

*From Tradition: Baskets of Alabama and
Quilts by 2001 National Heritage Fellow,
Mozell Benson*

July 11-August 29, 2002
Alabama Artists Gallery
Alabama State Council on the Arts
201 Monroe Street, Montgomery

November 2-27, 2002
Jemison-Carnegie Heritage Hall
200 South Street East.
Talladega

September 5-October 28, 2002
Kentuck Art Center
503 Main Avenue, Northport, AL



*Sponsored by the
Alabama Folklife Association & the
Alabama State Council on the Arts*

CREDITS:

Articles by Joyce Cauthen, Joey Brackner, Anne Kimzey and Georgine Clarke

Catalog Design by Bob Weathers

Lenders to the exhibition include the individual artists and

The Arnett Collection, Atlanta

Joey Brackner

Joyce Cauthen

Georgine Clarke

Mary Ann and Bill Smith

Dr. Maude S. Wahlman

Cover: Mozell Benson quilt from collection of Brenda and Carlton Nell; baskets by Lomia Nunn

This exhibition is sponsored by the Alabama State Council on the Arts and the Alabama Folklife Association.

The AFA is a statewide non-profit organization whose purpose is to promote knowledge and appreciation of Alabama folklife through activities such as festivals, conferences, fieldwork, videos, recordings and publications.



Alabama Folklife Association

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O PENINGS

Kentuck Art Center
503 Main Avenue, Northport, AL
September 5, 5-9 p.m.
205-758-1257

As part of Art Night in historic downtown Northport, this opening will feature fiddling by Chuck Reeves and Sharon Bounds and opportunities to meet some of the featured artists.

Jemison-Carnegie Heritage Hall,
200 South Street East, Talladega
November 2, 11 a.m.
256-761-1364

As part of the Alabama Folklife Association's "Gathering in Talladega" this opening will feature gallery talks by Georgine Clarke, visual arts program manager of the Alabama State Council on the Arts, and Jim Brown, Samford University history professor and folklorist. Several craftspersons will be on hand to answer questions, as well. For more information about the "Gathering in Talladega" call 205-822-0505 or visit the AFA website.

For information about purchasing works by artists featured in this exhibition, contact Georgine Clarke, Alabama State Council on the Arts
334-242-4076

From Tradition: Baskets of Alabama and Quilts by 2001 National Heritage Fellow, Mozell Benson

More than Necessity

*F*rom Tradition honors two forms of handcrafts that have remained strong through the centuries in Alabama. The traditional pieces in the exhibition are, first and foremost, functional. Mozell Benson's quilts are warm, sturdy, and quickly made from scraps of cloth on hand. These qualities were instilled in her by her mother in an era when many rural Alabamians lived in houses with no insulation and with gaps in the floors that showed the ground below. On winter nights a family could easily use 25 quilts. These quilts—which frequently saw use as pallets on the floor when company came—would be washed in iron pots and wrung out by hand or cranked through ringers. Such quilts could not be delicate works of art.

Likewise the baskets. Prior to World War II, many Alabamians lived on self-sufficient farms where they grew or made all they needed, and they traded for what they could not make themselves. Families needed containers in which to carry cotton and corn from the field, vegetables from the garden, eggs from the yard, and covered dishes to church suppers. White oak trees were abundant and provided the best materials for baskets. They could be split into long strips and woven into large, strong baskets.

Each family or small community had people who excelled in this craft, and some were able to use these skills to earn cash by selling baskets, particularly cotton baskets, in town on trade days. Farmers who employed many cotton pickers bought baskets by the dozen and set them out in the cotton fields. Pickers would empty their cotton sacks into the baskets and at the end of the day load the baskets onto a wagon to be carried to a shed where they were stored until the day the cotton was dumped into a high-sided wagon and taken to the gin.

Pine straw baskets, believed to be of Native American origin, found early use as grain winnows, church collection baskets, fans and sunhats. While pine straw basketry has endured more as a recreational arts-and-crafts project than as a way of rural life, its appeal lies in the idea of making attractive, functional items from free and abundant natural materials.

