

From Limb to Limb

Geoffrey Bates, ISM Assistant Curator of Art, Lockport Gallery

From Limb to Limb, an exhibition assembled by ISM Assistant Curator Geoffrey Bates, Lockport Gallery, and funded partially by a grant from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Division of Forest Resources and the U.S. Forest Service and Private Forestry, draws objects from the Illinois State Museum's natural history and anthropology collections and pairs them with contemporary artworks by Illinois artists. By asking viewers to reevaluate their expectations of what defines an aesthetic object and what defines a natural object, the project seeks to advance an idea radical in its simplicity: that human beings have developed systems of art and design through the evolution of an increasingly imaginative manipulation of the natural world.

Exhibition Venues

Lockport Gallery, Lockport, Il.: May 1–July 10, 1998
ISM, Springfield, Il.: September 20, 1998–January 3, 1999
Illinois Art Gallery, Chicago: to be announced
Southern Illinois Art Gallery: to be announced



Kentucky Warbler Nest
Collected by Saul B. Ladd, May 29, 1887
Illinois State Museum Barnes Collection

This Kentucky Warbler's nest gathered in 1888 demonstrates an interesting use of materials. The interior is lined with a dense covering of fine vine material woven to a smooth cup, which transitions to a leafy exterior, assisting in its camouflage amid the thickets and glades it typically chooses as nesting sites.

Tracing the Current

The intellectual curiosity that defines humankind frequently compels us to act, modifying our environment in what has been termed a “march toward progress.” Furthermore, humans possess unparalleled manual dexterity with which we have relentlessly embellished our physical surroundings. Art and design emerged at the confluence of this technical agility, our human ingenuity, and the flowering of our aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities. *From Limb to Limb* weaves all of these concepts together and presents them in tangible form for the viewer's consideration, exposing connecting threads that run from sources in the natural world, through the development and evolution of basket forms, and ultimately to contemporary expressions rooted in these earlier systems.

Inspiration from the Natural World

Foraging in the warmth of a burgeoning spring sun, an aboriginal gatherer comes upon a clutch of eggs. She scoops up the entire nest to return home, but pauses in a moment of realization. As she examines the nest and explores its potential as a vehicle of transport, a series of questions unfolds: How does the nest stay intact? What else could be transported in such a container? Could other materials be employed to produce a similar vessel? How could those materials be shaped, and what shapes might be best suited for different functions?

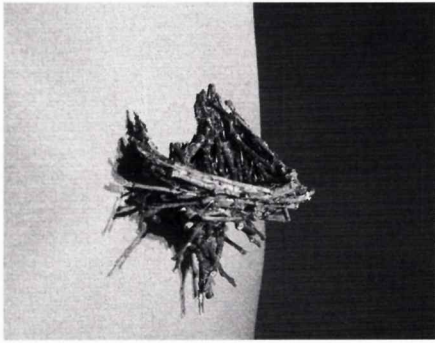


Discovering a bird's nest has always been a remarkable event. Whereas in the past it might have delivered the prospect of food, companionship, or a potential hunting partner, today it can deliver both an opportunity for wonder and speculation about the magical character of nature and a chance to reflect upon how we, as its stewards, have maintained an implied covenant with its most vulnerable constituents.

Like the individual in the narrative, many of us have come upon a bird nest and marveled. Using only their beaks and legs, birds create a striking array of shapes and complex structures, each satisfying the unique needs of a particular species. The scale and complexity of avian architecture varies with the size of the bird. Nests go well beyond simple agglomerations of sticks and are created by the careful arrangement of elements, based on a fundamental interlacing technique of weaving linear materials in an over-and-under pattern to create form.

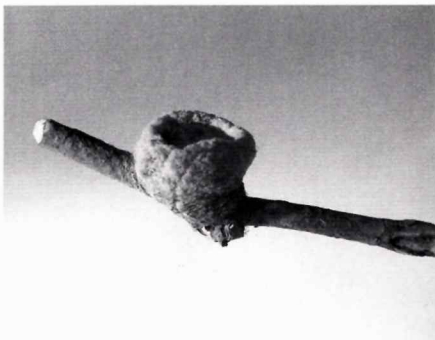
How did our predecessors act on *their* musings about the natural world—about nests in particular? Is it possible that, as described in the scene above, bird nests inspired the shape and media of some early basketry? The physical manifestations of a variety of cultures' containers seem to begin with and reflect nest forms. Nests may have been examined, deconstructed physically, and then reconstructed as baskets using materials more suitable to a particular purpose.

