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Basketry Techniques and their uses in the Domestic Irish Environment, between 1900 and 1950s

by

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INTRODUCTION

> "The importance of Ireland is that, thanks to the 'time-lag'; it has rendered to Anthropology the unique, inestimable, indispensable service to carrying a primitive European Precivilisation down into late historic times and there holding it up for our observation and instruction".
>
> *RAS McAlister*[1]

A basket is a vessel made of twigs, willow or rushes, as well as a variety of other materials, interwoven together, and used for holding, protecting, or carrying any commodity. Basketry has been practised in Ireland from the Neolithic period to the present century. It is the oldest of all traditional handicrafts.

The antiquity of basketry is historically proven in that it predates ceramic crafts. Before the invention of the potter's wheel, it is believed that the potter used a basket around which to mould the clay, and according to Connolly, sherds of pottery dating from Neolithic times show wicker imprints[2]. The earliest known piece of basketry in Ireland is dated from such an object from about 2500BC, found at Twyford, Co. Westmeath (Fig. 1, p. 8). Due to the nature of the materials, early examples of the craft in a good state of preservation are few. The bogs of counties Tipperary, Westmeath and Longford, however, have preserved objects reliably dated to Neolithic times, which were made by binding alder rods in spiral shapes[3].

Essentially a primitive folk craft, basketry has been used throughout history to construct a variety of objects. According to Estan Evans "baskets, themselves, are among the most pleasing of native products, their shapes being perfectly adapted to their purpose"[4]. This perfection of shape, function and form is made possible by the close relationship between the necessity, the maker and the materials.

Basket-making, however, has not been confined to the fabrication of those useful utensils from which its name is derived. Earliest man, due to his proximity with nature and constrictions of tools and materials, used willow-work in a variety of innovative ways.

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[1] (Evans, 1979, p.12).
[2] (Connolly, 1994, p.46).
[3] (Shaw-Smith, 1984, p.118).
[4] (Evans, 1979, p.18).

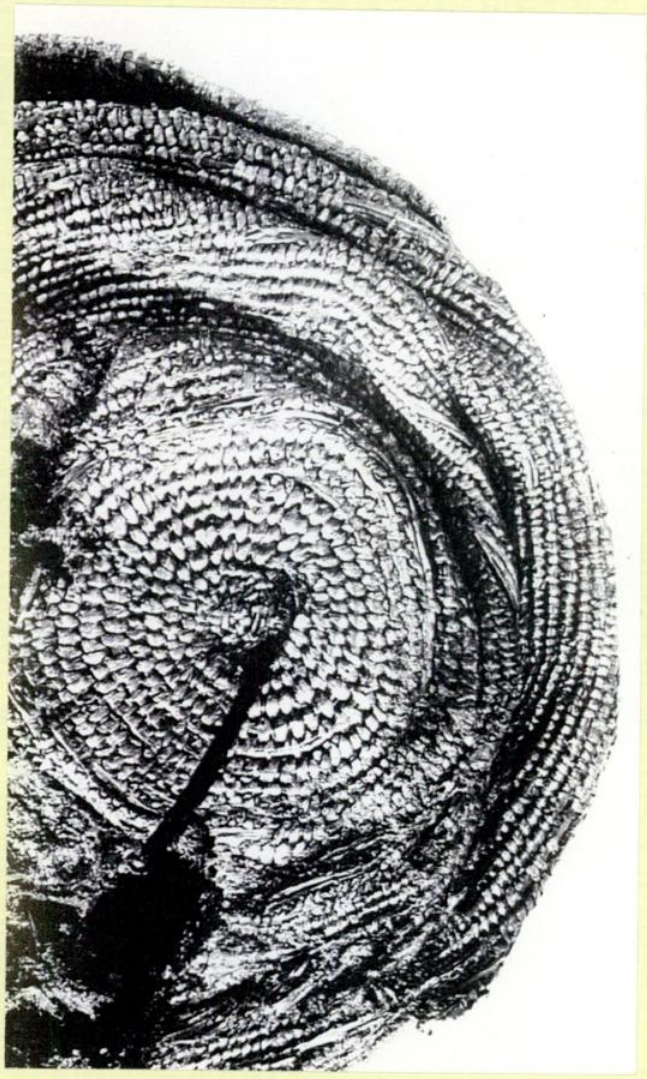

Fig. 1. The earliest known piece of basketry in Ireland. Found at Twyford, Co. Westmeath. Dating to about 2500 B.C.

