Two Euchee (Yuchi) Baskets in the Collections of the Philbrook Museum of Art

by Jason Baird Jackson on June 24, 2016

The basketry traditions of the Native South have experienced divergent histories from a common regional tradition of work basketry. Among the North Carolina Cherokee, for instance, the indigenous river cane basketry tradition was augmented with the adoption of an old European white oak splint basketry practice and a more modern vine runner basketry practice using Japanese honeysuckle. The two older traditions are focused on workbasket forms, even as these have increasingly become works of art and heritage appreciated as aesthetically compelling collectables rather than tools of labor. The vine runner basketry made in honeysuckle added graceful forms intended by their makers to be visually appreciated more than used for rough labor. The richness of Cherokee basket making, up to the present, has been facilitated through an arts and crafts market fostered by the location of the Eastern Cherokee community in a key tourism destination at the eastern gateway to the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. While workbaskets were, for a time during the early 20th century, presented for sale to outsiders among the Florida Seminole, Florida Seminole basketry shifted in that century to decorative craft baskets made from coiled sweet grass. As in Cherokee, North Carolina, these baskets were crafted with non-Seminole tourist-collectors in mind.

Not all Southern Native communities reside in locales where tourism and tourist craft markets could foster (and reshape) local basketry practice. In many native communities, local baskets were used less and less for work—replaced by commercial containers—and thereby they became less and less common, as did knowledge of their construction and use. In some contemporary Native communities, a commitment to revitalize tribal cultures has more recently led to a renewal of basketry practices, not so much for external consumption but as heritage endeavors celebratory of local traditions. This dynamic is found among the Catawba (ex: “Catawba Indian basket maker revives almost-lost ancient tradition”) and among numerous groups—such as the Chickasaw—who have begun regularly organizing basketry classes (ex: “Chickasaw Nation to host basket weaving class”).

While revivals of the sort that numerous communities are pursuing can be initiated in the near or distant future, there are some communities in which basketry has quietly fallen into obsolescence. As with heritage languages, we might describe basketry in such communities as “sleeping”—especially when extant baskets are present in museums and some ethnographic documentation of basket making or use has been made. As with “sleeping languages,” sleeping basketry traditions are capable of being revitalized, especially when knowledge can be gained from basket makers among neighboring peoples sharing similar practices.

While they are an extraordinarily vital community in many other ways, sleeping describes the present state of basketry among the Euchee (Yuchi) people now residing in Tulsa, Creek, and Okmulgee Counties in (present-day) Oklahoma. (For the remainder of this note, I will just use the “Euchee” spelling.) To my knowledge, eight Euchee baskets are curated in museum collections. Then a Ph.D. student in anthropology, Frank G. Speck collected five Euchee baskets in the Sand Creek tribal town near Bristow, Indian Territory in 1904. These were purchased with funds from the American Museum of Natural History and are preserved in its collections. They can be studied in the AMNH’s online database and were discussed in Speck’s Ethnology of the Yuchi Indians, a book-length study that is now freely accessible via the HathiTrust Digital Library and the Internet Archive (see pages 31-34). [If consulting the AMNH database, see numbers 50 / 5368, 50 /...
One Euchee basket is cared for by the Columbus Museum in Columbus, Georgia. (I hope to report on it later.)

Of interest here are two baskets close to the present-day Euchee community, at the Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa, Oklahoma. These two baskets (I believe, the only ones in Oklahoma museum collections) are significant in a number of ways that I will narrate here.

They are, to my knowledge, the most recently collected baskets from among the Euchee. Some Euchee families preserve heirloom objects from the past, but I have not been shown or told about old workbaskets in the possession of the Euchee families that I know. There is a chance that these two were among the last in Euchee hands.

They were collected by famed basketry collector Clark Field. One can learn more about Field and his collection in the volume *Woven Worlds: Basketry from the Clark Field Collection* edited by Lydia L. Wyckoff and published by the Philbrook Museum of Art. Field collected these two baskets from Johnson Tiger, then living in Kellyville, Oklahoma. [Kellyville is a municipality in the territory of the Yuchi Tribal Town known as Polecat (after nearby Polecat Creek)].

