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To safeguarding traditional basket making for the future

ABSTRACT

Korgen lyfter [*Raising Basket knowledge*] is a Swedish national project started by handicraft consultants from three different regions in 2019. The project aims to promote basket making and knowledge by strengthening contemporary basket makers, make the diversity of domestic basket traditions visible and increase the interest of basket making. Through efforts in training, inventory work, seminars, lectures and networking, nationally and internationally, the project has made knowledge available and problematized the question of the fragile position of basket making. Among other things, the project has been involved in developing shorter courses in basket making and started a basket appeal related to the UNESCOs convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Through a traveling exhibition, different events as well as high digital presence, the project has reached many people.

Keywords:

Basket making, Material knowledge, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Traditional skills.

INTRODUKTION

Basket making is one of the world's oldest crafts and baskets are one of the most original means of transport, collection and storage (Hasselrot, 1997). According to *The Carrier bag theory* the ability to carry and transport in a basket or bag is one of the main advances of early human development (Fisher, 1980). Baskets have been made mainly by joining various braiding or binding techniques. Technically, there are many similarities between baskets made in different places of the world, eventhough the materials have varied, being local natural materials. In basket making, there is a great deal of intangible knowledge about gathering and processing of the materials aswell as the manufacturing (Senrance,

2001). Although some processing of basket materials nowadays can be done by machines, all baskets are made by hand. This means that baskets have been made in similar ways throughout most the history of mankind – a breathtaking thought. Still, the basket is an everyday object that has only in exceptional cases been seen as a status symbol (Tingbo, 1999).

There are few finds left of early baskets, but in 2021 a large, well-preserved basket was found in Israel, dated to 10,500 years old and it is considered to be the world's oldest basket. The oldest woven basket in the world found in Israel dates back 10,000 years (Ancient Archaeology, 2023). In Sweden, we have wellpreserved basket-weave finds in the form of catching tools for eels, dated to 7500 years old (Hadevik, Hammarstrand Dehman, Serlander, 2008) (Figure1).

Baskets have many climatebenefits worth noticing. Especially when they are made and marketed locally from indigenous natural materials. Baskets are durable and can be used for a long time, unlike plastic and paper bags. When worn out, they can return to the eco-cycle.

In Sweden, the tradition of basketry is very varied due to the country's many climate zones providing a great variety of materials (Hasselrot, 1997). During our inventories, we have come to the conclusion that there are as few as approximately 80 professional or semi-professional basket makers left, many of whom have reached retirement age. In 1911 there were 1810 basket makers in the country (Hemslöjdskommittén, 1918). Most often there is only one single maker left in each technique and in some none at all. This means that many basket techniques connected to materials and basket types are worthy of protection based on the UNESCO convention on the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, n.d.).



PICTURE 1. The 7500 years old braided catching tool that was find i Malmö 2008. Some of the materials were willow and hazel. Photo: Steen H. Madsen.



PICTURE 2. Different types of baskets in varying materials which are common in traditional Swedish baskets. Photo: Linnea Rundgren.

Based on this, the multi-year national project *Korgen lyfter* [Raising Basket Knowledge] started in 2019. The project is led by the handicraft association in Scania in collaboration with the regional Sörmlands museum in Sormland. At the beginning the Handicraft association of Östergötland also was included. The project is financed by the Swedish national heritage board (<https://www.raa.se/in-english/>) and the National Swedish handicraft council (<https://nfh.se/om-namnden-for-hemslojdsfragor/in-english.html>).

PURPOSE

Korgen lyfter (<https://korgenlyfter.se/>) wants to promote the diversity of basket traditions that exist in Sweden as well as strengthen and make visible the few active basket makers and make use of existing basket knowledge. In addition, make it possible for more artisans to devote themselves to basket making through training efforts, imparting knowledge and documentation. The project wants to highlight basket making as an important intangible cultural heritage and make its fragile position visible. The ambition of the project is to include craftsmen and people interested in crafts throughout the country.

METHODS

Korgen lyfter works in-depth through, for example, educational efforts, inventory, seminars and lectures. In parallel, we work with public education through a high digital presence as well as exhibition and activities in various locations. This provides both depth and breadth as well as a good geographical spread. The project operates throughout the country, which is promoted by the interregional cooperation with shared project leadership in two different regions.

RESULTS - IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation of the project began with a mapping of the situation in the country.