Though farmers no longer haul cotton in split oak baskets and most people do not sleep under five quilts at night, the craftsmakers in From Tradition continue to make such items in honor of family traditions and

because they simply love to do so. Ms. Benson may make her quilts a bit lighter than her mother did and the basketmakers may fashion baskets for holding magazines, casseroles and business cards instead of corn and cotton. Still they are concerned with functionality. Their work reveals craftsmanship finer than functionality requires and special touches—the spontaneous yet artful placement of colored strips in Mozell Benson’s quilts, the tasteful curls woven into the sides of Vonnie Miller’s baskets, the interweaving of dark and light splits to create patterns in the baskets of Jesse Thomason and Gwen Chafin, and the pottery-like curves in the baskets of the Jacksons and Johnsons, the Smiths, and Ms. Rice. Their creations are much more than useful covers and containers.

Going even further from tradition, other contemporary craft makers give honor to the materials, techniques and styles of folk tradition, but often they have not learned the craft from family or community elders. Rather, craft workshops, publications and personal artistic vision mold the creations. Their works make reference to use instead of having a strictly functional purpose. Baskets, for example, take a variety of vessel or container forms, but are then embellished or modified to become even more art object or sculpture.

Included in this exhibition are twisted wisteria vine by Andrew McCall of Letohatchee and by Marc Stinchcomb of Millbrook; pine straw wrapped and stitched with raffia in a decorative, distinctive design by Doris Canon of Opelika; steel cable coiled into a sculptural vessel by Rick Batten of Birmingham--all examples of contemporary artwork with strong roots in the working craft traditions of the state.



Basket bottom by Vonnie Miller Photo by Joyce Cauthen

Mozell Benson

Opelika, Lee County

Mozell Benson was born in 1934 in rural Lee County. With nine brothers and sisters who needed to stay warm at night, she learned early in life that quilting was a necessity. Under her mother's supervision she made quilt tops from scraps of flour sacks and fertilizer bags and for the stuffing used cotton "scrapping" which the children picked after the main crop was finished. Also they stuffed quilts with any fabric they had on hand that couldn't be used for the top, such as worn out undershirts, quilts and rayon shirts. They quilted the top, stuffing, and back together in a traditional shell pattern, but when the stuffing was made of a used quilt or blanket, they simply tacked the three parts together with evenly-spaced knots. They occasionally made quilts with repeating patterns but more often pieced together narrow strips or blocks of fabric, which was much quicker.

Ms. Benson says that little has changed in the way that she makes quilts today. A working mother who raised 10 children, she still sees quilts as utilitarian objects to be made quickly and used daily rather than hung on a wall or stored in a chest. Today, however, she has more and better fabric to choose from. Because of her fame as a quilter people have given her a storeroom full of cloth and she is now able to buy old blankets at yard sales to use as stuffing for her quilts.

Though Ms. Benson sees herself as a "country quilter" rather than an artist, she allows her creativity to reign while making functional pieces. Dr. Maude S. Wahlman, who nominated her for the National Heritage Fellowship, considers Ms. Benson a master at visual improvisation, "the two dimensional equivalent of jazz or blues, with many variations on a theme" and said that Ms. Benson's most coveted quilt, now in the Museum of American Folk Art, is "a red, green, and yellow painting in cloth." Professor Wahlman wrote in *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* (1993), "The use of the strip and the powerful movement of her quilts place them within the African-American quilting tradition, clearly associated with African textile design. Ms. Benson is aware of the probable African origins of her quilt making. She comments, 'Black

families inherited this tradition. We forget where it came from because nobody continues to teach us. I think we hold to that even though we're not aware of it.”

