

TRADITION INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Yvonne Grovner and Herbert J. Dixon

The following text is from an oral interview summary prepared by Adrienn Mendonca on behalf of the curator. She spoke with them at the Sapelo Island Cultural Aid and Revitalizations Society on the artists' home island of Sapelo Island, Georgia, April 2, 2007.

In general, why do you do what you do? What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?

Herbert does it because of the heritage. He reads about South Carolina as the place doing all of the sweetgrass

baskets, but it's also here. Herbert thinks we need to do more marketing on the statewide level,

promoting sweetgrass baskets in Georgia. Yvonne does it to keep the tradition going, and because it also makes a good bit of extra income.



*Yvonne Grovner- Sweetgrass Baskets
Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007*

What influences your work? Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how?

Herbert when asked, “is history important?” replied, “Yes, it’s our cultural heritage and it’s been with us for a long time.” Slave owners would take the baskets made by enslaved people and sell them to other local plantations for their use. The motifs and styles go back for hundreds of years. Round baskets are not traditional baskets, such as the small charm baskets.

How is, or is, utility and function a part of your work?

The function was, in the past, utilitarian in nature (i.e. to fan rice, carry food, etc.); now it's for decoration. Sometimes people use baskets for casserole dishes or bread baskets, so they can be decorative and functional at the same time. Yvonne had one woman who had her buy a Pyrex dish and custom make a basket to fit (to be used as a charger of sorts). They can be used as trivets. The function has changed over time to being primarily decorative from one that was primarily functional or utilitarian.

Can you describe your workshop practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?

Yvonne likes to work in front of the TV at home, at night as she works during the day and baskets are a side job. Herbert tends to do it while he's watching TV as well, at night; he sits on chair cushions on the floor, leaning up against something. "Sometimes I fall asleep," says Herbert. Both agree it is relaxing. "During the day, if the sun is shining I'm not going to be in the house. If it's raining, I'll be in the house, in front of the TV and work on some baskets."

Both work mostly by themselves; Yvonne's husband sometimes works on one with her, and also her daughter and her son sometimes work on baskets. Herbert does it by himself, but he does teach others.

What does "mastery" mean to you?

Yvonne is glad to be called a master artist and that she can teach others how to do this.

Herbert jokes that he told his Uncle Allen one day, "I'm going to be better than you are." Truly, mastery to him is "being able to master what you're doing, and do it well, and being able to pass it on to someone else."

Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there? How long have you lived in the South?

Yvonne moved to Sapelo 27 years ago (when she was 20) after marrying her husband, whom she met in high school on the mainland. She grew up in a small town just north of Eulonia. Herbert's granddaddy had one of the only two telephones on the island, and when Yvonne would call he would go get her boyfriend. Herbert used to hate that phone because he would be the runner to go get people. Herbert still has the phone at his house.

Herbert is a "saltwater Geechee", which means being from the island, around the saltwater. He was born on Sapelo Island. "Freshwater Geechees" are those born on the mainland that live inland, where there's nothing but freshwater, "They aren't fortunate enough to be in this area." Yvonne is a freshwater Geechee but married a saltwater Geechee.

If born in the South, how do you think you've been influenced by it?

Herbert has lived both in the North and the South. People in the South are friendlier, and more courteous. Northerners are not friendly at all, someone can walk by down here and talk to you, but up North, they won't do that. The South has nice weather. Herbert spends all of his time outside, as much as he can. He likes to fish, garden, and go to the beach.

It's better to collect materials in the summertime, as the grass grows much greener than in the winter, when it's got more dead materials. Islanders and staffers also burn the grass yearly (through controlled burns) every winter, when it's dry, which helps promote new growth.

Both Herbert and Yvonne have tried other traditional artforms popular in this area, including making muscadine grapevine baskets or wreaths and cast net making, but sweetgrass baskets are the artforms they stuck with.

Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place. Do you have a particular relationship to the land or a landscape? If you do, please describe?

