



Basketworks: The Cotsen Contemporary American Basket Collection
September 28, 2008 – January 4, 2009

- This exhibition debuts the gift to RAM by noted Los Angeles-based collector, Lloyd Cotsen, of 151 contemporary baskets by 74 artists.
- The Cotsen Contemporary American Basket Collection is the single largest gift of contemporary baskets to arrive at RAM. When added to the nearly 300 contemporary basket works already in the museum's permanent collection, it creates one of the largest concentrations of this material in any US art museum.
- The exhibition represents a selection of nearly 70 works from the collection by both masters and emerging talent.
- This collection is of particular note because the vast majority of the artists represented are American women. This reflects Mr. Cotsen's belief that American women artists are leaders in advancing fibers as an art medium.
- The collection also contains some key works by American men, as well as European and Japanese women, who contributed to the American contemporary basketry movement as teachers and exhibiting artists during the last two decades of the 20th century.
- Mr. Cotsen believes that baskets—historically viewed only as functional objects used for storage—are now being explored as three-dimensional sculptural forms.

About Lloyd Cotsen

- Lloyd Cotsen is Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Cotsen Corporation and the former President, Chief Executive Officer and Chairman of the Board of Neutrogena Corporation.
- Born in Boston, Massachusetts, he currently resides in California with his wife Margit. He has three children and eight grandchildren.

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- Mr. Cotsen has served on numerous regional and national business, civic and education boards, including the Board of Trustees, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; Board of Directors, Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, Los Angeles; Board of Trustees, Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles; and Board of Trustees, The Textile Museum, Washington, DC.

Cotsen and Collecting

- An avid collector since the early 1960s, Mr. Cotsen's interest in contemporary American baskets represents a more recent pursuit.
- Initially, he amassed a major collection of international folk art that was displayed in the headquarters of his company, Neutrogena Corporation, and his home.
- In 1995, Mr. Cotsen and Neutrogena donated nearly 2,500 of these works to the International Folk Art Museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico.
- Mr. Cotsen then turned to collecting Japanese bamboo baskets, accumulating hundreds of works. He presented 900 of these works to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco in 2006.
- Mr. Cotsen's interest in American baskets was a direct outgrowth of his study of Japanese basket forms.
- In building the basket collection, he was largely self-guided. He learned about the artists primarily by reading exhibition catalogues and visiting exhibitions. Most of his acquisitions were made through dealers, such as the del Mano Gallery in Los Angeles or third party outlets like the Maui Crafts Guild in Hawaii where he would buy works by local basket makers. As his curator, Mary Hunt Kahlenberg also brought artists and works to Mr. Cotsen's attention.
- Certain artists such as Dorothy Gill Barnes, Lillian Elliott, and Mika McCann are collected in depth. He made the decision to pursue these artists because of their use of materials, the textures they are able to achieve, and their contribution to basket making.

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- Lloyd Cotsen is now focusing on his Textile Traces Collection, developed to incorporate contemporary artists. He and Kahlenberg selected two sizes of storage boxes, 14 x 14 x 3 and 23 x 14 x 3 inches in size. Then, they commissioned artists in the fibers field to work in three dimensions within the structure of this small, unusual space. This format approach is a conceptual challenge that fits his interests in encouraging artists to broaden the scope of their own work. Could they take a standardized environment and change it in a creative way that made it their own, while advancing the development of their work through this challenge?

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This exhibition debuts baskets from the collection that utilize traditional techniques, such as coiling and interweaving, with natural materials like reed, tree bark, and pine needles, as well as non-traditional ones (e.g. woven copper, found wine bottle corks, pistachio shells, and plastics).

Selected artists in the exhibition

Lillian Elliott (deceased) and Pat Hickman, USA

Opening, 1984

Samurai, 1986

Lillian Elliott

Drawn Form, c. 1992

Wrapped Form, 1988

Jakarta, 1986

- Elliott's individual works were concerned with pure structure and conceived as three-dimensional drawings. She tried to use a minimum number of elements to circumscribe a defined space.
- She was particularly interested in pushing the limits of scale.
- In her collaborative work with Pat Hickman, she was interested in the interaction between the structure, which she built, and the surface that Hickman formed out of animal gut.

