

'WILLOW BASKETRY' - AN INTRODUCTION TO WORK

I would like tonight to introduce to you, by way of an introductory talk followed by a practical demonstration, the craft of willow basketry.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS

Basketry is acknowledged as one of the so called 'primitive crafts', and is considered one of the oldest known, predating textile weaving and even more ancient than the ceramic arts.

Remnants of coiled baskets have been found in the middle East, dated at about 10,000 BC. In Africa parts of pots with the imprint of basketry patterns on them have been dated at 8,000 BC. It is thought that in order to make a basket water tight the basket was lined with clay. At the same time the form of the basket could have been used as a kind of 'mould' for making a clay vessel.

Numerous records exist to show that from the earliest times willows have been used for making baskets and have been used for making all kinds of domestic and agricultural artefacts.

Wicker work fragments have been unearthed from the Glastonbury Lake Village, 100 BC. And Pliny, AD 23-79, an early historian, specifically mentions the cultivation of osiers.

In England the earliest record we have of any basket making is dated 1381, and is mentioned in connection with a basket maker, on an early Poll Tax record, in the county of Suffolk.

Basket making was so important in this country, supplying containers and many other commodities for home and industry, that for many centuries, right up to the end of the 19th century, there was a basket maker in every large village.

In 1570, basketry reached sufficient importance that the basket makers, along with other craftsmen, were organised into Guilds. St Julian was taken as their patron. In 1937 the Guild gained an even higher status by receiving the Royal Charter. Today the 'Worshipful Company of Basket Makers' is still an active organisation that together with the British 'Basket Makers Association' actively promote the teaching and practice of traditional basketry and related skills, such as chair seating and rush work.

The practice of basketry is world-wide and achieved with a wide range of materials. The materials available depend in the first instance on the local climate and soil conditions.

As soon as people became aware of the need for a container they would have twisted and woven together natural materials and fibres into some sort of basket - perhaps the idea came originally from observing the birds and their nest building techniques.

The particular materials available in any region would have influenced the styles and the way basketry techniques have developed in different countries. In some countries such as those with a tropical climate, fine grasses, roots and even leaves were used for coiled or plaited baskets.

In the Far East, namely Japan and China, bamboo and cane constitute the traditional materials. They are used whole or split to make finer and very technically complex baskets.

In other places, in the so called temperate areas, such as where we live, in Northern Europe and much of America, stronger thicker materials like willows or other parts of more woody plant materials have been used.

In Europe particularly, it is the willow that has given rise to the technique of putting a basket together by the technique called the 'Stake-and-Strand' method, which I will demonstrate later.

Other traditional materials found in Europe and America use various woods cleaved into splints for 'Frame and Slatted' baskets.

Over the centuries, travel between the different continents meant that different skills were passed on and mixed with other cultures, so developing the various techniques further.

Willow in Britain

However, despite basketry being a very ancient craft, it is only in comparatively recent times, 800 AD, that we have any records of the cultivation of suitable materials such as willows for basket making materials. Throughout the 19th century willow growing flourished in certain regions of Britain, but then basketry went into serious decline with the advent of man-made materials such as cardboard and then plastics for carriers and the importation of cheaper foreign made baskets.

The traditional willow growing areas in Britain are Somerset, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Nottinghamshire, Staffordshire, Berkshire, Suffolk and Norfolk, all areas that enjoy a reasonably mild climate with a higher than average rainfall and fertile soils. In Somerset areas of low land are suitable because of the well maintained ditches and drainage systems to keep the land from becoming water logged.

Although willows will grow almost anywhere, they do favour certain conditions to grow neat long straight 'Rods'. They require fertile lowland sites with deep well drained soils especially clay and silt mixtures. They do not like acidic conditions which usually result from stagnant water in poorly drained soils or peaty conditions.

Today there has been a revival of the willow growing industry. However, this is not so much in the form of basket making factories that used to provide all the basket requirements for the household and many other industries, such as the textile and coalmining industries; it is the general public who are taking up willow basketry, particularly baskets made from hedgerow materials, as a hobby.

The demand for materials has meant that the growers of willows are putting down fields of willow to meet the increasing requirements. Today there is also a growing fashion for Live Willow Sculptural work, and if you wanted to you could attend a Live Willow Workshop almost every weekend.

