

Hickory, Ash & Reed: Traditional Baskets, Contemporary Makers

March 31 – October 15, 2016

The contemporary basket makers exhibited recognize the rich history of American basket making in their artistry and innovative designs. Meticulous craftsmanship and traditional methods pay homage to the trappers and farmers of our forebears in **Stephen Zeh's** work. **Lois Russell** twines waxed linen into vessels that are sparingly used but delight with recognizable, sculptural forms. The baskets of **Jonathan Kline** are sturdy-bottomed, made from the trees of woodlands surrounding his upstate New York home. Often painted, their colors recall the stains of berries and plants used by Native Americans. Inspired by architecture and design, as well as the gardens and woods out her back door, **Kari Lonning** weaves rattan reed into striking, colorful vessels and sculpture. West Coast basket maker **Marion Hildebrandt** used cattail leaves, hazelnut branches, bark, and natural twine to evoke her native surrounds, creating baskets of incomparable elegance. Contemporary Nantucket baskets crafted by **Harry Hilbert** and **Gail Halvorsen** are a distinctly American handcraft that came out of the maritime cooperage tradition, involving woodworking as much as basketry.

Guest Curator: Shawna Barrett



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Wilton Historical Society
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Marion Hildebrandt

California

Marion Hildebrandt (1925 – 2011) was inspired by the basket making materials of Native Americans. A native of California and a student of local flora and fauna, she collected local grasses, branches, pine needles and bark to create unique structural objects and vessels. Watchful of her surroundings, Hildebrandt marveled at the changes the cycle of seasons effected on the plant materials she used, gathering and collecting at all times of the year.

Though many of the forms of Hildebrandt’s baskets appear functional, most are not, intending instead to delight the eye with form, artistry and a unique use of natural materials. Her smaller baskets have a delicacy to them, objects of curiosity and worth to be praised and prized by collectors and observers alike.

Marion Hildebrandt baskets on loan from browngrotta arts, Wilton, Connecticut.

Finlandia, 2002

Waxed linen twine warp, paper twine weft, California hazelnut branches
5 ½ x 8 ½ inches

#190/3, 2003

Waxed linen twine, paper fiber twine, hand twined bur-reed, spice bush branch, bark
8 ½ x 4 ½ inches

#188/1, 2003

Waxed linen twine, paper fiber twine, hand twined reed, wooden and round reed, leather ties
7 ½ x 4 ½ inches

Basket #181, 2001

Waxed linen twine, paper twine, spice bush branches, eucalyptus tree bark
18 ½ x 10 inches

#189/2, 2003

Waxed linen twine, paper fiber twine, hand twined bur-reed, 4 Madrone wood rounds (attached with spice bush branch twigs)
5 ¾ x 5 ½ inches

Urban Renewal, 2002

Paper twine, waxed linen twine, CA spice bush branches, bark, leather ties
7 ¼ x 5 inches

From the Pond, 2002

Waxed linen twine warp, paper twine weft, hand twined cattail leaves
8 ¾ x 8 inches

#165R, 2000

Black sisal twine, brown waxed linen warp, hand twined rush, ash strip, wood rounds with leather ties
9 ½ x 8 inches

Inside Aviary Wire Basket, 1994

Brown acrylic, dyed flat reed
8 ½ x 9 inches

Forest Remembered, 2002

Paper twine, waxed linen twine, CA hazelnut and spice bush branches, wood rounds
10 ½ x 8 ¼ inches

Jonathan Kline

New York

The splint baskets of Jonathan Kline are inspired by the former Shaker and Taghkanic communities native to his birthplace in the Upper Hudson Valley of New York. Today, harvesting the supple wood of the native black ash tree in the Finger Lakes region of his home in Trumansburg, New York, Kline uses a mallet to crush the spongy fibers between the tree’s layers of growth, ultimately separating or peeling the strips from one another with a froe ax. Sliced to a proper width, the strips or splints are then shaved to a smooth finish with a knife, ready for weaving.

Kline creates baskets of all sizes, each one having either a round or rectangular bottom. Once the framework for the bottom is formed, the weaving is continued up the sides to form the basket. Rims and handles for the baskets are made from lengths of shagbark hickory, carefully shaped and lashed by hand to the finished carrier.



Kline is also known for his painted baskets. Paint was traditionally used to enhance a basket or to extend the life of a valued, worn one. Using a casein base with mineral pigments, Kline layers his durable colors, finishing them with linseed oil for an aged, mellow patina. The result is a work of art.