From the late Bronze Age to Early Christian times, wickerwork was used to construct habitations, evident in the many crannógs or lake dwellings scattered throughout Ireland. In the famous Ballinderry crannóg, Co. Offaly, the late bronze age layers dated between the fourth and first century BC, revealed a number of small huts and a larger structure, all made of wicker, the walls of which were smeared with clay and the roofs thatched[5]. Replica crannóg dwellings have been reconstructed in heritage parks throughout Ireland today (Fig. 2, p. 10). Many examples of basketry have been excavated in Dublin city, including the large circular base of a basket from the thirteenth century. Evidence for the use of wickerwork in fences between plots, walls of houses, pathways and floor mats dating from the tenth and eleventh century were also found.

Basketry remained a primitive, rustic craft in Ireland until the beginning of this century. Geographic and climatic features, exacerbated by poor economic and social conditions, aided its survival throughout the turbulence of the early 20th century. National characteristics as a pastoral, rural, farming society helped maintain the use of basketry in the execution of daily activities about the farm. From the obvious uses of serving, carrying and storing to employment in architecture, furniture, transport and entertainment, Irish ingenuity has expressed itself in material culture. In terms of local material exploitation and the perfect adaptation of form to function, the Irish peasant farmer has shown his skill in adapting basketry techniques to fit a variety of functions.

Cheap mass-produced and imported goods first affected basketry and other indigenous crafts in the beginning of this century, gradually replacing the demand for these goods. Today, modernisation has increased material comforts, unfortunately the attendant consumerism has adversely affected the country's cultural heritage. Professor Evans laments the decline of our craft traditions, arguing that "knowledge of the ways of life that have altered little for centuries is passing away; skills whose loss the practical countryman may have cause to regret are disappearing"[6].

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[5] (Shaw-Smith, 1987, p.118).
[6] (Evans, 1979, p.10).