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Dorothy Gill Barnes, USA

Untitled, c. 1995

From Our Front Yard, 2000

Summer Pine, 1997

Pine Dendroglyph, 1995

Double Weave Inside Bark, 1995

From Ora's Woods, c. 1995

Nova Scotia Spruce, 1985

- Barnes is interested in capturing the spirit of each of the materials she harvests and retaining it in the vessel form.
- She carves into the bark of live trees to generate scar tissue that creates unique, decorative surfaces. Barnes returns, sometimes years later, when these specially selected trees are pruned to make room for other maturing trees.
- She finds color in nature. She sees chaos in the materials she harvests and seeks to restore order in the final composition. Barnes shares her concern with making order out of chaos with many artists of the 1980s.
- Barnes functions as a conceptual artist who works with natural materials.

Gyöngy Laky, USA

Hotbed, 1996

Former Bonheur, c. 1995

- In addition to creating baskets, Laky creates large environmental installations, free-standing sculptures, and works for the wall.
- She often creates works inspired by the quintessential open bowl form with its timelessness, elegance, and balance.
- Her interest in color was sparked by a visit to India.
- She is known for working in recycled materials from both the natural (e.g. prunings from California orchards) and man-made (e.g. bottle corks, colored plastic tapes) environments.

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Hisako Sekijima, Japan

Untitled, c. 1998

Untitled, 1988

Alternated, 1991

- She has used over forty different species of plants in her work, usually creating one basket per month.
- One of her primary sources for materials are the trees in her urban neighborhood. She gathers what people trim off while doing their yardwork, and incorporates this “debris” into her work.
- Sekijima is interested in making the most of the natural color of plants. She uses their natural colors and textures to create compelling woven patterns.

Kari Lonning, USA

Adobe Grid with Hairy Walls, 2002

- Because of her Norwegian heritage, Lonning uses a subdued palette of rose, peach, lavender, blues, and blue-greens, and shades of gray and taupe.
- To suggest weight, she developed the double-walled construction that distinguishes her works from those by other basket artists.
- There is a strong sense of geometry to most of Lonning’s baskets that creates a distinct visual rhythm.
- She chose to work in basketry because it allows her to work with color and pattern in a rigid form.

Maggie Henton, UK

Arrowhead Bowl, 1994

- A keen gardener, Henton brings the same interest in the articulation and manipulation of space into making baskets as she does into landscaping. She sees her forms defining the spaces that they occupy, as well as containing space in her baskets’ interiors.

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- In Henton's work, she uses color to express mood and emotional response. She incorporates dye and brass wire to add color and brighten the visual patterns woven into the cane of her baskets.

Karyl Sisson, USA

Untitled, 1991

- Sisson's selection of materials – zippers, clothes pins, and other sundries – come from rummaging through basements, garage sales, and junk stores.
- The basic structures are developed by interlocking; no glue, nails or internal supports are used.
- Initially, she made small pyramids of these materials; however, after traveling to the Yucatan in 1983, she inverted the pyramid, re-discovering the container form that has continued to intrigue her over the years.
- By recycling these everyday materials, she gives them new life and new associations. Removing them from their original context as functional objects, Sisson alters them to create works of art.



The Cotsen Contemporary American Basket Collection at RAM

For this debut exhibition of the Cotsen collection, RAM's curatorial staff have grouped the works into four separate categories:

Architectural Structure

Interior Space: The Inner Void

Responding to Nature

Skin: The Exterior Envelope

These groups have been selected to point out aesthetic concerns these artists share and conceptual aspects these works have in common. There are numerous ways to interpret and appreciate each of these pieces. Some of these works could easily move from one of these categories to another because they share more than one of these characteristics. There are works in this exhibition that could fit under many of these categories since the artist addresses a broad range of these concepts in making a single piece. For example, artists creating architectural baskets can, at the same time, pay attention to fabricating external skin or revealing an interior space through their construction methods.

We invite you to use these categories as introductions to begin your exploration of the baskets as you think about their meanings. We encourage you to find your own additional facets in these works during your exploration of this gallery.

