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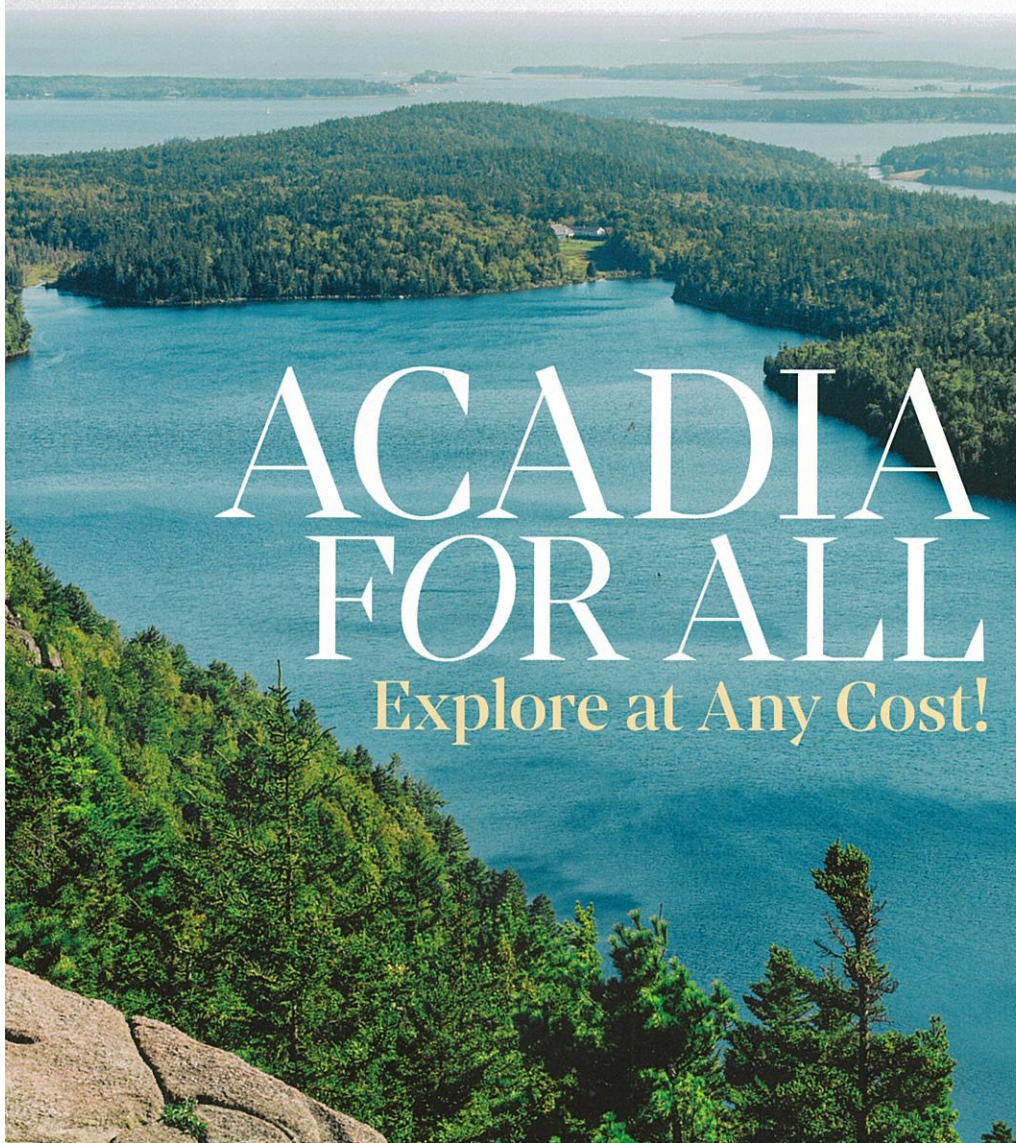
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BY VIRGINIA M. WRIGHT →