There aren't a lot of people outside of Sapelo and the Darien area that make sweetgrass baskets. Both Herbert and Yvonne notice places when they are on the mainland that they can find nice looking materials (such as Savannah).

Yvonne: You can't find no other place like this no more, ... you know, like Sapelo.

Ain't no where in the world now that you can find a place like Sapelo.

Adrienn: How do you describe Sapelo?

Herbert: Heaven ... Where else can you go, not too many places I know, you can go and leave your house open all day, leave your keys in your house.

Yvonne: You can go to your neighbor's house and borrow a can of milk. You can walk in people's houses; you can borrow people's cars. There are no police, no speed limits. Things are communally owned. It's more open and freer.

Both Herbert and Yvonne have a home on the mainland (Darien and Atlanta).

Herbert: 95% of my time is here on the island. When I got sick, and I moved back here, it was just like (going) from hell to heaven, and my doctors said they didn't know what I was doing but to keep on doing it. We take care of one another ...

In your opinion, are there features, factors, conditions that distinguish your work being made in the South from work made in other parts of the country or world?

Yes, in relation to other kinds of baskets. They use palmetto for centers (for knots), and dyes aren't used. Materials and appearance are different. Natural is better because people want it all natural. Yvonne and Herbert also think it is prettier, and highlights that these baskets are handmade, not from a retail store.

How has your worked changed? Is your work evolving?

Herbert made a basket once in the shape of a large vase, in which he put a bowl and some flowers for his wife. One day Herbert was just sitting around the house and saw a shape and said, I can make that, and he did. Yvonne did the same when she saw a vase in a catalogue and made it. Yvonne has sometimes made pins and earrings, and Herbert has made some modern art looking pieces.

Their technique has improved. Innovating new styles is not something they go toward; traditional basket styles are the base. But they also want to try something different, and people love it when designs are quirky. Herbert has books of basket styles that he can look at for inspiration, as does Yvonne.

Describe your relationship to community or family? Are there groups of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?

Everyone on Sapelo is related. Herbert says of it, “it’s one big family, there’s not one particular group, we all get together and do whatever you want to do. It’s always a whole group; it’s not an individual thing.” Mostly people born and raised on the island and who live in Hog Hammock gather together; but everyone is invited. People who work there are also invited to be a part of events and special gatherings, such as a New Year’s covered dish/oyster roast. It’s communal. Just about everyone is related. “Hey cuz!” is a common greeting.

When Herbert married his wife, he says that she said, “You have a lot of beautiful young ladies from the island, now, how come you not getting married over there?” And he responded, “Darling cause most of those people are my cousin.” This is home, he hangs out with his family and the community; The Trough is a local bar/hangout that most people gather in.

Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you? What would you like your legacy to be?

Herbert: Yes, I do because I want it to stay and be here for many years to come, I want to see other people take what I do and try to do it.

Herbert went into the service when he was around 20 years old, he left Sapelo when he was 18 and would come back to visit, until about 11 years ago when he came back permanently.

How did you learn your craft?

Yvonne learned from Allen Greene, a master basket maker from Sapelo. He got a grant to hold classes where he taught about five people on the island. Yvonne later got a grant from GCA (Georgia Council for the Arts) and the Sapelo Foundation to teach basket making, which is where she taught Herbert. Herbert learned from Yvonne after he came back to the island; he was interested because his Uncle Allen (Greene) used to do it.

Allen got sick and Herbert never learned from him. Yvonne says Allen used to say “No, no, I’m gonna take it to my grave,” when asked to teach others, but he got a grant. The tradition came from Africa, and “we don’t want it to die out, so that’s why we pass it on.” It’s important to teach each other and new generations.