Until the fairly recent advent of man made materials, i.e. cardboard and plastic - willow baskets, provided for almost our every domestic need. From a child's cradle - the famous Moses Basket, to all manner of carrying and container type artefacts: shopping baskets, baskets for holding food and even water. Basket work has provided fencing and fish traps, huts and hats, chariots, chairs and clothing, animal muzzles and cages. On a larger scale, balloon baskets for air travel and invalid and other carriages for land transport have been made of willow.

Warriors shields and armour have been made from wicker and during the Second World War aircraft had their heavy seats replaced with ones made of willow so as to increase the pay load of the planes. Basket work hampers, full of food and ammunition, were strong enough to be air-lifted and dropped in Europe. Even the Guards today at Buckingham palace have a willow structure under their large furry hats called 'Busby' to support them.

Houses were built of basket work, daubed in mud in colder climates like ours, using a process known as 'wattle and daub'.

In conclusion, with respect to man's final resting place, there is a firm that has today brought back the 'willow coffin' in an attempt to save on the world's timber by using a renewable source of material to manufacture this 'end product'.

CRAFTS

Basketry is just one among many of the human activities that we call a 'craft'. Craft is an activity that combines the skilful use of human hands with certain tools and human creative capacity to transform a variety of materials acquired from natural sources to serve domestic and social cultural needs.

Many crafts have a long and ancient tradition, such as spinning and weaving, wood working, pottery, and metal crafts like copperwork or blacksmithing.

However before work became specialized, man worked as a 'hunter', 'fisherman' or 'farmer'. The activities associated with these areas of work, areas of necessary human activity but not yet specialized, can be termed '**pre-craft**'.

Given time, these activities developed into what we can call the '**archetypal crafts**' such as that of the woodcutter, stone mason, weaver, potter and metalsmith.

With the development of civilization and human consciousness a further step was taken in the development of work to what could be called the '**service crafts**',

that is those crafts or trades that were specifically set up to serve the needs of 'fellow men' and include those of the tinker, tailor, butcher, baker and candle stick maker.

Today we can see that the gesture of serving others also underlies the work and vocations of the priest, the nurse and the teacher.

With the development of the hand tool into the machine, as occurred during the period we call the Industrial Revolution, more and more sophisticated crafts could be developed and we have the start of the manufacturing industries that used vast resources of materials and often complex processes to convert them to commodities . Generally speaking we could call this type of work the '**technical crafts**' .

ORIGINS OF WORK

Originally the motivation for work was not just to serve what could be seen as the human and domestic needs of existence. Man's activity was primarily as a result of his giving thanks to His God, wishing to express reverence and gratitude, devotion - man-made objects to bring as offerings to the Gods.

In Christian Mythology, in the Book of Genesis, the story of Adam and Eve portrays the moment in time described as 'The Fall of Man', when humankind fell from grace and have through this event introduced pain and suffering into the world, bringing the origins of work and labour into the world.

There are some wonderful medieval paintings that show Adam after the Fall having to till the soil and by the sweat of his brow having to gain his daily bread, and since people then found themselves naked, Eve is shown working a distaff, a simple spinning tool, to make thread for cloth to be made into clothes.

At the same time, however, the ability to know between right and wrong and that, for human beings, most cherished attribute, the burgeoning experience of freedom, could also start to enter human existence. Humankind could in freedom rise from the 'creature state' to that of 'creator', to continue, it could be said, in the path and work of the 'Divine Creator' and 'Maker'.

In some of the earliest recorded art work, in the 'Cave paintings', the symbol of the 'Hand' is depicted. Why the hand? Perhaps because all work is accomplished by human hands, the one organ that most separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom.

Today we have only a dim memory or sometimes only a fleeting glimpse that the 'hand' was an organ of sense, as are our eyes and ears, for perceiving the world and the Self. No animal can do this.

Again only through what happened at the Fall did a sacrifice occur enabling the hand to be put to the service of the earth and giving rise to the birth of craft work.

The German word 'Handwerk,' meaning handwork/craft, indicates that the hand enables man to create, to do work. The hand is a physical instrument, used as a tool. But in contrary to animals, which can also build and create marvellous forms and structures, through what we refer to as instinct, the human hand is meant to be free, not patterned into some fixed habit, but free to give and take and, moreover, used to express human feelings.

In brief we can say that 'craft' means: To give expression to an idea (existing in the non-physical domain, which we can also call the spiritual domain) by means of earthly materials i.e. bringing spirit into matter.

This process is synonymous with a fundamental Christian principle and indicates how practising craft is related to the development of human morality. This, one could say, has more to do with 'doing' than it has to blindly obeying a set of rules or religious dogma. Within all 'doing', within all work, lies the possibility for serving 'needs' and taking responsibility for one's actions.