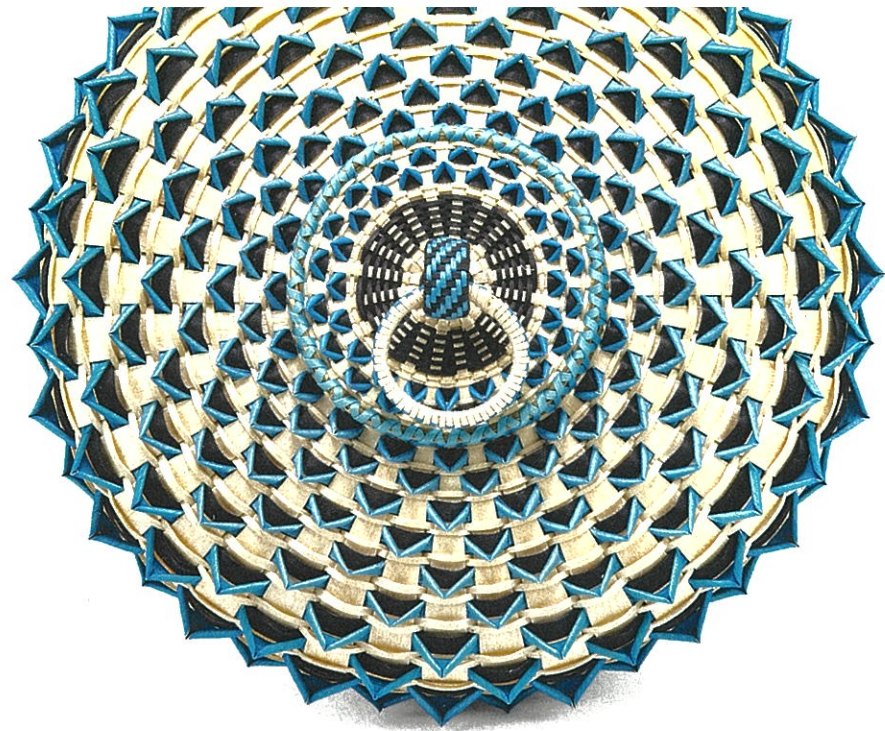
# THE WORLD WITHOUT TIME

→ PHOTOGRAPHED BY JASON PAIGE SMITH

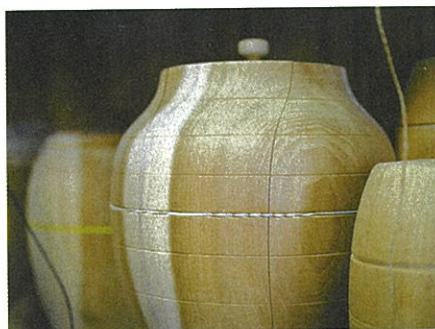


Jeremy Frey in his studio, in Eddington. This year, his baskets are traveling to exhibitions from Portland to New York to Paris.

The Wabanaki have been making baskets from ash trees for many thousands of years, and JEREMY FREY has braided the slender strips of wood for only a couple of decades. But the boldly beautiful vessels he creates have earned him countless awards and followers and, most significantly, pushed the art world to reconsider this ancient craft as a contemporary form. Now, Frey is the subject of the first-ever major retrospective of a Wabanaki artist, and his baskets are showing up in famed museums at home and abroad. Amid the hype, he's still able to lose himself in the steady rhythm of weaving in his quiet home studio, where he's forever cognizant of tribal basketmakers' challenging history and tenuous future — and where he's working on new ways to keep the tradition going.



On shelves in his home studio, Frey stores the wooden molds he makes to shape his baskets around. (Photos of Frey's finished baskets are courtesy of Eric Stoner.)