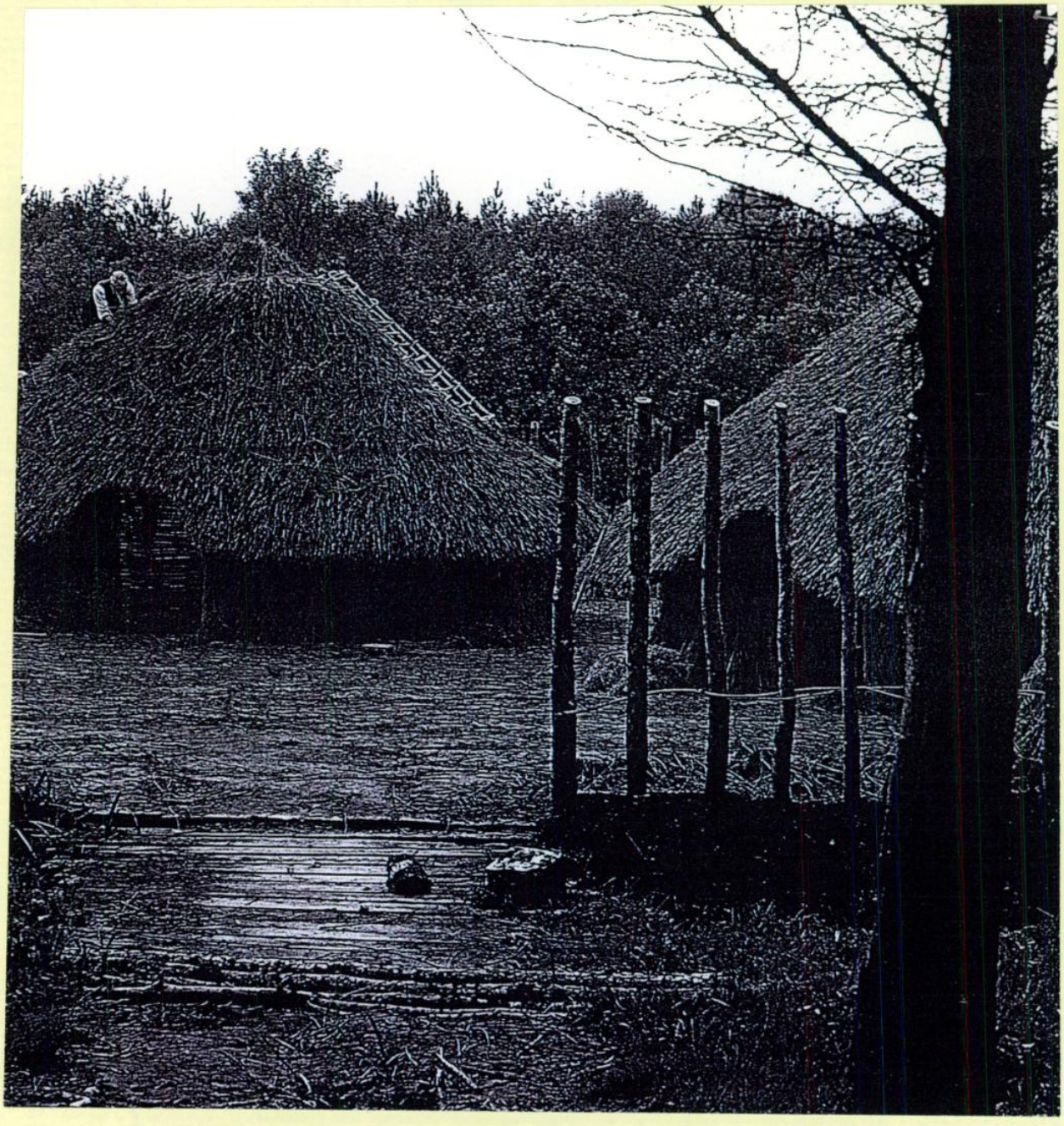

Fig. 2. Reconstruction of a Bronze Age village with thatch-roofed dwellings at Craggaunowen, Co. Clare.

Despite the changing social and cultural Irish climate since the nineteenth century, eminent in the events of famine, emigration, civil war and urbanisation, basketry has survived. Through its versatility and adaptability basketry has weathered these events to cater for the needs of an urban consumerist society, as earlier it adapted to the requirements of a pastoral, rural, farming nation. Basketry thus contributes to a sense of identity, heritage and stability that remains permanent in an ever-changing world.

"Nothing in this world is single
All things by a law divine,
In one another being mingle".
Shelley

Chapter One analyses the social, cultural and economic climate prevalent in 1900s-1950s Ireland. The major forces of change are examined in terms of population distribution, civil war, famine, emigration, national identity and their effects on the tradition of basket-making. Examination is made in Chapter Two, of basketry's context in the 1900s-1950s by looking at the makers, the materials and the process of growing, harvesting and producing baskets. Chapter Three explores the application of basketry techniques in the rural environment of the 1900s-1950s, in the areas of architecture, the domestic setting, transport and entertainment. Examination focuses on use, materials and construction. The fourth Chapter investigates the role of contemporary basket-makers and the status of basket-making today. New trends and movements for basketry methods are examined in relation to continued use of traditional procedures, new materials, sculpture, jewellery and popular culture. In conclusion, the information gathered is evaluated and assessed to give feedback on the future survival of basketry.

CHAPTER I

SOCIAL HISTORY: IRELAND 1900-1960s

The social and cultural history of a nation shapes its evolvement from the struggle for survival and the fulfilment of man's basic needs to a more sophisticated and complex social organisation.

The identity crisis facing every individual in the twentieth century is one that has faced Ireland as a nation for two centuries. Subjected to foreign invasions throughout her history, first by the Celts and then by the Normans, Ireland was then colonised under British Rule for centuries. The question of identity is, therefore, of crucial importance to a country which during this century began to take her first faltering steps as an independent Republic. That identity is once again in question by virtue of Ireland's amalgamation with the European Community.

For individuals within a rapidly evolving society to internalise and adapt to the changes occurring around them, they must be able to draw from an understanding of their national and individual past. Knowledge of our history allows us to take on board new experiences without losing our sense of who we are and gives us a context for understanding where we fit in the order of things.

