The story of American basketry is the focus of an upcoming traveling exhibition organized by the National Basketry Organization in conjunction with the University of Missouri – Columbia (MU). Rooted, Revived, Reinvented: Basketry in America is co-curated by Jo Stealey and Kristin Schwain, both professors at MU. To tell this uniquely American story, 80 objects have been selected to illustrate how American basketry has maintained its traditions, while it has simultaneously transformed into an important component of contemporary art.

While no one knows exactly how old the craft of basketry is or how it originated, what is known is that the techniques of this craft have permeated every culture throughout the world. Early humans used basketry techniques to create utilitarian objects for gathering, trapping, transporting, storage, and architecture. From its humble beginnings, these same processes have evolved, been deconstructed, and expanded upon by many artists through what has become known as the contemporary basketry movement.

This movement is rooted in two distinct but interrelated historical narratives. The first story begins in Native America,
Europe, and Africa. Native American groups developed basketry traditions with materials, iconographies, and functions specific to their communities. Slaves and immigrant populations brought their particular techniques and designs to the New World, continuing their practice and passing this knowledge on to others. Gullah sweet grass and European willow basket makers are two examples of immigrant cultures who have maintained the materials and techniques of their ancestors. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many of these ethnic and regional traditions were transformed in response to market demands, causing basket makers to create works with consumer (tourist) expectations in mind. Today, American basket makers draw upon traditional techniques from all of these groups. Some artists preserve and work within traditions, while others call upon their materials and techniques to create baskets that push the boundaries into sculpture, installation, and conceptual art.

The second story is rooted in the cultural revolution of 1960s America, exemplified by the work of Ed Rossbach, University of California, Berkeley, art professor. Rossbach was stationed in the Aleutian Islands during World War II, and
returned inspired by native Alaskans who used local materials and traditional techniques to create baskets he considered art objects. He translated this model of art production to his own work and teaching. Using found materials gathered through "urban foraging" (like Andy Warhol), Rossbach integrated imagery from popular culture into his baskets.

New forms of basketry emerged on the scene in the 1960s, inspired by Rossbach and others who began similar explorations, such as JoAnne Segal Brandford, Lillian Elliott, and Pat Hickman. It was born from a confluence of factors, including: the back-to-the-landers' creation of handmade products; the feminist movement's celebration of traditional crafts as fine art; the explosion of fiber arts on the national and international art scenes; and the attendant experimentation with architecturally scaled textiles.

As a result, many artists rediscovered basketry as a medium of visual expression, forging dialogues with its traditions and reevaluating it as a functional craft as well as fine art. The result was the contemporary basketry movement.

Rooted, Revived, Reinvented is divided into four distinct sections—Cultural Origins, Living Traditions, Basket as Vessel, and Beyond the Basket—organized in a loose chronological sequence for visitors to see both the continuity and transformation of materials, techniques, and functions. Cultural Origins contains historical examples of bone, Nantucket Lightship, Shaker, Gullah, Native American, and Appalachian baskets. Living Traditions showcases artists from the 20th and 21st centuries, such as JoAnn Kelly Catsos, Katherine Lewis, and Pat Courtney Gold, whose baskets perpetuate and transform the
historical traditions in which they work. These sections lead into Basket as Vessel, which explores the New Basketry movement spurred on by Ed Rossbach. While the baskets in this section reference vessels and suggest utility, few are intended to function as containers. Works by Dorothy Gill Barnes, John Garrett, and Lois Russell illustrate how these artists were inspired by the past, but eschew function for explorations in personal and material expression.

The final section of the exhibition, Beyond the Basket, focuses on current artists bridging the gap between the craft origins of basket making and the medium’s new place within sculpture, textile, and installation art. These artists incorporate traditional and nontraditional techniques and materials, explore scale and dynamic form, and examine and comment upon contemporary cultural issues. It is within these works where the trajectory of contemporary basket making is being transformed.
at its greatest level. Carol Eckert, Amanda Salm, Ann Coddington, Aron Fischer, Stephanie Gorin, and Amy Masters are a few of the artists who are pushing the boundaries of the materials and techniques normally used for basketry.

Coiling is an ancient process in basket making and has been utilized by many cultures, though in the hands of Carol Eckert and Amanda Salm it is used more as a sculptural drawing implement. Much of Eckert’s works are tableaux inspired by myths and legends just as old as the technique she uses. According to Isidore illustrates a range of feathered and four-legged animals in a seven-foot long mythological narrative. Salm coils naturally dyed horse hair in Showered with Laughter to construct a three-dimensional contour drawing that projects off the wall, inspired by sea life seen at the Monterey Aquarium in California. These women are reimagining this archaic practice to create sculptural forms that poetically narrate personal stories and experiences.

Basketry’s past has focused on a single unit or container with a specific purpose in mind. Ann Coddington and Aron Fischer, however, inflate basketry’s footprint with large-scale wall installations made of multiple elements.

Reminiscient of a time forgotten, Fischer’s piece 3-5 Pegs includes objects that appear to be hand tools constructed with techniques and materials customarily employed in basket making. He goes even further to recall tradition by hanging the objects on a wooden peg rail that resembles the Shaker practice of storing items up and out of the way. Coddington’s Fingerprints includes an array of small vessels that act as vestiges of the past and embody memories of her experiences. These diminutive baskets are each unique and comprised of myriad construction methods and materials. While both of these installations are quite large, they contain an intimacy in their approaches and commentary on loss, memory, and time.

Stephanie Gorin addresses important current political and social issues. The large vessel #bringbackourgirls is made of rebar with woven vinyl paper containing images and information referencing the April 2014 kidnapping of more than 200 girls from their school in Nigeria by the terrorist group Boko Haram. The title of the piece is the hashtag for social media postings about this horrific event. The images on the outside of the piece depict scenes referencing events related to this story, mostly appropriated from postings.
using the hashtag, and numbers of how many
days the girls have been missing. On the inside,
faces of the kidnapped girls all stare inward and
are woven over and under the rebar, a symbolic
representation of their imprisonment.

The Halloween Grace by Nathalie
Miebach commemorates the sinking of the
Andrea Gail, a fishing vessel that was lost at sea
during the night of the Perfect Storm in October
1991. This intricately constructed work incorpo-
rates weather data collected by Miebach with bas-
et making techniques to create visually rich and
fanciful forms. Her playful approach to the work is
intentional, as she wants to lure the viewer into
the scientific data through a sense of play and
whimsy. In the deconstructed basket form Yellow
by Amy Masters, viewers are invited to put their
hands on the piece to move the material about
and reinterpret its form. This, along with its bright
color, allows one to engage with the work and to
get lost in a state of play. Both artists evoke a
sense of wonder and whimsy that harkens back
to childhood.

Rooted, Revived, Reinvented: Basketry in
America highlights historical traditions in basketry
while illustrating how it has transformed the tradi-
tional into new realms and territories. The artists
represented in this exhibition are but a few who
reference American basket making, break molds,
push boundaries, and confirm basketry’s status as
a significant force in the contemporary art world.

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Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of
Missouri – Columbia (January 28–May 14, 2017),
and its three-year journey around the US begins in
the summer of 2017. An accompanying scholarly
catalog, along with an iCatalog, interactive web-
site, and museum education package, is
being developed. For more information and the
exhibition’s travel schedule, visit:
americanbasketry.missouri.edu

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