# LATELY

JEREMY FREY has been thinking about legacies, the one he inherited and the one he will pass on. Slender, with a closely trimmed beard, the 46-year-old Passamaquoddy basketmaker is in his home studio in Eddington, hunched over the lid for the elegantly woven vase sitting on his worktable. Scattered about the floor, tables, and shelves are plastic totes sprouting thin peels of blond-hued ash wood. Overhead, a spectrum of award ribbons — purple, blue, red, white, yellow — fringe a ceiling beam's entire length.

"Passamaquoddy basketry is a legacy that you're born into," he says, threading a cardinal-red strand of ash around the lid, under and over, under and over, rarely breaking rhythm because the basket must ship tomorrow for a group show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, and Frey doesn't miss opportunities to put his baskets before new audiences, not even now, when demand for them is at an all-time high. "There are more brain surgeons than there are Passamaquoddy basketmakers, and if you master it, you're a rare thing in the world. I like that. But it's not just that. I love the weaving. I love the designs. I love the feeling of the baskets when they're done. They have their own aura and energy."

His legacy is a new energy — a boldly contemporary take on an ancient woodland craft. "I've worked for more than 20 years reinventing this traditional art form," Frey says. "The idea at first wasn't about reinventing basketry. I was in a basket market, and I just wanted to stand out in the crowd. I'd do these tweaks — what if I did more of this or what if I made this smaller or what if I cut these this way? I would get a good response, which is all I really wanted."

When he got what he wanted, he upped his game. Each ribbon from a juried show, each museum acquisition found Frey making a more novel, more complex basket, whether that meant slicing the ash strips thinner, changing the angle of the points that prickle on the surface, or fostering the illusion, in a single piece, of three, four, and even five nested baskets. His mesmerizing creations have made him the best-known protégé of the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance, a group that brought Wabanaki basketry back

from the brink of extinction in the 1990s.

A few years ago, Frey set his most audacious goal yet: he would find influential gallerists and curators to help him break through the institutional boundaries that have historically segregated Native American art, and his work would be appreciated on the same stage as other fine-art forms, raising the profile of Wabanaki basketry in the process. Now, he has fully arrived, most notably with the late-May opening of *Jeremy Frey: Woven* at Portland Museum of Art, the first-ever major retrospective of a Wabanaki artist in a fine-arts museum, a show that will later travel to the Art Institute of Chicago and the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Connecticut. Frey is also flying to Paris to find out if he is the winner of the international Loewe Foundation Craft Prize, which comes with an award of 50,000 euros. His submission, an intricate woven urn of brown ash and sweetgrass, titled *Symphony in Ash*, will display alongside the works of 29 other finalists — sculptors, ceramicists, glassblowers, jewelers from around the world — at Palais de Tokyo, the largest museum in Europe dedicated to contemporary art. His baskets are set to

have a solo show at a major museum. Ten years ago, we couldn't donate a basket to a museum in Maine," Secord says. "Jeremy's taken this traditional art form and changed it into cutting edge, dynamic, and innovative. Before he came along, we were weaving our grandparents' baskets, and our grandparents had been weaving their grandparents' baskets."



"WEAVING is like a language," Frey says, his fingers dancing as they guide the wooden thread. "It identifies our people as much as our language, our drumming, and our songs. And though I'm writing it slightly differently, it's a tradition that I guard. There's a sacredness to it that I respect."

Frey is descended from several generations of weavers — indeed, most members of the four federally recognized Wabanaki nations in Maine have at least one basketmaker in their family tree. Long before the arrival of the Europeans, the Wabanaki totemed their belongings in backpacks, pouches, and boxes crafted of wood, reeds, rushes, sweetgrass, and cattails when they went on

## By the late 1980s, the number of Wabanaki weavers had dwindled to about 50 people statewide, most of them elders.

appear in summer exhibitions at the Met and the Baltimore Museum of Art as well.