In 2001, Ms. Benson was honored with a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, which she received in a gala ceremony in Washington, D.C. She said, “From the time I won the award I started calling my quilts ‘prayer covers.’ The reason is that I have been so blessed all my life and to win this award was really a special great blessing. I tack most of my quilts and the ones that I tack have a special blessing in them. Each tack in there—and there are quite a few—has a little blessing. I can’t give you the blessing; I can just ask for it for you. You go to God for it. You have to have the faith, which I do.” —*JC*



Mozell Benson *Photo by Kim Appel*

Vonnie Miller

Carrollton, Pickens County

Vonnie Miller was born in Speed Mill Beat in 1920. His father and grandfather were farmer-basketmakers and he took up the craft as a young man. During the week, he made dozens of cotton baskets to sell in Aliceville on Saturdays. His father and brothers worked in the field during the day while he made basket bottoms. When his father came in at dusk, he would run the sides up. He often stayed up late on Friday night putting rims on the baskets and loading them onto the wagon.

Mr. Miller quit making baskets when he started his own business. He bought and cut timber, which he calls “paperwood,” off of people’s land and sold it to a lumber company in Demopolis that sent it to paper mills. He continued to work in the woods until he got too old to do it anymore. Fearing that he would “go down” if he didn’t stay busy, he began making baskets again. At age 82 he continues to go into the woods alone, cut down white oaks the size of his leg, and drag them to the roadside where a friend with a pickup truck hauls them to his workshop. Bud Spiller, a merchant in downtown Aliceville, offered to help him sell his baskets and until it closed, Bud’s Auto was the place to stock up on Miller’s excellent baskets. Though his father also made feed baskets and square bottomed baskets in which people carried food to church, Vonnie Miller never made anything but cotton baskets until Spiller suggested he try making other sizes. Now he makes feed baskets and garden baskets of various sizes—all smaller versions of his cotton basket.

Vonnie Miller baskets are not signed, but they are highly recognizable. All have round pattern bottoms with a hump in the center and usually have a faint reddish-brown stain, a result of his pressing it with rocks on a mound of red dirt. He makes the rim of his basket with a thin strip of heartwood wound around several times, giving the top a protruding lip. Most distinctive are the curlicues on the sides of the basket. As he finishes attaching the rim to the basket with a narrow split called a lasher, he weaves the end of the lasher into the sides in a decorative way rather than snipping it off and directly tucking it in. —*JC*



Vonnie Miller *Photo by Joyce Cauthen*

Lomia Nunn and Pamela Jones

Graham, Randolph County

Lomia Nunn, born in 1918, learned her craft from her father, who made cotton baskets for farmers in and around Randolph County. This was an important source of income for the family and all the children participated in making the baskets. Lomia recalls staying up past midnight as a child to help her father complete orders for baskets.

She also recalls the first basket she sold as a young girl and all the wondrous items, such as sewing cloth, she bought with the \$1.50 she was paid. In adulthood, she was the person in the community who repaired chair bottoms and worn-out baskets. However, as a single mother raising her 13 children, her main efforts went into raising and butchering hogs and growing vegetables for the table. After developing heart disease, she discontinued her hog farm on doctor's orders and became a prolific basketmaker once more. She and her second husband, the late John Philpot, traveled to crafts festivals in an old school bus filled from top to bottom with baskets. Her winning smile and huge piles of baskets drew many admirers and made her the subject of feature articles in newspapers across the state.

At age 84 she now lives in Birmingham with one of her daughters, Patricia Heath, and makes baskets when her youngest daughter, Pamela Jones, brings her white oak. Though her baskets are no longer used in farm work, she still values strength and durability over appearance. She does not "dress"(or smooth) the splits unless a buyer requests (and pays for) that luxury. Her baskets do what they are supposed to do; they are durable, comfortable to carry and feel secure when being used.

As a child Pamela Jones, born in 1957, helped her mother find and cut white oak trees. She began making her own baskets at age 14. She says her mother never actually sat down and taught her how to make baskets, she just absorbed the skill.

