

Magic in the Air, Baskets on the Table

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there would be room for improvement, and all participants have been bringing their A-game in recent classes, because the stakes were dramatically raised.

Beginning in March, the Hallie Ford Museum at Willamette University will open a six-month exhibit of contemporary Grand Ronde basketry, and don't expect any scrub pieces out of this class.

Matheson could be considered less a teacher, and more a master in the realm of basketry. She owns a doctorate in Ethnobotany, the study of human usage of plants, and even did her dissertation on West of the Rockies basketry. For 20 years baskets have been a centerpiece of her life. She has traveled to Europe to study the craft, and even lived in Japan to devote herself to bamboo basketry.

"The most interesting thing about this is that really, it takes longer to prepare materials than to make the baskets," she observes. "When you actually start on your basket, you are more than halfway done."

This class especially offers testament to that. Everybody had to gather their own materials, and some still gather to this day. Many materials are seasonal, so considerable foresight is needed, and a plan essential. Branches and the like need a good soaking before they are workable, and many materials change hue over time.

Mueller uses, among other things, spruce root, willow bark, beargrass and woodwardia for her materials. Mercier prefers western red cedar, cherry bark, yellow Alaska cedar and seagrass. Tony Johnson, the Tribal Cultural Specialist, may be the purist of the lot.

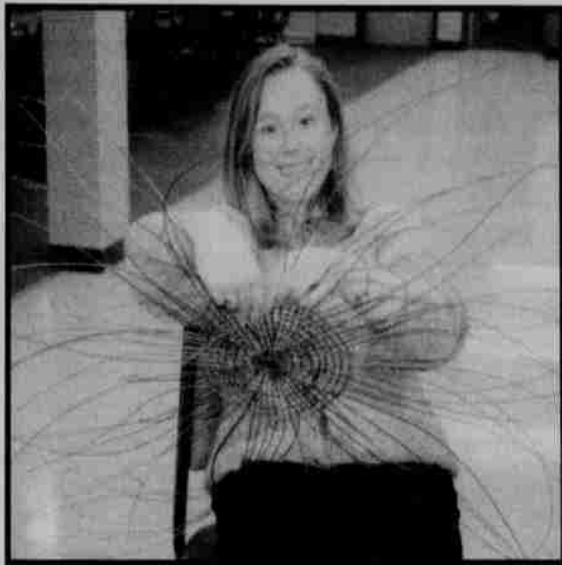
"I got this sweetgrass at the mouth of the Chinook River," he says proudly.

For many that might not signify much, but for Johnson it marks clear tradition. He has traced his ancestry diligently, and knows that his forebears gathered materials at that same spot.

"Many people, sadly, think basketry is stupid," Matheson says somewhat bitterly. "Yet they don't understand how important baskets were long ago, for gathering, storage..."

Indeed, she says, a good basket was often an investment, and a necessity. One would not think that roots, grass and slim branches would expect a long life, but many of the baskets in the Tribal collection are more than a century old, with a handful teetering on the brink of 150 years. Hold them in your hand and they are just as flexible, pliable and yes, sturdy, as the models being crafted today.

The baskets come in many shapes and sizes, from a rough picnic basket complete with handle, to smaller cylindrical pieces destined for some



Above: Kathleen Feehan making a willow tray.

Left: Kim Mueller working on a spruce root medallion.

Below: Marion Mercier (right) is creating a junkus purse to match one that was made by a family member years ago. Her daughter Candi Koehler is working on a cedar basket.



necklace. Mercier has crafted her own purse, and Mueller a medallion. Perhaps the simple shapes are what cause many people to blow them off. But close inspection will reveal just how intricate, and obviously painstaking, these wonders are. An eye for detail, and no less, is needed to understand their value.

For Rebecca Dobkins, who teaches courses on Native American cultures at Willamette University, the baskets are a godsend.

"After seeing how difficult it is to make these, you can really appreciate the work that went into the original baskets," she says.

Dobkins, who was instrumental in establishing the exhibit, would know. She also oversees the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Gallery at Hallie Ford Museum. This gallery displays basketry from Oregon's premier basket phenoms, including Joey Lavadour, who teaches basketry at the Crow's Shadow Institute for the Arts in Pendleton, and was mentor to Tribal member Sam Henny. An assortment of Henny's own work will be included in the exhibit.

"I am soooo excited for this," Dobkins says. "You can see that they've really got some talented basket weavers here."

On Feb. 21, Dobkins attended the final Grand Ronde basketry class to help students pick their best works for the exhibit. Dobkins has been friends with Matheson for years, and agrees that classes like these are vital to preserving the Native Ameri-

can identity. Basketry has the potential to fall by the wayside, she says, because many people no longer find any use in it. To some, it is simply a hobby.

Oddly enough, Native American basketry will be no stranger to Willamette University. During the early part of the 20th century, the university collected scores of baskets, ones that had been given to Methodist missionaries by the Clatsop and Kalapuyans. During the 1930s, two well-known Salem collectors donated several hundred more baskets to the university. And in ensuing decades the baskets became a prominent part of the university's art collection as paintings, sculptures and other art forms from around the globe found their way to the small Salem school. Yet despite this huge and gradual influx of works, the university lacked a museum in which to display all of them.

Alumnus Dan Schneider and Professor Roger Hull began the arduous process of gathering support to found a museum, and in 1996 presented the idea before the Willamette Board of Trustees. With the help of an enormous donation from long-time benefactor Hallie Ford, of the Ford Family Foundation in Roseburg, the university was able to purchase the U.S.

West Communications Building just one block from campus, and by 1998 transformed the 27,000 square foot structure into a bona fide museum.

The Hallie Ford Museum has since enjoyed many more donations, in the form of art and money, and boasts some rather impressive pieces. In addition to the extensive basketry collection, the museum also features 12 prints by Auguste Rodin, donated by Michael Foster, and also 12 ancient vases given by Muriel Stieber.

The Spirit Mountain Community Fund donated \$250,000 in 1999 to help establish the Native American basketry exhibit. Nobody would call the money ill spent.

"I'm impressed by this class," Matheson says, and nods in satisfaction "I really am!"

She has reason to be, for while this class marks her departure, it does not mean the end of the gathering. Many of the students plan to convene every Wednesday, same as usual, to resume their hobby. And though Matheson's expertise will be sorely missed, don't expect the enthusiasm level to diminish. Already plans are underway for the spring gathering of materials, and if you've a penchant for this sort of thing, stop on by. Everybody is admitted.



Above: A display of old Grand Ronde basketry.

Below: Siletz Tribal member Lori Brown reproduced a peeled willow basket she modeled after three old baskets. All of the baskets are pictured here — Lori's is the light colored basket in front.



Photos by Kim Mueller, Chris Mercier and Marion Mercier