Techniques of construction grew in complexity and sophistication as they were constantly revised. Intuitive responses to materials and the gradual refinement of visual suggestions gave rise to the incorporation of images into the weave and the application of graphic, symbolic, and sacred elements onto the surface, embellishments that carried more than decorative significance. Over generations, complex forms and image systems



Chimney Swift Nest
 Illinois State Museum Barnes Collection

The Chimney Swift constructs its distinctive nests in chimneys and on other vertically enclosed, isolated surfaces. Unable to perch or stand upright like songbirds, they are uniquely qualified to roost on vertical surfaces. Using a mastic of spittle, the swift gathers and interweaves twigs to create a shelf-like affair that holds up to four eggs during incubation.



Black Chinned Hummingbird Nest
 Illinois State Museum Barnes Collection

The nest of a Black-Chinned Hummingbird is only three-quarters of an inch in diameter. Its deep cup and density function not only to conserve body heat but to make a secure container for the precious pair of eggs tended by the female.

Birds Nests of the Illinois State Museum Collection

The Illinois State Museum has a large collection of bird nests, collected primarily by Judge Richard Magoon Barnes, editor and publisher of *The Oologist* magazine, during the early twentieth century. The collection, numbering more than ten thousand specimens, came to the Museum in 1947 through the generosity of Mrs. R. M. Barnes, Col. Richard Barnes Stith, and Mrs. F.W. Stith. In addition to a broad array of natural history specimens, the gift included an extensive collection of rare books, magazines, and folios that reflect Barnes's primary interest in ornithology. The nests selected for the *From Limb to Limb* exhibition, some of which also come from the Museum's Holland Collection, illustrate the broad range of configurations that have been achieved by birds from disparate regions and environments.

evolved, resulting in a richly varied yet formally consistent iconography of geometric signs, symbols, and patterns in use throughout the world.

Origins of Basketmaking

Adrienne Zihlmann is among a group of anthropologists who suggest that early hominid societies be termed gatherer/hunters instead of the more accepted hunter/gatherers. She points out that "with containers, our early ancestors could bring home and share caches of berries, nuts and roots, rather than eat them 'on the spot,' like other animals." Containers, such as hollowed gourds, animal bladders and stomachs, pouches, and *baskets*, would be a boon for the transport of food and water to groups who were nomadic in lifestyle. Narrow-necked baskets waterproofed with pine pitch would lend gatherers extra mobility in their search for provisions. With the rise of organized agriculture, basketry represented an important asset. Without the presence of utilitarian containers, there would have been limited means of long-term storage for the large caches of foodstuffs that were the result of agricultural production.

Unfortunately for anthropologists, the very characteristics of the materials that inspired early baskets—grasses, reeds, and sticks, which were readily available, lightweight, and easily manipulated—made them very susceptible to the ravages of time. The best-preserved evidence for early basketry is found in very wet, even submerged, conditions or in dry caves and shelters, such as those of Mexico and the American West.

Worldwide, the earliest evidence for the use of basketry comes from an area in Yugoslavia and dates to roughly 30,000 years ago. Some archaeologists suggest that early societies employed baskets extensively. Among them is James Mellaart, who bases this position upon his examination of silica sheen remaining on what he terms ancient "reaping knives." Certain types of vegetable material, such as seed-bearing plants and tall grasses, contain significant amounts of silica, which leaves behind a clear, hardened residue on a cutting implement used over an extended period. It would not have been long before early agriculturalists used the large quantities of straw leftover from the harvest to expand basketry production.

North America's most ancient basket remains are between seven and nine thousand years old. Did early Native Americans bring a basket-making technology with them as they crossed the Ice Age land bridge onto the continent? The high degree of technical development displayed in the earliest examples of basketry yet found on this continent hint at this possibility.

