Learning to Look: Wabanaki Baskets

This resource will allow you to lead your students through a careful observation and analysis of two baskets woven by Wabanaki artists from Maine.

Molly Molasses (Mary Pelagie), Penobscot, c. 1775–1867
Fancy basket, c. 1862
Brown ash, diameter: 6 in.
Collection of the Abbe Museum, #1914
Photo by Julia Clark, Abbe Museum

Ganessa Bryant, Penobscot, b. 1982
Point basket, 2007
Brown ash and sweetgrass
Height: 5.25; diameter 4.5 in.
Purchased through the Alvin and Mary Bert Gutman ’40 Acquisitions Fund; 2008.46
Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel

It is based on the Learning to Look method created by the Hood Museum of Art. This discussion-based approach will introduce you and your students to the five steps involved in exploring a work of art: careful observation, analysis, research, interpretation, and critique.

How to use this resource:
- Print out this page for yourself.
- Read through it carefully as you look at the image of the works of art below.
- When you are ready to engage your class, project the images of the works of art on a screen in your classroom using an LCD projector. Use the questions provided below to lead the discussion.

There is no substitute for seeing the real thing!

Please visit the Hood Museum of Art to see a wide range of original works of art from around the world. There is no charge for admission, and the museum is open every day of the week except Monday. Free tours for K–12 school groups as well as programs for adults, teens, and families are available. Visit the museum's Web site to learn more.
Background Information
Explain to students that these baskets were made by Native American artists of the Wabanaki tribes of Maine. Five Eastern Woodland tribes—the Abanaki, Penobscot, Passamoquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac—formed the Wabanaki alliance in the eighteenth century to increase their political power with European nations and their strength against the neighboring Iroquois Confederacy. These tribes remain allies today.

The baskets are made primarily of woven splints of wood from the ash tree, sacred to many Native peoples who call it “the basket tree.” The baskets are quite small; the first is only 3 ½ inches high and the second is 5 inches high.

Basket #1
Step 1. Close Observation
Ask students to look carefully at the first basket and describe everything they see. Start with broad, open-ended questions like:

What do you notice about this basket?
What else do you see?

Then become more and more specific as you guide your students’ eyes around the work with questions like these:

What do you notice about:
  the materials used to make this basket?
  the color of the basket?
  the shape of the basket?
  the shape of the lid?
  the way in which the basket is woven?
  the basket’s texture?

Step 2. Preliminary Analysis
Once you have listed everything that your students noticed about the basket, begin asking simple analytic questions about this visual information to deepen their understanding of the work.
For instance:

How do you think this basket was made? Where did the artist start? What did she or he do next?

How do you think the artist created the different types of weaving?

Does this basket look difficult or simple to make?
Do you think its size (3 ½ inches tall and 6” in diameter) affected how hard or easy it was to make?

What might this basket have been used for?

Do you think this basket is old or new?

After each response, always ask, "How do you know?" or "How can you tell?" so that students will look to the work for visual evidence to support their theories.

**Step 3. Research**

At the end of this document, you will find background information about this basket that you cannot acquire simply by looking at it. Read the information or paraphrase it for your students. In addition, look for information related to the exhibition *Spirit of the Basket Tree: Wabanaki Ash Splint Baskets from Maine* on the Hood’s Web site.

**Basket #2**

**Step 1. Close Observation**

Ask students to compare the second basket to the first one. How is it the same? How is it different?

Again, be sure students notice:
- materials
- color
- shape
- types of weaving
- texture

**Step 2. Preliminary Analysis**

Again, once you have listed everything that your students noticed about the basket, ask some simple analytic questions.

For instance:

*Does this basket remind you of anything from nature?*

*What might this basket have been used for?*

*Do you think this basket is old or new?*

After each response, always ask, "How do you know?" or "How can you tell?" so that students will look to the work for visual evidence to support their theories.
Step 3. Research
At the end of this document, you will find some background information on this basket. Read it or paraphrase it for your students.

Step 4. Interpretation
Interpretation involves bringing your close observation, preliminary analyses, and any additional information you have gathered about an art object together to try to understand why a work of art was made and what it means to the person who created it and those who experience it. There are many possible interpretations of a work of art. Challenge your students to defend their interpretations based upon their visual analysis and their research.

Some interpretative issues to discuss about these baskets might include:

Why is basket making important to the Wabanaki?

Why is it significant that we know the name of Mary Pelagie Nicola, or Molly Mollasses, who created Basket #1 in 1862?

How does Ganessa Bryant, the creator of the contemporary basket, honor the past with her work while also being true to the present? What is traditional about her basket and what is modern?

Step 5. Critical Assessment and Response
Critical assessment and response involves a judgment of the success of a work of art. It is optional but should follow the first four stages. Art critics often engage in this further analysis and support their opinions based on careful study and research of the work of art.

Critical Assessment involves questions of value. For instance:

Do you think these baskets are well made?

What makes them different from inexpensive, largely machine-made baskets?

What makes them works of art?

Another realm that this fifth stage can encompass is one’s response to a work of art. Possible questions might include:

Do you like these baskets? Which one would you like to own? Why?

Does knowing the importance of basket weaving to the history, survival, and independence of the Wabanaki affect how you see or feel about these baskets?

