

Standing the Test of Time’: Kentucky’s White Oak Basket Tradition

Exhibit at Kentucky Museum to celebrate basketmaking

On Sept. 16, The Kentucky Museum on the campus of WKU will open a new exhibit titled *Standing the Test of Time: Kentucky’s White Oak Basket Tradition*, which will explore the many facets of this tradition and honors the basketmakers connected to this important regional art form. This exhibit will run through Jan. 31, 2017.

Baskets are made all over the world, reflecting the folk communities and environments from which they emerge. For generations of community members in and around Kentucky’s Mammoth Cave region, basketmaking, particularly basketmaking using the thin, hand-rived splits of the white oak tree, has been a way of life.

For the Kentucky Museum and Kentucky Folklife Program Director Brent Björkman and folklorist and basketmaker Beth Hester, co-curating this exhibit has been a prideful labor of love.

“This exhibit is a way to share with a greater public the work of so many basketmakers we have known who have carried on this tradition,” Hester said. “It is a time-honored artistic practice distinct to southcentral Kentucky, something that each individual artist takes pride in.”

At the exhibit the visitor will not only begin to discover the makers’ painstaking hands-on process, but also how the evolving marketplace — from family production within the home to production for tourists and collectors — has historically affected and expanded individual innovation within a revered framework of community ideals. Over time what was once a utilitarian item used on the farm or for carrying things to market became a sought-after item of beauty.

Several of the basketmakers whose works are in the exhibit have baskets in the Smithsonian. The exhibit will also take the visitor from the forest to the final product, describing through materials and tools how a white oak basket is made.

Standing the Test of Time exhibit will be the first time such an evolving look at the Kentucky white oak basket tradition has been presented to the public.

“This exhibit has a dual role,” Björkman said, “to share the culture, history and art of the white oak basket tradition, but also to honor the artists, past and present, who have passed along their community-based knowledge to the next generation.”

Standing the Test of Time: The Kentucky White Oak Basket Tradition opens Sept. 16 with a reception from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. In addition to the opening reception, there will be other gatherings and workshops throughout the four-month run. For information, visit the Kentucky Museum website at www.wku.edu/kentuckymuseum.

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