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## A Trio of Fowler Exhibitions Explore African American and African Basketry Arts

This fall at the Fowler Museum, three exhibitions explore various aspects of African American and African basketry arts, and their historic connections. The largest of the three exhibitions is *Grass Roots: African Origins of an American Art* (Oct 4, 2009– Jan 10, 2010) a major traveling exhibition organized by the Museum for African Art in New York. The second exhibition is *African American Life on the Gullah/Geechee Coast: Photographs by Greg Day, 1970–1977* (Sept 20, 2009–Jan 3, 2010), which features forty black-and-white images taken in the same South Carolina region where the *Grass Roots* basket makers live and work. A third exhibition, *Fowler in Focus: African Basketry Arts, Thinking outside the Basket* (opening Sept 6, 2009), highlights ingenious and beautiful basketry forms from the Fowler's permanent collection that were not created as containers but served other purposes in African life.

### *Grass Roots: African Origins of an American Art*



In *Grass Roots: African Origins of an American Art* exquisitely crafted coiled baskets demonstrate one of the enduring contributions of African peoples and cultures to American life. Featuring more than two hundred objects, a myriad of baskets made in Africa and the American South, African sculptures, watercolors from the Charleston Renaissance, historic photographs, and videos of basket makers demonstrating their techniques and telling their stories, the exhibition shows how a

simple farm tool once used for processing rice has become a highly collectible work of art and an important symbol of African American identity.

*Grass Roots* traces the entwined histories of coiled basketry in Africa and the United States, starting from the domestication of rice in West Africa, through the transatlantic slave trade, to the little-known migration of African rice culture to America. The exhibition addresses the history of the Carolina rice plantation, highlights the technological innovations brought to American agriculture by people from Africa, and tells the compelling story of the survival of African American basketry over three hundred years.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the art of basketry continues from generation to generation. In South Carolina and Georgia, as in many parts of Africa, virtuoso basket makers invent forms, experiment with new materials, and perfect the techniques they have learned from their parents and grandparents. The exhibition features baskets made by contemporary American basket artists including Mary Jackson (a 2008 MacArthur Fellow) and Henrietta Snype, African basket makers Beauty Ngxongo and Bester Nhlengethwa, as well as historic examples—some dating to the early 19th century—from Lowcountry rice plantations and African villages.

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### Materials

African basket makers often combine different techniques and materials in a single basket and add color or beading for decoration. On rice plantations in the Lowcountry—the coastal region from North Carolina to Florida—the predominant technique was coiling and the preferred materials were bulrush (*Juncus roemerianus*) bound with splints of white oak (*Quercus alba*) or stalks of the saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*). Today, Lowcountry basket makers prefer to use sweetgrass (*Muhlenbergia sericea*), in combination with bulrush and pine needles (*Pinus palustris*), sewn with strips of palmetto leaf (*Sabal palmetto*).

### The Lowcountry Plantation and Rice Culture

From the founding of the colony of Carolina in 1670 through the end of the transatlantic slave trade to North America in 1807, about ten percent of all Africans arriving at the port of Charleston, South Carolina, came from the region then known as the “Rice Coast” or “Upper Guinea Coast.” An equal number came from Congo and Angola, where farmers did not grow rice, but used coiled baskets to winnow other kinds of grain. The vast majority of people in the Lowcountry were of African descent, and most of them lived in compact settlements on large estates known as plantations. A section of the exhibition explores the rice culture of the plantations and features several stereographs of rice cultivation, beautiful plantation baskets, and tools unique to rice agriculture.

### Charleston Renaissance

At the end of the Civil War, coastal rice plantations lay in ruins. Efforts to revive production persisted for fifty years until a series of hurricanes dealt a deathblow to the industry. Fueled by nostalgia for a lost civilization, descendants of the plantation elite memorialized the world of their parents in paintings, prints, and drawings, prose, poetry, and drama. What some recalled as a golden era, however, signaled memories of hardship and suffering for others.

In the 1920s and '30s, the figure of a stately woman balancing a basket on her head in African fashion became an icon for a group of artists and writers whose work has come to be known as the Charleston Renaissance. Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, Elizabeth O’Neill Verner, Alfred Hutty, DuBose and Dorothy Heyward, and others established an art scene in Charleston and several examples of their work from this period are displayed here.