Woven Box, 2015

Black ash and hickory
15 x 16 inches

Footed Bowl, 2015

Black ash, hickory and casein paint
9 x 19 inches

Mail Basket, c. 2000

Black ash, hickory and casein paint
7½ x 6 ½ inches
Collection, Jane and Ed Besherer

Tapered Carrier, 2015

Black ash, hickory and casein paint
18 x 13 inches

Round Bottom Harvest Basket, 2015

Black ash, hickory and casein paint
19 x 22 inches

Large Round Storage Basket, 2015

Black ash, hickory and casein paint
32 x 28 inches

Woven Tray, c. 2000

Black ash, hickory and casein paint
14 x 84 inches
Collection, Lynda Campbell and Corey Greenberg



Lois Russell

Massachusetts

Lois Russell is drawn to vessel of all kinds – bathtubs, mixing bowls, canoes. She has made baskets that hold fresh bread, apples, crayons and folded laundry. With a reverence for both the interior and exterior of her woven forms, Russell weaves baskets that often reveal from within while keeping contents together, protecting them from spills and guarding them from the outside.

Russell has studied basket making for years, learning traditional techniques and working with every imaginable material including bamboo, telephone wire, bark and countless fibers. Playing with shape, color and texture, she has explored the “architecture” of the basket, creating imaginative sculptural forms that defy imagination and fly in the face of the function that determined the forms of most early baskets.

In the last eight years, Russell has focused on twining waxed linen thread to weave the baskets exhibited here. In some, a riot of pattern and color come together to form what she calls “patchwork vessels”, dramatic shapes composed of patches of color in a variety of twining patterns. In others, coiling nods to the inspiration of our Native American ancestors while openwork recalls crochet or lacemaking.

A self-avowed wanderer, Russell weaves with a restless curiosity, exploring her varied experiences in an art form that makes order of the complex, wonderful world we live in.

Long and Winding Road, 2013

Twined waxed linen thread
6 x 7 ½ inches

Untitled, 2005

Twined waxed linen thread
3 ½ x 5 ½ inches

Muddy Spring, 2007

Twined waxed linen thread
2¾ x 3½ inches

Untitled, 2015

Twined waxed linen thread
6 x 3¼ inches

November, 2011

Twined waxed linen thread
13 x 10¼ inches

Blub, Blub, 2010

Twined waxed linen thread
13 x 11 inches

Button Up for Safety, 2009

Knotted waxed linen thread, wool yarn, synthetic button
6½ x 6 inches

Untitled, c. 2010

Twined waxed linen thread
3¾ x 3¼ inches

Untitled, 2008

Knotted waxed linen thread
5¼ x 4 inches

Habitat: a melliflora, c. 2010

Twined waxed linen thread
10 x 8 inches

Untitled, c. 2010

Twined waxed linen thread
5¾ x 5½ inches

Seventh Wave, 2014

Coiled waxed linen thread
14¼ x 7 inches

Untitled, 2004

Coiled waxed linen thread
4¾ x 7 inches

Untitled (with ball), 2015

Coiled waxed linen thread with knotted wax linen ball
6¾ x 7¾ inches

Stephen Zeh

Maine

Stephen Zeh makes baskets from the brown ash tree found in northern Maine forests. Using traditional tools such as the drawknife, shaving horse, froe, hornbean maul, ax and knife, Zeh employs the methods of his predecessors, Maine woodsmen, Shakers and Native Americans, to create traditional baskets of stunning natural beauty. Carefully selecting a tree that provides wood with suppleness or “flex” for tight



plaiting and a unique grain for unadorned beauty, Zeh is the ultimate craftsman. Hand-splitting, pounding, hand-scraping, carving and green-bending, or shaping moist wood to a desired form, are some of the many long-established techniques used in his basket making.

Formerly a trapper in the woods of Maine, Zeh learned to make baskets while hunting, ultimately honing his craft with a Penobscot Indian basket maker by the name of Eddie Newell. The structure and utilitarian aspect of his baskets belie an unparalleled attention to detail. Smooth weave, painterly grain and hand-carved rims and handles are trademark qualities of a Zeh basket, qualities that endure and improve their luster with age.

