

EXHIBITION AND CATALOGUE REVIEW

USEFUL ARTS: ARTFUL UTENSILS

STEPHEN HUGH-JONES

Basketmakers: Meaning and Form in Native American Baskets, Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum, 16 June 1992–22 May 1993.

LINDA MOWAT, HOWARD MORPHY and PENNY DRANSART (eds.), *Basketmakers: Meaning and Form in Native American Baskets* (Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, Monograph 5), Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum 1992. 175 pp., Bibliography, Index, Maps, Figures, Plates. £16.25 including postage and packing (from the Pitt Rivers Museum, South Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3PP).

THE new temporary exhibition at the Pitt Rivers Museum and the accompanying catalogue together make a sustained and largely successful effort to rescue baskets from the twilight of evolutionary and taxonomic ethnology, to recognize their aesthetic significance, and to give some recognition to the lives and values of the people who made, and still continue to make, them.

In the artistic stakes, pots definitely have the edge over baskets—find me a basket in a decent art gallery, name me a Bernard Leach or a Josiah Wedgwood in the world of baskets! Like sluggish tortoises, overtaken by ceramics, textiles, paintings and sculptures in the race towards high culture, baskets seem to have balked at the very first hurdle, the division between arts and crafts. Dry carapaces whose regular forms and geometric patterns bear silent witness to past life, they were picked up and placed in ethnological museums ruled by the strict taxonomic regimes of type, technique and provenance, or played second fiddle to tribal masks in galleries of 'primitive art'. As head of the anthropology department at Cambridge, Jack Goody used to talk of 'basket weavers' as a shorthand for museum curators lacking in anthropological expertise—for him baskets seemed to epitomize everything that he felt was wrong about museums and material culture.

Heirs of a pre-ceramic technology, light, strong, functional and flexible but also ephemeral and easily replaced, baskets have not fared well on the road to modernity either. The carefully woven fabric of each basket incorporates many hidden hours spent on learning skills and on fetching and preparing materials—the catalogue makes clear the impact of environmental degradation on the availability of materials for basketry and the sometimes extraordinary lengths that contemporary Native Americans go to obtain them. Made by poorly remunerated peasants or Indians whose time is not money, baskets were rapidly displaced by plastic and metal alternatives, both cheaper to make and tokens of a new identity. The fate of many a basket is summed up by a Yavapai Indian from Arizona in a quotation displayed in one of the exhibition cases: 'Her father sold it 'cos Rena going to school, and after that maybe she marry a whiteman, don't live like Indian, don't want basket.' The 'best' of these unwanted baskets found their way to museums and galleries, the rest were forgotten.

Squeezed into a relatively small area, the main exhibition is divided by region, but other cases cover prehistoric basketmakers, the different techniques and uses of basketry, the way increasing commercialization has transformed basketry form and function, and the lives and products of contemporary Native American basketmakers. Uncluttered by excessive commentary, the cases allow the pieces to stand for themselves as objects of beauty, displays of technique, and as ingenious solutions to practical problems in a workaday world. Some excellent and informative photographs taken by historical and contemporary collectors provide information about materials, settings and contexts and serve to restore the objects to the hands and faces of their makers.

The catalogue is lavishly illustrated, its ten colour plates highlighting the role of colour in pattern and design and illustrating both the subtle tones of natural materials and vegetable dyes and the possibilities opened up by the use of chemical substitutes. The catalogue's divisions follow those of the exhibition but its text provides several further dimensions that add greatly to the appreciation of the objects displayed. After an introductory essay on the museum's basketry collections and collectors and a clear summary of different basketry techniques, regional specialists 'from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego' provide succinct accounts of local variations in construction technique, form, function and basketry design in archaeological, historical and traditional contexts. In their different ways, however, the essays go well beyond the concerns of technology and tradition to provide accounts of the cultures and histories of both basketmakers and basket collectors and to examine the changing status of native basketry as part of the colonial encounter. What comes across especially interestingly, both in some of these accounts (notably that by Ann McMullen) and also at a material level in the exhibits themselves, is the way in which Native American basketry has been transformed through time.

Though basketry has always been an item of exchange and trade, in all the cases considered here, baskets were once largely produced for internal consumption within 'tribal' groups made up of people who lead lives that depended, to a greater

or lesser extent, on their use and who held a distinctive set of ideas and values in common as part of their own identity. In Amazonia this still largely applies, but elsewhere basketmakers have responded through time to a number of selective pressures that have altered radically both what they produce and the way their craft and its products are evaluated. These pressures involve not only the introduction of new techniques, materials and uses, and the displacement of baskets by new, alternative technologies, but also the increasing targeting of baskets to an external market made up of both users and collectors whose demands for 'authentic Indian basketry' have transformed quite radically the objects themselves. The wonderfully kitsch Passamaquoddy ash-splint strawberry basket made by Clara Keezer is but an extreme example of selective pressures leading towards miniaturization and decorative elaboration. The juxtaposition of the contemporary and the traditional and the exploration of the links between them are welcome and important features of an exhibition that places objects firmly in the context of the lives of the peoples who make them.

For many Native American groups, basketry is one of their most important and significant vehicles of aesthetic expression, a point that is clear from the displays and that is explored in Howard Morphy's stimulating concluding essay (a revised version of which appeared in *JASO* (Vol. XXIII, no. 1, pp. 1-16)). Rather than being set aside as 'art', baskets are firmly anchored in practice and practicalities—baskets are as beautiful as they are well made, serve useful ends and are integrated into culturally meaningful activities. The cases display an astonishing array of different basketry forms, each relating to a specific function—not just picking, carrying, harvesting, winnowing, sieving, straining, storing, but also carrying water and serving food and drink. There are also mats and cages, fire-fans, traps and toys, and even baskets for dancing and getting married with.

As hats, bindings and belts and as the support for feather head-dresses, basketry also figures as part of bodily aesthetics. This connection between bodies and baskets is not entirely fortuitous. Many Native Americans began their lives in the basketry cradles that Colombian peasants refer to as '*un moisés*' ('a Moses'): a free-standing Yurok cradle complete with movable sunshade is a *chef d'oeuvre* of the exhibition—and baskets have served as coffins too. For the Trio and other Indians of lowland South America, human bodies are animated baskets and thus share the same repertoire of painted designs. As one exhibition case reveals, an informed reading can translate the intricate designs on Hopi ceremonial basketry plaques into the powers and attributes of Kachina spirits that are represented in the costumes of dancers. The Californian Pomo decorated their baskets with beads and coloured feathers in the manner of human bodies; given away as gifts and burned at funerals, these valuables inspired many copies that were sold in the expanding market for Indian arts.

Drawing on David Guss's exploration (Guss 1992) of the cultural significance of basketry for the Venezuelan Yekuana, Morphy argues that an appreciation of alien aesthetic traditions may allow us to see objects through eyes that can appreciate the meanings and values that lie behind form and function. The

problems here are those of scale. Guss deals with a culture at one moment of time while the exhibition deals with a continent and a long pre- and post-colonial history; Guss's weaving includes houses, the cases contain more collectable basketry. The exhibition faces up to these difficulties honestly: as the catalogue makes clear, museum collections are usually products of the whims, fancies, prejudices and logistical constraints of assorted collectors, and not usually representative samples of the objects produced by any given culture. But such difficulties severely constrain our capacity to appreciate other aesthetics at a glance. To go further requires extensive research—the catalogue contains an excellent bibliography.

REFERENCE

- GUSS, DAVID M. 1989. *To Weave and Sing: Art, Symbol, and Narrative in the South American Rainforest*, Berkeley: University of California Press.