Yvonne thinks Herbert does a better job than she does, and folks used to tell her she did a better job than Allen; each generation gets better and better at weaving. Other people do basket weaving on the island — about six or seven people — and you can take a look at a basket and tell who made it because everyone weaves differently. “You can look at it and tell whose basket it is, ‘cause no two persons stitch alike.” Herbert’s baskets are tighter than Yvonne’s. Yvonne thinks hers are different through the stitches.

The ladies in South Carolina use purple muhlenberg to make their baskets. Sapelo uses sweetgrass and purple muhlenberg combined. Yvonne starts the center of her baskets with muhlenberg and weaves with sweetgrass. Herbert starts his center with palmetto and weaves with sweetgrass. Mr. Greene taught Yvonne to start with palmetto, but she switches to using muhlenberg because she likes having all grass. Purple muhlenberg grows close to sand dunes near the beach. Palmetto comes off palmetto fronds (palmettos).

The sawtooth palmetto is shaved from the inside of the stalk. You have to cut the edges off first to avoid the teeth. There is a great deal of talk about how to shave a palmetto. You cut the palmetto into thirds and then shave it down until it feels very flexible, and you pick out the soft pieces. The object is not the last piece, but the shavings that are used.

How long have you been making baskets?

Yvonne has been making baskets for 13 years. Herbert has been for five or six years, “I’m one of the rookies.” Mr. Greene was one of the longest living artists.

Do you share your knowledge/technique/experience with others--the next generation of artists/craftspeople?

Herbert teaches classes at Geechee Kunda in Riceboro, and he teaches another basket maker in Sapelo.

Herbert: He sold one of his (first) baskets, and I said, “You never sell your first basket!” He gave it to his grandmother for her birthday, then made another one and sold that one too.

Herbert’s nephew who comes down during the summer “wants to make it like me, right now, I said, you have to start learning first, you can get there but it takes time.” Herbert also teaches Joelle on the island. “I love it, you know, and people call, especially since they did that radio piece (on Herbert’s apprenticeship).” Herbert’s daughter started

learning back in 2000 and all she has is a bottom started; she's getting ready to graduate from Auburn University.

Yvonne has classes at the local libraries and does demonstrations at Reynolds Mansion. She teaches an older woman named Fran who wanted to learn how to make the baskets. Yvonne taught her daughter, and got her to start making baskets in exchange for her wants (i.e. you want new shoes, make a basket). Her daughter still makes them and gives them to Yvonne to sell for her.

There are lots of people on the island who do know how to make baskets but don't necessarily want to teach others (through demonstrations) or just don't have the patience to make baskets.

Yvonne says that some people say, "When you go out and teach classes, you're not afraid that people are going to take your tradition? No, she answers them, "cause most times when people do a class and they see how long it takes, we don't have to worry about it."

Can you tell me about the process of making sweetgrass baskets?

First you collect the material, which is all around Sapelo on the island. You collect the grass, which has a lot of dead pieces in it. The grass must be cleaned (remove dead pieces, keep green pieces) then spread out to dry. Herbert spreads it on tin for about a week, and weights it down with a 2x4 to keep it from blowing off (sometimes, not always). Later, you collect the "starter grass," or purple muhlenberg it's easier to get than the sweetgrass. It's very flexible and will bend easier and will not break when you use it to start a basket. Eventually all of the grasses/palmetto will cure to the same color. You can braid or plait the grass.

The hardest part is collecting and drying the grass. Palmetto is always used green, because it loses flexibility and becomes brittle; if it sits too long it will not shave very well. You can cut it up in advance and coil it, then place it in a bucket of water and it will stay green and flexible; the water has to be changed or the leaves will gas off and turn black, and it smells bad. It's easier to have a full bucket of palmetto to work from, than to stop and strip it as you need it.

Grass cannot be used the same day it's collected. Herbert likes to take the dried, cured grass and pile it up, straighten it then cut the ends to make them the same length.

Preparation steps are as follows: gather, clean and dry sweetgrass, gather purple muhlenberg, gather and prepare palmetto. That's it – then you start weaving.

