

# Courtney Gold preserves heritage through basketry

By Virginia Grantier

She had waited for years, for just the right time, to make a trip across the country to be with it, to see it. And when the museum staff brought out the old basket, she could feel her heart begin to pound.

As if a beloved someone had appear unexpectedly from behind a door.

She couldn't speak for about 20 minutes, remembers Pat Courtney Gold, nationally honored American Indian artist.

Staff members at Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology let her hold the basket, which is more than 200 years old, in her gloved hands. While she did, they asked her what she was feeling. She remembers just waving a hand to indicate she couldn't speak.

"To me it represented my culture; I felt that I was touching my ancestors... It was such an emotional and spiritual experience," Gold said. "I held it for six hours."

The Wasco Tribe, her tribe—a branch of the Chinooks who lived at the Columbia River—traded this basket in 1805 to explorers Lewis and Clark.

The basket's intricate design of horizontal faces set in geometric shapes reflected the tribe's view of time as a circle: no beginning, no end. Baskets, items of cultural and spiritual meaning, also held the powdered salmon and other items the tribe used to barter with other tribes.

When the tribe was forced by Euro-Americans to leave for the reservation in central Oregon in the 1850s, the move tore at the fabric of their culture, their practices, by separating them from all that was familiar.

They had to leave behind plants so valued for basket-making, medicine and other uses that prayers were spoken prior to harvesting.

During the decades after, many cultural traditions, including basket-weaving, were almost



Gold with her latest work at the School for Advanced Research (SAR) in Santa Fe, NM.

lost.

So in 2009, what is left? Gold, for one.

She now harvests native plant fibers, and prays and weaves.

Gold was in her 50s when she started to learn to weave.

After college, she used math skills honed at Whitman College in Walla Walla to work as a researcher in a hydraulics lab at Washington State University, then taught math at community colleges before returning to research work for state and federal environmental agencies. She also worked for the Bonneville Power Administration in Portland on projects, including a study on environmental effects of Columbia River dams.

About 20 years ago, she and a sister, both enrolled members in the Wasco Nation of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, decided to learn how to weave, in part to help keep that aspect of the Wasco culture from dying. With the help of the few weavers left, and through research and studying baskets in museums, the sisters learned.

Gold's persistence resulted in mastery. She has received numerous honors, including the 2007 National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Award in Washington, D.C. for her artwork and for her outreach efforts to teach workshops and to form a new organization of Native basket weavers.

She was featured on National Public Television's award-winning "Craft in America" program and was a consultant for an exhibit at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. Gold also directed a film about basket weavers, and her work is in public and private collections here and abroad.

In the 1990s, as she learned to weave, she saw a picture of the 1805 basket stored at the Peabody Museum and resolved to go and study it when she felt confident enough in her own weaving. When she took the trip in 1998, she found a clear connection with its maker.

"The way (the basket weaver) started at the base is exactly how I start a basket," Gold said. To

create an 8-inch base using the technique they share can take about seven hours. The total time invested can be more than 80 hours to harvest, prepare and dye the fibers and weave a basket.

Gold sometimes has to travel hundreds of miles to find the plants—tule, cattails, dogbane—she needs for fibers. Native plants have been lost to urban and agricultural development. Some on federal land are sprayed since they're considered invasive plants.

At one time she tried to grow the plants at her Scappoose home, but eventually stopped.

"The fiber in the plants that grow wild is much, much better. They're stronger, taller," she said.

Her parents raised their family in a cabin in the woods near Warm Springs, and taught their children respect for the earth, including the responsible harvesting of native plants and the importance of always saying prayers of thanks. They participated in traditional ceremonies, but basket-weaving skills weren't

passed down.

Gold learned the cultural value of baskets during childhood visits to the Maryhill Museum of Art in Goldendale, Wash., where her mother would point out the beautiful Wasco baskets.

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