Evans maintains that a perception of a nation's whole past is needed to explain the present[7]. In this we must not neglect the apparently mundane acts of ordinary living, the simple habits and practices which mark our daily lives. These are the forces which forge us, make us who we are and combine to shape our instincts and thoughts. The intimate living of our daily round, arguably does move to mould us rather than the political events of recorded history.

We know that historical evidence shows Ireland to have been a rural, familial and socially-graded society from as early as the New Stone Age. Ireland, right down to the recent past, has retained these characteristics, embedded in the national psyche of her people, even in the midst of great social and cultural alterations. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Irish lived their daily lives adhering to traditions which were passed down from one

[7] (Evans, 1979, Preface XIV).

generation to the next. Change filtered slowly into this established and simple environment, this aided the survival of basketry skills well into 1950s Ireland.

Into the twentieth century, Ireland retained this heritage, being a pastoral, rural-dominated society where 61% of the population lived outside towns and villages[8]. Small and medium-sized farmers predominated, with 53% of the State's gainful employment being engaged in agriculture. Distribution of employment on farm holdings was as follows:-

301,084 employed on farms of less than 30 acres
121,220 employed on farms of less than 30-50 acres
117,255 employed on farms of less than 50-100 acres
61,155 employed on farms of less than 100-200 acres
34,298 employed on farms of less than over 200 acres

The majority of the population were, therefore, poor, small farmers, ekeing out a livelihood from their minimal plots of land. Economic necessity maintained self-sufficiency as the keynote of life, where every material requirement was filled by the work of the family, the local community and the surrounding environment. Reflected in the craft of basketry, down through the centuries, the majority of baskets were made domestically by people for their own use, although basket-making was also a specialised craft carried out by professional craftsmen. There were also itinerant basket-makers who travelled around the country selling their services at a small fee. This demanded dexterity and ingenuity in the handling and manipulating of locally available materials to produce the articles needed for everyday living. Basketry incorporated a wide range of such materials which, apart from the well-known willow, included a number of other pliable fibres such as hay, straw, heather, nettles, brambles, roots and even dock stems all of which were used to fashion a large variety of objects required for use in the domestic environment, including vessels, furniture, flooring and architectural structures.

[8] (Brown, 1981, p.18).

Such close and intimate contact between people, and their dependence on their local area ensured the existence of a close, natural link between people, and the world around them. The geographic features of the country in association with poor quality infrastructure, exacerbated by rural isolation, facilitated the survival down the centuries of the indigenous people and their customs[9].

The 1920s in Ireland was a politically volatile period. The Easter Rising in 1916 (Fig. 3, p. 16), and the ensuing Civil War from 1919-1921 culminated in the Irish Free State Act of 1922, giving independence to a twenty-six county republican Ireland. Despite the dramatic change in Ireland's status, as a result of the Treaty, the social and cultural changes envisaged as a consequence of independence were not so readily forthcoming. Historians have suggested a number of reasons why this transformation did not occur.

Ireland, in the aftermath of the devastating Civil War, was in a state of economic recession. A country not only requiring physical rebuilding but the uplifting of national confidence and morale. The geographic and climatic features of the island dominated the years 1923 and 1924. The Summers were harsh, gloomy and sunless, while Autumn and Winter months were marred by continuously heavy rains, disrupting the work of agriculture, dampening an already sagging national spirit. Indigenous industry in Ireland was in a weak position. The world industrial boom which ended in 1874 reflected the progress lag in the economy, as it had not even taken off in Ireland. The few and small size of native industries and the high percentage of unemployable people in the form of mothers, widows and young children rendered industrialisation an aspiration rather than a reality. There was a lack of investment in the industrial possibilities of the island. Irish entrepreneurs tended to concentrate on service rather than manufacture. Proximity to and competition from such a highly industrialised country as Britain, where technological progress made manufacturing easy and production costs low, did

[9] (Evans, 1979, p.12).

Fig. 3. 'Dear, Dirty Dublin, a City in Distress', 1899-1916',
The Easter Rising: a view of Lower O'Connell St. after the Rising.

little to help. As Oliver MacDonagh perceptively phrased it ....."The Free State ....was not so much .... an undeveloped country, as .... a pocket of undevelopment in an advanced region"[10].

