

National Basketry Organization

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quarterly review | Summer 2013



Promoting the art, skill, heritage, and education of traditional and contemporary basketry.

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#### ON THE COVER

Artist: Dorothy Gill Barnes Basket: Roman Numeral (2005) ?"x?"x?

Photography by ?

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## letter from the editor

Fellow Members:

Pam Saint-Pierre is a member of the NBO board. (She keeps track of all the money and we couldn't do it without her.) Back in 2007 she signed up to attend the NBO conference at Lake Tahoe. Then she cancelled her registration. She got cold feet. Chickened out.

So what was scaring her so much? Flo Hoppe. Now any of you who know Flo know she is about as not-scary as they come. There will never be a Flo Hoppe Halloween costume.

But Pam felt that as a beginning basket maker she would be out of her league.

Then she got up her courage and signed up to take a workshop with Herman Gutleich at the Portland conference. Guess who was in the class with her. Flo Hoppe. Pam has since taken classes with Flo and now laughs when she thinks about her hesitation.

Pam and I were talking recently about all this because a friend had told me she wants to go to the conference at Arrowmont, but she is "just a beginner."

We understand this. You look at that list of teachers and you see names you know from gallery shows and exhibitions and magazines. You are sure that everyone else in the class will be a pro and you will end up huddled in a corner with a misshapen, laughable attempt at a basket.

We have all been there. No one is born a basket maker. Everyone has a first basket.

And even if you are an experienced basket maker, there is always more to master as I learned several years ago in a willow class with Lydia Pesata. Lydia took us all to a willow patch, selected a rod, notched it, put one piece in her teeth and peeled off three sections smooth as a new jar of peanut butter.

So we all selected, notched and bit; but our products were four-inch scraps, maybe a foot or two long by the end of the day. At the end of the week, my hands ached, my thumbs were bleeding and I brought home the ugliest little basket you have ever seen. I keep it in my studio to remind me that there is always more to learn.

When Susi Nuss was putting together the faculty, she asked everyone about the level of experience the instructor recommended. She even pushed back a couple of times. One of the instructors emailed, "Don't take away my beginners!"

The thing about basket making is that it is an apprenticeship craft. Although some fiber departments include basketry techniques, for the most part, basket makers learn from other basket makers. I think we all want to work with beginners because we have all learned from more experienced makers. It is part of participating in the long and rich legacy of American basket making.

So if you are hesitating to sign up because you are intimidated, get over it. And if you know some timid folks who would like to come, encourage them. As the President of NBO, I promise, promise, promise you will feel welcome.

And, by the way, if you are in Katherine Lewis's class...Flo will be a fellow student.

Michael Davis Editor of NBO Quarterly review



# president's

There are many ways to "waste" time on the Internet. I have a new favorite: the Likes on our Facebook page. Whenever a new person "Likes" our page, his or her profile picture appears.

These profile pictures are wonderful. Some show a picture of the person, providing proof that basket makers come in all sizes, ages and colors. They also come from all over the world. People who watch our page come from Brazil, Denmark, South Africa, Japan...everywhere.

Others reveal more. There is a background with a glacier, a family or a garden putting the person in a fuller context. Other people only show you something they love: a baby, a flower, a view. And others include images of their own art and so we know we are being watched by quilters, weavers, ceramists, woodcarvers, felters and a woman who makes custom purses to conceal handguns.

I remain somewhat wary of social media and caution people to be careful what they reveal. I have a nephew who deeply regrets a certain photo posted during a college party. But I am now appreciating how you don't have to reveal much to say a lot. Scrolling through our list of "Likers" makes me smile because people are so varied and so interesting and they are just saying hi, just curious about what other people are up to.

So if you haven't been to our Facebook page, we invite you to join this international crowd of people who love baskets...and add your profile photo to the group picture!

