

BASKETRY

making human nature

Basketry is about far more than baskets. This exhibition includes architectural panels and mats, boats and traps, hats and shields, alongside contemporary design and works of art, some specially commissioned. It celebrates the astonishing variety of uses for basketry technology and explores the place of basketry in human culture.

Basketry is defined by techniques such as plaiting, knotting and binding. Although most basketry materials are organic, metals and plastics are increasingly popular and recycling has long been a part of the process. Materials of all kinds can be used providing some of them are flexible enough to be woven to create a unified structure.

The origins of basketry go back several thousand years in the archaeological record, but there is some evidence that it is much older. Although primarily associated with the creation of useful objects, basketry gives us insights into human ingenuity and thinking processes. It shows us how inventive people are, making all manner of things to resolve challenges and needs. It also reveals our resourcefulness in discovering appropriate materials and our capacity to experiment and innovate.

Basketry develops a spirit of enquiry. It has played an important part in making human nature.

Number pattern form

Understanding the relationships between number, pattern and form is essential to basketry, central to mathematics and to our sense of order in the universe.

Most basketry techniques use regular repeated actions to produce various patterns. In plaiting, for example, weaving a strand from one side across the other strands, then doing the same from the other side, establishes an even and recognisable diagonal structure. The character of the pattern varies, depending on whether the sequence of weave is, 'one under one over' or 'two under two over'.

Many weaves involve intertwining elements approximately at right angles to each other but other methods are also widespread. For example, weaving three strands at 60 degrees to each other results in a design of triangles or hexagons. In this way number and geometry determine the character of surface pattern.

Three-dimensional basketry can be made by binding or stitching together a continuous plait or bundle of fibres in a spiral to make a bowl or cone. Another common method is to begin with a flat rectangular or circular woven base, raise the strands vertically and introduce a new element to weave through them to make sides. The result may be 'cubic' or 'conic', but many other geometric solid forms can result from different techniques. Transitions between shapes are common within a single basket.

Transformations

The forms and patterns which occur as part of the process of basketry manufacture are often copied in other media, indicating their significance. The technology itself can also be modified and transferred and acts as a visual reminder of basketry prototypes.

Early forms of pottery, such as those from the Bronze Age, are constructed by coiling lengths of clay, a technique directly borrowed from coiled basketry. This conversion may be accentuated by patterns imprinted on the clay itself, which imitate the binding or stitching of coils of plant fibre. Although the technology of production is very different, the Hellenistic glass bowl in the exhibition transfers the shape and patterns of an everyday basket to an elite luxury object.

A design feature which is copied in another material, even when functionally unnecessary, is termed a 'skeuomorph'. The word 'plectomorph' has been devised for the practice of copying woven designs and applying them to artefacts in another material. The Kuba peoples from the Democratic Republic of Congo are particularly accomplished in this area. So deep-rooted is the world of woven forms and so significant is the role played by these motifs that they are transferred directly to other artefacts and contexts, such as masks, wooden boxes and clay pots.

The many transpositions of basketry forms show their value and adaptability, for example the use of interlace in Early Christian art.

Harvest

Humans have successfully exploited the natural world for tens of thousands of years. Initially used for harvesting and preparing food from the wild, basketry was adapted for controlling domesticated animals and for agricultural processes in settled societies.

Basketry is still widely used to make protective structures such as fences, pens and houses. It also has a long history as a means of catching prey; basketry fish traps, rat traps, lobster pots and fishing weirs are common in many cultures around the globe. Equally, basketry is employed for the storage and processing of foodplants such as rice, wheat and cassava and to transport goods to and from the marketplace.

The manufacture of these structures varies enormously. A fisherman may make and mend his own pots and traps, sometimes out at sea. Yet a basket such as the herring cran was also an official measure, produced on an industrial scale, subject to rigorous external control, and had to be discarded when damaged. While some production practices involve strict regulation other objects on display are constructed and repaired with a more individual and inventive approach.

Flexibility

It is an essential characteristic of basketry that some elements are flexible enough to weave through the structure to hold it together. Flexibility has a number of advantages. If the elements are very flexible the object can be folded up or rolled into a small space when not in use. Where the strands are springy, they have the capacity to absorb pressure or impact and then regain their original shapes. This means that some basketry containers expand when filled, or cushion their contents if dropped. It also makes basketry ideal for shielding the body.

Inspired by shapes and contours in nature, the flexibility of basketry lends itself to the construction of sinuous and bulbous forms, evoking the vitality of its organic origins. The associations with living things and growth can provoke a range of reactions, from comfort to threat. A container with slightly swollen sides may suggest the fullness of ripe fruit while serpentine or whip-like shapes are less reassuring.

Makers and materials

Behind every basket is a basket maker, the man or woman who determined its form, chose and often prepared the materials. The status of basket makers varies enormously; even today some remain anonymous while others are widely celebrated. This exhibition includes work across this range as well as baskets collected directly from their makers by scholars who have fostered a close relationship with them.

Basketry requires the acquisition and careful preparation of materials. Where plant fibres are chosen, selection criteria can include the maturity, colour and calibre of the stems to achieve the desired results. The plants may be found in the wild, but especially where large-scale production is concerned it is necessary to cultivate them in quantity to sustain the industry. Basketry materials are crops and treated as such.

The material is rarely in a ready-to-use state. Once gathered it has to be cleaned and prepared using various techniques. These may include cutting, scraping, splitting, soaking, shredding and bleaching. Weavers usually size their materials so that the dimensions are uniform, a meticulous and time-consuming task necessary to ensure the regular and consistent appearance of the finished product. There are many tools used to aid preparation. Some are specially devised modern machines, but in most cultures traditional methods remain the norm for small-scale production.