Living standards in both rural and urban areas were low. The 1926 Census reveals the poor living conditions of the population where 22,915 families lived in "overcrowded" conditions in one-roomed dwellings. Overcrowding constituted more than two persons per room. Those living in two-roomed dwellings numbered 39,615, while 24,849 persons living in 2,761 families with 9 persons in each, lived in two-roomed dwellings (Fig. 4 and 5, p. 18). Such an endemic housing situation resulted in high mortality rates, especially among young children. In Dublin alone, the average death rate per 1,000 children between one and five years was 25.6%. The chronic housing problems throughout the entire country did not aid the economic and social development of a demoralised and poor State trying to find its feet after independence.

Economic conditions alone, however, did not account for the slow rate of social and cultural change. Recurrent famines in the country, of greater or lesser severity, the last being as recent as 1879, only some 30 years before, was still prevalent in the minds of the people. In the face of these uncertainties the population, not surprisingly, was afraid to abandon the stable security of established traditions and craft techniques such as basketry which, as we have seen, through its versatility and adaptability had fostered a culture of self-sufficiency and survival in impoverished conditions.

F.S.L. Lyons comments on the environment which bred conservative, nationalistic idiosyncrasies. The contributing factors, a combination of late marriages, large families and a high percentage of single people all spelled a recipe for conservatism. The Irish peasant with his compulsive hold on the land was supported in his social attitudes by the Church.

[10] (Tobin, 1984, p.159).

Fig. 4. City Housing: Insanitary Cottage rear in Faddle's Alley, off Clanbrassil St. Early Twentieth Century.

Fig. 5. (*Left*) Interior of a Dublin Tenement. This room would have housed a family. Sickness and unemployment meant that most goods were pawned leaving only the bare necessities. Early Twentieth Century.

The conservative ideology of 1920s Ireland was dominated by a socially homogeneous Catholic population. The 1926 Census returned 92.6% of the inhabitants of the Irish Free State as Catholic. Douglas Hyde, an English Protestant, noted the prevailing Catholicism of the country, "The Irish Gael", he maintains "is pious by nature; ..... he sees the hand of God in every place, in every time and in everything"[11]. The popular ideology of the country was, therefore, one which was ruled by the hierarchy of the Church, its teaching and its traditions. The Church saw its mission as the protection of the people's faith and the enshrining of its own dominant position in Irish society by regulation of social and cultural change.

Another feature of Irish social history which contributed further to the social and cultural stagnation of the time, was emigration. The exodus of Ireland's young men and women from the country began with the first famine of 1718 and has been urged on by Ireland's many social, economic and cultural problems since. By the 1920s, 43% of Irish born men and women were living abroad, compared to an average of 14% in Norway and Scotland, 11.2% in Sweden and 4% in most other European countries. The vast majority of Irish emigrants choose to settle in Britain and the U.S.A. Emigration had many negative effects on the State. Depriving the country of its youth population removed vitality, and future community and political leaders. Depleted of her most highly educated and those individuals who are most innovative, she was left with a residual population which was more conservative. Emigration, in turn, aided the decline in basketry and other indigenous craft traditions. The remaining older generation who maintained basketry techniques, had no-one to hand down the skills to, and so knowledge of their craft died with them.

[11] (Lyons, 1982, p.82).

Harsh and discouraging as this reality was, the country at the time idyllised these intrinsic characteristics of a pastoral, rural nation in which traditional heritage had passed down through the ages unmarred by progress and commercialism. National identity was the major concern of the twenty-six county Free State in the 1920s. Cultural life elevated the traditional attributes of rurality and pastorality, which became the main focus for Irish writers and artists. "Nationalism", according to Kearney, "displays a multiform and elusive character, it observes a common organising principle - namely, the structural function of unifying a variety of elements (territory, language, statehood, tradition, history, race, religion, ideology) into a certain identity"[12]. The extent to which the State wished to promote the image of a simple agricultural nation as the emblem of its national identity was evident. The national coinage was changed. The traditional symbols used during the Civil War of round towers, shamrocks and sunbursts were rejected. Percy Metcalfe's animal imagery was chosen to identify the new State's self-image, which bore intimately on the rural nature of Irish life. This move was approved by Thomas Bodkin, Governor of the National Gallery, who maintained that "The wealth of Ireland is still derived in overwhelming proportion from the products of her soil. What, therefore, could be more appropriate than the depiction upon our coinage of these products"[13].