Facebook is just one of the ways NBO is working to promote basketry this spring. We are working on three major exhibitions. One is on the evolution of basketry in American. Another project we are very excited about is to document the endangerment of the natural materials used for basket making. Entries are coming in to Juried Art Services for the All Things Considered VII which will open at Arrowmont in the fall. We are in the final stages of planning to "travel" the show to the Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, MA from November until the spring. After our successful show there two years ago, they want us back!

And we are, of course, planning and organizing for the biennial conference at Arrowmont. The response has been wonderful and classes are filling up.

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"Basketry as art is our main focus."

## Dorothy Gill Barnes

by: Catherine K. Hunter, Museum and Education Consultant



**Dorothy Gill Barnes peeling Bark (1999)** Photographer Unknown

Dorothy Gill Barnes has been at the forefront of fiber art since the 1970s. She lives and works in Ohio where she is a Visiting Artist at Ohio State University. In this article you will hear the voice of Barnes in excerpts from "Oral history interview with Dorothy Gill Barnes, 2003 May 2 - 7, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution" and from my interview at her home in April.

A select list of Residencies includes Museum of Glass, Washington, 2008; Pilchuck Glass Studio, Washington, 2008; Elm Tree Project, RISD and Brown University, Rhode Island, 2005; and Oregon College of Art and Craft, 1997. Teaching includes Haystack, Penland, Arrowmont, Peters Valley Craft Center, and Split Rock Arts Program; also residencies and workshops in Denmark, New Zealand, Australia, Fiji, and Canada.

Selected Honors include Fellow, American Craft Council, 1999; Ohio Governor's Award for the Arts, 1999; Lifetime Achievement in the Crafts Award, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC, 1993; Ohio Arts Council Individual Artist Fellowship Grant, 1998, 1994, 1986.

Her work is in the collections of Racine Art Museum, Wisconsin; Ohio Craft Museum, Ohio; Mint Museum, North Carolina; Museum of Arts and Design, New York; Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian's American Art Museum, Washington, DC. Exhibitions are listed at www.dorothygillbarnes.com.

Dorothy Gill Barnes is a prominent basket artist who has been making vessels and sculptures using tree trunks, limbs and bark for over forty years. She has been experimenting with glass for a decade; however, the work primarily expresses a loving relationship with trees. Sophisticated and elegant, guiet and rhythmic with repeating forms, folds and interlacings, the artwork has the compact power of poetry. Simultaneously, Barnes expresses her interests in the natural history and ecology of individual locales. She gathers and uses specifically local materials from wherever she goes: aspen from Colorado, fire-ravaged eucalyptus from Australia, kelp from New Zealand, mica from an abandoned industrial site in North Carolina, mulberry trees from her own yard in Ohio. And she is equally committed to what she calls "respectful harvesting." There is no one like her.

Most people relate to the forest as a monochromatic landscape, green in summer and brown in the winter. Colorful leaves in autumn are the exception. While tree guides inventory leaves and silhouettes to identify species, Barnes brings our attention to bark as the distinctive feature. Imagine the texture and color of hickory, pine, cedar and birch. She transforms bark into an aesthetically pleasing material.

The depth of her knowledge invites a comparison to Native Americans whose material culture relied upon wood for an array of useful and ceremonial objects. Wood and bark were used for baskets, tools, clothing, birthing mats, shelter, flotation devices, even food when grinding bark into flour. Barnes' work pays homage to nature and ancient traditions.

Few of us can appreciate the athleticism and patience required to experience the properties of tree species, cultivate trees, and peel bark. Barnes earned her place in the forest; she is as weathered as her beloved trees. Her hands are gnarly; her frame is wiry; movements are concise, purposeful and graceful. It is a perfect coincidence that botany and human anatomy share the same terminology; as a devoted team, Barnes and trees act as one, interlacing trunks and limbs as they work.





