Carriers of Culture: Teaching and Learning Native Basketry

by Marsha MacDowell, PhD, and C. Kurt Dewhurst, PhD

Heritage Fellows practice traditional ways of learning and teaching that feature powerful aesthetics, methods, and standards but differ from formal education in schools, academies, and museums. Within cultural groups who share common language, values, and traditions, folk artists learn by observing, imitating, and practicing music, dance, narrative, crafts, rituals, and ways of living. To illustrate this learning process, Marsha MacDowell and Kurt Dewhurst describe their experiences with Native American basket makers during years of collaboration with diverse Native artists on the Carriers of Culture project. Many of the artists have won recognition from their tribes and home states and several are Heritage Fellows (Evalena Henry, Delores Churchill, Nettie Jackson, and Mary Holiday Black).

This article is adapted from "Carriers of Culture: Native Basketry in America," by C. Kurt Dewhurst, Marsha MacDowell, and Marjorie Hunt, Smithsonian Folklife Festival Program, *2006.*

Lesson Ideas

Mom always said, "You have to make a basket wrong before you can learn to do it right."

– Donald Sanipass (Micmac)

- Ask students what this quote means to them. Read other quotes from this article aloud. Learning involves taking risks and making mistakes. What examples do students have of learning to make or do something—skateboarding, hair braiding, cooking, mastering games? How did they learn to do it correctly?
- Ask students to choose a skill they have learned and think carefully about it. Who taught them? Have they taught it to anyone? Ask them to write about the skill or create a storyboard sequencing the steps.
- Students can demonstrate and teach their skills to classmates in a Young Masters showcase.

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 throwaway attitude of so many, Native artists are nevertheless gathering natural materials and weaving them into objects of profound beauty and meaning.

Carriers of Culture: Living Native Basket Traditions, a multiyear, multifaceted project, examines the contemporary state of Native weaving in the United States and the ways Native baskets—and their makers—are "carriers of culture." Coordinated by Michigan State University Museum in partnership with the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage and the National Museum of the American Indian, the project to date has resulted in gatherings of weavers, a major interpretive program at the 2006 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, a preview exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian, a web-based resource center showcasing weavers' multimedia portraits, and Next Generation programs for young people carrying on their elders' traditions (see Resources on p. 9). This article highlights contemporary stories of the scope of knowledge and skills encompassed in the making of baskets, how the knowledge of basket making is being passed on, and the meaning that weaving has for Native peoples.

Kelly Church and her daughter Cherish Parrish at the 2005 Great Lakes Folk Festival, East Lansing, Michigan

Photos by Marsha MacDowell, courtesy of the MSU Museum

Ed Kaneko shows Mikah Tomono how to make a hat of lauhala *palm, Kona, Hawaii*

On learning to weave…

Learning in Native culture means having respect for the plants you gather, your teacher, the traditions of your tribe, and your ancestor's knowledge that has been passed along from generation to generation. Native basket makers point out that learning to make a basket starts with knowing where, how, and when to gather and prepare materials. Many weavers begin their first lessons by accompanying elders on trips to traditional gathering locations where they help dig cedar roots, strip birch bark, or carry logs of black ash home and then further assist in the often time-consuming, laborious processing of those materials for weaving. These are occasions for learning the culturally appropriate ways to harvest plants, including giving thanks to the earth that provided them.

Many weavers recount growing up with baskets, even being surrounded by them at times, and learning to weave within family and community settings. These formative experiences, like those with gathering and preparing materials, are also important times for learning indigenous language stories, songs, and other cultural knowledge and foster feelings that weaving baskets are a part of who they are as Native peoples.

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.

—Sylvia Gabriel (Passamaquoddy)

Please turn to page 7

Learning Native Basketry

continued from page 4

The first hour of my life I was put in a basket. 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.
–Vivien Hailstone (Yurok, Karuk, and Hoopa)

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.
–Karen Reed (Chinook and Puyallup)

Meeting Standards

Most weavers learn by watching and imitating the skills and practices of community and family members, then applying their own creativity and talent. Standards of excellence are firmly established and well known within Native communities and those with exceptional skills at making baskets or teaching weaving are given honor and respect as *kumus*, as elders, as masters. Beginning weavers know they must pass the scrutiny of both teachers and peers and meet community standards of excellence. Adherence to cultural values, norms, and beliefs is fundamental to community-based notions of what makes a good basket. In many cases, it is even the spiritual dimension of the basket that determines whether it will be "good."

I learned to make baskets when I was nine by carefully watching my mother. I started using yÈ'ii and yÈ'ii bicheiis designs because my mother used to weave them in her rugs.
–Sally Black (Navajo), daughter of Heritage Fellow Mary Holiday Black

Once I was having a lot of trouble with a basket and I was complaining to my tutu *[grandparent], and she said, "Just love it, you have to put more* aloha *into it." And I'm thinking, "This is not a puppy dog. This is not a husband, boyfriend, whatever. This is a basket." But the same principle applies. When it's giving you a little bit of trouble you have to* lomilomi *it, massage it, you have to be very patient with it.*
–Sabra Kauka (Native Hawaiian)

Always keep good thoughts when weaving. To have bad thoughts will ruin your basket. 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.
–Wilverna Reece (Karuk)

Always remember your hat or whatever you weave is a reflection of yourself. To have a good finished object, you have to have a good heart in yourself to put into that.

My kumu*, Aunty 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`opï`i (Native Hawaiian)

A renaissance of weaving…

The latter part of the 20th century saw a decline in weaving in many communities for a variety of reasons. Today, the establishment of new programs for structured formal and informal learning has revitalized 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. These programs are contributing to a renaissance of interest by Native peoples of all ages and ensuring the transmission of weaving culture in the U.S.

Not only do these programs offer opportunities for young people to learn from elders, they allow young people to share what they have learned with others. At the annual gatherings of the Northwest Native American Basketweavers Association, for instance, talented younger weavers teach classes in simple basket projects for beginning weavers. Five young weavers from Maine who participated in the Next Generation program at the 2006 Smithsonian Folklife Festival were invited to teach at the Heard Museum's annual Native Basketweaving and Food Festival in Phoenix. It was the first time that younger weavers taught at that annual event and both they and the elders valued their participation.

On the importance of weaving…

Weaving lauhala [palm leaves] is like weaving a relationship. . . .It is weaving together the older with the younger generation. We are all connected through weaving.
—Gladys Grace (Native Hawaiian)

Although modern technology and materials have reduced most functional needs for handmade woven clothing, fishing and trapping gear, household furnishings, or various containers, baskets are still important both for traditional everyday uses and ceremonies and rituals. For many Native weavers, learning to weave is 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 not only as an artist but also as a member of family and community with whom they share values, beliefs, and knowledge that have passed from generation to generation.

C. Kurt Dewhurst is Professor of English at Michigan State University and Director of the MSU Museum. Marsha MacDowell is Professor of Art and Art History at MSU, Curator of Folk Arts at the MSU Museum, and Coordinator of the Michigan Traditional Arts Program.

Resources

Find media clips, photos, and background information on Native basket makers, including Heritage Fellows on these web sites:

Carriers of Culture at the 2006 Smithsonian Folklife Festival **www.folklife.si.edu/festival/2006/Basketry**

Carriers of Culture: Native Basket Traditions, MSU Museum **www.carriersofculture.org**

Fiddler Liz Carroll learned to play in formal lessons and informal Irish music gatherings around Chicago. "I had 80-year-olds that I got a great laugh with. . .listening to them telling stories about music in the 1940s and loving it. I hope I'll be there for some young person who comes along."

Photo by Alan Govenar