Rural tradition and attitudes were not only influential in terms of creating a sense of national identity, their impact was also discernible in the trends and ideology of the newly evolving urban classes; many of whom had been brought up in the country and retained their rural habits in the towns and cities. This trend was particularly evident in the Catholic percentages in urban areas and the numbers attending daily mass. The Church was undergoing renewal at the time, changing to adapt to the needs of an increasing urban population. Catholicism was enjoying a period of prestige as it was hailed as another defining element of our national identity, one sympathetic to nationalist ideology and distinct from Anglo-Irish thought and Protestant Britain.

[12] (Kearney, 1997, p.8).

These representations of rural life continued to be used in cultural arenas, despite the fact that the Irish countryman of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was open to modernisation, although, as we have seen, economic conditions stunted this inclination. By the 1920s, the countryman was willingly adapting to mass-produced articles of everyday use instead of home or locally made produce. Many of the old basketry skills using local materials were replaced by cheaper mass-produced goods. Súgán rope made from straw was overthrown by imported sisal and raffia, for example. The primitive defence of a hay rope strung with thorns was replaced by barbed-wire, while binder twine killed the craft of home-made ropes and thongs. "The economist", states Evans, "might think of them as bonds tethering rural communities to the soil, but to the sociologist they imply spiritual as well as physical links with mother nature"[14]. Aspects of country social life were introduced into town and city living. With the establishment of the Gaelic Athletic Association in 1884, country sports of hurling and football became national pastimes. The Irish language also enjoyed a renewal under the marketing policies of the Gaelic League, founded in 1893, especially among the new urban elite.

Notions of respectability and social conformity prevalent in the towns of the early twentieth century were filtering into the countryman's philosophy of life. Most, probably, being brought back by the young who had migrated to towns and cities and became dissatisfied with country living standards on returning. Better living conditions brought about improvements in housing. There was a gradual change in native architecture as the countryman moved from byre dwellings (which also housed his livestock), to houses with loft bedrooms and slated roofs. The native tradition of thatching became known as the roof of the poor man, and knowledge of the craft died as it was replaced by slated roofing. The basketry technique of "wattle and daub", consisting of a wicker-work lattice covered with clay, often used in indoor architecture as partitions and chimney canopies was made redundant as more sturdy two-storey stone built structures became fashionable (Fig. 6, p. 22). The parlour became a new addition to architectural planning at this time, embodying for countryfolk town and city notions of respectability paralleling Victorian ideology.

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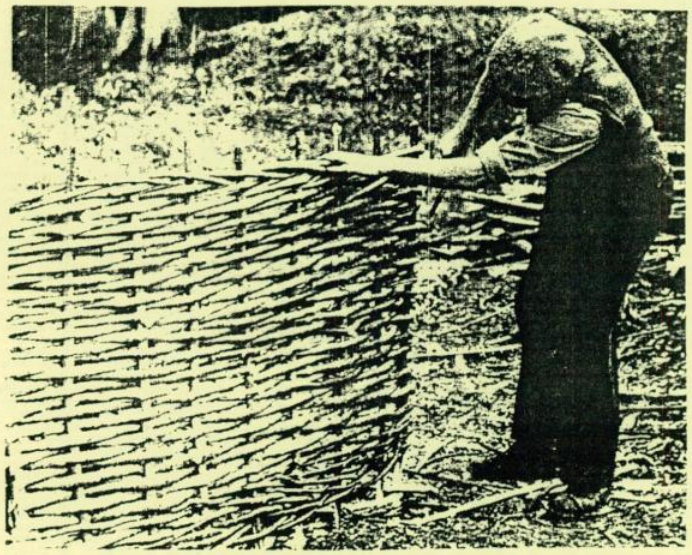
[13] (Brown, 1981, p.97).

Fig. 6. Making a 'wattle' hurdle. This technique was employed, smeared with clay in vernacular architecture and was known as 'wattle and daub'



[14] (Evans, 1979, p.200).