Sweetgrass Notecard Tray, 2009

Brown Ash
4 x 6 inches

Feather Basket, 1992

Brown Ash
10 x 10 inches
Collection, C. Edward and Mary Ellen Wall

Maine Packbasket, 2000

English bridle leather, shearing, copper and brass
14 x 10 inches

Swing Handle Apple Basket, 2000

Brown Ash
15 x 9 inches

One Bushel Corn Basket, 1999

Brown Ash
14 x 19 inches

Quilt Basket, 2009

Brown Ash
15 x 14 inches

Harvest Basket, 1986

Brown Ash
10 x 10 inches

Potato Basket, 1995

Brown Ash
15 x 18 inches
Collection, C. Edward and Mary Ellen Wall



Kari Lonning

Connecticut

A native of Ridgefield, Connecticut, basket maker Kari Lonning lives and works in a 1900’s schoolhouse on a property surrounded by gardens and sheltered by expansive skies. Coils and coils of dyed reed extend from studio to greenhouse, nearly into the gardens beyond, where the colors of leaves, flowers and vegetables lend inspiration to the pigments she uses to dye her rattan. An avid photographer as well, Lonning constantly records her surroundings, collecting images that are reflected in the elegant forms and interesting color combinations of her exquisitely crafted baskets.

Lonning explored a number of crafts before settling on the art of making baskets.

Pottery, textile weaving, woodworking and silversmithing all led to what she refers to as the “building” of baskets. Structure, technique and color are the “architecture” of her craft. Corrugated rooflines, hosta leaves and snow-covered roadways inspire the subtle patterns and bursts of color in her weaving. Playfulness also finds its way into Lonning’s art. Her “hairy” baskets are experiments in vibrant color combinations, using multi-element twining to weave hundreds of short pieces of reed into the walls of these whimsical baskets. And the marbles found in the double-walled *Mottled and Squared* add an element of surprise – a basket is not always just a basket.

Blue and Purple Melon, 1979

Artist-dyed rattan reed, commercial water-fast dye
11 ¼ x 12 inches
Collection, Bill and Suzanne Berland

She Became Her Garden, 2005

Artist-dyed rattan reed, commercial water-fast dye
30¾ x 13½ inches



Mottled and Squared, 1995

Artist-dyed rattan reed, commercial, water-fast dye, encaustic, marbles
3 x 14 inches

Little Hairy Pot, with purple rim, 2015

Artist-dyed rattan reed, commercial water-fast dye
6½ x 7 inches

Hairy Vessel

Artist-dyed rattan reed, commercial water-fast dye
7 ¼ x 9 ½ inches
Collection, Lois Russell

Nantucket Baskets

Harry Hilbert

Connecticut

A successful Connecticut antique dealer by trade, Wilton resident Harry Hilbert (1917 – 2010) learned the art of basket making later in life. Self-taught skills as a woodworker and cabinetmaker facilitated the approach to his new craft, and it was the form of the Nantucket basket in particular that became the focus of his expert workmanship.

Hilbert referred to his baskets as “non-tucket” baskets as they were not made on the island of Nantucket and included different materials than those rooted in the tradition of the 19th century baskets originally created on board the “lightships” moored off shore. In addition to the red oak found in Connecticut, Hilbert experimented with rare and exotic woods, creating baskets with stunning inlaid lids, carved bases and novel finishes and accents.

Equally known as a gifted teacher, Harry Hilbert generously shared his talents and knowledge with students. Honest and thoughtful, he took the time to share his technique and expertise with others, apprenticing many in the art of basketmaking and woodworking and inspiring them in turn to teach and share their individual talents. Gail Halvorsen, a Fairfield County resident,

was one such student and is exhibited here alongside her beloved mentor and teacher.

Harry Hilbert baskets from the collection of Gail Halvorsen.

Oval purse with shell inlay, 1999

Red oak, cane rattan, mahogany, curly maple, Corian, brass
12 x 9½ inches

Round purse with compass rose, 1995

Red oak, cane rattan, cherry, curly maple, ebony, mahogany, Corian, brass
13 x 9 inches

Oblong purse with carved shell, 2001

Red oak, cane rattan, cherry, mahogany, curly maple, Corian, brass
13 x 10½ inches

Gail Halvorsen

Connecticut

Gail Halvorsen made baskets in her New Canaan workshop, set up years ago with the help of her renowned teacher, basketmaker and woodworker Harry Hilbert. Teacher and student met in Hilbert’s workshop in 1994 where Halvorsen made her first “Nantucket” basket. Taken with the entire process of making a basket, she carefully selects her woods, makes her own molds, carves her handles and waxes her finishes. Facile with a woodturning lathe, band saw, drill press and other tools of the trade, Halvorsen credits the generous spirit of her influential teacher with her love of each aspect of the craft.

Round basket, 1999

Red oak, cane rattan, cherry
4 x 11½ inches

Small basket mold, 2000

Pine, mahogany, steel
11½ x 3 inches

Nest of seven baskets, 2003

Red oak, cane rattan, cherry
13 x 8½ inches

Oval basket with handles, 2001

Red oak, cane rattan, cherry
14 ¼ x 13 ½ inches