An early effort was to produce the traveling exhibition *Beloved Baskets!* which has been an important tool for reaching out (Korgen lyfter, 2023a). The exhibition shows baskets made by around thirty, still active, makers. It tells an overall story about the history of baskets in Sweden, and the most common types of techniques and material. The exhibition has been shown in ten locations in Sweden from Luleå in the north to Trelleborg in the south, so far (Picture 3).

The pandemic changed many conditions for the project and led to a high level of digital activity, through www.korgenlyfter.se, the Instagram account and Facebook page @korgenlyfter. We also have a Videopodcast on YouTube @korgenlyfter. Furthermore, the project has arranged digital lectures and seminars. For the physical activities, seminars and lectures have been arranged. For examples a basket festival in Trelleborg took place in May -23 with lectures, demonstrations and basket sales (Picture 4).

The project has, in collaboration with the National Association of Swedish Handicraft Societies (<https://hemslojden.org>) and Sätergläntan – the Institute for Crafts and Handicrafts (<https://www.saterglantan.se/>), performed two pilot training distance courses corresponding to five weeks of full-time studies (Picture 5). From September 2023, Sätergläntan runs the education which has now been made permanent (Sätergläntan, 2023).

The project has carried out targeted investments in basket techniques that are particularly in need of protection – skruck, a type of goat willow basket that only a few people can produce today, and an straight-braided chip baskets with hand-split chips of pine (Picture 6).

In collaboration with the National Swedish Handicraft Council, the project has carried out a call for baskets makers (Korgen lyfter, 2023b). The aim was to analyze the state of knowledge still being accessibly in the country. The appeal is inspired by the Pom, program for cultivated diversity, *The Program for Diversity of Cultivated Plants* (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, 2022).

The project has participated with an exhibition at the 5th World Wicker and Weaving festival in Poland, where many international contacts were made with basketry- and craft organizations.

Activities often take place in collaboration with other actors such as authorities, museums, education providers, municipalities, regions and civil society organisations.



PICTURE 3. AND 4. Some of the contemporary baskets in the exhibition *Beloved baskets*. Photo: Helena Åberg (Picture 3). Karin Lundholm with baskets and other crafts in birch bark, one of the basket maker at the Basket festival in Trelleborg. Photo: Sofia Månsson (Picture 4).

CONCLUSIONS

The project's key words are breadth and depth, which means that it has been accessible to a variation of people based on their level of interest and knowledge. It involves both information about the history of basketry and the endangered status nowadays as well as direct activities to transfer knowledge and practical skills in basket making from person to person. An important focus has been the traditional basketry and how the knowledge should be transferred to new generations. Several makers have expressed that they were strengthened by the initiatives taken by the project and that their skills now are being made visible in a larger context.



PICTURE 5. AND 6. One of the student in our longer distans pilot cours weawing with birch bark. Photo: Helena Åberg (Picture5). Only a few people know how the basket type Skruck is made. This makes the technology extra worthy of protection. Photo: Helena Åberg (Picture6).

Working on different platforms in both the digital and physical world is a successful method. Furthermore, the project has involved the whole country and has been carried out in broad cooperation with national, regional and municipal actors as well as NGOs and craftpersons.

The method of running a project as a collaboration between several regional actors has proven to work very well. A national project provides good geographical spread and impact as well as weight and legitimacy. We have seen an increased interest in traditional knowledge and basket making with natural materials, often linked to climate awareness and the need for climate-smart solutions and local production. Making a targeted investment in project form with earmarked funds creates financial conditions for carrying out both own activities and being able to support external initiatives.

The project has created an embryo for a longer course in basketry, something that has been lacking until now and which is certainly a reason for the weak position basket manufacturers have. Further and longer and more training efforts are needed to strengthen the position of basket making. However, it is positive for the future of the basket that several younger people have participated in the trainings that have been given so far.

Much remains to be done to make the basket's unique position as one of the world's oldest crafts visible. This applies to both the lack of educational opportunities and the difficulty in obtaining financial profitability for the makers. Due to changes in forestry and to the urbanization, the availability of sufficient material in several techniques is decreasing. This is serious and increases the risk of natural materials being replaced by petroleum products, which partly pose a threat to the climate but also pose

a risk that important intangible knowledge disappears. In order for basket-making, with all its diversity, to be able to join men into the future, it is important to collaborate between researchers, craftsmen, educational institutions, cultural heritage institutions, authorities and NGOs. Considering both the issues of availability of material and knowledge transfer.

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