Ms. Nunn sold Pamela's baskets for her at festivals and now Ms. Jones returns the favor. She lives in Carrollton, Georgia, where she works as a seamstress and makes baskets in her spare time. Though traditional in form, her baskets are created for contemporary use as

casserole carriers, storage baskets with lids, clothes and picnic hampers, Easter baskets, toothpick holders, business card holders, and more. She puts a finer finish on her baskets than her mother does and applies stains to some. —*JC*



Lomia Nunn *Photo by Kim Appel*

Jesse Thomason & Gwen Chafin

Blountsville, Blount County

Jesse Thomason was born in Blount County in 1921. Jesse's father Frank began teaching him the rudiments of white oak basketry when he was ten. He soon learned to make a variety of baskets at home on their farm in northern Blount County. Most of these baskets were square pattern utilitarian baskets in a variety of sizes. One exception was the "egg basket" known locally at that time as a "bow basket." Frank Thomason would make baskets to sell to his neighbors or take with him to Oneonta to sell. This was unusual because in the 1930s, most Blount County farmers made their own baskets for use around their farm or in their community, therefore there was not much of a market for them

In the mid-1980's after a career as an egg farmer and coffee salesman, Jesse Thomason returned to this family craft. When folklorists first encountered Mr. Thomason, they were astounded that he made the bi-lobed "egg basket" better known in Tennessee and Kentucky. The fact that this form was also indigenous to North Alabama was unknown until then. Today, it is his signature creation, taking a full two days to make out of thinner strips of oak.

Jesse Thomason has taught his daughters Gwen Chafin and Debra Brodeur to make baskets. Other basket makers such as Bill and Mary Smith have also benefited from his teaching through the Alabama Folk Arts Apprenticeship Program.

The market for white oak baskets is much better today than that of his youth. Today, Thomason and his daughter Gwen name their baskets after the modern usage, such as magazine baskets, laundry baskets, picnic baskets, and stair baskets. He is a frequent demonstrator at Alabama craft festivals where he sells both round and square pattern traditional baskets as well as innovative creations of his own. But he still makes egg baskets and fish traps, which are much in demand for their unusual form and beauty. —*JB*



(Above) Jesse Thomason
Photo by Joey Brackner



(Left) Gwen Chafin
Photo by Joey Brackner

Mary Ella Johnson, Estella Johnson Jackson, and Floyd Jackson

Demopolis, Marengo County

When Sterling Johnson died in 1999 at age 74, some might have thought that the end of the basket making tradition in Demopolis was at hand. Three years later, his widow Mary Ella, along with their daughter Estella Jackson and grandson Floyd carry on this Marengo County tradition.

Sterling Johnson sharecropped for about 30 years, then worked at a sawmill and on a road crew. The life of a sharecropper with four children was difficult. The family never came out ahead farming, so he finally gave it up for paying work. All this time, he made some baskets when he had time. As he grew older, workplace injuries forced him to retire and he began spending more time making baskets for sale. His specialties were cotton baskets and fish trap baskets made for the local community.

Sterling Johnson taught his wife Mary Ella to make baskets. They were married in 1944 and had five children (one died in infancy) who he also taught the basketry tradition. Estella, aged 56, is the only one of their children who remained in Alabama and is currently making baskets. She taught her children to make baskets also. Today, she and her mother are teaching younger people in their family as well as others who are interested in the process of white oak basketry.

In 2000, the Rural Studio Program of Auburn University built Ms. Jackson a basket making shop in her father's honor. They make and sell baskets from their shop and at local crafts shows and festivals. They do this despite the difficulty in getting good wood and the slow economy in the wake of 9/11. It is also hard to get wood in sufficient length to make large forms such as large cotton baskets so most of their forms are small. The family makes both round and square pattern baskets, but tend to make square pattern because round pattern is so difficult. Like other basket makers today, they make fewer utilitarian forms such as cotton baskets and fish baskets in favor of more decorative forms such as "churns" and "flower

baskets.” They occasionally dye some wood strips with hemp or red oak but mostly they use plain oak strips. —*JB*



(Left) Mary Ella Johnson and Estella Jackson

Photo by Joey Brackner

(Below) The Johnson basket shop

Photo by Joey Brackner



Odessa Rice

Eutaw, Greene County

Odessa Rice is one of the leading Alabama practitioners of coiled pine straw basketry in the African-American tradition. Native Americans and European Americans also practiced this art form, which saw a revival in the 1930s and 40s through classes taught by home extension agents.