#### **THE BEGINNING**

While attending Coe College and the University of Iowa, where she earned BA and MA degrees in Art Education, Barnes took classes in a variety of art mediums and subjects: life drawing, metals, clay, painting, art history. Courses in silkscreen printing at Cranbrook Academy of Art, Michigan, and in pattern drafting at Minneapolis School of Art brought further diversity to her education. Barnes taught art as an adjunct faculty member at Capitol University, Columbus, Ohio, from 1966 to 1990. She names artist and teacher Ruth Mary Papenthein at Ohio State University and Dwight Stump, an Ohio-based traditional basketmaker, as among her influences and also acknowledges the encouragement of Jack Lenor Larson and the inspiration she found in the exciting, fresh work of Ed Rossbach, John McQueen, Pat Hickman and Lillian Elliott.

Essentially self-taught as a fiber artist, although comfortable working with cloth and sewing techniques since childhood, she attended classes at the local weaver's guild, read FiberArts magazine and experimented with translating techniques commonly used with fiber and textiles into natural materials. In the final paragraphs of the Smithsonian's oral history recorded in 2003, Barnes praises the mission of the NBO, founded in 1999, and recalls attending an NBO event showing "...folk art, Japanese bamboo, and the wonderful work of Ed Rossbach. It was a special joy for me to see recent fine work by traditional and contemporary basket artists that I have known and respected for years...."

In the Smithsonian interview, Barnes describes her evolution as a basket maker and an early commitment to wood and bark:

"I think I was just lucky not to have had some of that early training that I might have sought if I knew from the beginning that I wanted to make baskets...or that I wanted to be an artist in some three-dimensional form in sculpture. If I had learned traditional basketry and made it well, I would be very proud to have done

A: Athens Woven Willow, detail (2008) 10'H Willow Photography by Dorothy Gill Barnes **B: Pieces of White Pine (?)** Each 7" long White pine Photography by Dorothy Gill Barnes





that, but to have had the other experiences were wonderful and having time for family and all of that.... The thing that came together for me that worked so well is that the sewing part and the carpentry part and the love of being in the woods all just kind of came together.... And I don't think there's any place in a classroom, except perhaps now in the good crafts schools, where you can have in-the-woods experience to collect your art materials. You go to a place and buy your art materials. And if you have that access to the out-of-doors and to observing in nature, and then also have in your head the idea that you could either sew it, braid it, paint on it, break it, fold it, pleat it, burn it--all the different things you can do to wood and to bark. And to have that available to you and then have some of the skills that give you the chance to put it together one way or another. Not always the good sense to do it in a proper way, and not always the good sense to make a form that's interesting, but the trial and error is constant...."

Barnes has no need to anthropomorphize her sculpture, to be representational, to add excessive embellishments, or to include artificial materials. She steadfastly invents refreshing forms only using ordinary trees. Barnes told me that she

C: Indigo Wrapping and Glass (2007) Various sizes Indigo Dyed Wood, Nylon Wrapping and Glass Photography by Cory Piehowicz

makes some of her best work quickly when the pulled bark is fresh and most pliable. Other work is time-intensive, sometimes waiting years for manipulated tree bark to grow.

Endless inventiveness is one hallmark of her career. Barnes regrets occasions when she attempted to duplicate a work of art to fulfill a commission. Barnes is not motivated by commissions or the art market; rather, she is motivated by the joy of discovery. When I asked if she felt compelled to work each day, she responded:

"I work each morning...No, no, not to work...to play, play, play. It is fun to have a new idea that cleans up your head.... Just slice the bark, pull it back and fold it. Have fun. Bark is so relaxing and flexible and wants to be in your hands. I enjoy that a lot.... It is fun.... It is a puzzle."

Another hallmark of Barnes' career is her flexible approach. She rarely sketches a concept in advance, views splits or cracks as challenges to be repaired, and is never reluctant to invest time. Her home and studio are an astonishing summary of fascinating experiments; concepts ready to be co-joined or to expand further.