### African Origins

The next sections of the exhibition show how African rice, sometimes called “red rice,” was transplanted to the American South. African baskets made for winnowing rice, calabash covers—including newer ones made with colored synthetic wrapping material resourcefully obtained by unraveling commercial sacks of sugar, rice, and onions—elegant sculptural figures of wood used to guard the rice fields, and other objects related to the rice harvest attest to the long and important history of rice in Africa. Also included are Congolese and Angolan basket forms, notably baskets with stepped lids and footed bowls, which were adapted for use on rice plantations.

### Basketry Today

With the completion of the Cooper River Bridge in 1929 and the paving of Highway 17, the major coastal artery that passes through Charleston, basket makers began hanging their work on roadside stands and selling directly to tourists and local customers. Freed from middlemen, basket makers profited as they could charge the retail price for their baskets.

But for later generations things have changed as people have adapted to a faster pace of life and branched out into other professions. Real estate development has swallowed fields and woodlands, destroying sweetgrass habitats or cutting off access to basket-making materials. With a renewed interest in Gullah/Geechee culture since the early 1990s, however, the

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sweetgrass basket has become an object imbued with a great deal of meaning and pride, and some efforts are underway to grow sweetgrass commercially in the region.

Today, in Africa, a wide variety of basket traditions coexist. While methods are time-honored and stable, materials can be new and changing. As natural resources become scarce, African basket makers adapt by incorporating modern materials into their work. In The Gambia, for example, plastic bags are cut into strips and used to bind the rows of a footed basket. In the cities of South Africa, some people make baskets with no natural fiber at all, creating fabulous multicolored platters from copper and plastic-coated telephone wire.

#### Additional Information

*Grass Roots* is curated by Enid Schildkrout, chief curator and director of exhibitions and publications at the Museum for African Art, New York, and Dale Rosengarten, curator and historian, Special Collections, College of Charleston Library, with input from an advisory board of social historians, art historians, anthropologists, and contemporary basket makers. The exhibition was organized by the Museum for African Art in cooperation with the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture at the College of Charleston, the McKissick Museum at the University of South Carolina and the Sweetgrass Cultural Arts Festival Association. The exhibition is accompanied by a lavish catalogue with essays by scholars of African and American history and art.

This exhibition has been supported, in part, by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, and the MetLife Foundation's Museums and Community Connections Program. The National Endowment for the Humanities honored *Grass Roots* with a "We the People – America's Historic Places" designation. Additional funding for the video components, created by filmmaker Dana Sardet, has been provided by The Henry and Sylvia Yaschik Foundation, the South Carolina Humanities Council and the South Carolina Arts Commission.

The Los Angeles presentation is made possible through the generosity of Barbara Goldenberg and the Shirley and Ralph Shapiro Director's Discretionary Fund. Funding for the accompanying programs is provided by the Yvonne Lenart Public Programs Fund, and Manus, the support group of the Fowler Museum. Media sponsorship provided by *edible Los Angeles*.

#### **African American Life on the Gullah/Geechee Coast: Photographs by Greg Day, 1970-1977**



In the 1970s, photographer Greg Day lived in the African American basket-making communities along the Gullah/Geechee Coast, documenting a way of life on the verge of change. Casting for shrimp with nets made as they are still made in Africa, making sweet grass baskets, scraping bristles off a freshly slaughtered hog, dancing at a juke joint on a Saturday night—these rural pastimes would soon be displaced by suburban sprawl, hastened by the destruction of Hurricane Hugo in 1989.

Designated by Congress in 2006, the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor extends from Wilmington, North Carolina through coastal South Carolina and Georgia to Jacksonville, Florida. It is home to one of America's most unique cultures, a tradition first shaped by captive Africans brought to the southern United States from West Africa and continued in later generations by their descendents. Today many African Americans, including First Lady Michelle Obama, trace their ancestry to this region. Once identified with the Creole language

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spoken by African Americans in the region, today the term Gullah refers to a whole range of customs and beliefs, cuisine, domestic architecture, and arts, including the sweetgrass baskets in the exhibition *Grass Roots: African Origins of an American Art*.

