SOUTH CAROLINA
LOWCOUNTRY
COIL BASKETS
A VALUABLE INVESTMENT

In continuous production since the 18th century, Low Country coil basketry is one of the oldest crafts of African origin in America. Today they are purchased by museums and art collectors throughout the world. Each basket reflects the cultural heritage and history of a unique people. Each is an original sculpture that reveals the artist's skill as both designer and technician. A basket's value increases with age and with proper care it will last indefinitely. Examples of Low Country coil basketry exist today that are well over a century old.
HISTORY OF LOWCOUNTRY COIL BASKETS

Throughout the slavery period, plantations in the South Carolina Low Country prospered from the labor and skills of Africans and their descendants. Plantation communities were largely self-sufficient: Slaves produced their own food, built their own houses, and engaged in many crafts such as carpentry, masonry, iron work, net making, weaving and basketry. Plantation records show that in 1730, and possibly as early as the 1690's, black Carolinians were using "fan­ner" baskets for cleaning rice.

"Fanning" is a method of cleaning grain, similar to one found throughout West Africa. The rice is placed in a wooden mortar and pounded with a pestle to break the hull. After pounding, it is winnowed in large, coil baskets to separate the hull from the seed (see photo). The design and manner of construction of mortar, pestle and coil basket were brought from Africa and have been handed down in Low Country black families to the present day.

In the 19th century, coil baskets were made throughout coastal South Carolina for both agricultural and household use. Basket design varied from one black community to another due to different artistic traditions and different local needs. Artists made baskets for their own use and for their families and friends.

By the beginning of the 20th century, basket making had all but ceased in the Low Country. In those rural communities where rice was still cultivated, a few craft­ men and women continued to make "fanner baskets." It was at this time that artists near Mt. Pleasant began to make basketry that reflected the traditions of their com­ munity. Today it is only among the Mt. Pleasant Basket Makers of Charleston County that this ancient art remains an important part of everyday life.

A FAMILY ART

Handed down from mother to daughter to grand­ daughter, the making of Mt. Pleasant baskets has always been a family art. Both young boys and girls learn to make simple baskets which their mother or older sister "build onto" in creating larger and more difficult designs. Women sew baskets at home while taking care of children and performing other household tasks. Men usually do not make show baskets, but often travel long distances to gather sweet grass and palmetto leaf for their family. Today over 1,500 people are involved in some aspect of basket making. Artists cooperate with close kin to produce and market their baskets. Competition is strong between large families who are known for differences in both basket design and construction techniques. There is a greater variety of baskets today than ever before.

HOW BASKETS ARE MADE

Mt. Pleasant baskets are of the simple coil variety, and are made from natural materials indigenous to the Low Country. They are made by first tying a knot in the center of a small bundle of sweet grass. The free ends of this bundle are folded together and wound around the knot to begin a coil. An opening is made in this center knot by piercing it with the "bone", anawl-like instrument made from a metal spoon handle. A strip of palm leaf is drawn through this opening, wrapped around the grass coil and pulled back through another opening in the coil. After pounding, it is winnowed in large, coil baskets and has been handed down in Low Country black families to the present day.

Basket Stands on U.S. Highway 17 north of Charleston


THE MT. PLEASANT BASKET MAKERS

The Mt. Pleasant Basket Makers live in an area just north of the town of Mt. Pleasant, in old Christ Church Parish. They trace their heritage back to African slaves who were born on local plantations during slavery. Contemporary basket makers provide the following in­ formation on the history of their art:

Men in this community have been making work baskets for agricultural use, and women have been making show baskets for household use since the 19th century. To give them greater strength work baskets are made of bull rushes and sewn together with split white oak or split palmetto butt. Show baskets are constructed of sweet grass and sewn together with split palmetto leaf to make them lighter and more colorful. Show baskets were first made for sale to residents of Charleston in the early 1900's. During the 1920's, the coastal highway from Charleston to Georgetown was paved and artists began to sell baskets along the section of road that passed near their community.

Today show baskets are sold at over 60 family-operated stands along this four-mile stretch of U.S. Highway 17, in the Old City Market and on the streets of Charleston.

ONE OF AMERICA'S OLDEST AFRICAN CRAFTS

Today the Mt. Pleasant Basket Makers of Charleston County continue this ancient art.
BASKETS MAY BE PURCHASED FROM ARTISTS:

IN THEIR COMMUNITY
Everyday — At Over 60 Family Stands
U.S. Highway 17
North of Mt. Pleasant
Near Charleston

IN CHARLESTON
Weekdays and Saturday
Old Charleston Market
Market St. at State St.
Downtown

Monday through Saturday
The Four Corners of Law
Meeting St. at Broad St.
Downtown

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