embraced within Native communities and showcased as art in museums, galleries, and other venues that previously considered Native baskets in more restricted categories of "ethnic arts," "crafts," or "tribal arts." The individual creativity of the maker infuses the works they create. "To me, each basket is a kind of sculpture. You form it with yourself, you build it with your own hands," Carol Emarthle-Douglas (Seminole and Northern Arapaho) concludes.





## On Mastery and What Makes a Good Basket...

Good, strong, healthy materials to start with. Good, strong, healthy thoughts by the weaver. Good, strong, healthy use by the weaver. Good, strong, healthy thanks from all.

—BRYAN WAYNE COLEGROVE  
(HOOPA, KARUK, AND YUOK)

Standards of excellence are firmly established and well known within Native communities and those with exceptional skills at making or teaching about baskets are given honor and respect as *kumus*, as elders, as masters. Beginning weavers know that they must pass the scrutiny of both teachers and peers and must meet community standards of excellence. Adherence to cultural values, norms, and beliefs—and perhaps equally important, the character of the basket maker—are fundamental to community-based notions of what makes a good basket. “Always remember your hat or whatever you weave is a reflection of yourself,” Michael Naho’opi’i comments. “To have a good finished object, you have to have a good heart in yourself to put into that.” Weaver Wilverna Reece (Karuk) reinforces this point, suggesting, “Always keep good thoughts when weaving; to have bad thoughts will ruin your basket.” She continues, “Never laugh at another’s basket, because it will show in yours. Never leave your basket unfinished for a long length of time. It will go out that night and dance and break its legs.” In many cases, it is even the spiritual dimension of the basket that determines whether or not it will be “good.”

Both within and outside Native communities, important programs recognize and honor outstanding teachers and makers of baskets. The National Heritage Fellowships of the National Endowment for the Arts, the Community Spirit Awards of the First Peoples Fund, and state heritage and governors’ arts award programs are but a few of the efforts bringing wider recognition to master weavers.



(Left) Detail of “Tradition Meets Technology” basket made out of waxed linen thread, beads, and Indian hemp by Carol Emarthle-Douglas, a Northern Arapaho and Seminole basket weaver from Bothell, Washington. Photo by Pearl Yee Wong, courtesy Michigan State University Museum

(Above) Apache basket weaver Evalena Henry of Peridot, Arizona, was honored with a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 2001. Photo by Tom Pich

## On the Future of Native Basket Making in America...



For Native baskets to continue to be “carriers of culture” for Native traditions, there are still many challenges to overcome. The ever-changing natural and built landscape in the United States is leading to loss of plants essential to weaving. As more land moves into private ownership, weavers encounter increasingly limited access to traditional gathering sites. Non-native land management practices will continue to affect the health of plant materials and of weavers themselves.

Undoubtedly, other challenges to the continuity of the traditions of living Native basketry in the United States will also emerge. While much progress is being made to revitalize the basket traditions in many Native communities, there are other Native communities where basketry is in rapid decline. This will mean not just fewer baskets, but the irreplaceable loss of an array of indigenous knowledge linked to the art and a diminishment of the diversity and richness of our American experience.

Native baskets are not antiquated containers or artifacts of a past life; they are very much a part of Native life and identity today. Native baskets truly are “carriers of culture”: they embody the knowledge of those who have gone before, those who have respect and reverence for the natural world and the plants that form their baskets, and those who have shared their knowledge with others to keep the chain of indigenous knowledge unbroken.

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*Dewhurst, MacDowell, and Hunt served as curators of the 2006 Festival program *Carriers of Culture: Living Native Basket Traditions*.*

(Above) Native Hawaiian basket weaver Marques Hanalei Marzan from Oahu, Hawai'i, holds his hand-woven *pe'ahi maoli* (fan). Photo by Marsha MacDowell, courtesy Michigan State University Museum

(Right) A Tohono O'odham basket made by Terrol Dew Johnson of Sells, Arizona. Photo by Pearl Yee Wong, Michigan State University Museum



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