

# NORTHERN WOODLANDS

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## RISING FROM THE ASHES: MAINE'S NATIVE AMERICAN BASKET-MAKERS HAVE BROUGHT A TRADITION BACK TO LIFE.

by Joe Rankin



Jeremy Frey's basketmaking style emphasizes small, tight weaves. His baskets are among the most highly prized by modern collectors. Photo by Mary Rankin.

For Jeremy Frey, of Maine's Passamaquoddy Indian tribe, weaving ash baskets is a family tradition. He learned to create baskets from his mother when he was 22. His grandmother also wove baskets. Other family members did, as well.

Frey tells people this when they stop at his booth at Native American arts fairs. He loves to share the details of how he collects ash logs, pounds them to separate the fibers, splits the ash splints. How he turns wooden molds for his baskets. How he comes up with designs, spends hours upon hours hand-weaving to get a particular look, incorporating porcupine quills, perhaps, or sweetgrass.

"When you teach people, they're more likely to appreciate it," said Frey. You're not just selling a work of art then, you're selling a tradition, a story. "You're selling the purity of it. It gives more credence to what you're doing."

Today, Frey's baskets are avidly sought by collectors. They're displayed in museums, including the Smithsonian, and in galleries and collections around the country. In 2011, he won best-of-show at both the Santa Fe Indian Market, the largest Native American arts festival in the world, and the Heard Museum Guild Indian Fair and Market in Phoenix. This past August, he won best-of-show in the basketry division at Santa Fe. His creations routinely fetch thousands of dollars.

## A Heritage Restored

The black ash tree occupies a unique spot in the culture of Maine's Indian tribes. Tradition holds that the Wabanaki – the People of the Dawn – are the progeny of the tree. It is said that Glooscap, hero of the tribes' creation stories, shot an arrow at a black ash and from the wound in the tree's bark people flowed out like a river to populate the world.

Stories aside, there's no doubt that the black ash (or brown ash, as it's commonly known in Maine) has helped sustain the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac tribes for generations. The tree has a unique property: once its bark is removed, the tree can be pounded along its length until the growth rings separate, producing perfect ash splints that can then be planed and split and resplit, producing pliable yet durable weaving material as wide as a man's belt or as fine as dental floss.

Exactly how far back ash basketry goes is hard to determine. Ash baskets don't fare as well in terms of archaeological preservation as, say, pottery. But there's no doubt that the eastern woodland Indians took advantage of natural materials found in the woods – ash splints, sweetgrass, birch bark, spruce roots, or cedar bark – to make strong and beautiful baskets. And it's been done for a long time, said Julia Clark, the curator of collections at the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, which is devoted to the Wabanaki.

At first, utilitarian baskets likely held sway, but as Maine's cachet as a tourist destination began developing in the mid-1800s, fancy baskets – purely ornamental works – became important, said Clark. "Fancy baskets fed into a Victorian-era fascination with 'exotic' peoples, and the basketmakers were pretty savvy. They saw what wealthy collectors wanted and tried to incorporate those style elements into their work. A lot of baskets would have matched the stuff in a Victorian home."

Basketmaking became an essential part of the economy in some native communities. "They weren't making a killing by any means," said Clark, "because they weren't selling them for very much. But for some families it was a critical source of income. They would work all winter to harvest and process the ash and sweetgrass and make baskets."

Jennifer Neptune, a Penobscot basketmaker and the executive director of the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance, said the tribes have a "special relationship" to the black ash. "It has sustained our communities. Ash baskets paid for people to go to school, paid for clothes, paid for food. Some people went to college with basket money," Neptune said. "It fed us when there weren't animals to hunt and the rivers were dammed up and we couldn't fish for salmon anymore. It was basketry that fed our people."

But in the late twentieth century, the popularity of Wabanaki ash basketry waned. By the early 1990s, there were only about 30 active Indian basketmakers in Maine, and their average age was 63. Elders weren't passing on their skills. The craft was in danger of being lost.

Concerned about that trend, basketmakers from the four Maine tribes formed the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance in 1993. The group began putting on workshops for kids and created an apprenticeship program that paid master basketmakers to mentor younger generations. The Alliance began arranging shows and exhibits and helping basketmakers with marketing.

Now there are some 150 active basketmakers from the four tribes, and the average age has dropped to 40. Meanwhile, prices have gone up, with basketmakers getting hundreds and sometimes thousands of dollars for their works.

This year, five tribal basketmakers from Maine competed in the juried show at Santa Fe. In addition to Frey's best-of-show in basketry, former MIBA Executive Director Theresa Secord,

a Penobscot, won first place and Sarah Sockbeson, also Penobscot, an honorable mention.

