

The art of the basket

Caroline Gould has
perfected her artwork
over eight decades

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CAROLINE GOULD fears the art she has practised for over 80 years could die out.

The Mi'kmaq elder and basketmaker has made thousands of baskets from miniature trinket or "five cents" baskets to an ornate covered basket for the Queen.

"I feel if they don't learn within 15 or 20 years, there won't be anybody to know how to make baskets. It will be sad not to keep up our culture," says Gould, surrounded by her exquisite ash and sweetgrass baskets at the Mary E. Black Gallery in Halifax.

Now 92, Gould is always asked how long she's been making baskets.

"The only answer is ever since I can remember."

She was taught by her parents, Michael and Jane Paul, and she remembers her father taking 100 baskets and going to the South Shore, the Annapolis Valley, New Brunswick and into Quebec to sell from house to house.

Baskets were the only way to make an income.

"There was no work on reserves. That's the only thing we could do."

Born and raised in Barra Head, Gould married Roderick Gould of Whycocomagh Reserve in 1936 and had five daughters. She ran the Ulnoo (Indian) Crafts shop on the Trans-Canada Highway from 1968 to 1981 and imported aboriginal crafts.

This exhibit, curated by Gould's great-granddaughter Ursula Johnson, shows the evolution of baskets from craft to art and features 30 of Gould's baskets from the last 30 years.

Her first baskets, say Johnson, were "common baskets" such as potato baskets, berry baskets and hampers, and her baskets by the 1980s were simpler "so she could make them faster because she had to sell them for a living, especially when she had five daughters.

"She made sometimes 10 baskets a day and sold them door to door."

Once her kids grew and she sold the shop, she had time to make "fancy" baskets.

"I never made fancy baskets before because I was making them fast. Now I have all the time in the world because I don't do this for a living."

Today Gould works in black ash that she gets from Quebec because Nova Scotia's black ash is diseased. Her parents used maple, which nobody uses anymore, she says.

"It's nice to work with. My father would get maple and then he'd make planks and splice it and there's grain so you take your knife and put it in the grain and open it."

Gould loves making baskets.

"When you sit and just do baskets you don't think of anything; you're not worried or thinking of going somewhere. When I start baskets, I don't know what it's going to shape like. I start with the bottom and start weaving it and shape it and finally I make a basket."

She's a perfectionist, which is evident in her delicate, flawless and highly detailed work.

"Sometimes when I make a basket and when I see there is a mistake or I didn't do it right, I rip the whole thing. I think she does this too," Gould says, looking over at Johnson.

"Because she taught me," says Johnson, a Halifax multimedia artist who uses basketry in her conceptual, sculptural projects. "You take it apart and start it over."

"And do it right," says Gould. "Sometimes three or four times I ripped up a basket by the time I'm satisfied with its shape.

"I compete with myself. When I make a basket, the next one I see if I can make it better, fancier."

Gould's style combines her own ingenuity and traditional elements, says Johnson, "like the S twist — that curl there — or the Z twist.

"These are found in traditional late-18th century baskets, and she has taken them and altered them to become her own expression."

The small trinket baskets are called five cents baskets because "80 or 90 years ago they charged five cents," says Gould, who now sells them for \$25.

"I remember when I was married and making baskets (in the 1950s) and the big ones I could sell them for 50 cents and the big sewing baskets for \$2. Those days, 50 cents was a lot of money.

"My little basket last month, you know what somebody paid for it? \$1,500."

The little basket was one she made to donate to an auction at a salite (sal-ee-tay), a ceremonial feast and celebration of a person's life after he or she has died.

Most Mi'kmaq are Catholic, says Johnson, and after the funeral and burial there is a salite. "It's the last feast that individual will have."

"There's lot of food and tea and juice and usually a few hundred people — there could be a thousand — and everyone brings an item to donate for an auction and my great-grandmother brings a basket and a lot of people will go to the salite, and if they know my great-grandmother has brought a basket, they sit. And they wait."

The auction is to assist the family in paying for the funeral expenses.

"Some people bring a toaster or a pair of socks and then out comes the Caroline Gould basket."

Last summer, Gould made a basket to present to the Queen when she and Prince Philip visited the Membertou 400 event on the Halifax Commons.

At first, "I wasn't really excited," she says. "The Queen, she's just like anybody."

Gould spoke with her, demonstrated basket weaving and gave her the commissioned basket.

"After, I realized, my God, it's like a dream. I don't believe I was talking with the Queen and we got a letter from her after, the Grand Chief sent it to me. The letter told him not to forget to mention to thank me for giving her the basket. She probably liked it.

"I often think what my parents would think that I made this basket and gave it to Queen Elizabeth from England. They would be so proud.

"And there were so many things I didn't ask when I was young like . . . 'Why do you call these baskets kloqowej?' "

Kloqowej, explains Johnson, means star, and a kloqowej basket has a circular bottom with a star pattern.

Gould, active throughout her life in preserving and teaching Mi'kmaq culture,

language and the arts, first signed her baskets in the early 1980s as Mrs. Roddie J. Gould and then in the mid-1980s as Caroline Gould. While her artworks are all over the world, she has only one at home — her green-lined sewing basket, which Johnson emptied out to put in this show.

It was originally made as a church collection plate. "The church saw it and said it was too big, we'd never fill it," says Johnson. "That's the only basket of hers she kept."

Kloqowej continues through Feb. 27. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Friday, 9-5, Saturday and Sunday, 11-4. Admission is free.

The gallery is in the Nova Scotia Centre for Craft and Design, close to Pier 21, Halifax.

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