"Jeremy is not only an extraordinary Wabanaki artist, but a Wabanaki artist who is one of the most astonishing contemporary artists of our moment," says Ramey Mize, Portland Museum of Art's associate curator of American art, who organized *Woven* with her predecessor, Jaime deSimone (who's now chief curator at Rockland's Farnsworth Art Museum). "He defies all odds. It blows my mind that he was able to build the following and incredible vision he has without studio support, without a bachelor or master of fine arts. He's built this from the ground up with his sheer will, charisma, and skill."

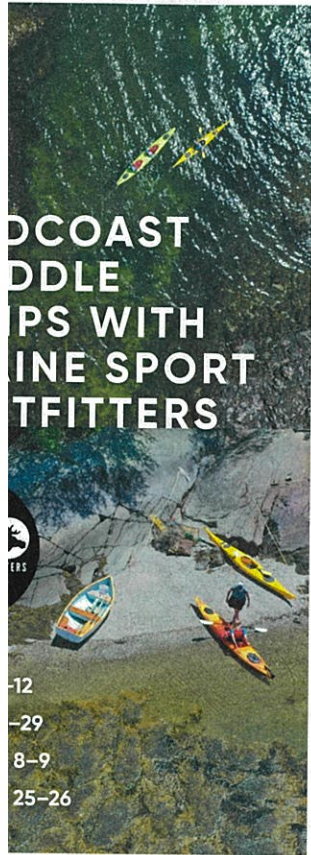
The show elicits strong emotions from Theresa Secord, a member of the Penobscot Nation who cofounded the basketmaker alliance and whom Frey counts as his mentor. "Even with my experience and national outlook, I never thought it would be possible for a basketmaker from Maine to

seasonal migrations. Later, they produced baskets for trade with white settlers, and when colonization forced them off their land, basketmaking helped them maintain a degree of economic independence. From the late 1800s until the 1930s, ash and sweetgrass baskets were among the tribes' chief sources of income — and a symbol of their cultural resilience against the pressure to assimilate.

At Sipayik, the Passamaquoddy reservation near Eastport, Frey's ancestors were among the men who assembled thousands of bushel baskets every year for Maine's sardine canneries and the women who made "fancy baskets" — thimble cases, button boxes, and decorative pieces resembling corn cobs, strawberries, urchins, and acorns — to sell at their families' summer encampments in resort towns all along Maine's coast. Harvesting brown ash was a cooperative effort, the men traveling up into Aroostook County to find adequate stands of timber, then returning to Sipayik to pound the logs with the back

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BLUE POINT URCHIN, 2016, ASH, SWEETGRASS, AND DYE, 5X9X9 IN., COLLECTION OF DR. AND MRS. ARI AND LEA PLOSKER; OBSERVER, 2022, ASH, SWEETGRASS, PORCUPINE QUILL ON BIRCH BARK, AND DYE, 13.5X10.5X10.5 IN., COLLECTION OF CAROLE KATZ, CALIFORNIA; DEFENSIVE, 2022, ASH, SWEETGRASS, AND DYE, 12.5X7.5X7.5 IN., COLLECTION OF CAROLE KATZ, CALIFORNIA. ALL © JEREMY FREY.

# NEW ADVENTURES FOR 2024



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of an ax, loosening the layers of growth rings so they could be peeled off in long strips. The “basket tree” leant spiritual significance to these communal activities: in tribal creation stories, the hero Glooskap fired his arrow into a brown ash, splitting its trunk, from which the People of the Dawn — the Wabanaki — poured into the world.

Basket weaving faded as an occupation after World War II, as the sardine factories, which once numbered around 400 in Maine, went into steep decline and many tribal members moved off reservations for year-round jobs. By the late 1980s, the number of Wabanaki weavers had dwindled to about 50 people statewide, most of them elders. At the time, Theresa Secord, then the staff geologist for the Penobscot Indian Island Reservation, was learning to weave with master basketmaker Madeline Tomer Shay through a Maine Arts Commission apprenticeship. “Basketmakers in all four tribes were complaining that they couldn’t get good ash material, and the prices were so low that they didn’t have a market,” Secord recalls. “The tradition was really flagging.”