As the making of baskets was incorporated into the lifeways of early peoples, need, diligence, creativity, and curiosity were the driving forces behind innovation. Their significance can hardly be ignored.



Storage Basket 1890-1900
 Western Apache
 Willow, devil's claw
 Illinois State Museum Condell Collection

This Western Apache food-storage basket demonstrates, with its closed neck configuration, the similarity in container shapes in cultures separated widely by geography and time. Its similarity to Greek amphorae is striking. The abstract pattern of interwoven diamond forms recalls the shape of netting that was in earlier times used to carry such baskets.

Notes author Jack Lenor Larsen in his book *Interlacing: the Elemental Fabric*:

Plaiting in systemic rhythms to achieve a regularity of form demanded such a strong sense of discipline that the development of interlacing may be considered as a symbol of human triumph over the vagaries of nature and life itself. Creating the means of patterning and its imagery required ingenuity and control. Development of the finished basket rim and the handle were supreme technical feats. Each transition increased the complexity of structure and form. Intellectual acumen and manipulative skills grew in the process.

Just as curiosity may have spurred the initial emergence and development of container forms designed for specific purposes, it may have also sparked early forays into the creation of imagery and pattern motifs.

In making the stitches with strands of different shades... quaint figures necessarily were produced on the surface of the basketry, by the appearance and disappearance of the discolored splints.

From the haphazard alternations of color doubtless came the first rude suggestions of design, dark and light regularly alternating in bands...

G. Wharton James, *Native American Basketmaking*, 1901

Like daydreamers who watch clouds pass overhead, making up stories about the nimbus parade of mythical beasts, early peoples may have “seen” figures implied in certain arrangements of grasses woven into a basket wall. Astute designers would then have explored techniques to develop specific imagery and coloration: exposing the grass to smoke, thus shifting the value; adding vegetal or mineral dyes; or burnishing certain surfaces with a hard, smooth tool. Over generations, a dynamic vocabulary of visual forms emerged pan-culturally, with many of the motifs developing independently beyond geographic and cultural boundaries.

Echoes of these ancient motifs can be seen in the “Greek Key” or “Chinese Fret” patterns found on artifacts from Kiev, the Ukraine, to baskets woven by the Tlingit Indians of the Northwest Coast. This meandering motif appears time and again. Anthropologist Gene Weltfish asks if we should “look to mat weaving for the original [pattern]” and compares these motifs to elemental interlaced technologies where the graphic, diagonal hatching acts as an abstract sign for woven materials. Further confirmation of the enduring nature of this pattern can be found as nearby as the monitor of your personal computer: the Windows 95 operating system includes among its selections of background screen designs a pattern entitled “key,” which includes a repeating key motif.

Contemporary Adaptations: Beyond Function

Sensitized to environmental issues such as biodiversity, and championing a philosophy of pluralism facilitated by the media age, a cadre of contemporary artists references elements of nesting technology and ethnographic basketry in both the concept and construction of their works. Their art reflects a renewed appreciation for the ability of certain species to sustain their existence amid the helter-skelter depletion of open lands and rain forests alike. These artists celebrate the continuity of life on the planet with sculptural meditations upon natural forms that articulate distinctive visual sensibilities.

Contemporary artists frequently appropriate techniques and ideas from a variety of sources to realize their particular visions. Often, they will forge new approaches that stretch the limits of their materials physically and alter our perceptions of them conceptually. Modern Illinois artists—basketmakers and sculptors alike—draw inspiration in a surprisingly direct way from the natural world and from earlier, less technologically dependent cultures. The resulting objects have their roots in elemental systems of fabrication and the artists’ experience of the natural world.



Hat 1870-1890

Thompson River Tribe

Spruce root, aniline dyes

Illinois State Museum Condell Collection

In the Thompson River tribe’s open wide-brimmed hat, meditations upon need and function combine with ingenuity to create an object of subtle beauty. The shallow, bowl-shaped hat has an interior rim that adjusts to the wearer’s head size. Not content with the innovative quality of this efficient design, the maker embellished it with a series of concentric circles. These vary in color and contrast with a delicate, checkerboard band that appears three times and lends a dynamic sense of unity to the overall design.



