



Abbe Museum

INSPIRING NEW LEARNING ABOUT THE WABANAKI NATIONS WITH EVERY VISIT

Exhibit: Four Directions of Wabanaki Basketry

Location: Circle of Four Directions, Abbe Museum

This exhibit was made possible through the generosity of John & Ruth Overton.

THE CIRCLE OF THE FOUR DIRECTIONS is a unique space within the Abbe Museum for a multitude of reasons. Aside from the intriguing architecture and incredible acoustics, this space was specifically designed to acknowledge aspects of Native spirituality. Suggested by Native advisors and designed with input from Watie Akins, a Penobscot engineer and musician, the Circle of the Four Directions is meant to be a place of quiet reflection for visitors to the Museum.

The circle and equal-armed cross are two symbols frequently used to interpret aspects of Native American spirituality. While the spiritual meanings assigned to these two symbols seem to be infinite, this exhibit focuses on two Wabanaki teachings about the Four Directions.

The first teaching focuses on the life cycle of people. Beginning in the East, each person begins their life as a child. As they mature and progress to the South, they reach adolescence and begin to gain independence. Approaching the West, each person becomes an adult, caring for families of their own. Finally, as they near the North, each person becomes an elder, passing on wisdom to younger generations, and eventually reliant on others for care—just as they were as children, thus completing the cycle.

The second teaching that inspires this exhibit, while very similar, names each direction as “belonging” to a particular group of people. The East is the children’s direction; the South, the women’s direction; the West, the men’s direction; the North, the elder’s direction. Each direction not only offers wisdom specifically to the people it represents, but also offers teachings about those people and about the cycles of life.

In the Wabanaki creation story, Koluskap creates the Wabanaki people from the brown ash tree. To this day, Wabanaki people use the same tree to weave both utility and fancy baskets. Basketmaking is considered a sacred art, because by weaving with the same material from which Koluskap created the Wabanaki people, basketmakers are themselves “Creators.”

This exhibit features a basket from each of the Wabanaki tribal communities. The artists were chosen based on the themes of the exhibit as well as the relative geographic locations of each tribe. The eastern basket is made by a Maliseet child, the southern baskets made by Passamaquoddy women from Motahkomikuk and Sipayik, the western basket made by a Penobscot man, and the northern basket by a Micmac elder. You are hearing the creation story of “Koluskap and the Ash Tree” in the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy/Maliseet, and Micmac languages.



FRUIT AND VEGETABLE BASKETS

Brown ash, sweetgrass, dye

Clara Neptune Keezer, Peskotomuhkati

2002 National Heritage Fellow

Growing up at the Passamaquoddy community of Sipayik (Pleasant Point), Clara began weaving with her mother and grandmother when she was eight years old. Making fancy baskets in her home, her sons Rocky and Kenny Keezer learned to weave by watching Clara as she worked. Known for her intricate weaves and bright patterns, Clara has encouraged many students to carry on the proud tradition of brown ash and sweetgrass basketry, and hopes that the traditions will continue to grow.



MEDICINE GATHERING BASKET

Brown ash, dye

Jordyn Tibbetts, Wolastoq

Jordyn Tibbetts is a young basketmaker from the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians. Jordyn has shown great promise during workshops held by the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance, and was asked to showcase her talents by working with Maliseet Master Basketmaker Fred Tomah. Each of Fred's basket designs has a specific meaning, and Jordyn chose to weave the Maliseet Medicine Gathering Basket. At only twelve years old, Jordyn shows great potential to become one of the next outstanding Wabanaki weavers.

Fred Tomah, Wolastoq

Fred began weaving in 1966, learning from his grandfathers and uncles, Charley, Leo, and Jim Tomah. Creating the company Tomah Baskets, and working to provide utility baskets to harvesters, Fred has evolved his craft into his own unique, contemporary art form. Known for his black-and-white geometric patterns, Fred is now one of the most prominent Maliseet basketmakers. Fred's signature is a small, intentional mistake woven into each basket, because "only the Creator can make a perfect basket."



GATHERING BASKET

Birchbark, cedar, spruce root, sweetgrass

Barry Dana, Panuwapskek

Former Chief of the Penobscot Indian Nation, Barry Dana is a gifted birchbark artist and talented educator. Using mainly birchbark, spruce roots and cedar, each of Barry's etched baskets tells an intricate story. This basket depicts not only the Wabanaki creation story of "Koluskap naka Wikip" (Koluskap and the Brown Ash Tree), but also two mountains sacred to Wabanaki traditions: Katahdin and Cadillac Mountain. The woven splints of the ash tree represent weaving traditions, along with the interconnectedness of all living things.



PACK BASKET

Brown ash, nylon, plastic
Richard Silliboy, Mi'kmaq

A member of the Aroostook Band of Micmacs, Richard comes from a long line of utility basketmakers. Like many Mi'kmaq families, Richard's family wove potato baskets as an important source of income, essential to the annual potato harvest in Maine's northernmost county. While potatoes are now primarily machine harvested, Richard continues to make strong baskets that are of outstanding quality. Like many basketmakers of his generation, Richard can often be found teaching students of all ages throughout the Wabanaki communities how to make various styles of utility baskets.



FLOWER-TOP BASKET

Brown ash, sweetgrass, dye

Molly Neptune Parker, Peskotomuhkati

2012 National Heritage Fellow

A member of the Passamaquoddy tribe at Motahkomikuk (Indian Township), Molly Neptune Parker has been making baskets since she was seven years old. Molly learned from her mother, Irene Newell Dana, and she often incorporates her mother's signature decorations, such as her woven ash flowers, into her baskets. Molly has taught her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren how to weave, and continues to teach willing students from all Wabanaki communities.