The crafts had their kind of culmination, their height and fulfilment in the late Middle Ages. In the great cathedral buildings of Europe we see the coming together of many craftsmen in a wonderful example of human ingenuity, wisdom, thoughtfulness, and technical ability to master the natural resistance of materials.

To preserve the skills and knowledge within the different craft disciplines, and to ensure the right kind of training, Craft and Trade Guilds were established. Apart from maintaining the skills of the craft, the practical knowledge, they were also charged with preserving the ancient mystery knowledge associated with their craft work and concerned with the spiritual development of its members. To become a stonemason, for example, was an outer and inner training and in those days the craftsmen had a good social position.

Today traditional handcraft work is only professionally practised by relatively few people. It may be an activity in various schools or may provide a useful and meaningful means to introducing those with special needs to work in the Training Centres.

It is still true today, I believe, that the right practising of craftwork can offer not only the immediate satisfaction of making something but also has something of a more transformational quality to impart.

In craft activity, head, heart and hands are brought into a particular relationship with each other. Craft activities serve not only to educate about the nature and processes involved with different materials, about traditional skills, the use of tools and equipment; there is also a more hidden - if you like therapeutic aspect - from which we benefit when practising true craft.

For it is in the very nature of handwork crafts to bring order and bestow order, to bring order to the materials used and to bestow order upon the maker, the creator. In the practising of crafts we can indeed rise above our creature state to that of co-creator.

In the practising of crafts a potter, for instance, not only leaves his thumb print on the clay, but he/she too is inwardly impressed by the creative processes at work.

The vehicle for this 'dual action' is what I call the 'craft gesture', to be seen in the movements of the craftsperson. When acquired, these movements play upon the soul of the human being, giving a beat to the sphere of will, rhythm to the sphere of heart and feelings, and a melody to the thinking human being. It is the 'being' of movement that is active and resounding within the soul of man.

The wisdom of the crafts and that hidden knowledge which they can impart, not only to the individual but also to society, is well illustrated, albeit in an imaginative way, in some fairy tales. In some of the ancient fairy tales there are references to how the craft activity brings about morality.

We find descriptions of 'trial periods' for craftsmen and of the 'transforming' quality through work, for example in the image of 'turning straw into gold' (willows into baskets).

In some of Dr Koenig's thoughts on craft he also talks about the good practice of craft and the products they produce, creating 'golden threads of morality', which are sent out into the world and have an effect on a world saturated by mass produced artefacts, most of which are not really needed.

Basketmaking

We can find in various cultures, where basketry has had a long tradition, different mythologies and interesting historical insights into how people related to their craft activities.

In Arizona stone age burial places have been found, which are 'the Graves of the Basket Makers. There baskets used in various ceremonies and religious functions were works of art. To the ancient Indian woman, basket making was a work of love, baskets were made for people to mark specific occasions, marriage, a birth, a death. The baskets belonged only to one person and when they died the basket was destroyed, so that the 'soul' of the basket would accompany the dead person's spirit. According to the Native American Indian the weaving of baskets had a strong civilizing effect on their primitive communities. Many other ancient records of the Egyptian, Assyrian, Greek and Jewish cultures also suggest the significant use of baskets.

I would in fact go as far as saying that it was indeed the craft process that throughout the world has played an import part in the civilizing process and cultural development of mankind.

Before I introduce willow and some basketry techniques, I would like at the hand of a Grimms Fairy Tale, King Thrushbeard, to illustrate some of the potential value all craft work can have for human, social and educational development.

King Thrushbeard 'The Haughty Princess'

She is given the task to perform 3 crafts - *basketry - spinning - selling pots.*

- Why is basket making mentioned?

To answer this we have to ask - what is basket making for the human being?

What is a basket? What is it for?

It is an enlargement of the hand, and with a handle I can bring more into balance than I would within the palm of my hand. By making baskets I enlarge and balance something, my hands.

The hands belong to this middle realm of the human organism, along with the chest, heart and lungs. This middle realm of the 3-fold man, we would agree, is the seat of my emotions, my feelings. Might it be that the Haughty Princess is made to start with basketry, for she first has to bring into balance her rather unrestrained emotional and self centred behaviour.

She has to find 'inner balance' before she is asked to 'Spin' - thoughts, useful ideas.

Basketry - Feelings

Pottery - Stand firmly with her feet on the ground.

