

French Wickerwork: The loss of an ancient tradition

Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship Proposal

Camille Labarre

The advent of plastic and agricultural advances in the twentieth century marked the steady decline of world-renowned traditional French wickerwork. The survival of this legacy of craftsmanship currently depends on less than two hundred artisanal basket and wicker furniture makers left in the country. With a poor written record of regional basketry techniques and an even poorer availability of related resources on the Internet, the craft's chances of survival are not promising. The rich history of rural French basket weaving and the enthusiastic few who fight to keep it alive represent an overlooked facet of the country's heritage that faces disappearance unless actions are taken to document and update this art form.

Should I have the privilege of receiving a Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship, I would research and practice basket weaving directly from artisans in the two remaining wickerwork towns in the French countryside. The desired outcome of my project is twofold. Firstly, I hope to help preserve a disappearing piece of French culture through documentation and education. As is the case with most crafts, basket weaving is passed down from craftsman to craftsman. To learn from a single weaver is to have access to generations' worth of experience. However, as the number of basket makers in the country continues to decline, that oral history is at risk of being lost. The goal is to collect as much information as I can, including the skills, history and culture surrounding this craft, how it exists today and ways that it can become relevant again. Secondly, I hope to apply everything that I learn to my studio practice. To recontextualize and update basket weaving in the form of sculpture would be a way of giving a new purpose to a craft that no longer has a place in industry. The use of woven willow in my work would allow me to continue to explore themes of labor, disability, and cultural identity, and to do my part in preserving a remarkable tradition.

Fayl-Billot, a small town in southern Haute-Marne, is the uncontested heart of French basket weaving. There stands The National School of Osier Culture and Wickerwork, under the Ministry of Agriculture: one of the only basket weaving trade schools left in the world. The school and the weavers of Fayl-Billot make a concerted effort to keep the craft alive through their archives and willow festivals. Artisans at Fayl Billot specialize in their iconic “vannerie en plein”, or “full basketry”, meaning that the craftsmen do not leave any negative space between the rods of willow. Across the country in Touraine, there is a basket weaving cooperative in a remote town called Villaines-les-Rochers. This is the second biggest basket weaving town in France, known for its “troglodytes”, damp limestone caves where the weavers live and work, surrounded by a carpet of willow clippings for warmth. Though this town has a rich regional tradition of its own right, many of its current craftsmen were trained at Fayl-Billot, which has become the only option for the few young people interested in basketry - the dwindling number of basket weavers makes it difficult to find apprenticeships. This has resulted in the standardization of basket making, and consequently, the loss of regional techniques, terms, and models. That said, Villaines is extremely dedicated to preserving French basketry through their Musée de la Vannerie and workshops hosted by the cooperative.

For the purpose of this fellowship, it would be logical to concentrate my research efforts on Fayl-Billot and Villaines. These are the towns where struggling artisans stick together to save the dying art that is their livelihood. However, in the interest of learning about regional particularities, there are a few other resources that I must not overlook. Bussièrès-les-Belmont is home to a cooperative of weavers that specializes in “vannerie à jour”, or “openwork baskets”, a type of basketry that incorporates negative space between the rods. They share the same willow as Fayl-Billot, but obtain a very different result. There is also a town in the south of France called Vallabrègues that used to be a booming center for basketry, but the only vestiges of this past are their Musée de la Vannerie et de l’Artisanat, their famous Fête de la Vannerie, and the memories of their elders. I could also visit the Musée du Compagnonnage in Tours on my way to Villaines, which is a museum that displays

the traditional tools and work of an organization of apprentices that has existed since the Middle Ages: Les Compagnons du Devoir. In the same vein, La Maison de l'Outil in Troyes is a notable resource for the study of traditional tools. It should be noted that basket makers use very few tools, and that these tools have been the same for centuries. As a result, these craftsmen often have an aversion to machinery, let alone the Internet. Keeping the limited online resources in mind, I am also relying on word of mouth to direct me to additional resources as I go along.

Should I have the opportunity to embark on this year of research in France, I have been invited to begin my studies in Denmark first with basket maker and historian Steen Madsen. He is, as he puts it, my "European basket weaving mentor." Steen taught me to make my very first basket when he was hosting a workshop in the States. Those days spent making baskets reminded me of a thought I had studying a wicker photographer's chair in a class years before: I have to learn to do that. Once I heard about this fellowship, I immediately got in touch with Steen and he enthusiastically answered all of my questions and put me in touch with some of the best basket weavers in Fayl-Billot and Villaines-les-Rochers. He has been incredibly helpful in directing me to various resources, and the opportunity to study in his home where he hosts workshops and grows willow would provide me with an invaluable foundation for my research. According to Steen, this generous attitude is not uncommon in the basket weaving community because many basket makers are mindful of the preservation of their craft. As a result, they are eager to pass down their knowledge and offer help to younger craftsmen. Based on his advice and on my interactions with various weavers, I am confident that the artisans will be receptive of my project and will provide me with leads along the way for further investigation.

