WEAVING A LEGACY
HO-CHUNK BLACK ASH BASKETRY

AUGUST 3–NOVEMBER 10, 2024

EXHIBITION ORGANIZED BY THE MUSEUM OF WISCONSIN ART

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Weaving a Legacy introduces audiences to the historically important and visually striking tradition of Native basketmaking in Wisconsin. The exhibition is curated by Ho-Chunk artist and University of Wisconsin–Madison Professor of Photography, Tom Jones with essential contributions by Ho-Chunk UW–Madison doctoral candidate in anthropology, Molli Pauliot.

In a monumental act of cultural preservation, Jones spent the last decade collecting, photographing, and documenting more than two thousand black ash baskets dating from the mid-1800s to the present. Inspired by family history—his great-grandmother Mabel Lowe was a highly regarded basketmaker of the early twentieth century—Jones's groundbreaking original research is all the more remarkable considering there have been no comprehensive monographs or museum exhibitions solely dedicated to this history.

Featuring nearly 200 works by more than forty known Ho-Chunk makers, baskets in this exhibition were lent by Ho-Chunk families, many of which have personal familial connections to the baskets. Other lenders are pioneering collectors with strong ties to the Ho-Chunk community. As an expression of commitment to this art form, the Museum of Wisconsin Art accessioned its first Ho-Chunk basket into the permanent collection in 2024.

In its role as the museum for the state, MOWA endeavors to represent all Wisconsin-based communities and histories. Past exhibitions and projects have included important Native voices like Oneida architect Chris T Cornelius (in 2022 and 2024), Ho-Chunk artist Truman Lowe (in 2014), and Ho-Chunk photographer Tom Jones (in 2022). With the museum's footprint located on the ancestral lands of the Menominee, Potawatomi, and Ho-Chunk people, this exhibition holds profound importance as a bridge connecting the past, present, and future. Exhibitions such as this one not only enable the museum to draw in new audiences and viewpoints, but also fulfills an essential tenet of MOWA's institutional mission.

ORIGIN STORY/BASKET MARKET

The story of how and why Ho-Chunk basketmaking came to be is said to have originated sometime in the early 1800s. A part of the Ho-Chunk tradition of oral story-telling, it begins with a tale about a distraught Ho-Chunk woman whose loved one had recently died. Ho-Chunk tradition mandated that a Medicine Dance take

H. H. Bennett Studio, American (active 1920s–1940s). Mary (Stacy) *Yellow Thunder Weaving a Basket*, c. 1920. Photo postcard. Courtesy of Wisconsin Historical Society

Unknown maker, American. *Roadside stand in Black River Falls*, c. 1925. Gelatin silver print. Private collection

place—an almost weeklong event in which the host incurred significant costs. Lacking resources, the woman was unable to provide the necessary items. One night, she dreamed a "voice" instructed her to find a specific tree in the forest, identifiable by its bark and leaves (a black ash tree). The voice outlined how to prepare, dye, and weave strips into a basket that could be sold or traded for the money needed to purchase the necessary items for the Medicine Dance. And thus, the beginning of Ho-Chunk basketry.

Around the time this origin story began to circulate (in the early 1800s), large numbers of German, Norwegian, and French immigrants were arriving and settling on traditional Ho-Chunk lands which helped fuel the Ho-Chunk basket market. With limited employment options and increasingly frequent government policies displacing Ho-Chunk from their land, families needed a way to supplement income. Basket-making became a family endeavor that kept households intact and acted as a conduit for retaining customs and traditions.

By the early twentieth century, tourists were flocking to central Wisconsin brought by newly constructed roads like Highway 12—one of America's earliest east-west routes connecting major cities like Chicago and Milwaukee to increasingly popular regions like the Wisconsin Dells. Ho-Chunk entrepreneurs opened roadside stands to sell baskets, along with beadwork, textiles, and handicrafts. Carloads of visitors stopped to purchase baskets, drawn in by the vibrant colors and dynamic patterning. Most Ho-Chunk sellers kept track of sales; unpublished inventories identify makers and indicate prices which ranged from $4.50 for a market basket to $6.50 for a picnic basket. Summers could be very lucrative; in one especially fruitful season, a Ho-Chunk family touted that they had earned enough money selling baskets to purchase a car.