Secord joined forces with Kathleen Mundell, the commission’s traditional-arts specialist, to address the critical decline of basketmaking in meetings at each of the state’s five reservations. Those meetings led to the formation of the basketmakers alliance, with Secord as its first director. The alliance took over the apprenticeship program, opened a gallery, organized craft markets, held workshops on everything from pounding ash to weaving, and worked with the University of Maine and U.S. Forest Service on a task force investigating a drought-triggered decline in New England’s ash trees.

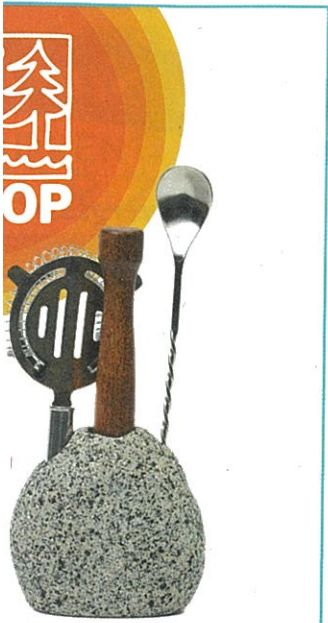
Among the alliance’s first apprentices was Gal Frey, Jeremy’s mother, whose mentor was the late Sylvia Gabriel, an expert maker of porcupine baskets, so called for their spiny surfaces. Gal was learning advanced techniques when Jeremy, 22 years old and burned out by a dispiriting job as a restaurant cook, moved back home, determined to break a drug addiction. Eager for something to busy his hands and quiet his mind, he asked his mother to teach him how to weave — and he insisted on skipping over the basics and tackling Gabriel’s challenging twisty and loopy weaves first. “It became a new addiction,” he says. “I realized there are

healing things out there for everyone. Mine happened to be baskets.”

That realization was a bit of a surprise to Frey. Though basketmaking runs deep in his lineage, his only memory of it from childhood is olfactory — the watermelon-like scent of pounded ash at the Sipayik home of his late grandfather, Frederick Moore Jr. Still, art making and creative play had been constants when he was growing up on the Passamaquoddy Indian Township Reservation, 45 miles northwest of Sipayik. Unable to afford many toys for her four sons, Gal had supplied them with paints, pencils, paper, and clay. Jeremy, fidgety and distractible in school, often drew pictures in class. “My teacher would be doing a history lesson, and he’d say, ‘Jeremy, what did I just say?’ And I’d speak it back word for word. So he let me draw. It helped me stay still, and if I was still, I could hear.”

Early on, Frey set himself apart by harvesting and pounding his own ash trees, and he remains one of only a handful of the state’s roughly 150 Wabanaki basketmakers who do it. He started because he was unhappy with the quality of the ash he was buying, but he’s come to believe it makes him a better artist, connecting him to the forest and the cultural history it embodies. Finding a tree is time-consuming. Maine’s three ash species — green, white, and brown (also called black) — collectively make up only 4 percent of the forest, and only one in every dozen or so brown ashes is a good basket tree: it must be straight, have several feet of branch-free trunk, and have the right thickness of growth rings (although the latter is a matter of personal preference). Once Frey fells a tree, he hoists its bruising weight onto his shoulder and carries it to his truck, which could be a muddy quarter mile away (brown ashes thrive in wet soil, which lends their wood its suppleness).

Frey was still a beginning weaver when he met Secord, who hired him, at Gal’s suggestion, to pound ash at a weekend community workshop at Sipayik. “I wrote him a check for \$50 to cover gas for the drive from Indian Township,” Secord recalls. “That was his first artist payment.” Frey impressed Secord with his questions about breaking into basket markets and with his vision and skill. “He was remarkable from the get-go,” she says. “He was a born artist — you could see that right



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away. This is one of the things that's so remarkable about his trajectory. Most of the artists he's in company with — even the Native American artists — have been to the best art schools in the country. Jeremy has not. He's completely self-driven and almost entirely self-taught."