Mrs. Rice, 63, grew up in a farming family in rural Greene County. Her father made white-oak cotton baskets, feed baskets, and picnic baskets and also bottomed chairs. “But I didn’t learn that,” said Mrs. Rice.

She first learned to make pine straw baskets from the late Mabel Means in the mid 1980s. “I saw them at the festival [Folk Roots Festival held each August in Eutaw]. And I asked her if she would show me how to make them,” she said. Mrs. Means taught her at home and soon Odessa Rice had mastered her craft. She now teaches four or five students per year as a Master Artist in the Alabama State Council on the Arts’ Folk Arts Apprenticeship Program.

Making the baskets is “very relaxing,” she said. “I just get pleasure out of making them and decorating with them. And I get pleasure out of seeing other people enjoy them.”

The coil method lends itself to round shapes. She explained that the baskets are useful for holding small items such as coins or potpourri, “or just decoration.” She sometimes makes vase-like baskets in which to display artificial flowers.

As the first step in basket making, Mrs. Rice collects long leaf pine needles from her sister’s yard and washes them. Then she boils them in a solution of salt, vinegar and water. “That gives them a gloss and helps to preserve them,” she explained. After they’ve cooled she wraps the pine straw in a towel to keep it moist.

To begin the coil, she gathers about six bunches of pine needles and clips the cap off the end. Then she bends the material about a quarter inch and wraps thread around it. She continues to bend and wrap the pine straw, adding more as she goes and sewing the coils together with needle and thread.

When she gets the flat base as wide as she wants it, she adds coils

vertically to make the sides. “You continue to come up until you get it as tall as you want it. To finish the end of it, you wrap it two or three times,” she described. To some baskets she will add lids or handles, depending on their use.

She prefers natural baskets, but mentioned that some basket makers use hair spray to help preserve them. Also, “some people put shellac on them, but that makes them hard,” she remarked.

Odessa Rice said it takes her about three to four hours to make a small basket. —AK



Odessa Rice *Photo by Melissa Springer, 1990*

Mary Ann and Bill Smith

McCalla, Jefferson County

The Smiths are North Carolina natives who took up basketmaking as a hobby during the 20 years they lived in Ohio. There they made baskets from commercial crafts materials but longed to learn the entire process from cutting down the white oak tree to tucking in the final lasher. It was not until they moved to Alabama in 1988 that they found someone willing and able to teach them--Jesse Thomason of Blountsville, Alabama. They apprenticed with him for five years, two of those years as part of the Apprenticeship program of the Alabama State Council on the Arts, and traveled with him to numerous crafts shows and the Alabama Folklife Festival. They also have a close relationship with basketmaker Vonnie Miller of Carrollton.

In making baskets, Bill and Mary Ann follow a division of labor based on what each does best. Bill generally cuts the tree and turns it into splits and Mary Ann designs and weaves the baskets. Both are capable of doing the whole process themselves, however.

They are resident craftsmakers at Tannehill State Park on weekends nine months a year and they teach one week each year at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, N.C., where they are pleased to be able to share their skills with students, just as their mentors did with them.

Though their focus has always been on traditional Appalachian styles, in recent years they have begun to add personal touches, incorporating wisteria vines, hand-spun wool, feathers, antlers, poplar bark and natural dyes into some of their baskets. For this exhibition the Smiths selected an egg basket, a form they learned from Mr. Thomason. Also they included a Jeremiah basket, a form characterized by graduation from a broad bottom to a narrower top. Their tall storage basket decorated with African porcupine quills, turkey feathers, and handspun wool represents a combination of utilitarian traditional split-oak basketry and personal artistic expression. —*JC*



Mary Ann and Bill Smith *Photo by Joyce Cauthen*

