

A Basketmaker in Rural Japan

THE BOOK AND VIDEO

BY LOUISE CORT AND NAKAMURA KENJI
1994, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION
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VIDEO: 11 MINUTES, COLOR
1994, ARTHUR SACKLER GALLERY
AT THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

THE BOOK AND THE VIDEO ARE AVAILABLE THROUGH
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Photograph by Louise Cort, courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

Through the fortuitous meeting of a highly skilled basketmaker, a dedicated collector and a discerning curator, a complete collection of beautiful handcrafted Japanese baskets has been preserved in the U.S. for future generations to study and enjoy. The baskets are the work of Hiroshima Kazuo, a professional basketmaker who resides in a small village in the southern part of Japan. From November 20, 1994 to July 9, 1995 Mr. Hiroshima's works were exhibited at the Arthur Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The exhibition is over but an excellent catalog and video, both entitled *A Basketmaker in Rural Japan*, remain to document the life and works of an extraordinary craftsman.

The eleven-minute video introduces Mr. Hiroshima, the last professional basketmaker in Hinokage, a mountainous region on the island of Kyūshū, the most southern of Japan's four main islands. Born in 1915, Mr. Hiroshima turned to basketmaking as a young man as a way to earn a living, a decision based largely on the fact that he grew up disabled because of a child-

hood accident. Unable to finish high school because of his physical condition and with few other prospects before him, he became an apprentice to a local basketmaker at the age of sixteen. Over many years he perfected his craft by learning from various basketmakers and reproducing the baskets of other makers upon his clients' request.

In the video we not only observe Mr. Hiroshima at work making a specialized basket used by fishermen, but we are also privy to him talking about his life as a craftsman. With great sadness Mr. Hiroshima spoke of the scorn farmers and other people in the region held for basketmakers. They were viewed as little better than beggars working at a job that required little or no skill and which was accomplished with bamboo gathered at any roadside at no cost. Basketmakers were often people with physical disabilities, a situation that has resulted in contempt for basketmakers as a group in general.

The catalog, with copious illustrations of a great variety of baskets, gives the context for the baskets, showing the reader the close connection between shapes and tasks, form and function. This is a most welcome change

from the usual manner of exhibiting crafts as discreet objects cut off from both the person who crafted them as well as the user. In this catalog and video the social and physical contexts of each of the baskets are clearly explained. The baskets have distinct purposes, shapes and sizes, and in the case of Mr. Hiroshima's baskets, the tasks are related to agriculture or fishing.

The introductory essay walks the reader through the ways that many of the baskets were utilized. Mr. Hiroshima knew the owners and understood the tasks they would be performing. He also took into consideration the type of terrain in which certain tasks would be performed. Farm work carried out on flat land dictated a different shape of basket than one used on hilly terrain, even though the work may be very similar. These baskets are works of great beauty as well as masterpieces of functionality.

In 1992 Mr. Hiroshima received recognition from the Ministry of Labor as an "Outstanding Contemporary Craftsman" and was given a government pension, but even this recognition by the government of Japan could not wipe away the

anguished memories of growing up despised and uneducated. The video is an especially good antidote to the romantic view of the life of craftspeople. Japanese crafts have been held in high esteem both in and outside Japan, but the harsh living conditions under which they are created has often been hidden from view.

Through the efforts of two very perceptive people, Mr. Hiroshima's baskets finally came to be exhibited at the Sackler. Mr. Nakamura Kenji, a young businessman who was concerned with preserving the crafts of the Hinokage area, saw Mr. Hiroshima's baskets in 1978. He began collecting them along with other regional crafts that he displayed in his family's local rice store.

In early 1982 Ms. Louise Cort, Associate Curator of Ceramics at the Sackler Gallery, became acquainted with Mr. Hiroshima's work through Mr. Nakamura while leading through Japan a group of thirty people who were interested in studying Japanese regional crafts.

Thanks to this fortuitous meeting of Mr. Nakamura and Ms. Cort, this beautiful collection of baskets is preserved in the Sackler and Mr. Kazuo Hiroshima has come to be recognized as a representative of many generations of basketmakers in rural Japan. ■

Elaine Vukov

ELAINE VUKOV is Director of Educational Outreach at the Japan Society in New York, NY. She is currently working on sending a group of New York City high school students to Japan on an exchange program.