Furthermore, it is crucial that I learn the fundamentals of willow culture because most basket makers grow the willow that they work with. According to French tradition, basket weaving is done exclusively in white willow. Willow, also known as osier, is an astonishingly speciose and versatile plant. While some weavers use cane and rattan imported from abroad, most prefer to use willow

because it is native to France. In order to grow willow for basket weaving, the agriculturalists stick dormant willow cuttings in neat rows in the Spring. They select from just under a hundred different species of willow suitable for weaving depending on the product in mind. The willow can range in color, length, flexibility, and strength. The rods are ready to be cut the following year when they are already a couple meters long. Though these rods of willow can be worked as is, the French do not stop here. To obtain white willow, the rods sit in water for months until the sap begins to rise. Only then can the bark be easily peeled from the rods and the white willow is left to dry before use. In order to continue working with willow in my studio practice, it is crucial for me to have a grasp on how to properly grow and prepare my own.

After having spent my undergraduate career studying art, making sculptures, and doing performance art, I am very enthusiastic about this fellowship as a means of transitioning from student to artist. My work primarily deals with issues surrounding identity and family, and I believe that woven willow would give me a new and exciting outlet for expressing these themes. I grew up in a French household and attended French school in New York. As a result, I am very interested in the implications of being bicultural: of simultaneously belonging to both and neither cultures. At the risk of sounding sappy, the act of weaving fibers that grew in French soil according to local techniques would be an incredibly cathartic experience for me. Secondly, my father was born in the same region as Fayl-Billot. He became a furniture maker, immigrated, and is now the superintendent of the building I grew up in - the subject of a lot of my work. Our France is that of the peasant and the craftsman, which is not the same France that people picture when they learn our nationality. This is why I incorporate physically-demanding and time-consuming labor in my performances, which are autobiographical on the surface but also deal with socio-economic issues on a deeper level. Lastly, having been raised with a severely autistic little brother has led me to think a lot about the implications of being able-bodied and able-minded, a subject that also comes up in my work. As it turns out, basket weaving has a very rich history with disability. Wheelchairs used

to be made of wicker because it is sturdy, lightweight and absorbs shock. In addition, the school in Fayl-Billot was founded in 1905 as a way of giving employment to disabled soldiers after the Franco-Prussian war, and there are several wicker furniture companies that employ disabled workers today - including the blind. I owe my brother the understanding that if I am physically and mentally able to achieve a goal, I have no excuse not to. What I cannot do with certainty, however, is understand his perspective. Art has been the most meaningful means of trying to empathize with him, or at the very least, cope with the notion that I cannot.

In short, the possibility of incorporating authentic basket weaving techniques in my work with a deep understanding of their origin and history is to me the most exciting part of this proposal. In fact, many of my previous works stemmed from the intensive study and practice of a very similar craft: crochet. It has been around for centuries as a means of making practical and decorative objects but has been largely replaced by mass-produced alternatives. However, it cannot be reproduced using industrial means. I spent two years crocheting at least two hours a day in an effort to learn everything I possibly could to understand the craft and most of my art work has involved crochet ever since. It allows me to take any flimsy string-like material and create a sturdy surface in any shape I want. It made me contemplate whether craft has a place in art and the grey area between art and design, which was extremely valuable to my studio practice. It also taught me to view craft as a visual metaphor for time and labor, how the hand of the maker can be mapped by following the trajectory of the thread. The string not only serves as a timeline of the realization of the object, but also as a record of the maker's actions along the way. However, what compels me the most is the paradoxical nature of the craft: it is conceptually simple but has the potential to be incredibly complex. The result is a craft with an overwhelming potential for experimentation.

Every aforementioned aspect of crochet also applies to basketry except for one thing: resources for making and learning about wickerwork are far less accessible. I cannot stress enough that the opportunity to learn basket weaving

directly from experienced craftsmen would be an invaluable experience with profound, long-lasting effects on my creative process. Thank you for your consideration.

#### Bibliography:

Lesourd, Félicien. *La Culture De L'osier*. Paris: Librairie Agricole De La Maison Rustique, 1927. Print.

Wright, Dorothy. *Baskets and Basketry*. London: B.T. Batsford, 1959. Print.

Bertrand, Bernard. *La Vannerie Sauvage: Pour Aller plus Loin*. Aspet: Ed. De Terran, 2006. Print.

Duchesne, Robert, Henri Ferrand, and Jean Thomas. *La Vannerie*. Paris: J.-B. Baillière Et Fils, 1963. Print.

Robinet, Jean, and Daniel Robinet. *Les Maîtres Du Saule: Histoire De La Vannerie*. Langres: D. Guéniot, 1991. Print.

Latière, H. *La Culture De L'osier*. Paris: Librairie Médicale Et Scientifique Jules Rousset, 1912. Print.

Bichard, Maurice. *Baskets in Europe*. Abingdon, UK: Fyfield Wick Editions, 2008. Print.