**The Art of Basket Weaving – Brings Forth Bountiful Benefits**

Basketry NSW will soon offer an insight into the world of ‘basket’ weaving today and what it entails by showcasing their member’s work in an exhibition of contemporary basketry and fibre sculpture entitled “What’s a Basket”. You can attend their annual Open Day, which will be held at Primrose Park Art & Craft Centre, Cremorne in Sydney on Sunday 4th August, 2013 from 10am to 4pm.

Focusing our attention on how best we can benefit the future of our planet, many people are turning once again to old and true ways of providing the tools we need for our daily lives through natural products such as plant material, tools that very often take us back to basics, like baskets, which humans have been using since the dawn of the ‘civilised’ age.

*‘And did you not love Ishullanu, the gardener of your father's palm grove?   
He brought you baskets filled with dates without end; every day he loaded your table’*

Baskets are mentioned in the Epic of Gilgamesh, a heroic tale rooted in the ancient wisdom-tradition of humankind by perhaps the oldest known human author who lived 27500-2500 BC. Modern archaeologists have found a great deal of relevance to both ancient sites and cultural practices in its prose.

At its heart are the human themes of friendship and courage needed in abundance by each and every one of us so that we may gain the skills necessary to deal with the finality of death while learning about, and searching for, the meaning of life.

All cultures on earth have basket weaving traditions that date back before the times of Gilgamesh, which we are still learning about.

Indigenous tribes on every continent including Australia were involved and used carefully selected strong, thin, narrow strips of fibre from many different plant materials, including irises, lilies and rush, as they provided for all people.

Weaving is an activity the first human beings did together, and baskets one of the earliest of all known forms of containers. Light to transport, they are also mentioned in the story of the ‘flood’, also in the Epic.

*The carriers brought oil in baskets, I poured pitch into the furnace and asphalt and oil; more oil was consumed in caulking, and more again the master of the boat took into his stores.*

Remains of baskets have also been found in the tombs of the ancient Egyptians, where picture stories (hieroglyphics) tell us they were used to gather and transport grapes for the wine harvest and to also carry oil.

This storage basket, in a remarkable state of preservation, was discovered in the tomb of Senenmut's mother, Hatnofer, who lived into the reign of the female Pharaoh Hatshepsut.

This basket was woven from palm and has herringbone strips up the sides and across the lid. It would have been tied shut with linen cords and a mud seal pressed over the knot at the center of the lid. Amazingly the mud sealing still clings to one of the cords.

Nowadays however, like many basic structures in our time they have also undergone ‘a radical reinvention’ as contemporary artists attempt to challenge people’s perceptions of what a basket ‘really is’.

Basketry NSW is a group primarily for those who already have some skill in basketry, to practice their craft in the company of other basket makers just as the first basket makers did.

Basketry NSW started several years ago as an informal group of basket makers meeting and became an incorporated association, joining the stable of art and craft groups at Primrose Park Art and Craft Centre, Cremorne.

There are similar basketry groups in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania, and every two years groups get together for a national basketry "Gathering".

Meri Peach, the group’s President has been making baskets since 2002 and regularly teaches basketry workshops. She also exhibits her work in art galleries and had a solo exhibition "This Bygone Age" last year at the Sturt Gallery, Australia's oldest craft centre, renowned as a centre of excellence for the promotion & teaching of Australian contemporary craft and design.

She works with both natural and synthetic fibres and as a research biologist; her biological background also informs much of her artwork for which she uses traditional basketry techniques such as twining, stitching and weaving to create non-traditional sculptural and functional forms.

Meri is also inspired by natural structures such as cocoons, webs, shells, burrows, plankton and microorganisms.

Today the cultural concepts wrapped up in basket making when mixed with modern elements, provide new and exciting ways for contemporary artists to express their reverence and respect for the ancient craftsmen and women whose innovation and imagination help inspire and motivate their work.

Carolyn McDowall, The Culture Concept Circle, 2013

PS: There are a great many basket artists involved in the show. Download their names and info about their baskets here.