Secord encouraged Frey to participate in markets and enter juried shows beyond Maine, and she "sent him places where he could see himself with peers, especially other young male weavers," like the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, where a Hawaiian artist taught him the chevron pattern he uses on his lid fobs. In 2010, Secord nominated Frey for a United States Artists Fellowship and helped him write the required résumé (his first draft was just one sentence long, she says). He won the \$50,000 award. That same year, he went home from the prestigious, juried Santa Fe Indian Market with two blue ribbons — his first time competing in the arena that would influence his style and rocket his career.



THERESA SECORD still has the video she recorded at the Santa Fe Indian Market awards ceremony in 2011. Her lens was trained on her fellow Maine participants as they waited to hear the final award of the evening, the coveted Best of Show. When Frey's name was announced, the video began to shake from the trembling of Secord's hand. Frey appeared overwhelmed too. "I don't know what to say," he said, as he accepted the white ribbon for his pointed vase of sweetgrass and brown ash. "I just want to say thanks."

"I couldn't believe it," Secord says now. Not only was it the first time that a basket had received the top honor in the market's 90-year history, but just a few months earlier, Frey had taken the Best of Show at the Heard Museum Guild Indian Fair and Market, making him only the second person to have ever received both honors in the same year. Maine artists were still relative newcomers to Santa Fe, which Secord calls "the pinnacle of our world," showcasing the works of 1,000 artists and drawing 160,000 people every summer. In fact, when the alliance had its first booth a few years earlier, many of the people who stopped to browse, including artists from other tribes, were surprised to learn that Native communities still existed in New England.

Frey became a regular at the market,

where he gained a following and found inspiration. "At Santa Fe, I'm surrounded by these amazing artists, and a lot of them are doing contemporary work in the Native field," he says. "One reason I left traditional work behind is traditional has been done before. But everything that is traditional started off as contemporary, whether it was the first bow, the first arrowhead, the first braided sweetgrass — all of that appeared once for the first time. I'm just the next person in line making the tradition." Back home, he met some resistance from elders who had firm ideas about what a Passamaquoddy basket should be. "I got a little pushback," he admits, then adds with a hint of sass, "but not anymore."

Frey proved to be not just a talented artist but also a savvy businessman. He understood artist-gallery relationships and the value of exposure and marketing, and he strived to maintain a consistent body of work, says David Schultz, the owner with his wife, Ann, of Home and Away Gallery, a Farmington-based online retailer of Native American art (formerly with a brick-and-mortar outpost in Kennebunkport). It was Frey who suggested Schultz write the 2018 book *Baskets of Time*, after the two had been lamenting that all the existing books on the subject treated the craft as something from a bygone era. *Baskets of Time* profiles 20 present-day basketmakers, including four award-winning Freys: Jeremy, his wife, Ganessa, his mother, Gal — all makers of fancy baskets — and his brother, Gabriel, a maker of upscale pack and market baskets (Ganessa is now studying to be a nurse and not currently making baskets). Jeremy has distinguished himself not so much by inventing new techniques as by riffing, often dramatically, on traditional ones, an approach that allows him to stay rooted in the culture, Schultz says. "If you look at baskets from the early 20th century, you'll see some of the elements that are in his baskets today, like nesting and quill work, but Jeremy does them much finer than any I've ever seen."

Frey achieves his tight, superfine weaves in part by slicing his ash strips paper-thin. Sometimes, he executes a familiar pattern with an unexpected material — a braid of cedar bark instead of sweetgrass, for example — or he constructs a vessel that seems to defy gravity, like the exaggerated cone he built earlier this year for the Frieze Los Angeles fair. On some of his lids, he coaxes natural and dyed



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porcupine quills into detailed images: black bears, cardinals, gray wolves, a fiery setting sun shooting red and orange rays skyward. He often starts a project by imagining its future owner and the sort of room that personality would keep. His vision of “an office that’s all leather and hardwood, with shelves built into the wall, maybe a little cigar smoke” resulted in *Permanence*, an urn with vertical stripes of natural and dyed dark-brown ash and a lid reminiscent of a medieval nobleman’s ornately embellished pill-box hat. The piece ended up at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, which is fine by Frey; the mental image had served its purpose.