OBJECT AESTHETICS

All of the components of Ho-Chunk baskets are harvested entirely from the black ash tree. In addition to the weaving, handles, handle attachments, and other decorative additions are hand-carved out of black ash. Ho-Chunk men typically select and cut down the trees, prepare and pull splints—thin strips of pliable ash wood—from tree trunks, and carve the handles while women dye and weave the baskets. Although the act of making a basket often involves the entire family, the majority of the weavers are women. Many times, weaving styles, skills, or color palettes are passed down generation to generation from mother to daughter. Contemporary Ho-Chunk

weavers, although still predominantly female, feature a highly skilled group of male artists like William and Sydney Hall and Christopher Roth.

Preparing wood for basketmaking is no small feat. Splints are cut from the concentric age rings that make up the trunk of a tree. Once a suitable tree is selected and cut down, the branches and bark are carefully removed. The trunk is pounded using an even and consistent pressure until the age rings can be loosened with a knife. Each ring is carefully removed in long splints that run the length of the trunk. Splints can be further divided into thinner and thinner pieces increasing the pliability for intricate weaving purposes. The bark of the trees is often used to create canoe baskets while wood from branches may be used for carved basket handles. One log can produce as many as thirty-to-fifty baskets, depending on the basket sizes.

Black ash basketry had fully emerged in Wisconsin by the 1820s. It took inspiration from the Indigenous tradition of hand-woven fiber and wool mats, rugs, and panel bags, as well as the later practice of ribbon-work appliqué, which incorporated European trade goods into Ho-Chunk designs. In particular, the panel bag was an important

Unknown maker, Ho-Chunk. *Panel bag*, c. 1880. Wool with applied vegetable-based dye. Collection of Little Eagle Arts Foundation

Unknown maker, Ho-Chunk. *Feather basket*, c. 1950s.
Black ash splints with applied dye. Collection of Michael Schmudlach

predecessor to the black ash basket due to its similar size and functional characteristics. Panel bags are two-sided with different but related patterns on each side. Ho-Chunk baskets readily adopted the bag's geometric color bands and repetitive patterns, including the diamond and arrow-shaped motifs which were common to both. Like the bags and other textiles, basket-makers also tinted basket splints a variety of vivid colors, creating natural dyes from minerals, berries, fruits, flowers, seeds, roots, and grasses. By the 1920s, with the introduction of commercial dyes like Rit, most basket-makers shifted away from natural dyes.

BASKET TERMINOLOGY

Most baskets are constructed with two directional components: vertical "warp" elements that provide the core support for the basket and horizontal "weft" elements that run crosswise to create pattern and design. Varying designs are produced as the maker applies different combinations of the warp and weft—twilled work baskets are made by passing one splint of the weft over two or more warp elements, producing diagonal or arrow-like patterns that wrap around the basket. Dark brown splints come from the inner core of the black ash tree and are typically harder and more durable; because of their strength, these are often used for the warp, or vertical structure of the basket. Conversely, lighter-toned splints are cut from the tree's outer rings and are often dyed in vibrant colors. Over time, all splints darken to a rich, golden honey brown and with repeated exposure to light, colors can fade, leaving some baskets less visually contrasting, although still beautiful, than originally intended.

Because baskets are "functional art," it is helpful to understand the underlying uses. More than fifty known basket shapes are named for function, supporting domestic chores like laundry, sewing, waste collection, mail organization, and food storage. Outdoor activities include fishing, flower gathering, picnic, market, and shopping. Tall, sizable feather baskets store large eagle feathers regularly used in traditional ceremonies. A few basket names emphasize the shape of the basket including barrel, kettle, urn, or canoe. It is important to note that categories do not necessarily strictly dictate shape and size. Oftentimes, makers have re-interpreted function, creating innovative shapes with unexpected weaving styles and colors.

Unknown maker, Ho-Chunk.
Sewing basket, c. 1880. Black ash splints.
Collection of Michael Schmudlach

NOTABLE MAKERS

Most basketmakers did not sign their work; this tradition changed for some in the 1970s. Although the names of many of the makers have been lost to time, there are a few notable exceptions.