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Architectural Structure

Many artists approach creating a basket as if it were a construction project. A supporting structure is often a starting point, and the form takes shape around this support. A skin or surface can be applied on top of this structure, or the supporting members can also be shaped into the work's exterior layer. The steps of building, or constructing, a basket relate closely to the techniques of architecture. Many of the works in the **Cotsen Collection** display their foundation as a visual element of the work. Pieces in this portion of the exhibition have a strong sense of architecture in which the structural components also produce the visual rhythm in the work as the assembly process creates the completed form.

John Garrett's *Tempest* is an energetic basket that moves in many directions at once. It suggests the solidity of a building or the movement of a ship or some large land vessel with walls of woven copper and brass hardware cloth. Garrett's use of non-fibrous materials underscores the industrial connotations his form creates, recalling industrial buildings and huge machinery. Naomi Kobayashi's small cube-like vessel suggests a small piece of modernist architecture. Its crisscrossing lines intersect to support the exterior walls, which are periodically covered with a triangular paper skin, suggesting windows in a façade.

In *New Bones*, **Gyongy Laky** connects Sycamore tree branches with wooden dowels. The branches simultaneously create support, surface and interior by openly displaying these elements. The pegs function as connectors and also create a lively visual surface that is Cubist-inspired in its shifting planes. **Leon Niehues** creates baskets that demonstrate the sturdiness of architecture, for they feel more as if they have been built than woven. He creates a formal structure that is visually interesting and holds the basket together at the same time. These containers are "contained" by their stitched exterior members in ways that are similar to a human body being supported and held in place by a brace or corset.

Lillian Elliott's *Drawn Form* is an extremely large work for the basketry medium, where pieces have traditionally been formed in the artists' laps or on table tops. Tied and painted bamboo loosely encircles space in ways that suggest a large abstract ink drawing that has leapt off the paper and continued to move and grow after landing on the floor. *Drawn Form* is all structure, like the metal or concrete superstructure for a skyscraper that lays waiting for the skin of glass exterior walls and windows to be applied. At the same time, **Elliott's** loopy elegant construction has a sense of Zen-like chance to it, as the work appears to have created itself as an organic construction.

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Interior Space: The Inner Void

Baskets were originally designed for food storage. Thus the interior and its function were of primary importance to the maker of the basket. Although surface decoration became important in many cultures, the most important purpose of the basket was what happened within its interior space. While the basket's surface fascinates many contemporary artists, others are drawn to the traditional interest in a basket's inner void. They create works with elaborate and visually intriguing interiors to be explored by viewers. These fiber artists devise ways to bring the eye inside these sculptures. Some of these works, referring to the basket's traditional role as a container, actually hold objects to be discovered for contemplation. Other sculptures use natural materials to suggest portions of the landscape or forests with caves and dens to explore.

In *From Our Front Yard*, **Dorothy Gill Barnes** creates a rectangular basket that holds a large round fibrous form, as if it were something grown in a home garden and picked for serving or display. It also suggests a fenced outdoor pen that encircles a small animal. Another **Barnes'** untitled sculpture combines corkscrew willow with wood dowels to create a large entwined wooden cube that attracts with both its interior and exterior geometry. **Dail Behennah** creates a hollow form of willow and copper wire. This boat-shaped form is open, displaying its construction like a view across a deck or into the hold of a ship. **Chunghi Choo's** *Red Treasure Basket* is a pillow shape of brass wire mesh that forms a transparent enclosure for a grouping of objects specifically selected by her to function as a still life composition. The basket form both encases these objects and presents them to the viewer.

Joanne Segal Brandford spins dyed rattan and nylon to form *Nest*. Her interlocking curved bands of dyed rattan depict movement and encircle interior space with an open framework that welcomes the viewer's gaze into the work's interior space. This experience allows the viewer to feel like a naturalist, inspecting a bird's nesting place. An untitled sculpture by **Hisako Sekijima** produces a similar sense of looking into a creature's nest that has been discovered in the natural environment. The holes in the tightly woven exterior walls draw the viewer inward.

Betz Salmont creates a sculpture that suggests a seed pod bursting forth with seeds or a sprout. The woven section of plant material emanates from within a paper pod. It suggests growth and life springing forward, but also intrigues the viewer who wonders what else is inside the pod.

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Responding to Nature

Baskets were traditionally created out of fibers their makers found in the natural environment such as reeds, palm fronds and pine needles. These materials were woven or coiled so closely together that they could be used for storing grains and other foods, providing secure and portable storage of these valuable commodities.