D: Hickory Branches (?) Fach 5 1/2' x 2" diameter Hickory branches Photography by Cory Piehowic A distinctive feature in Barnes' work is "drawing" on trees and she adopted the term dendroglyphs (literally Greek for "tree symbols"). She incises the tree with a utility knife and waits months or years for the scar to heal and enhance the linear design. A book about the marks and drawings made on trees by sheep herders in New Mexico caught her

DENDROGLYPHS

Barnes' earliest dendroglyphs were simple marks such as Roman numerals—"interesting shapes and an old way of writing"—and curvilinear lines. Later ones became more complex and might relate the form she intends to use them in. Once, a few months before attending a basketry workshop in Japan she asked a friend, "Could you make a Japanese character that the sap could flow around?" He drew the character for "tree," which she then replicated on the bark of a tree in her yard and harvested in time to take to Japan. She spoke about the appeal of marks during our visit and in this excerpt from the Smithsonian oral history:

attention, and she decided that "somehow or

other it was kind of interesting."

"... I do think that those marks, when they are there, are fun to look at, and they give me a feeling of not just humans on this earth,

E: Young White Pine (1995) 8" x 6" x 4' Pine log and bark, slotted and wrapped Photography by Doug Martin

F: Found Underground (2001) Approx 24" long Mulberry Root Photographer unknown



Naturalists explain that elk rub trees to mark territory. Bears leave claw marks by climbing. Beavers, moose and deer gnaw trees as part of their winter diet. Insects create curving trails. Yellow-bellied sapsuckers peck

symmetrical rows of holes. Such natural marks have been collected and exhibited by Barnes in a series called "Marked By." It occurred to me that Barnes, like an elk, marks her trees, if not a territory.

Intrigued by dendroglyphs, I looked closely at the tree and realized that barks are covered by dash-like horizontal marks or pores that are round, diamond-shaped or oval. Native Americans in the northeast call the horizontal marks on birch bark "eyes." Naturalists identify the marks as "lenticels" whose function is to allow trees to breathe by exchanging gases



and making a difference in what things happen and how things go back to the earth by being chewed. The elk have to rub their antlers on the trees, and I think they're just beautiful."

between the inner living layer and the surrounding air, a process that is essential for bark photosynthesis. Could Barnes' marks be interpreted as man-made lenticels?

#### TOOLS

Along with traditional weaving, sewing and assembly techniques, Barnes uses power tools, along with the nails, wire, or staples as needed. Exposure to electric tools began while volunteering with a building crew of Habitat for Humanity. This experience also taught Barnes to welcome electric tools and personal assistants as labor saving benefits. She described tools as "collaborators" during our visit and in the following excerpt from the Smithsonian interview:

"I also like the idea...that when I make saw marks, the saw teeth marks are pleasing to me. I have one piece where I have used several different tools in several different kinds of saws and left all those marks on purpose in that piece.

G: Markedby Series, detail (2000-ongoing) All pieces 22" long Various woods marked by animals and nature Photography by Cory Piehowicz

#### H: Spalted Maple Book - Open (2008) 15" x 5" x 2"

Spalted Maple Book, open with metal pin, with Blair Davis Photography by Cynthia Tinapple



I: Dorothy braiding willow shoots in Athens (1996) Photography by Ora Anderson

> J: Tulip Poplar with Glass (2002) 10.5" × 9" Poplar and glass Photography by Cory Piehowicz K: Athens Woven Willow (2005)

10' Height Willow Photography by Dairy Barn

L: Varied Small Projects with Weaving (2011) Various Sizes Photography by Dorothy Gill Barnes

It's kind of a thank you to the tools. It's a way of my saying, I don't want to sand this smooth; that's not what it's supposed to be here. I want to maybe have the sanded place next to the rough place. And I didn't do that completely by myself. It was sandpaper or the saw that made those marks with me, and so it's in

cooperation with tools and an appreciation for the tools, and that means a lot to me...."

Barnes' car is ever ready with a collection of favorite tools including utility knife, burnisher, axe, two Japanese saws and clamps. An essential tool for transportation, the car determines a size limit of 6' for harvested, folded bark! At home, her favorite electric tool is a small chain saw. For fun at a workshop in remote Canada, she tested, but does not recommend, a bicycle-powered table saw!





