

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Carol Welch

The following text is an interview summary from a conversation conducted by David Brose on behalf of the curator at the artist's home in the Big Cove Community of Cherokee, North Carolina on April 16, 2007.

Carol Welch was born on the Eastern Cherokee Indian Reservation January 14, 1940 at the Cherokee Hospital. She has lived most of her life in the Big Cove community within the Qualla Boundary. While the communities are all pretty homogenous (as Carol says, “everybody cooks the same, you know”) it is Carol’s belief that no two people make baskets the same.

Carol learned to weave white split-oak baskets at the age of twelve from her mother. Later, in high school, 9th to 12th grade, she learned to weave single-and-double weave baskets out of river cane and honeysuckle vines from a woman named Lottie Stampher. She changed over to the white oak when she couldn’t get the river cane (since she couldn’t go cut it herself anymore.) The lack of cane is not a new phenomenon; the Cherokee people have, for many years, had to go to Murphy, North Carolina to find “cane breaks.”

Making a river cane basket starts with a good cane. It needs a bushy top, and can’t be young (despite how pretty it looks in the ground.) Once harvested, they are split and trimmed, then scraped down to an appropriate width. When dyeing the cane (a process which takes about two days of slow boiling), Carol uses yellow root, butternut root, walnut root and blood root for dyes.



***Carol Welch- Single Weave Basket
Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007***

In her home community Carol is respected both for her river cane and for her white oak baskets. She tries to teach, and has taught before at the local high school. She operates out of her home, running a craft shop for the Methodist Church and giving local craftsman a place to sell their crafts.

She also used to teach down in Philadelphia, Mississippi with Lottie Stampher. Partially, she had trained Carol to take over her teaching jobs, though by the time Lottie had retired they had stopped the basketmaking program. The Choctaws use river cane as well (she was teaching them white oak.) Basketmaking is highly regional. The baskets in Mississippi had different colors and weaving patterns from those that she made.

In a discussion of her craft, she mentions that the basket for the exhibition is single weave. Both types of basketmaking are complex and time consuming, though double weave is more so. Her dyes are all natural, products of boiling with herbs. Black coloring is from butternut roots. Blood root gives a dark red color. She cautions that a galvanized steel pot will ruin the dye, giving a spotted appearance.

A good basket made by a respected basketmaker has certain characteristics. The baskets need to be tight, with a well-defined bottom. When selling a basket in her store Carol looks for good workmanship (though she buys baskets from beginners at a discounted rate.) She laughs, “when I want to cut my hands up I work on cane.”

Carol has not pondered what her legacy might be. She jokes, “I don’t know if anyone would miss me or not.” She has a daughter, whom she has taught to make baskets, but prefers to work outdoors and is studying construction management at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina. Despite denying “mastery,” many people have sought her out repeatedly and collect her baskets.