In 2022, Frey’s work caught the attention of Manhattan gallerist Brendan Dugan at the New England Triennial, in Massachusetts. Soon after, Dugan visited Frey at his Eddington studio and offered him exclusive representation at Karma Gallery, in the East Village, putting his work before a new audience in a much bigger art market. Frey spent the next several months sending baskets, four or five at a time, to Karma for his first solo show, *Out of the Woods*. When he stepped inside the gallery for the show’s opening, in the spring of last year, he was staggered by the sight of his baskets sitting on stark-white pedestals in a stark-white room. “It felt so surreal,” he said. “My path has been so strange: from an ancient woodland craft to a contemporary gallery in Manhattan. It was powerful to walk into that space and see Passamaquoddy baskets in that context. It wasn’t just the environment. It was the way they were curated and cared for — the white-glove treatment.”



RIPLING BENEATH this success, though, is a poignant undercurrent. Twelve years ago, Frey traveled to Michigan to see the damage wrought by the emerald ash borer, a tiny beetle with a metallic-green shell first detected in the United States near Detroit in the summer of 2002. Believed to have hitchhiked from its native Asia on shipping pallets, the tiny beetle burrows into an ash tree to lay its eggs, and the larvae chew serpentine tunnels into the inner bark, effectively girdling the tree so water and nutrients can’t reach the leaves. An infested tree will typically die within three to five years. With few natural predators in North America, the beetle’s spread was deemed inevitable. The question was not whether it would arrive in Maine, but

when. After examining the riddled wood, Frey was convinced the days of weaving with ash were numbered, and he began to fear he might be part of the last generation to make Wabanaki baskets from traditional materials.

Maine foresters detected emerald ash borers for the first time in 2018, in Aroostook and York counties. Now, the beetles have shown up in 12 of the state’s 16 counties. Last year, after finding they had spread farther into central Maine, the state forestry service expanded the quarantine areas it had set up to restrict the movement of firewood, logs, branches, and plants — the biggest contributor to the bugs’ spread.

Wabanaki basketmakers and harvesters have been working with the forest service, policymakers, and researchers to share strategies for protecting ash trees, including saving seeds for future generations. But Frey is not encouraging his and Ganessa’s three children to become basketmakers. “Why teach such an exotic, crazy skill when the ash isn’t going to be around?” he says. “Why train them up to be master weavers, because what is the point? It’s damn sad, especially since ash is not just a material for weaving baskets but part of our history and legends — it drains down into every part of our lives.”

Frey, who uses six to eight trees a year to make baskets, now cuts and pounds two for every one he needs, stashing away a reserve supply. He’s also using greater quantities of what are typically accent materials, like birch, cedar bark, and spruce root, creating a style that people will recognize if he no longer has ash to weave — and ever shaping his legacy as the man who reinvented Maine’s oldest surviving art form. As he tells me this, his hands stop moving for the first time in our conversation. “You want to see something cool?” he asks. He reaches across the worktable for the catalog for his Portland Museum of Art exhibition and opens it to a photograph of a fat, rounded vessel with a quill picture of a bald eagle’s head adorning a lid that’s propped against its side. A broad, leathery shell of dark-brown birch bark encases the urn’s woven undyed ash body. It’s unlike anything Frey has made before. “It’s called *Cihpolakon*, which is Passamaquoddy for ‘eagle,’” he says. “It’s one of my favorites.”

Virginia M. Wright is a contributing editor for *Down East*. Her next book, *A Town Built by Ski Bums: The Story of Carrabassett Valley*, comes out later this year.