

# Lancaster Farming *Antiques Center*

## Culture, Beauty, History Woven Into Baskets Worldwide

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LEESPORT (Berks Co.) — "Baskets are the oldest recognized craft in the world," Tina Barrows said.

Barrows, a basketry artist and curator, recently displayed her collection of baskets to the Spring Awareness Day, con-

ducted at the Berks Extension Service, Leesport.

Until recently, baskets reflected the cultures of areas throughout the world. The ethnic patterns woven into baskets of the past are not as definable in current basketry. This change is because of worldwide trade, which greatly impacts basketry.

Now isolated countries find

out what sells in the United States and fashion their baskets to meet consumer demand. Third world countries no longer need to rely on tourists coming to their area and selecting a souvenir; instead, they are selling via the Internet.

Baskets from the past reflect fascinating history. From the beginning of time, baskets were woven for specific usages, such as carrying heated rocks or cradling babies.

Although a recent Czechoslovakia archeological dig uncovered the oldest basket in the world and some baskets were preserved in King Tut's tomb, few baskets have survived in comparison to other objects. Barrows explained that discrepancy to the fact that baskets have been used heavily and have worn out.

Some baskets are molded over a form such as pottery. The form dictates the function for which the basket will be used. Forms are used to make nestling baskets to ensure that the baskets will fit snugly within each other.

Materials used to weave baskets have varied greatly over the centuries. People most often used materials that were native to the area such as seagrass in coastal areas and woods and barks inland.

Written history reveals that the early settlers smuggled willow cuttings (not from a tree but from tall grasses that were harvested yearly) into the bottoms of ships to ensure having it to weave baskets.

Barrows said that England did not want willow basketry taken over by the colonists and for that reason did not want them to take willow cuttings.

Although Native Americans were adept in basket weaving, their techniques were seldom adopted by early settlers, whose condescending attitude was that "natives" had nothing to teach them.

Time shows that Native Americans were ingenious in the materials and styles of baskets. Examples of their work varies greatly from region to region with the Southeast patterns being distinctly different from those from the Northeast. Barks, also made interesting materials for basketry.

More open to learning from Native Americans were the Shakers, a religious sect, who became masters of basketry. They duplicated many of the Native American techniques such as the spoke formation and double bottoms.

Shaker baskets were made almost exclusively of ash. Some were made with poplar. Shaker baskets were made and formed over a mold to create sturdy baskets used for many different purposes.

Although Barrows enjoys making baskets, she said that she would not have made a good Shaker craftsman. "Whatever they were good at doing, they were assigned to do all day every day," Barrows said. Shaker baskets required very hard labor.

Nantucket baskets are also highly collectible. In 1850-1880 when Philipinos lived in Nantucket, many worked on lightships for whaling trade and were at sea for 6-8 months at a time. During their spare time, they used leftover wood, weaving in scrimshaw designs and pieces of real ivory, which resulted in decorative baskets.

These were made for family and friends, not as a production items. Tremendous work is in-

involved and requires a long process of carving handles. Barrows said that Nantucket purses originated in the 1940s.

"For many baskets, more time is required to gather materials than the actual weaving," Barrow said.

Those made by Pennsylvania Germans were completely different than those made by other na-

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Tina Barrows said African-Americans used coastal seagrasses to weave this basket to hold knitting needles.



Betty Leidel shows off a basket that was passed down from her grandmother who died in 1948. Leidel was one of several participants who displayed baskets with a history at the Berks County Extension workshop.



The audience at the Berks County Extension Spring Awareness Day had the opportunity to examine a collection of baskets from around the world.



"Feel and smell the basket," Steward Mayes said of trying to determine the age of baskets. Nails can also be an identifying mark when trying to determine the age of baskets. This display by William Turner Associates from Monkton, Md. appeared at the York Antiques Show.