Nests and webs

The development of basketry as inspired by nature is deeply rooted and emphasises the interrelationships of art, nature, and human culture. It seems that people learned the forms, functions and processes of basketry by observing the behaviour of other creatures. The nests constructed by small mammals or birds, webs and cocoons made by insects, have more in common with basketry than anything in the culture of our evolutionary relatives among the apes.

It is noticeable that many of the techniques used by birds in nest building have basketry equivalents. These include the coiling of fibres in an upward spiral, and 'stitching' materials together with long strands, as weaver birds do. Some nests are thick and impermeable, whilst others have very open structures that allow water and air to pass through them easily. Like humans, some birds are ready to experiment with unfamiliar materials, even recycling human rubbish. Nests may have been appropriated by humans as one of the earliest forms of containers, most obviously for carrying a clutch of eggs.

Fascination with spiders and their webs is widespread in human culture and myth. The common arrangement of spokes and concentric rings is adapted to form one-way entrances in fish traps from many different parts of the world.

Recycling

Basketry exploits available resources of all kinds, primarily natural materials but more recently manmade ones. People are not alone; birds and other animals may use paper, plastic and wire in constructing their nests. The principle is the same, finding materials with the required properties of strength, flexibility, insulation or permeability.

The repair of damaged baskets is an important aspect of recycling as it often involves making do with whatever materials are to hand: strips of metal or nylon cord. The character of the basket gradually changes through the successive stages of mending.

Increasingly the advantages of using discarded materials are being exploited in creating new baskets. Strands of tape or thin rolls of paper and anything that can be cut into strips, such as plastic containers and card, lend themselves to experiment. Their colour and texture have extended the aesthetic repertoire of basketry.

Recycled materials are also broadening the ethical aspects of the technology, for reusing rubbish is now seen as a contribution to protecting the environment, equivalent to the traditions of nurturing natural resources. Perhaps it is this broad moral dimension that makes recycling appealing for a wide range of producers, from the developing world to contemporary art studio practice, and to the markets for which they are working.

Protecting the body

For tens of thousands of years, woven fibres have provided people with additional protective layers. Most often in direct contact with the body, they were also formed into larger containers: baby carriers and cradles, boats and houses. The association with safety and comfort remains fundamental to the positive feelings we have about basketry.

The boundary between textile and basketry is hard to define; the use of a loom for making cloth is probably the most important distinction. Garments of various kinds, such as the two capes in the exhibition, apparently designed in imitation of animal pelts, use techniques related to mat making. These are both quite flexible, but it is often the relative rigidity of basketry that is most significant as, like a carapace, it can provide the equivalent of an exterior skeleton for protection, for example when used as armour.

The effectiveness of the technology itself as protection is suggested by its widespread use for weaving hats and cloaks to cover the most vulnerable parts of the body. For these reasons, the woven patterns painted or scarified onto the skin, especially the torso, and perhaps the plaiting of hair are related to basketry.

Ritual and belief

Ceremonies and ritual practices associated with belief systems are common in cultures all over the world. Basketry is a significant aspect of these occasions because of its transformative and protective qualities.

Various mythological accounts of the creation of the universe involve weaving. They seem to show that the development of basketry is directly implicated in ideas about divinely created order. In a Maori myth, Tane nui a rangi (Son of Heaven) obtained three baskets from the heavens: *te kete tua tea* (the basket of ritual knowledge), *te kete tua uri* (the basket of occult knowledge) and *te kete aronui* (the basket of technical knowledge and the arts).

In Central Africa close communication with the dead and beliefs in the effectiveness of their powers are mediated by healers, diviners and *banganga* (ritual specialists). *Banganga* use containers, including baskets, filled with spiritually-charged materials for divination purposes. These baskets become so potent that they are themselves often contained in places of secrecy.

Basketry costumes appear in masquerades in which a masked figure impersonates a spirit, ancestor or some other ideal entity. Masks have a life of their own, acting as a second skin which subsumes the identity of the performer.

The Purari Delta

For the communities of the Purari Delta on the south coast of Papua New Guinea, basketry is a fundamental, but changing, part of life. Made exclusively by women, baskets known as *akeke* composed of young leaves from sago palms, and baskets known as *aku* made from tree bark, are used for food processing and storage as well as to hold items of personal value. Coloured with both local and store-bought dyes, the designs of these baskets link their users to their ancestors who take the form of various animals and plants inhabiting the surrounding forest and waterways. Today these baskets are all that remain of an integrated ritual art tradition largely abandoned with the adoption of Christianity in the 1950s.

Women draw upon the same repertoire of plaiting techniques and materials to make local fishing equipment. The largest of these is a fishing weir called *uru*, which consists of numerous narrow strips of sago palm bark woven together to form a screen. Staked into the creek bed during high tide, as the tide recedes *uru* trap fish, prawns, and turtles, which the women catch using *iviri* (dip nets) and *orea* (conical nets).

As communities are increasingly pulled into the global cash economy these technologies are slowly disappearing. Commercially marketed bags are replacing *akeke* and *aku*, while nylon nets are taking the place of *uru*. With the disappearance of these basketry forms repertoires of knowledge about the environment, designs and the ancestral relationships they materialize are being eroded, as are the social relations that the making and using of these forms engender. Recognizing these practices through exhibitions such as this one may encourage communities to continue producing these objects for use and out of cultural pride.