Contemporary fiber artists have examined the close relationship basket materials have with the natural world. These artists use these commonalities as a starting point for their own comments about the complex relationship we humans have with the natural environment. These women reference nature in their work because of a respect for its role in the history of the basketry medium. Using plant materials also enables these artists to comment on current ecological issues. Works in this section of the exhibition have been grouped together because they demonstrate a kindred sensibility with ancient baskets and a respect for nature.

Works by **Christine Joy**, **Mika McCann**, **Doris Messick** and **Judy Mulford** present plant material in a relatively straightforward manner. These artists use a variety of fibers in ways that combine their knowledge of contemporary abstract forms with a respect for these remnants from the natural environment. **Dorothy Gill Barnes** works with plant material like a conceptual artist. She approaches her use of bark—whether scarring it, pegging it or overlapping it—in ways that move beyond the tradition of basketry and into the realm of abstract sculpture. In *Pine Dendroglyph*, **Barnes** follows the nature of the bark, while coaxing it to take unexpected turns in her assembly of these pieces.

Other artists create basket forms that are more playful, but still reference the importance of nature. In *Hotbed*, **Gyöngy Laky** salvages prunings from California apricot orchards and secures them with colored pegs to construct a swirling vessel. **JoAnne Russo** creates a vibrant and visually rhythmic surface awash in porcupine quills. **Don Weeke** recalls the use of dried gourds for food storage in some cultures in *X-Fragments*. However, he explodes this gourd, stitching pieces together to create a fragmented exterior surface. **Ed Rossbach**, one of the main leaders of the contemporary basketry movement, constantly played against the reverence artists had towards natural materials. In *Cedar Roll*, he uses cedar as the main material, but instead of traditional construction methods, he uses contemporary metal office staples. In his approach to combining the products of nature and the machine, **Rossbach** implies that although one can concentrate on nature today, we must remember that we are also surrounded by a modern world of consumer-oriented objects.

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Skin: The Exterior Envelope

For a number of basket artists, although they are interested in the creation of structure, their main concern in their work is in its skin or surface. The exterior of functional baskets is often created in ways that keeps the interior intact and separate from the outside so it can serve as a container. For these contemporary sculptures, the artists concentrate on ways to present an intriguing surface—whether through the use of paint or dye coloring, textures that are applied or embellishments that are added—that attracts and holds the viewer’s interest. Just as the skin of our bodies shields and protects a host of organs and systems underneath it, so too, the surfaces of these works shield the baskets’ interior spaces and provides a face to the external world. Each of the works in this section has been gathered here because of the ways these artists concentrate on fashioning intriguing facades.

Paper and other materials can be applied to a vessel and serve as a skin-like surface. **Mary Merkel-Hess** wraps a structure of reeds with a surface of paper, which she paints to create a sense of mood and environment. **Marion Hildebrandt** stretches papier mache over a bowl formed of wood twigs and wire in *Outside Aviary Wire Basket*, enclosing this open space. **Norma Minkowitz** simulates the undulating curves of a human torso by knotting subtly dyed fibers. Her human-like form is transparent, but its structure is all on the surface and one’s gaze continuously returns to the exterior of this work. **Fran Reed** also investigates the importance of a vessel’s shell by actually using salmon skin, combined with hog casings, to create a basket.

In *Untitled*, **John McQueen** simultaneously creates surface and structure by creating a basket whose skin is made up of alphabet letters carved from bark. He combines the natural with the commercial by assembling his bark letters with white plastic manufactured rivets. **Lillian Elliott** energizes the surface of *Jakarta* by interweaving found wickerwork and bamboo cane, recalling **Picasso’s** use of chair caning in some of his Cubist collages. Her purposely untidy surface holds great interest as fibers rush and collide in section after section of this sculpture.

A number of the artists in the **Cotsen Collection** recycle everyday materials in their works. They bring the associations of their former use to these works, but are also transformed into something new by virtue of being employed for the creation of a basket. In *Former Bonheur*, **Gyöngy Laky** forms a vessel by connecting used wine bottle corks. **Ed Rossbach** almost completely covers the natural eucalyptus bark surface in *Moonlight* by covering it with a layer of shiny silver Japanese paper, except for a moon-shaped circular hole.