Tiger indicated for Field that the first of the baskets (catalog number 1963.13.2) was made by his grandfather George Fulsom and dated to 1875. George Fulsom was age 57 at the time of the 1910 census and thus he was born around 1853. If the basket was actually crafted in 1875, this would have been when George Fulsom was about 22 years of age. Field paid Tiger $27.50 for the basket in 1962, which would be about $218 in 2016 dollars. (As noted below, it may be that this amount was the price paid for both baskets.)

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**Euchee tray or fanner basket of river cane. Collected from Johnson Tiger in 1962 and attributed to his grandfather George Fulsom. Late 19th century. Polecat Tribal Town. Philbrook Museum of Art #1963.13.2. Used with permission of the Philbrook Museum of Art.**

This plaited basket is made of river cane, the primary material out of which baskets were historically made in the Native South, but a plant that was and is increasingly rare generally and that is particularly rare on the western edge of its range in Oklahoma. Like most of the known Euchee baskets, this example was one of two fundamental tools used in processing corn for food. (It could be used, of course, for other activities, including other food processing ones.) With a solid bottom, this kind of basket was used to both catch grain falling through a sifter (sieve) basket and for fanning grain that has been pounded (or ground) so as to separate the grain from the chaff.
As J. Marshall Gettys has noted, this basket is interesting because it is made of rivercane (the region’s old material) but it has a reinforced rim assembled in a style more common in European American basketry styles. In river cane trays or sifters in the South, a braided rim (as found in the second basket, below) would be more common (Gettys 2001:182).

The second basket was likely long used as a pair with the first one. It (catalog number 1963.13.3) is a sifter basket or sieve. Johnson Tiger told Field that Fannie Fulsom, his grandmother and the wife of George Fulsom, made this basket. As with the first basket, he dated it to 1875. According to the 1910 census, Fannie Fulsom was 45 in 1910, indicating that she was born around 1865. If this is correct and if the basket were made in 1875, then she would have been age ten at the time of its manufacture. While it is possible a ten-year-old made it, my intuition is that it was either made at a later (but still probably nineteenth century) date or by a different maker. Like all of the other Euchee baskets in museum collections, this (and the other Philbrook basket) shows extensive wear from practical use. Especially noteworthy is the way that the basket was patched with cloth strips. Because they are woven with evenly sized openings in their bases (bottoms), sifter baskets are more fragile than fully woven trays, such as the other Philbrook basket.


The Philbrook records do not preserve a purchase price for the second basket. It is possible, but unproven, that the price recorded for the first basket was a price for both baskets.

While this basket has a braided rim in the region’s aboriginal style, it is made not of river cane but of narrow splints of hardwood (probably hickory). My interpretation of this material is that it represents an Indian Territory (Oklahoma) adaptation in a setting in which river cane was difficult to obtain. To my knowledge, it is only in Oklahoma that we find Southern river cane-based forms produced in materials other than river cane. Elsewhere in the South, newer materials were utilized in altered, adopted, or innovated forms.

Euchee basket making may continue to sleep. If it does, that should not be taken to mean that Euchee people lack appreciation for the baskets, basket making, and the basket-using of their ancestors. Elders I have known, from the 1990s to the present, have often recalled memories of how baskets such as these were used. These stories were never simply for my benefit. They are regularly shared with audiences of younger Euchee people. The tellers of such stories are eager to preserve a memory of past Euchee ways of life. The moral of such stories often center on how hard older Euchee people worked to care for their families and communities and how they possessed and use specialized cultural knowledge to sustain a rich and
self-sufficient social life in the face of hardships and limited financial resources. In the late 1990s, I worked with cultural leaders from the Euchee community to organize an exhibition at Tulsa’s Gilcrease Museum. For this exhibition, two of the AMNH baskets were lent and displayed. Euchee elders noted how well-worn these baskets were. This prompted not only an appreciation for their industry of their ancestors, but also laughter at the thought that the baskets unnamed Euchee owners turned a nice profit selling end-of-life, totally worn out, baskets to an earnest young scholar from the East. They also appreciated the fact that some Euchee work baskets still existed in the world and would thus be available for future generations to see and appreciate. These thoughts apply, I think, to the two baskets that Johnson Tiger sold to Clark Field in 1962.

Thank you to my friend Christina Burke, Curator of Native American and Non-Western Art at the Philbrook Museum of Art for letting me spend time with these two baskets, not once but twice. Thanks also to the Euchee elders who have shared their people's past and present with me.