Weaving the knot is the start of a basket, and the hardest part of making one. You take a handful of grass, twist it tight (curl it up) and then make a loop, and tie it in a knot. You tighten the knot as tight as possible, then twist the two sides that come out, loop it hand over hand. Knots are made in oval or round shape, and in no other shape. If shavings are

long, the basket will be very long (like an olive boat); if short, it will be more like an egg shape (for oval baskets). Palmetto knots are made slightly different, they are knotted then separated into three sections and braided. Herbert likes to start all of his baskets with palmetto, and Yvonne prefers starting with muhlenberg.

After the knot is made, you start stitching sweetgrass into the base of the knot. You stitch the basket using the palmetto strips (this is where uniformity in size in palmetto strips becomes important). You use a knife or nail to make a hole, run the palmetto through, and begin twisting sweetgrass as you go. You feed in sweetgrass as you go, as it's needed, or "You work by feel." There's no timing or anything else to how to add grass. You insert the grass in the middle of what's left and tighten it with palmetto stitching.

Starting is the hardest part, the rest is easy – going out to up is easy. "You have to make sure you have a lot of patience when you're working on a basket," says Yvonne. The knife points and where you place them determine whether the basket goes out or up.

Adding a handle or top is easy. You wrap the palmetto around a length of sweetgrass, then attach it at the end of wherever you want to put it. You can also add it as a detail – i.e. a wavy border.

What materials do you use?

Sweetgrass, purple muhlenberg, and sawtooth palmetto leaf stalks. They do not use natural or chemical dyes – their focus is on natural baskets. Dyes will break down baskets.

Where are the materials found/located, etc?

Muhlenberg is in the scrubby area near the beach. Palmettos are everywhere. Sweetgrass grows mostly in the wetland area, near freshwater. Rattlesnakes are prevalent, as are other snakes. Alligators are also around. Herbert made a three-pronged pitchfork he pokes around before he goes in to see if anything comes out, then he just sits down and cuts the grass. Yvonne has a gas-powered trimmer, her husband or son might come and help cut while the other gathers. Herbert uses hand trimmers and does it by hand, then stuffs it in a bag.

What tools and/or equipment are used?

Nail, knife scissors and hands – that's all you need. You use a nail or spoon handle with the end cut off (grind it down to a point). Mr. Greene used nails, to flatten the end and make the point sharp. Knives should be dull, not too sharp, and they tend to wear down in the middle. Knives are used to shave down the palmetto, prepare materials and shave off flyaways on the finished product.

How do you decide what you're going to make?

There are a number of traditional forms, including oval shape, a circular rice fanner (which was used to fan the rice and separate from the chaff), and a casserole, which can also be made into a sewing basket (will go straight up and have a lid on top). There is a very utilitarian purpose to basket making. Herbert did research that shows baskets were used in harvest, for storage, and for toting things around. Sometimes you decide baskets on what people ask for commissions. Rice fanners, casserole, bread baskets are the most common basket forms they make.

How long does it take to complete?

“Shoooooot, that’s according to the size!” Herbert can do a small basket in 12-14 hours, a larger basket can take a few months. Stitching takes a long time. This depends on the size of the basket. The larger the basket, the longer it takes to finish. Curing (color fading to one color) takes a variable amount of time. Usually the grass starts curing to the same color by the next day.

How do you know when you’re finished?

It’s up to you, and whenever you want to end it. You try to end on the same side you went up on, so you don’t have ten rows on one side and nine on another. You look at your basket, there’s no need to count, you can see where the sides start coming up. If you end on the opposite side you’ll have a lopsided basket that’s off center.

During finishing, you pick off the frizzy parts off the side. Herbert uses nail clippers, Yvonne uses her knife.

