

THE HERITAGE OF OUR AFRICAN ART



BY ANASTASIA HOWARD

SEA GRASS BASKET MAKING IN AMERICA HAS CROSSED OVER FROM BEING A SLAVE TOOL FOR FIELD AND FOOD TO A HISTORICALLY RICH REMINDER OF HERITAGE.



Think back to when you quietly stood at the edge of a vast coastline and let the dense, salty air give you a moment to feel free. Recall the rustle of sea grass bowing to the wind. Clouds would go as they please. The lap of the ocean fed the marsh and quietly foamed away. Legacy, honor, family, tradition and responsibility were all colorful rhythms of the soul that glided through generations as naturally as the tide. Remember it? Senegal. Sierra Leone. Gambia. Angola. West Africa. Home.

Millions of Africa's men, women and children were funneled through an unfor-giving passage to new shores. Questions came without answers. Sleep without rest. Role without right. Yet, in this relentless storm of reality emerged the familiar. South Carolina's tall grass rustled at the edges of the dunes. The air was moist and full of flavor. The sun-drenched marsh was deep and ripe. And through a crack between two worlds, home somehow found its way through.

A close look at the intricate coils of a handmade sweetgrass basket frames the colorful sweetgrass in its natural environment. The fragrant stalks are collected and sundried before they are used to make the cherished baskets of many shapes and sizes.

Turning nature into tools was a skill practiced for more than 1,500 years before West Africans were brought to North America as slaves. And the environment of South Carolina's shore was dramatically similar to that of their homeland. Here, their knowledge of planting, cultivating and harvesting rice was turned into an economic salvation for the South. To this day, the tool of their labor is still collected as an enduring legacy hailing back to ancestors on a shore a world away.

A skill passed through generations for millennia, sea grass basket making in America has crossed over from being a slave tool for field and food to a historically rich form of African art. They have crossed the generations and the melding of African and American cultures, and now are commonly associated with the Gullah people of South Carolina's Lowcountry.

"The transition of sea grass baskets from agricultural to cultural usage has helped introduce this art form to the traveling public in ways which convey its enduring legacy," says Michael Allen, educational specialist at the Fort Sumter National Monument and Charles Pinckney National Historic Site. For one, the art form lives on because generational knowledge is passed along through oral tradition, which is central to African and Gullah heritage.

To this day, the descendents of slaves still make the baskets by hand, spending a few hours or long months to complete just one. Today, they use fragrant sweetgrass, long leaf pine needles, palmetto leaf and marsh bulrush to weave the tightly coiled collectibles. Though far more intricate styles and colors are evident in the basket selections found at roadside stands today between Mt. Pleasant and Charleston, each coil is like an ancestral chain that cannot be broken by time or place.

As a historical expert on the Gullah culture, Allen says the basket making, rice cultivation and task system of production all were skills developed in West Africa over the span of many generations. "The

making of baskets is not a textbook, but a knowledge-based skill, which emphasizes their value today as that of an art form." While the skill has given way to making functional products like hats, pocketbooks and jewelry, the baskets are seen as a true art form because they have been a part of America for 300 years.

It is a legacy widely appreciated by art collectors, dignitaries, even royalty. Especially the work of Mary Jackson, who is considered the foremost artist of sweetgrass basketry. Her work can be seen in museums, and public and private collections, both nationally and internationally. Her specially commissioned baskets have been presented as gifts to visiting foreign dignitaries, including Prince Charles of Wales and the Emperor and Empress of Japan. She was a 1993 Lifetime Achievement Award recipient from the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

Even with such esteem, the baskets are equally adored hanging on the kitchen walls of South Carolina's many visitors and residents. Avid collectors say it is neither where you find your treasure nor how far you travel that measures your affection for sweetgrass baskets. More so, it is having an eye for their beauty and a passion for their heritage. It is allowing yourself a quiet moment to think back. To imagine West Africa's vast salty coastline clouded with a harvest's golden chaff riding freely on the breeze.

IF YOU GO...

CITY MARKET

Market St. @ Meeting St.
Charleston, SC 29401
843-723-1541

SWEETGRASS BASKET STANDS

Found along Hwy. 17 N. between
Mt. Pleasant, SC, and Hwy. 41

SC ARTISANS CENTER

334 Wichman St., Walterboro, SC 29488
843-549-0011

SC HISTORICAL SOCIETY

100 Meeting St., Charleston, SC 29401
843-723-3225