Pima Tray 1880-1890

Willow, devil’s claw

Illinois State Museum Condell Collection

The “key” pattern seen in this Pima tray is similar to those found in the weavings of other cultures around the world.

The Illinois State Museum Basket Collection

The Illinois State Museum owns the bulk of the Thomas Condell Collection of Native American artifacts, including a group of outstanding examples of basket work dating from the mid-nineteenth century to the early 1920s.

A lifelong Springfield resident, Condell traveled often to the Southwest U.S. for treatment of tuberculosis. Condell, who also traveled to the far West and worked in Colorado at the silver mine in which he had business interests, became an avid self-taught collector of Native American material culture. His eye was expert, and his selections demonstrate a broad range of techniques and approaches to creating containers for a variety of purposes. Most of the ethnographic basketry exhibited in *From Limb to Limb* is taken from the ISM’s Condell Collection.

Many times this interest in natural form stems from a concern about the disappearance of an “authentic” experience of nature. Nature, as defined here, is an unrestrained force with which humans coexist instead of dominate. Barbara Cooper’s sculpture *Ova* springs from this impulse. Touching lightly upon a variety of visual reference points, the work’s densely wrapped form appeals to us in its familiarity and holds our attention with its many contradictions. Does it represent male or female? Growth or decay? Heroism or submission? Schooled as a sculptor and utilizing veneer discarded in the furniture-manufacturing process, Cooper articulates in the concept and execution of this work issues clearly reflected in her words:

My sculptures have evolved from the extended study of plants, seed pods, bones, and shells. They are an attempt to connect my own phases of growth and need for support and protection with what I have observed in nature. My work is inspired by the integrated order that exists throughout the natural world where elements evolve for

their essential qualities of function while simultaneously becoming forms of sublime beauty.

From Limb to Limb

The notion that nature and contemporary art exist in mutually exclusive domains is a misconception that fails to recognize the essence of some of today’s most intriguing work by artists and artisans. The exhibition *From Limb to Limb* and its ancillary programs seek to dispel this misconception by establishing a dialogue, promoting links, and building respect between nature enthusiasts, contemporary art aficionados, and the public at large. Through

its novel presentation of natural, ethnographic, and contemporary objects the exhibition seeks to illustrate a deeply rooted, recurring, tie between the natural world and the creative moment and asks the viewer to reexamine the interrelationships of art, nature, and human culture. ♡

For further reading, see page 15.

Clockwise from top left:

Janet Reed

Earth Voices, 1997. Stained rattan, pine needles, 4½ × 7½ in.

Janet Reed’s experimental open basket forms flirt with the functional while resisting definition. Keenly interested in establishing a collaborative relationship with her materials, she incorporates pine needles into the structure of this basket, contrasting their sheen with the matte surface of stained rattan, allowing the relationships of these materials to determine the shape and direction of her wall.

Barbara Cooper

Ova, 1994. Wood, 74 × 34 × 40 in.
Photograph by Dean Jacobson.

Jerry Bleem

Mute (L), 1995. Found paper and plastic, wax, staples, acrylic medium, 6¾ × 10½ × 6 in. Photograph by James Prinz, Courtesy Pro-Art Gallery, St. Louis, Mo.



Creating a world that lies between the office wastebbin and rainforest haven, Jerry Bleem has created a small form that resembles, in its shape, the mud-daubed nests of the South American Rufous Ovenbird. It is not comfortable, though. Looking closely at Mute (L), one sees an object made of contemporary detritus gathered and assembled by the artist. Found business cards, acrylic medium, wax, and staples combine in an ironic comment, which the artist labels “(a) threshold... where inside meets outside.” “Ordinary, nonprecious, discarded, found materials are what I most often use in my work.” Demonstrating an artist’s talent for alchemy, he wrestles this dross into works that strike a coolly resonant note with the viewer.

Rosemarie Hohol

Raptor’s Nest, 1995. Reed, beads, bone, wrapped threads, fabric, ash, 20 × 15 in.

Rosemarie Hohol’s Raptor’s Nest sits quietly, awaiting the arrival of an avian visitor. The peeled maple stand acts as both pedestal and theatrical prop, establishing a narrative line that begs the viewer for completion.