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• MAINE

Weaving history and heritage into an art form

By Janet Mendelsohn

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URCHIN BASKET BY JEREMY FREY

• ARTICLEDISCUSS

When the Museum of Fine Arts opened its Art of the Americas wing last spring, Theresa Secord was invited to demonstrate her artistic process and discuss the cultural significance of ash and sweetgrass basketry. “Ours was once a very prominent art form,” the Penobscot basketmaker and executive director of the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance said recently. “Beginning in the 1800s, summer visitors came from Boston and New York specifically to buy baskets on Indian Island on the Penobscot Indian Nation reservation, where my family is from,” Secord said.

But over time, fewer elders passed along their knowledge to the next generation. Fearing the loss of a vital part of their heritage, Secord and others formed the alliance 20 years ago to preserve their tradition within Maine’s four federally recognized Wabanaki tribes - the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac nations - and expand its visibility in the state and beyond.

On Dec. 10, more than 50 artists, including Secord and Jeremy Frey, whose work this year won the top prize at the country’s two largest Native art festivals, will participate in the Maine Indian

Basketmakers Sale and Demonstration at the Hudson Museum on the University of Maine's flagship campus in Orono.

"The market is an opportunity for visitors to learn about the history and cultural traditions of Maine Indian communities," said Secord. "They can hear traditional language spoken, hear traditional music, learn about threats to indigenous traditions from an invasive pest. It is an opportunity to meet Maine Indian artists, especially basketmakers, and to purchase art directly from them. For us, this is a very important retail marketing opportunity as there are few places to sell Maine Indian baskets in winter here."

It's also a celebration. There will be storytelling and demonstrations. Children can make sweetgrass angels during their own workshop and drum with the Burnurwurbskek Singers. Wabanaki artists and their invited guests from other Native American communities will talk informally about how they create baskets, quill jewelry, wood carvings, birchbark, and bead work. Of four annual MIBA-coordinated markets, this and the Native American Festival in July are the largest.

It takes an artist's practiced eye to select the right tree. Once felled and cut into sections, the wood is pounded to separate strips from the logs. Then weavers pull the strips by hand through sizing gauges, wooden tools with metal teeth at one end that slice precise widths. Supplies of 10 or more widths are generally kept on hand, sorted by the wood's natural color - black, white, yellow - or tinted with natural or commercial dyes.

This August Frey, 32, an eighth-generation Passamaquoddy weaver, talked with people browsing at MIBA's newest addition to the schedule, a market featuring 20 Wabanaki artists at Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village. It's an appropriate venue. Long ago, the Shakers and Indians were trading partners who taught each other about basketry. Frey's baskets sell as fast as he can make them, for \$500 to \$10,000 each, since he won best of show this year at New Mexico's Santa Fe Indian Market and at the Heard Museum Indian Fair and Market in Phoenix.

When MIBA was founded in 1993, the average age of its 55 members was 63. Today, 200 basketmakers belong to the nonprofit alliance and their average age is 40.

It was only 10 years ago that Frey became interested in learning techniques from his mother, Gal Frey, a master basketmaker. Frey said he feels compelled to create works with deep Passamaquoddy roots. But he refines the traditional patterns she taught him; his contemporary ash and sweetgrass baskets are sculptural, bridging the oft-debated divide between craft and art.

"Weaving is like a meditation," said Frey, his fingers calmly, steadily weaving ash strips through a circular spidery wooden web.

This summer's Santa Fe Indian Market drew 100,000 visitors and featured more than 1,000 artists from over 100 federally recognized tribes and First Nations tribes. Frey's award-winning 18-inch-tall basket is an elongated pear shape with black-and-natural ash stripes. In the event's 90-year history, it was the first time a basketmaker won best of show.

At the December market in Maine, expect to find the two traditional Wabanaki styles. Fancy baskets were historically made for the tourist trade. Their curls and twists might form arrow-shaped points in tight rows, colorful stripes, or repeating patterns. Some look remarkably like an ear of corn, berry, or another fruit. Curly bowls and containers are made for jewelry or sewing

supplies. In contrast, work baskets are utilitarian, long valued for laundry and harvesting in the fields, as pack baskets, and large fish scale baskets in sardine factories.