Helen Lonetree (1932–2014) is widely regarded as the most experimental Ho-Chunk basketmaker of the twentieth century. Born in LaCrosse, she was the daughter of Chief White Eagle. Fluent in Ho-Chunk language and traditions, Lonetree often described her baskets as designed to "hold the dreams of the Winnebago's" (former name of the Ho-Chunk). She was known for her elaborate plaiting and sophisticated color palette, and her self-invented curlicue pattern technique is considered a tour de force of weaving. Aware of her important contribution to Ho-Chunk basketry, Lonetree was one of the first artists to sign her work on the bottom of each basket. Her work is widely collected and held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Museum of the American Indian.

Delphine Cloud (b. 1932) creates baskets that are noted for vivid color combinations and deceptive simplicity. This wastepaper basket (opposite) is a perfect example of her intricate technique—the square bottom rises almost imperceptibly into a broad circular opening at the top. The splints lengthen as row by row the horizontal weft transitions from a square to a round shape—this gradual shift is highlighted by varying contrasting colors to create dynamic visual movement across an otherwise unadorned basket. An esteemed member of the Ho-Chunk tribal community, Cloud continues to weave baskets to this day.

Delphine Cloud, Ho-Chunk (b. 1932). *Wastepaper basket*, 2024.
Black ash splints with applied dye. Private collection

Helen Lonetree, Ho-Chunk (1932–2014). *Sewing basket*, 1975.
Black ash splints with applied dye. Collection of Michael Schmudlach

Helen Lonetree, Ho-Chunk (1932–2014). *Lidded kettle basket*, c. 1950s.
Black ash splints with applied dye. Collection of Museum of Wisconsin Art

Lila Greengrass Blackdeer, Ho-Chunk (1932–2021). *Barrel basket*, 2011.
Black ash splints with applied dye. Collection of Michael Schmudlach

FUTURE OF HO-CHUNK BASKETS

Recently, the continuation of the 200-year old Ho-Chunk basketry tradition has come under threat by the proliferation of the invasive emerald ash borer (EAB) which is rapidly destroying black ash trees across the Upper Midwest. Native to northeastern Asia and first detected in the United States in 2002, the EAB was most likely introduced from China via wooden shipping crates. Based on field observations, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources predicts that a healthy forest will lose 98% of its ash trees in six years because of this insect. Although steps are being taken to combat the problem, including the introduction of an EAB-killing parasitic wasp and the application of insecticides, the threat is real. Ho-Chunk conservationists have already begun harvesting and flash-freezing black ash seeds for future reintroduction. However, there is growing concern among the Ho-Chunk community of this potential unimaginable loss.

WHY MUSEUMS MATTER

It is significant, if not a bit troubling, that *Weaving a Legacy* is the first museum exhibition to fully showcase Ho-Chunk basketry. It raises some serious questions regarding historical and gender-based injustice and underscores the importance of Indigenous-driven research to reset the art historical canon. More than ever, this exhibition is profoundly important. The real threat of climate change—creating new pathways for invasive species and warmer temperatures that allow range expansion—will have an unknown detrimental impact on traditional practices.

This exhibition of Ho-Chunk basketry calls attention to the often-overlooked beauty of everyday objects and highlights the important role the museum plays in presenting and protecting these objects for appreciation by future generations. As the museum for the State of Wisconsin, MOWA is proud to partner with Tom Jones and the Ho-Chunk Nation in this critical collective act of preservation.

For their generous support of this exhibition, we thank the exhibition's sponsors Travel Wisconsin, Wisconsin Humanities, and the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, as well as the museum's annual exhibition sponsors The Hyde Family Fund, Thomas J. Rolfs Family Foundation, and the Wisconsin Arts Board.

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Front Cover: Ruth Cloud, Ho-Chunk (1912–2001). Sewing basket, c. 1990.
Black ash splints. Collection of Truman and Nancy Lowe

Back Cover: Unknown maker, Ho-Chunk. *Wrapped handle shopper basket*, c. 1950.
Black ash splints. Collection of Tom Jones