#### **RESPECTFUL HARVESTING**

Barnes' commitment to "respectful" harvesting expresses an ethical stance, respectful of trees as life forms. Foremost, Barnes prefers to harvest materials herself, taking only trees slated for removal. She consults a network of community developers who are pruning and clearing land. Alternatively, Barnes has been known to follow the sound of a chainsaw on her bicycle to see what's coming down! She also owns eighteen acres of forest in Brinkhaven, Ohio, where she harvests bark annually, and her dendroglyphs mature for years privately. There is no desire to forage for materials in catalogs!

Barnes is acutely aware of the short season appropriate for gathering bark. For some species, bark is a renewable resource if gathered in the spring season when sap is running; attempt to gather in the wrong season, and the bark won't come off. Spring is the best time to peel bark. Next, there is a responsibility to store harvested materials – dry or refrigerated – for future use.



Through a lifetime of experience, Barnes has gained an intuitive understanding of bark and the qualities of its separate layers. To learn more about tree function, I turned to Wikipedia and a new field guide "BARK" (2011) by Michael Wojtech. It is remarkable that hydrostatic pressure is able to "lift" water from the wet tree roots to the dry canopy even against gravity; that nutrients in the water feed the tree through the process of leaf photosynthesis; that some trees depend on bark photosynthesis. Furthermore, trees are complex habitats for a variety of life forms from bacteria and lichen to birds and mammals. Both Wojtech and Barnes remind us to appreciate and protect trees.

#### A PERSONAL TOUR: Past, Present and Future

It was my pleasure to join Barnes for a day-long tour in Ohio. Our itinerary included her suburban yard, attached 10' x 14' studio, home, car and two garages. All are valuable resources as archives of the past, present and future. There was a progression from early traditional baskets, including an anti-war peace basket with yarns and beads, to sculptures, dendroglyphs, collaborations with glass artists, experiments with mica and oversize work with trees in collaboration with woodworkers. The best I can do to share that day is to describe selected observations.

The evidence of constant innovation was exciting and overwhelming. On one hand the samples of work provide a fascinating background while one examines the artwork that is exhibited and published; on the other hand, each sample stimulated Barnes to suggest a new concept or collaboration. Her eyes are always on the future.

Our tour began in the yard where she is growing a 36" cube of fourteen mulberry trees in order to display its roots. After 6 years of growth, she will harvest the project in 2014. "...The roots grow at right angles, a rare occurrence in nature." Time will tell if nature's work will meet Barnes' expectations.

Mica is an alternative medium for experimentation, and Barnes uses samples from a former factory in North Carolina, some of it mined there and some brought in from India. Her new discovery is that black walnut bark is dark enough to complement dark inclusions in otherwise clear sheets of mica. Iridescence when angled in light is an appealing feature. Unexpectedly, Barnes discovered that mica appears as opaque silver when sandwiched between two layers of clear glass! "...The first pieces of mica looked like dirty plastic...not nice...so, I am working on different ways of liking mica and caring about doing something with it..." Rocks are an alternative material supported by bark. One can almost interpret the vertical posture as anthropomorphic. Do the rock shapes suggest Native American celts, perhaps renewing a connection to ancient traditions that are mysterious and obscure? Regardless, the finished artwork is calm, mysterious and invites meditation.

Small samples throughout the house illustrate her vocabulary in bark. For example, there is an elegant contrast between limbs with and without bark, the latter being white, smooth and unblemished. There is a contrast between plain bark and bark that has been woven when freshly harvested and almost appears to have been woven on the living tree. Dendroglyphs of various ages show variations in scaring. When I mentioned that samples of folded bark remind me of cloth, Barnes replied that "...bark has a bias like cloth...just fold it on the bias..."

Barnes loves box elder maple for its distinctive red stains, a fugitive and glorious color. Pieces are wrapped in cloth, protected from light. While she admires the rare occurrence of red, it is interesting to learn that naturalists explain the color as a response to scars or wounds by insects, animals or sapsuckers. The stain could be thought of as a natural dendroglyph.