Greg Day photographed the sweetgrass basket makers from 1970–77 as part of PhD field research in anthropology at Rutgers University. He was joined in this research by colleague and fellow anthropologist Kate Young. A smaller selection of photographs from this series and baskets collected by Day travel within the *Grass Roots* exhibition and are in the Smithsonian's permanent collections as well as those of other museums.

#### ***Fowler in Focus: African Basketry Arts, Thinking outside the Basket***



Scholarly and popular definitions of “basket” and “basketry” have varied over the years. Nevertheless, more often than not a “basket” is rather emphatically defined as a “container” produced by coiling, twining, weaving, or plaiting while the term “basketry” is usually restricted to the technologies or processes of making a “basket,” regardless of whether or not the final product is a container.

*Fowler in Focus: African Basketry Arts, Thinking outside the Basket* focuses on basketry forms that were *not* created as containers, but rather served myriad other functions in African life. These range from architectural walls, wind screens, and sleeping mats, to hats, masks, and shields, all constructed from a wide variety of basketry techniques and materials. In addition to these well-documented and recognizable genres, African basketry arts include such diverse object types as combs, beer straws, brooms, and fish traps. Depending on time and

place, African basketry arts are often infused with the same complex social, religious, and political initiatives that permeate other more celebrated and durable African arts in wood, metal, and terracotta.

This exhibition is guest curated by Doran H. Ross, former director of the Fowler Museum and a scholar of African art.

**The Fowler Museum at UCLA** is one of the country's most respected institutions devoted to exploring the arts and cultures of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the Americas. The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$10 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310/825-4361 or visit [fowler.ucla.edu](http://fowler.ucla.edu).

#### **Selected Related Events:**

Saturday, Oct 3, 2009 5 pm

Fowler OutSpoken Lectures:

Enid Schildkrout and Dale Rosengarten: *Grass Roots: African Origins of an American Art*  
Complementary lectures by co-curators Enid Schildkrout and Dale Rosengarten trace the development of African American basketry. Our members' opening party follows.

Sunday, Oct 11, 2009 1–4 pm

Kids in the Courtyard: Woven Wonders

Join us for an afternoon of binding, twisting, curling, and coiling a variety of colorful materials into woven wonders of your own creation.

## 5-5-5 A Trio of Fowler Exhibitions Explore African American and African Basketry Arts

Wednesday, Oct 14, 2009 7 pm

Fowler OutSpoken Lecture: Jessica B. Harris: Carolina's Gold

Noted culinary historian and acclaimed cookbook author Jessica B. Harris examines the African hand in the foodways of the South Carolina Lowcountry. Harris will compare and contrast selected recipes from both sides of the Atlantic and look at the African origins of some Lowcountry culinary traditions, including holiday fare and street vending.

Thursday, Oct 29, 2009 6 pm

Exhibition Tour: *African American Life on the Gullah/Geechee Coast: Photographs by Greg Day, 1970-1977*

Photographer Greg Day discusses his works.

Thursday, Oct 29, 2009 7 pm

Fowler OutSpoken Lecture: Judith Carney: Black Rice: The African Antecedents of the Carolina Rice Plantation Economy

Judith Carney, UCLA professor of geography, draws attention to the agricultural and culinary history of African food crops in the Americas, examining the indigenous rice of West Africa and the role of enslaved rice farmers in establishing an African dietary preference.

Sunday, Nov 1, 2009 11 am-2:30 pm

Food Program: Sweet Tea and Sticky Rice

Explore *Steeped in History: The Art of Tea* and *Grass Roots: African Origins of an American Art* with museum educator and chef Maite Gomez-Rejón. Discover the trade routes, beliefs, and stories related to tea and rice, from Asia to Africa through Europe to the United States. Then, inspired by the in-gallery conversation, cook and enjoy a meal that incorporates food from China, India, England, East Africa and the American South. \$40 members; \$50 non-members. Reservations required: 310/825-8655.

Wednesday, November 18, 2009 12 pm

Culture Fix

The Fowler's director of education Betsy Quick highlights the distinctive basketry on view in *Grass Roots: African Origins of an American Art*.

Sunday, December 6, 2009 1-4 pm

Kids in the Courtyard: Round-Reed Baskets

At this afternoon of basket weaving, we'll begin with a basic basket start and then learn the process of weaving reeds over and under until your take-home baskets take shape.

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