

Woven Communities: collaboration and practice

In research into Scottish vernacular basketry

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Introduction to project

Woven Communities is a collaborative research project between the Scottish Basket-makers Circle and the author, a scholar, albeit a basket-making, willow-working one. The project follows Scottish basket-makers' self-directed research into the social history of Scottish vernacular basketry. Our research for the Woven Communities project has involved museum and archival research; practice; building an interactive website and using new media such as Facebook; and working together. You could say it's an ethno-historical research project centred on basketry as a fabric of society, but it has also become an exploration of the design-in-the-basket through emergent conversations between participants, and an exploration of new collaborative and practical methods of research, including the value of practice as a special form of thinking and talking, and in eliciting information from the public.

I cannot stress enough the importance of collaboration and interdisciplinarity for this project. The relationship between scholarly knowledge, curatorial knowledge and practical knowledge is never absolute, and perhaps it is better that this should be the case. Thus in our project, I have used practical knowledge to aid my academic research, and our basketry practitioners actively chose to conduct their own long-term historical research alongside their practice. Within the project, we have used practice in a variety of ways: practitioners have worked with curators in museums to enhance understanding of collections; we have used practice in demonstrations to encourage the public to be inspired to talk of their own social histories linked to these baskets; made replicas to better understand the process of making a basket; and even at symposia, we have insisted that practice be a pathway into discussion.

Ethno-historical findings

What we have found reveals an extensive picture of Scottish life through Scottish basketry. A lot of this could be seen as archival or ethno-historical knowledge, or social history. We're putting an artefact of material culture, the basket, which has been fabric of society over a long historical period, at the centre of our research and we're allowing the different aspects of basket-making and the socio-cultural practices it reveals to stream out of this centre.

To give a brief summary, we looked at crofting basketry, including on Orkney, Shetland, the Hebrides, and in the Scottish Highlands. People used baskets in these areas for carrying peat, seaweed, raw fleece for spinning, as ropes, chairbacks, and so on, all essential for the crofting economy. We have seen basketry's role in the fishing industry, from simple family-centred line-fishing, where baskets were used in all manner of tasks, from catching bait to laying out fishing lines for sea-bed fish, to selling fish, and the development of the Herring Industry. We followed basketry's use in Lowland agriculture. Tattie sculls were made in their hundreds by travellers. And we followed basketry through the Industrial Revolution, where it did not become obsolete, rather it was a necessary component, being light and yet strong, essential for all manner of carrying and transportation in cotton mills, distilleries, mining. We have seen the rise of fancy baskets, baskets used in War for surveillance balloons and carrier pigeons, and even in hospitals, from babies' cots to surgical dressing baskets. With all these roles, basketry did not become obsolete until well into the 20th century with the advent of the cardboard box, the petrochemical revolution which brought in the plastic bag, and the growth of supermarkets and shopping trolleys for customers to carry larger amounts of goods.

Practice in ethnographic research

Alongside this archival and ethno-historical knowledge, through collaboration, we also learned a great deal about practice, both in terms of understanding the dynamics of the making process, and in terms of design development. We very quickly understood that as a practice basketry can also be a valued way of thinking and promoting talk and thought. It involves a particular kind of attention. This is illustrated by a collaborative, interdisciplinary symposium we held, where

international scholars talked alongside basket makers, and we insisted that practice was apart of the event, introducing each session with practical basketwork. Many of the scholars couldn't be persuaded to put down their pieces of work. We had to almost take the basket from the hands of our keynote speaker to persuade her on the stage.

Our collaboration showed us how practice is also a valuable way of engaging the public to give stories about their own past histories and family stories connected to baskets. The very act of seeing basketwork elicits information from people. For example, Liz Balfour, one of our group, was demonstrating at a show, and was later sent a pamphlet a family had written about their basket-making ancestor. This is incredibly useful on an ethno-historical project, because it takes you beyond the archive, to the kind of lived experience information you can't easily find, from what people thought about their work of making baskets, to the division of labour in basketwork.

