Woven to the Past

By Joquita Burka

From mother to daughter. Father to son. Generation to generation. Today the ancient West African tradition of weaving sweetgrass into art flourishes in the South Carolina Lowcountry. Here’s a little sweetgrass primer with this note—this is much harder than it sounds. It takes years to develop the skills exhibited in these works. The faster and easier way to enjoy one of these baskets is to head down the unofficial sweetgrass basket highway, Highway 17 near Mt. Pleasant, where roadside stands showcase this art.

Originally, sweetgrass baskets were used in the rice fields as winnowing trays to separate rice from chaff. Later, baskets became decorative as well as a necessity for daily life.

Materials
Materials include sweetgrass, palmetto leaves, longleaf pine needles and a “needle” traditionally made from the handle of a spoon.

Process
After drying, the sweetgrass (muhlenbergia filipes) is wrapped with narrow strips of palm leaf. The weaver then uses the pointed “needle” to stitch the strands of palm through the tightly wrapped coils of sweetgrass.

For decoration, longleaf pine needles are used.

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