Different from assessment, the realm of response can be much more personal and subjective.
BASKET #1: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Molly Molasses (Mary Pelagie), Penobscot, c. 1775–1867
Fancy basket, c. 1862
Brown ash
Height: 3 ½; diameter: 6 inches
Collection of the Abbe Museum #1914, Maine

Baskets are an inseparable part of the culture and traditions of the Wabanaki tribes who believe that basket making is a skill that has been passed from weaver to weaver, generation to generation, uninterrupted for thousands of years. Wabanaki baskets are made from splints of the brown ash tree. Known as the “basket tree,” the brown ash is considered sacred to many of the Native peoples of the northeastern United States and Canada.

Specialized splint baskets used to gather and prepare food and trap fish were made and used before and after European contact. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, church, state, and federal policies pressured Native people to reject their own cultures. Instead, many tribal people used basket making as a way to make a living outside of non-Native towns and cities. Wabanaki families traveled together by canoe, foot, horse, train, and steamship to sell their baskets in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. By the 1870s resort hotels sprang up along the New England coastline and inland lakes. These were places where Wabanaki traditionally had villages, and tribal people continued to return to them to hunt and fish. So it was only natural that Wabanaki set up encampments to sell baskets, as well as other art forms, beside the new resorts. These encampments built community among Wabanaki peoples who might otherwise have remained dispersed.

During this era, Maine Indian baskets became extremely popular. Basket making became the primary source of income for many Wabanaki families. By the turn of the twentieth century almost every Penobscot and Passamaquoddy household was involved in basket making. Entire families worked all winter in preparation for the summer sales. While utility baskets continued to be made for both Native and non-Native use, “fancy baskets,” decorative baskets with whimsical shapes, intricate weaving patterns, or multiple colors, became very popular and were made to fit every imaginable need.

This basket was made by Mary Pelagie Nicola, also known as Molly Molasses. A Penobscot woman born around 1775, she lived until the age of ninety-two. This basket represents one of the earliest examples of fancy basket work attributable to a specific person. Due to her reputation in the Bangor area, Molly Molasses was painted, photographed, and written about by local authors in books and newspapers. Her baskets were among the first to be seen as “art” rather than “souvenir art.”
BASKET #2: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Ganessa Bryant, Penobscot, b. 1982
Point basket, 2008
Brown ash and sweetgrass
Height: 5.25; diameter: 4.5 in.
Purchased through the Alvin and Mary Bert Gutman ’40 Acquisitions Fund; 2008.46.

The 1930s through the 1980s were hard times for Wabanaki basket makers. Cheap, largely machine-made baskets began to flood the market. Wabanaki children were encouraged to focus on education, college, and finding steady jobs. Although it was considerably harder to make a living from baskets, some basket makers kept weaving, in the hope of keeping the tradition safe for future generations.

For Wabanaki basket artists, weaving is a spiritual process. Many artists collect their own materials from the natural world, cutting down the ash tree and then preparing the wood for weaving. There are several steps involved in the preparation. The tree is first cut into sections and the bark is removed. The basket maker then pounds the end of the logs to split the wood along the tree rings. Each ring is then sliced into long, thin strips or splints of various thicknesses. Once the splints are soaked and sanded they can be woven into a basket. Artists also collect sweetgrass, a local grass with a sweet aroma. It is most often used in a braided form. Some weavers can braid so quickly that the movement of their fingers is barely visible. As they braid, the grass makes a sound known as “singing.” The artistry in these baskets is in the weaving, and many types of weaves are passed from generation to generation, specific to individual families. The shapes of the baskets vary with fashion and the market, but the weaves are often inspired by tradition and the past.

The 1990s brought a resurgence of basket making in Wabanaki communities. In Maine, Indian baskets gained acceptance as a legitimate art form among art collectors, gallery owners, museums, and state and federal arts agencies. This resurgence was due to the hard work of the weavers who kept this tradition alive and their decision to unite—the weavers formed the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance (MIBA) in 1993. Offering community workshops and apprenticeship programs, and sales opportunities for its members, MIBA has emerged as an international success story in traditional arts preservation.

This basket was made by Ganessa Bryant, a member of the MIBA. Bryant draws from the past in her choice of materials and weave, a traditional porcupine weave, made by folding and pinching the ash splints so that they create spiky points. But she also creates a basket that is modern in design and sculptural in form. Like Molly Molasses’ fancy basket, Bryant varies the width of her weavers to create visual interest. Also, like Molasses, Bryant created a porcupine weave that points in one direction on the side and in the opposite direction on the lid. Bryant then adds her own innovation with color, inserting a strip of black beneath each cinnamon colored point to create contrast.
These two baskets reveal an important aspect of the history of the Wabanaki. Basket weaving helped Wabanaki culture survive and thrive. It provided a way to make a living outside of non-Native communities. It connected the old to the young, weavers to apprentices, and built community among friends and supporters within tribes and beyond. Baskets remain a connection to the past, an unbroken chain of mothers, fathers, grandparents, and ancestors who protected and passed on the tradition for those who would need it in the future. These baskets hold memories of family and the tribal stories and skills of those that came before.

Sadly, this success is now threatened by an invasive beetle species from eastern Asia, the Emerald Ash Borer. First discovered in Michigan in 2002, it has spread rapidly, mainly by the movement of infected firewood. The beetle kills all species of ash, threatening the basketry traditions of several Great Lakes area tribes as well as the Iroquois, Abenaki, and Wabanaki. The Wabanaki are working with the government to find ways to protect the brown ash tree. They are also preserving seeds and archiving video and documentation of the basket making process so that in the event of total destruction, the brown ash can one day be replanted and future generations taught the basket weaving skills of their ancestors.
Basket #1
Height 3 ½; diameter: 6 in.
Basket #2  
*Height 5.25; diameter 4.5 in.*