Barry Dana works with birchbark, another traditional sustainable material. Stirring a steamy pot of water in which he was soaking spruce root for thread, the former Penobscot Nation chief described how he etches bark with images from nature: a wolf's face, a dragonfly, corn. Pictures appear as he scrapes away the darker winter bark to reveal its lighter summer color.

“When I was growing up on the reservation,” said Dana, “nobody was still doing birch work although some of the elders knew how. When I became a K-through-8 teacher of Penobscot culture and language at the Indian Island school, I decided to give it a try.” Priced from \$15 to \$2,000, his basket art was displayed beside bottles of pure maple syrup. Dana says he's the only Native maple syrup producer in New England.

Despite their importance as a local industry and traditional art, the only places to find the baskets today tend to be museums. They are part of exhibits of Wabanaki history and culture at the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor and the Hudson Museum, which has the widest array in its gallery devoted to 500 pieces of Wabanaki clothing, tools, and art. Historical examples are in the Penobscot Nation Museum on Indian Island and in Maine's lakes region in New Portland, at Nowetah's American Indian Museum, a privately owned collection and store. Periodically, the Maine State Museum in Augusta exhibits selections from its vast archives. Some of these (including the Abbe) and a few galleries have Indian-made baskets for sale. Few Maine Native artists hold open studios.

One exception is MIBA president Molly Neptune Parker (Passamaquoddy), who sells baskets made by many artists from her home on Route 1 in Princeton, Indian Township, near Calais. The studio is open Memorial Day to December, but Parker said anyone in town can direct you there any time.

Another of those planning to be at the December market is George Neptune, a 2010 Dartmouth graduate who began learning basketry from Parker, his grandmother, when he was just 4. They developed a special bond, working side-by-side while she told him about her own grandmother who made 100 baskets a week and her grandfather who hitchhiked to Calais or Bangor, returning only after the baskets were all sold. Neptune's slanted weave is inspired by Navajo baskets similar to a traditional Passamaquoddy pattern. His grandmother's signature is an acorn-shaped basket, his is a small woven bird on the lid.

If you go...

What to do

“Transcending Traditions,” an exhibition at the Hudson Museum until May 12 when it travels to the Abbe Museum through July 8, features five Maine Indian basketmakers who represent the next generation: Jeremy Frey, Ganessa Bryant, Sarah Sockbeson, George Neptune, and Eric “Otter” Bacon.

Maine Indian Basketmakers Sale and Demonstration

Dec. 10, 9 a.m.-3 p.m.

Hudson Museum Collins Center for the Arts University of Maine, Orono

207-581-1904 www.umaine.edu/hudsonmuseum

2012 Native American Festival and Basketmakers Market

July 7, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.

College of the Atlantic 105 Eden St., Bar Harbor

207-288-3519 www.abbemuseum.org

2012 Maine Native American Summer Market and Demonstration

Aug. 26, 10 a.m.-3 p.m.

Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village

707 Shaker Road New Gloucester

207-926-4597

www.shaker.lib.me.us

2012 Common Ground Country Fair

Sept. 21-23, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. (Sat-Sun till 6) 294 Crosby Brook Road, Unity

207-568-4142

Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association www.mofga.org

Where to see baskets

Abbe Museum

26 Mount Desert St. Bar Harbor

207-288-3519

www.abbemuseum.org

Hudson Museum

University of Maine, Orono

207-581-1901

www.umaine.edu/hudson_museum

Maine State Museum

230 State St., Augusta

207-287-2301

mainestatemuseum.org

Nowetah's American Indian Museum and Gift Store

2 Colegrove Road (Route 27), New Portland

207-628-4981

www.nowetahs.webs.com

Penobscot Nation Museum

12 Down St., Indian Island

207-827-4153

www.penobscot_nation.org/museum/Index.htm

American Folk Festival

Bangor

Aug. 24-26

www.americanfolkfestival.com

Center for Maine Craft

West Gardiner, Portland, and Bangor

207-588-0021

mainecrafts.org

Gerald "Butch" Jacobs (Passamaquoddy)

207-342-3295

www.quoddybaskets.com

Janet Mendelsohn, author of "Maine's Museums: Art, Oddities & Artifacts," can be reached at www.janetmendelsohn.com.

