



Dorothy Gill Barnes - Ohio  
as told to Tina LeCoff, December 2015

"I like my power tools and working outdoors ... "

Dorothy Gill Barnes is a bubbling geyser of ideas! Although she's classified as a basket maker, she is also a skilled tree surgeon. The work you see here is much bigger than she usually makes. She's thrilled with these experiments ... and the others percolating in her head.

Petite and energetic and 88 years old, Dorothy's serious focus on baskets and wood sculpture started in her early 40's. This grew out of years as a mom and a teacher - drawing and sewing - and weaving with maidenhair ferns on a loom. Inspired by traditional, functional Native American baskets, Dorothy began weaving baskets with flexible materials in the 1960's and 70s; green grasses and lily stems facilitated weaving innovative shapes.

In 1975, Dorothy entered a call for baskets from the Columbus (Ohio) Museum of Art and her sweet grass basket was accepted and won a top award. The renowned textile designer, Jack Lenore Larson, praised her work in a review that year, and the two remain fast friends. International travel, craft shows, and meeting craft veterans soon motivated her work.

Gradually, Dorothy turned to experimenting with growing trees - " 'because they change.' " She cuts and carves and draws on the bark of saplings to be removed from forests, calling these live drawings dendroglyphs. May through July is the busy time; the sap is flowing up the trees and that makes the bark beautiful. Cuts and carvings change quickly as the tree puts on summer growth. When she likes the changes, the bark or whole sections are carefully removed and sculpted.

Groups of helpers, often students from nearby Ohio University, help her with heavy jobs. They dig and expose the roots she finds, move heavy trees to work areas, and sort and organize materials.

For Shag Bark Basket, a helper cut strips from a living tree, without killing the tree. With strips measuring 7 foot tall by 4 inches wide, Dorothy and a traditional basket weaver wove a huge basket.

The yellow roots with purple stripes of mulberry trees inspired Dorothy to oversee lifting the double tree to expose it's 60 inch root system intact.

The hanging glass and paulownia sculpture is found objects, to compare and contrast the rough beauty of both.

In 2015, Dorothy was awarded a Lifetime Achievement award by the National Basketry Organization, adding to a dozen such awards. In 2003, Joann Cupps conducted an oral history for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And Dorothy is a Fellow of the American Craft Council.



DONA LOOK - Long Process with Fine Results  
as told to Tina LeCoff - 12/2015

TLC How many years have you worked on your art ?

DL I started weaving baskets 40 years ago, because I had access to materials in the forest and a curiosity and interest in traditional basket weaving. I began seriously weaving and sewing white birch bark in the early 1980's when I started collecting and experimenting with it.

TLC What led you to this direction and focus ?

DL Collection and preparation of materials is essential to my work. I choose to work with white birch bark because its unique physical characteristics make it suitable for both weaving and sewing. The process of searching the forest for large, healthy trees that will soon be logged inspires and guides me in understanding the appropriate use of bark from each tree. The diameter of each tree and the bark's thickness, markings and flexibility are of utmost importance to my work. The body of each piece is often made of bark from one tree.

TLC What's the easiest part ?

DL Each of my pieces is part of a continuous learning process where techniques, forms and use of materials have evolved. Working on several pieces at once allows me the opportunity to reflect and critique what changes in pattern, texture and form might be considered in the pieces to follow. Consequently, it's easier for me now to intuit the appropriate use of different sheets of bark and their construction generally.

TLC What's the hardest part ?

DL White birch bark is collected in spring when the sap is running. I then peel the dirty outer layer off along with an inner layer to store the pieces flat. Collecting and preparation of birch bark is dependent on weather and never easy, but it's become much more difficult recently. Using ladders, I peel bark from large, healthy trees which will soon be logged. Today, there are fewer stands of healthy trees to log. White birch trees were once very prevalent in northern Wisconsin forests, but our climate has changed.

TLC for every one that's perfect, are there some that don't work out ?

DL For every group of finished pieces, there is a cupboard full of woven and sewn experimental parts.

Sometimes finished pieces appear unresolved or details seem wrong. Those are put aside and sometimes cut apart later to determine a better solution.

TLC Do you have collectors of your work ?

I cannot know this since private collectors have purchased my work from a gallery and possibly pass it on to another collection. I am always thankful for people who have supported my work and see textile art as an important part of museum collections!



TLC Which museums own your work?

Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Washington, DC.  
The White House Collection, Washington, DC.  
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA.  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.  
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.  
American Museum of Art and Design, New York, NY.  
Racine Art Museum, Racine, WI.  
Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Houston, TX.  
Mint Museum of Craft and Design, Charlotte, NC.  
Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, AR.  
MCI Telecommunications Corporation, Washington, DC.  
Erie Art Museum, Erie, PA.  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston MA.  
Asheville Museum of Art, Asheville NC.  
Museum of Wisconsin Art, West Bend, WI.