

Basketry: Making Human Nature.* Sandy Heslop, ed. Norwich: Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, 2011. 68 pp.

Reviewed by Jason Baird Jackson

The volume *Basketry: Making Human Nature* accompanied an exhibition of the same name that was presented at the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts from February 8 to May 22, 2011. Both the edited volume and the exhibition were outgrowths of a larger collaborative research project led by Sandy Heslop and titled *Beyond the Basket: Construction, Order and Understanding*, which was funded by the Arts and Humanities Council (UK) as part of a program called *Beyond the Text*. A range of allied events and activities were programmed around the exhibition and the project.¹ This review focuses only on the published volume, which is a brief but compelling and contemporary evocation of basketry as a rich, enduring, dynamic, and widespread human practice, one that is simultaneously deeply cultural and a meaningful connection linking people with their environments.

Like the exhibition, the volume is global in scope but does not attempt encyclopedic coverage. Unlike earlier treatments of the topic, it does not attempt to provide a basic overview of basketry practices in cultural areas around the globe and, while regularly evoking the complexity and diversity of basketry technologies, the text does not attempt to systematically describe them. As a total collection, the volume serves to evoke basketry as a worthy matter for scholarly and public attention and to connect basketry to changing practices of everyday life in various locales, past and present, near and far. Of particular value, in my estimation, is the breadth of the frame of reference employed. Adaptations of basketry in contemporary architecture and efforts by contemporary artists to bring basketry-based works into fine art realms are evoked or interpreted alongside basketry forms and practices that regularly fall within the domains of folklore studies (as in the basketry of East Anglia) or anthropology (as in the basketry of Polynesia, Central Africa, Papua New Guinea, and Amazonia). The brief volume achieves its comparative aims through juxtaposition, primarily of images of basketry works in diverse forms.

I very greatly appreciated the breadth of the inquiry undertaken in the project and represented briefly in the pages of the catalogue. The missing piece for me, one that was alluded to by at least a few authors but that is not pictured in the volume, are contemporary mass-produced containers constructed through basketry techniques or, more extreme still, derived from basketry prototypes. With at least two cases, the volume pictures and explains remarkable non-basketry works based on basketry forms (i.e. a remarkable Hellenistic polychrome mold-pressed glass bowl made to look like a basket, explained in a brief essay by Joanne Clarke and a Kuba wooden box modeled after a Kuba lidded basket, discussed in Heslop's introductory essay). The molded plastic laundry "baskets" found ubiquitously in North American homes are a contemporary example of this same phenomena. The exhibition on which this collection is based was admirably adventurous as museum presentations of basketry go, combining locally rooted basketry practices with revival, fine craft, and experimental examples. My impression is that the project could have gone the final step and brought into its frame of reference the culturally

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anonymous but vaguely ethnic basketry purveyed by home decorating shops (such as Pier 1 in the United States), the industrial basketry evident in such objects as women's handbags woven from seatbelt strapping (the so-called "seatbelt purse"), and the whole phenomena of plastic "basket" derivatives that hold our fish and chips in casual restaurants and the paper clips in our desk drawers.

While not covering all of this ground, the project team is to be congratulated for the breadth and integrative character of their inquiry. The programs associated with the project were clearly rich and the exhibition brought together an impressive assemblage of baskets from many sources. It can be hoped that the project participants will continue to share the results of their studies. While the contributions to *Basketry: Making Human Nature* are mostly short essays, special mention should be made of "Basketmaking in East Anglia," a longer essay by Mary Butcher. She was the co-organizer of a companion exhibition focused on this local basketry tradition. The essay provides rich detail on the cultural, economic, and material history of basketry in East Anglia. It will be a key resource for studies of local English folklife and history and stands as well as a valuable substantive contribution to basketry studies in the United Kingdom.

Students of basketry will want to seek out and engage *Basketry: Making Human Nature*. It fruitfully points towards the kind of sophisticated, comparative, creative investigation that the ancient art and technology of basketry certainly deserves.

Note

1. Information on the exhibition is available online at <http://www.scva.ac.uk/exhibitions/archive/?exhibition=115>. An overview of the research initiative is available at <http://projects.beyondtext.ac.uk/beyondthebasket/>. Other project endeavors included a conference titled "Basketry and Beyond: Constructing Cultures and a range of public and scholarly programs. Resources generated from the project are accessible online at <http://www.basketry.ac.uk/resources/exhibiting-basketry>. All websites noted were accessed on June 5, 2014.

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