Here we have a glimpse of the therapeutic effect different crafts can have. This is the 'hidden secret'.

As a craftsperson I am striving for qualities of balance, beauty - uprightness, honesty, truth, I am exercising these qualities in my work piece, but the true practice of craft not only forms the outer shape, but as important is what is formed within, in ourselves, apart from any particular therapeutic role the craft may offer.

The actual processes of work and involvement in any craft engages us in a 4-fold manner from the conceptual to the realized product.

CRAFTSMANSHIP

4 Fold Process

1) PREPARATION

{Design

'Conceptual'

{Ideation – spiritual

Thinking activity

{Preparation of Material

{Plan ahead

2) ACTION – Activity

The craftsperson brings his/her hands to bear upon the materials - workpiece, and works out of the mental picture that

'Activity engages my will'

he/she has formed.

3) JUDGEMENT

As I proceed I exercise judgement as to the shape and form.

'Engage my feeling'

4) CONCLUSION

Finally I step back and look at what I have created.

'Combination'

Has it worked? Is it balanced – in drawing my conclusion, does the feeling tend to arise that with anything I make, it will always fall short of the ideal? Does this give rise to the motivation to try again to do better?

I. Preparation and Working Practice

1. Harvesting: In Nature

Cutting, sorting to size
Experience of living wood
Drying Process - elements involved.

2. Processing : Boiling - buff

Pitting, stripping for white
Brown, skin left on.

3. Selection of materials for basket

- a) Sorting - thickness] Tactile
- b) Grading – length] Skills - sense, touch
- c) Counting - number] Sight

4. Familiarise with willow rods.

Elements that gave character to the work.
Distinctive smell, dampness to workshop
All important stimulation of all the senses.
Water willow wet

Mellow fellow mallow

Dry rods brittle - wet - supple - elastic - strong

II. Working Process

1. BASE

- i) Forming slath conscious activity
exactness, cross
- ii) Tie slath rods together
spiral around and outwards
cross becomes a star form
- iii) 2 x 3 rods - 6 > 4 groups of 3=12
Aspect of hidden number

2. STAKE UP - Slype

- Cutting away conscious activity
- Demonstrate movement - sympathy and antipathy
- Gesture
- Sun rays - centre radii - outgoing - chaos

3. PRICKING UP

- Peace achieved in gathering it all up
- suggestion of basket - body, skeleton, structure, chest cage

4. UPSETT

- ensure that stakes go in the direction you want them to go.
- Rhythmic weaving, left to right, 3 rods

5. WEAVING SIDE

- pattern - dream off, sleep, shape - judging space formed inside basket, appears as 'I' in space outside basket experience.
- 'I' in vertical stakes, life in flow of weaving of events, destiny.

6. TOP CROWN

- border down
- Bottom foot track

7. TRIM OFF ALL ENDS

- basket appears
- END

III. Working Gesture

I believe the working gesture of Willow Basketry lies somewhere between the 3 dimensional work of the potter and the 2 dimensional aspect of weaving.

Basketry involves the rhythmical aspect of weaving but takes this into the vertical direction, into space.

- I. Potter - The working gesture of the potter is leaning over his work piece and

working from above, calling his pot upwards.

2. Weaver - the weaver works here in the flat space in front of him.

3. The basket maker - he sits here with his work piece in front of him - opposite himself.

The basket acquires its own centre, an enclosed space. It mirrors very much the middle realm of the basket maker, where the ribs and chest cavity form a basket like space - containing the rhythmical system, in the beat of heart and lung. In the basket the heart beat is transferred to the rhythm of the weaving (in, out, 1, 2, 3, left hand).

The basket maker also in the changing body positions goes from a semi-prone position - dream consciousness - into a more upright perhaps even standing position - vertical - awake consciousness.

The very characteristics of the willow, being hard, tough, tense yet elastic, flexible, warm, wet, alive - all these qualities work on those working with the material.

In my experience these very qualities and working gestures pose an appropriate challenge to most adolescents, youngsters who after all would wish to acquire some of these innate qualities of the willow. The willows have a natural uprightness, having inward strength and resistance. Yet they are at the same time elastic, bendable, flexible. Is this not what we wish to develop as mature adults?

It needs not only physical strength to work with willows but also the WILL to want to do something with the material, to make it obey one's own will.

The schooling of the will is the practising of craft in the 'ideal' to imprint, to express an idea in the material and in so doing help to bring to birth an aspect of the self within the Soul of Man.