Such was the social and cultural standing of the country on entering the 1930s, an era dominated in world history by the Second World War. Ireland chose to remain neutral throughout the war years, a choice viewed by many as opting out of history. To most of the Irish population, however, neutrality was seen as the only possible option which would preserve and maintain her recently won independence. Characterised by State strategies of cultural and social protection, with nationalism as the primary concern, Ireland's decision was based on her perceived national identity and the need to preserve her Catholic ideology.

Patricia Bourden examines the effects of neutrality on Irish circumstances. On the positive side, neutrality saved the country from the devastating effects of war, a state from which she had just emerged in her own recent history. Neutrality, by extension, did much to heal the wounds of Civil War in the country. A sense of national self-sufficiency and confidence was created in Ireland's future as an independent State without having a fully developed sense of national identity. Neutrality, however, also had its drawbacks. As a state of "emergency" was declared, the country was plunged into economic uncertainty and further social stagnation. Emigration increased as many young people sought employment in Britain. Cut-off from the affairs of mainstream Europe, Ireland entered into a period of cultural impoverishment, which was to have far-reaching effects for the next twenty years[15].

The 1930s and 1940s saw the beginning of a trend which was to radically change the geographical distribution of the population. A substantial number of people migrated to the towns and cities, resulting in the depopulation of country areas. This movement did not coincide with industrial expansion or an increase in population, as it had done in other European countries. The remaining countryfolk, especially craftsmen and women, found a decreasing market for their goods, exacerbated by competition from mass-produced goods as

[15] (Bourden, 1986, p.173).

we have already seen in terms of basketry. Instead of being absorbed in an industrial revolution in which their technical skills would be useful, they were forced to migrate or emigrate to earn a livelihood. Emigration in the ten-year period between 1936-1946 accounted for 18,700 people. This exodus continued well into the 1950s, when in 1951, 41.4% of the population lived in towns and cities, with 20% of the country's population residing in Dublin. Dublin's population increased from 472,935 in 1936 to 575,988 in 1951, an increase of over 100,000 in just five years. Migration can be accounted for by the fact that manufacturing employment in the Dublin Region increased from 80% in 1926 to 53% in 1961, thus increasing job opportunities in these areas.

Such rapid urbanisation exerted many effects on the face of Irish social and cultural order. One such effect transformed family organisation. These changes occurred as a result of the need to adapt traditional familial values associated with country living to life in an urban centre. A.J. Humphries commented on this evolvement in "New Dubliner's Urbanisation and the Irish Family" (1966)[16]. He recognised significant changes in traditional family roles; the mother in taking responsibility for the maintenance of the domestic environment becomes increasingly circumscribed by the private sphere, as the father's work focuses exclusively on the public sphere. This differed considerably from country roles, where especially among small tenant farmers, men and women would have shared responsibilities as women were often involved in agricultural duties working alongside the men. The rearing of children was also shared, particularly in the case of boys, the mother taking charge of all male children until the age of seven, when the boy became eligible to wear short trousers, and he then became the father's responsibility[17].

Even though family life adapted to urban lifestyles, the family still remained the centre of life. The family in rural Ireland was not merely a social unit, it was also an economic unit, essential

[16] (Brown, 1981, p.218).

to the working of the farm, to its extension and to its preservation from generation to generation. Many of Dublin's population had migrated from the country and still retained much rural ideology evident in urban attitudes concerning the family and religious practice. This ideological continuity with the rural past in modern Dublin, undoubtedly made the process of urbanisation less painful than it might have been.

Another consequence of urbanisation was the rejection of traditional ways of life. Life in Ireland in the 1950s was characteristically stagnant, both socially and culturally, lacking vitality, passion and heart. The reality of rural life was captured by many of Ireland's poets at that time. Patrick Kavanagh, a native of Co. Monaghan, in his poem "The Great Hunger", lashes out at the reality, "a life of dullness, deprivation and mute despair". These sentiments are highlighted by the fact that in 1957 there were 78,000 unemployed in a year when emigration was responsible for a net loss of 54,000 persons[18] . This stagnation was especially frustrating for those who returned from Britain after the war, where they had earned good wages and become used to a higher standard of living, it would not be an exaggeration to say that they found circumstances in Ireland intolerable. They rejected the poverty symbolised by the articles of self-sufficiency, many of which were the products of crafts such as basketry, thatching and rope-making, to mention but a few. Younger generations were not interested in learning these skills which, in their fast growing world of mass consumption, had become outdated. The increasing availability and influence of mass communications in the form of radio, cinema and magazines highlighted the deprivation of Irish life and increased dissatisfaction with the old traditional ways.