Liz's pamphlet was about one Thomas Nisbet, an Ayrshire miner, who made cake- (oatmeal), clothes- and errand-baskets as a 'hobby' in the late 19th century (Muir, 1897, 1). He made his 'hobby' pay and earned the respect of the neighbourhood and the right to be called 'master'.

'The *saugh* (willow) wands he grew on a little square plot in his garden. These, when ripe for his purpose, were carefully cut, boiled in a large pot, skinned and dried, and tied up in bundles for future use. The old man, as I say, was not without an eye for the beautiful, and the handles of many of his baskets were made of different colours, which were produced by simple colouring stuffs, which he bought in penny packets from the grocer' (*ibid*, 1).

This and other similar accounts have helped to build a picture of Scottish basketry as a craft which many could do if they had to, especially men, but which some did better than others, and if circumstances allowed, those who did it well, or enjoyed it, might work at it in their spare time to make a little extra money.

Basketry, design and creativity

Collaboration and practice have also enabled us to reflect on the very nature of basket-making in relation to design and human creativity. The key thing about basketry is that it cannot be done by machine, as Otis Mason first pointed out in his *Origins of Invention* (1895). This is largely due to the simple fact that the three-dimensional formation of the basket as it develops in the making, acts as both technology - the kind of loom or frame on which the basket is made - and at the same time it forms the structure of the basket itself. It's an emergent, gestural form and cannot be broken down into mechanizable elements. This also relates to the kinds of fibres used. In cloth weaving, the loom holds the warp threads in tension, and weaving in and out between these at right-angles is what gives the cloth its strength and its great value. In basketry, the plant fibres are short, irregular, uneven in diameter and strength, and cannot be held in place on a loom. Sometimes basketry warp materials, or stakes, are just not held in place at all, or else, they are tied loosely with a cord, or fixed into the ground. This means that all the tension has to be put in by the hands during making, the strength of the basket is the strength of the hands of the maker. Furthermore decision making and problem solving take place from stroke to stroke, and with each newly introduced strand, as the maker assesses the strength of the different stakes and strands to create a balanced, even basket basket at every stroke. So basket-weaving is a process of decision making, problem solving and adding strength as the maker interweaves every stroke and adds in every newly introduced strand, they are very engaged at this very core level of the process.

On a cloth loom, the creation of special devices for helping the warp to lift and assist the interlacing of the weft, known as creating the shed (shed is the path the weft makes between the warp threads) has had two further interesting outcomes. On the one hand, in cloth weaving there has been the invention of ever more complex systems to mechanically create the shed, and to make interweaving easier. This is exactly why Annie Albers, the famous Bauhaus weaver, argues that weaving is the key textile at the forefront of the Industrial Revolution and was developed to a more sophisticated level than any other form of textile. Cloth weaving is the only textile that has really produced a huge amount of inventions and almost all are around the shed,

this gap between the warp threads. These inventions, mean that the process of cloth weaving on a loom is quite controlled and can be very quick. But at the same time, this also means that the act of cloth weaving can be quite limiting creatively, the weaver has less control and capacity to change things in process, because the weaver can only pass the shuttle from one side to another in the weaving. So it's more difficult to be flexible and innovative during the making process.

All these aspects of basketry are critical in an age where there is a clear separation at every stage of design and making. If basketry's lack of a loom and its emergent three-dimensional practice is a matter of problem-solving, and decision-making from moment to moment, from one newly introduced stake or strand to the next, one can argue that almost all the processes of design are present in this multi-faceted craft. We are dealing with what Deleuze and Guattari call 'a variation of variables'.