For selling and pricing, “you just look at your basket,” says Yvonne. “Cause really you’re not making the amount of money in relation to the time that you spend on the basket, “ but it doesn’t cost us anything to make the basket. All of the materials are there. In Charleston, the prices are much higher for baskets than what Sapelo folks get. Yvonne attributes this to the lack of available materials; they pay other people to go get grass for them. “We don’t take any of this (Sapelo grass) up.” They keep it local. She also says South Carolina basket makers use mostly purple muhlenberg, and also pine needles and black needle work. They have adapted to what’s available around them now.

In the interview Herbert details a basket that he made which took him five months to complete, it was so large, with the purpose of donating to a non-profit. The organization raffled it off and got \$120; he was disgusted because they didn’t set a floor and didn’t get enough money for it in relation to his work. There is a difference between how Georgia baskets are priced versus South Carolina prices. South Carolina prices are higher because the materials must be paid for; but there may be more to it than that.

On the topic of South Carolina versus Georgia baskets; Sapelo Islanders don’t define themselves as one or the other (Gullah or Geechee), they see themselves as Gullah Geechee (as both). Sapelo is the only place on the Georgia coast where you find these sweetgrass baskets (there may be more, but it’s the most well-known). Materials are

different too: South Carolina folks use the heart of the tall palm tree. “I had a lady come over here to visit me from Charleston, and she wanted to go out and get some palms ... and that lady climbed that tree like a monkey... I guess she’s used to doing that.” She didn’t know what palmettos were used for. Herbert says “the sweetgrass lasts much much longer (than pine needle).” It will last for hundreds of years. Someone on Sapelo has a basket that’s been in the family for over 100 years.

Palmetto is also much stronger than palm tree hearts. Yvonne has repaired South Carolina baskets where the palm tree has broken. Sapelo baskets are stronger and last longer.

Sales are through mail order/COD and on island (at visitor center in Eulonia, at Reynolds Mansion on the island, at the Trough – a local island bar/hangout) to visitors. Herbert sells a lot of his baskets in Atlanta. Folks on Sapelo don’t make enough baskets to keep up with the orders.

Do you have trouble finding materials?

No, materials are plentiful on Sapelo Island. It’s removed from the mainland and can only be accessed by boat. Visitors must have a reason to take the ferry (visiting someone and be put on a list, visiting the Reynolds Mansion, or be taking a tour). Sapelo is not very populated and materials abound.

What makes a good basket maker?

First of all, patience. You have to have patience because if you don’t have patience you’re not going to do it. You can’t rush baskets, you must take your time. It doesn’t take much skill, really; most people have the ability to learn. “Once you start someone doing a basket, they can do it,” says Yvonne. Herbert once tried teaching a left-handed basket maker, who could not get it; so he sat in front of her (versus to the side) and she could finally mirror his actions.

What makes a good basket?

With the rows stitched tightly and stacked evenly. Ending the basket on the same side it was started. Stitching (with palmetto) lines up, with even strokes providing visual lines up and down the basket.

What makes a good student?

Patience. Willingness to go out in the grass and cut. One of Yvonne’s student’s didn’t want to do the work to get materials, so she ended up using her husband. A main part of the process is that you’re not only weaving it but also collecting the materials. Yvonne used to always go to Mr. Greene and ask him to start a basket, and he finally started telling her he would do it but would charge \$5.00 a knot, so she learned to do it herself.

How do you see the future of basket making on Sapelo Island?

The future is unknown.

Herbert: "Unless some of the younger people take more of an interest in it, we'll lose it, because the people we do have now that are doing are mostly the older people, except for Yvonne's daughter. We have a few younger people who want to do it ... but the way I see it, it's slowly leaving us."

Some of the kids and people on the mainland do sweetgrass basket weaving, but the residents want the kids who live on Sapelo to do it as well. There are only 13 kids who live on the island right now; they travel back and forth to school on the mainland.

The kids don't seem as interested in basket making. The artists want more of the people on the island, more kids doing baskets, because they don't want the practice to die out. Right now, there are only 47 traditional full-time residents in the Hog Hammock community.