## **Traditions and Innovations**

The revitalized basketry tradition has spawned a burst of creativity. Today, basketmakers are experimenting with new forms, finishes, and materials; they're looking to other arts for inspiration, as well as back into the tribes' basketry tradition to incorporate older techniques.

"I've always tried to develop my own style based on innovation," said Frey. As part of that, "I've kind of made everything smaller. I tighten everything up, bringing the standards closer together and making the weaving tight. I often use silhouettes as my inspiration. Not flat areas, but curves. They harken back to the feminine form, with a graceful sway and angles."

Frey said he works with different embellishments, including porcupine quills, a traditional material. This year he turned a wooden handle out of a burl and incorporated it into the top for a tall basket to take to the Native American Fair in Bar Harbor. That is not traditional. But the basket sold for \$20,000 – before the sale even officially opened.

At her booth at July's Bar Harbor show, Sarah Sockbeson snapped photos of her works with her camera phone before gently wrapping the sold items to send off with customers. Many of her baskets feature deer antler handles. She slices the antlers into cross-sections, then carves and polishes each one, drilling a hole through the center. "Each handle is kind of unique for the basket," Sockbeson said. Sockbeson gives careful attention to color combinations and uses a fiber-reactive dye developed for dyeing textiles. "I like the vibrant colors and I like the modern look on something that's really traditional and natural."

George Neptune, a Passamaquoddy basketmaker and the museum educator at the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, said he's turning his baskets into sculptures. One piece incorporated a raw piece of log with woven flowers on the basket and hummingbirds woven from ash appearing to sip from them.

"They're all slight adaptations on traditional methods I've been taught," Neptune said. "I'm kind of taking traditions and putting my own spin on them. I guess I get inspired from what I see around me and what I see in nature."

Neptune admits his works draw mixed reactions. "Some collectors really, really like it. Others think it's kind of crazy."

While black ash splints and sweetgrass are staple materials, more artisans are experimenting with others, including birch bark and the soft inner bark of the eastern white-cedar, both of which were once primary weaving materials. Sockbeson paints scenes on birchbark that she incorporates into the tops of some of her baskets.

"It's fun to play around with new things," Sockbeson said. "Some of them never make it out of the workroom. If I'm experimenting, I'll usually do one and see what kind of reaction it gets. I think natives, in general, have always used what they had available for materials. This is just the evolution of that."

Neptune said much of the experimentation today is by younger weavers, though traditionally, Indian basketmakers have been an innovative lot. It sometimes happens that a basketmaker will try something "and feel like they're being super innovative" only to later come on an antique basket that incorporates the same technique or material, she said. "They were pushing it back then, too, in terms of creativity, with new styles and ideas."

But Clark said the more avant garde basketry is drawing in new collectors who wouldn't have been there based on the previous styles.

JoAnne Fuerst, of Mount Desert Island, has been collecting Wabanaki basketry for decades. At the Bar Harbor show, she was thrilled to walk away from Jeremy Frey's booth with a miniature point vase. "I have pieces by many, many basketmakers," she said. "But this is my first Jeremy Frey."

The small vase is tightly woven in black and white. Fuerst mused that it has something of an oriental aspect to it, acknowledging that it "pushes the bounds of my collection, which is about half traditional nineteenth century and half modern. For many years, I resisted the more modern basketry because I was into the 'authentic' tradition. But I came to realize that it's an evolving art. The work that the really good people are doing at this point is so good that I really wanted to be part of it."

### **Ash Under Assault**

While part of the evolution in basketmaking is attributable to borrowing ideas from other art forms and cultures, including other tribes in North America, another part is more practical: the black ash's days may be numbered.

The emerald ash borer has now been found in two dozen states, including New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and two Canadian provinces. The borer is in the back of every Maine Indian basketmaker's mind, evidenced by the educational posters at the Bar Harbor show.

"The irony is that we've kind of broken into the art market scene nationally, and now we're threatened with emerald ash borer that could destroy our resource," said Neptune.

The Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance is working with the Maine Forest Service and the University of Maine to find ways to slow the spread of the bug and to make contingency plans for when it does arrive. Under the auspices of the University of Maine's Senator George Mitchell Center, the partners are mapping black ash stands, looking at whether long-term preservation of harvested ash trees is possible, and saving ash seed. They're also making videos that show "basket tree" selection, processing, and weaving techniques – a recorded legacy that could be used to bring the art back generations hence if the ash is wiped out and subsequently restored.

"We have a deep, profound, and spiritual relationship with this tree, and we feel we have a responsibility to do what we can to save it," said Neptune. Because black ash exists in pockets rather than scattered throughout the landscape, "some people are hopeful emerald ash borer may not spread as fast in Maine. Right now all we have is hope."