Materials

This is further illustrated through use of materials and the resultant adaptability in basket-work. Baskets are made from plants, and their construction depends on what plants are available, so basketry is closely interlinked with regional plant ecology. There is a use of different materials in different ecological zones. It might seem that there is a kind of constraint dictated by always working using similar strokes, forms and materials in basketry, but the adaptability involved in sourcing locally available materials in the face of the lack of others, and the resourcefulness entailed indicates a high degree of flexibility. Especially in the Highlands and Islands, different plants are available from place to place and sometimes even different areas on one island. There are few trees growing on Orkney Shetland and the Western Isles so little willow or hazel, classic basketry materials, is available for weaving. Plants used instead include black oatstraw (*gloy*), rush (*flos*), marram grass (*bent*) heather and *dockens*. The basketmaker has to thoroughly know the ecology of his or her locality and adapt stroke and spacing to suit each material. You might think to look at these basket examples that a range of weaves are used, but each time it is the same stroke, just innovatively adapted. See here in a back creel close up, long shot, Shetland *flakkie* close up, Orkney heather *cassie*.

Motivations to work well

A final consideration of our project has been the motivation to make things well, a characteristic feature of design, but not always noted in craft which is often labeled as workaday and utilitarian. Wherever we have looked from the outlying Monach Isles, where people were moved during the Highland clearances, to Arbroath or Shetland, we find examples of excellence in basketwork, made even in very unsuitable conditions, and despite the constraints of material. Peter Lindsay. Bait baskets.

All these aspects of basketry are critical in an age where we take for granted the separation between design and craft, machine-work and the handmade. To understand the intelligence involved in the making, suggests there is no absolute separation, between handwork and design, and that there can all kinds of creative thought in handwork and direct engagement. It's enables us to reflect on the place of basketry and technology in the Industrial Revolution and to appreciate that it was not technological factors, but critically, changes in economic relations which marginalized craft such as basketry.

Collaboration through the web

We found that the digital element of our project research gave us an extra strand to our information gathering, and expanded our collaboration. We get e-mails from people who've picked up on the site, or looked at the Basketmaker's Facebook page. As illustration, I was contacted by a man whose family were Travellers gypsies from Edinburgh and he sent me photographs of baskets his relative had made. Each such person, or contact can fill in pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. One-person linked us with a small archive in the north-east of Scotland which showed there were actual basket-making workshops which produced special kind of herring measures call quarter cran in this remote area. Yet, these reputedly had only been made in England. So digital research is like an extra part of our toolkit, an extra strand in our basket and an extension of our collaboration. And it also makes also using archives much more accessible

Intergenerational collaboration

But if we explore just who we collaborate with, and look at the historical crossover between what we're doing past with the work of past scholars and basket makers, we find that since the last century we are just the latest stage in this collaboration, using the latest technology and our combined experience in an intergenerational project of concern for skill and social heritage, moving it forward from the past to the future.

In Scotland, since the late 19th century there's been a kind of ethnographic turn when, for example, Erskine Beveridge documented North Uist basketry. The German photographer Werner Kissling made extensive documentation of the baskets of the Western Isles in the 1930s. But there were also autodidacts such as Leonora Rintoul and Evelyn Baxter, two early 20th century birdwatchers and friends, who at the same time made the definitive basketry collection for the National Museum of Scotland and later taught basket-making classes for the Scottish Women's Institute. Isobel Grant and Alexander Fenton, both great Scottish curators, put baskets at the centre of their collections of 'homely highland things'. Fenton made baskets and creels special category in his Scottish life archive.

So we have found that there has always been a consistent pattern of knowledge and cultural exchange in this area - an overlap between basket-makers old and new, collectors, autodidacts, well-meaning social reformists; curators - all with research interests into this subject, ie makers with an interest in basketry history; and vice versa - scholars with an interest in practice and skill transmission. Interwoven, collaborating, interconnected interests synthesising the practical and the conceptual.

So in conclusion, the two key, final and central features of our methodology, are that, not only are we working digitally, not only are we working using practice, but we're working collaboratively drawing on all these techniques in our toolkit, and we are putting an object of material culture, one cultural artefact, the basket, a mundane, everyday, undervalued fabric of society, at the centre of our research and we're allowing the different aspects of basket-making and the cultural visions it provides to emerge from that central research point.