Barnes fondly recalls the Elm Tree Project of the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island,



M: Woven Corkscrew Willow (?) Each 22" long Willow branches, leather Photography by Cory Piehowicz N: Poplar Upright (2006) 4'x 14" diameter materials? Photography by ? **0: Tulip Poplar (2004)** 4 1/2" x 2 1/2" dia Poplar and glass Photography by Cory Piehowicz P: Pine Cross Section (2007) 3 1/2" x 13" D Pine Cross Section with mixed fiber and glass Photography by Cory Piehowicz

in 2005. When a diseased oak was slated for removal, planks were milled for furniture and scraps were fuel for Barnes' workshop with students. She completed an artwork "Elm Tree Project" by clustering three similar tree shapes made with outside bark, interior wood, and glass. Because glass shapes duplicate tree forms, the glass is also a metaphor for the tree, possibly a metaphor for a shared memory of the tree. Barnes' collaborations with glass artists and students have been ongoing for a decade. Barnes presents works in progress to the artists and students and invites them to add to the projects with glass, asking them to join her in the challenge of incorporating glass with the wood and other natural materials she uses. I observe mostly clear glass and wondered if it could be a metaphor for water that is essential to healthy trees. I also observed glass shapes filling holes or volumes inside tree trunks, admitting light into the interior of the tree. The glass acts as a physical boundary but visually the glass does not exist. As a visual barrier, however, glass defines inside and outside or interior and exterior, themes that occur often in Barnes' work.

In a tribute to her community of glass blowers, Barnes used glass blowers' wooden tools as an alternative material. She combined worn, water-stained wooden cups used to shape molten glass with a piece of molded glass.



Glass magnifiers are placed on top of hollowed tree trunks. Look through the magnifier and a 12-inch-tall tree section appears to double in depth and the low lighting adds a dreamlike atmosphere. Hollows of progressive sizes, large to small, suggest a magical tunnel. I would happily follow Barnes into the tree, like following Alice into Wonderland or Mole of Wind in the Willows into his underground lair. Either would be fun, and "fun" is one of Barnes' favorite words.



The National Basketry Organization congratulates **DOROTHY GILL BARNES** on her selection as THE PENLAND SCHOOL OF CRAFTS OUTSTANDING ARTIST EDUCATOR National Basketry Organization • www.nationalbasketry.org At Haystack in 2011, Barnes found a new material among rotted branches on the floor of the forest. She harvested strong pointed masses where branches or roots once joined the tree's trunk. River teeth, adopting a term by author David James Duncan, are used in "Haystack River Basket" (2011).

Finally, Barnes showed me a large work at a neighbor's garage. We examined a 4'-tall tree with holes on one side; to Barnes' eyes, each hole is a window-like dendroglyph. Because the trunk is too large to mount on a lathe, a woodworker is removing the interior wood by hand. Barnes will experiment with adding to the height of the work, adding more trunk and limbs of the same tree, but only if she likes the result of each addition.

#### CONCLUSION

Barnes' love and respect for trees is profound. The foundation of her career as an artist is based on wonder, experiential learning and a creative collaboration with nature. Her dedication to natural, local material has always been clear and confident. Few of us can imagine cultivating, gathering and experimenting with barks. Few artists take the risks that Barnes requires of herself, welcoming chance as a partner in daily discovery.

As the day wound down, Barnes led me to a secluded tree to demonstrate the use of her utility knife and burnisher, but tree sap was not running and she could not lift the thin bark. Since no leaves were coming out of the tree canopy, I asked if the tree were dead? "No, just dry." Returning to the car, Barnes gave me a 6" long limb with a small dendroglyph on one side. On the other side, the bark was peeled and rolled, the interior wood was split. Handing it to me, Barnes suggested I cover the split with woven bark, invited me to return and said, "I'd like to know that you actually tried with bark. Take bark, wipe it, roll it around your hand and freeze it...until you have time...then weave it."

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