In such a state of national malaise, the programme for economic development proposed by the Lemass Government of the 1960s was greeted with enthusiasm, creating a favourable climate in which the rapid social and economic changes of the 1960s and 1970s could take place. A Catholic nationalistic, insular Ireland opened her doors to European Economic Development in

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[17] (Ulster Folk Ways, 1978, p.2).

the search for increased economic improvements and modernisation. The influx to urban centres continued to increase, as in 1971 52.25% of the population resided in urban areas. In 1979 the Irish Times reported that the "Ireland of the 1970s contrasts sharply with the internationally popular image of a sleepy backwater on the fringe of Europe. No longer is this the rural island of emigrants, but a fast growing industrialising frontier on the edge of industrial Europe"[19]. Ireland was rapidly evolving from her once traditional heritage of a familial, pastoral, rural community, to an increasingly commercial, secular and urban society. Prosperity in the 1960s was reflected by the amount of public investment, reaching £78.5 million against a target of £44.5 million. There was a 20% rise in National output and wages purchasing power, while the total number of cars in the country doubled.

Coinciding with the industrialisation and urbanisation of Irish life was the de-population of the countryside, caused by the net decrease of employment in agricultural sections of 272,000, while manufacturing escalated by 61,000 between 1926 and 1961. The need for modernisation had also penetrated rural areas, where between 1951 and 1961, the numbers of tractors in the country increased by 350%, while the numbers of horses fell by 50%. Those who could not afford to mechanise production, in line with European standards, were no longer able to compete. In 1974, the Farm Modernisation Scheme instituted by the Department of Lands announced death to existing small farmers by stating that their holdings were commercially unviable and partaking of the early retirement scheme was recommended. Killing the small farmer sounded the death knell to indigenous crafts which he had continued to use and keep alive. No longer would the farmer serve his own domestic needs by the production of baskets such as "creels" for carrying seaweed and turf, the "kish" for transporting potatoes and the "skib" for cooking and serving them. Among the many other objects, which due to his small scale of production, were more efficient for him to make himself than to purchase.

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[18] (Brown, 1986, p.212).

A way of life that had existed on this island for centuries was about to be extinguished by the tide of modernisation and secularisation, a way of life that had once been venerated as our distinctive national identity as a pastoral, rural nation in the 1920s and 1930s was being overthrown in favour of economic growth and social progress, to the detriment of our national heritage and folk culture. "The New Ireland", states Terence Brown, "vigorously in pursuit of economic development has set in motion a process which will destroy the core of nationality, the spiritual heart of the nation and the Irish language"[20].

[19] (Brown, 1991, p.258).
[20] (Brown, 1981, p.277).

CHAPTER II

BASKETRY

> "It was at once the strength and the weakness of traditional Irish craftwork that much of it was within the capacity of men who were primarily small farmers. If this meant a certain lack of expertise and professional finish it meant also that skills were widely diffused and did not disappear when the products of the professional craftsmen were superseded by mass-production"
>
> *E. Evans*[21]

Basketry until the 1950s was dominated by the skills of the many small farmers throughout the country. The farmer's main concern being agriculture, and its associated tasks meant that he acquired the appropriate knowledge to make the articles necessary to his work. Most country people turned their hand to numerous crafts, and consequently the basic tools for carpentry, harness-making, rope-making, stonework and basket-making were to be found in most houses. Basketry in Ireland has long been a traditional hearth industry; instead of the factory, the home was the centre of industry. Activities normally took place in the kitchen where one would find the simple tools of the trade scattered around, with willow rods being stored in the corner. Basket-making being the most versatile of all crafts, fitted numerous and varied requirements, as we shall see.

Besides the home basket-maker, there were professional craftsmen who supplied the needs of their local community. The professional would have traded in complex baskets requiring a higher degree of skill, such as the potato skib with its perforations in the centre for straining, which would have been beyond the capabilities of the average farmer. There were also itinerant basket-makers who travelled the country offering their services for a small fee. According to Connolly, competition and secrecy over techniques was rife; many professionals jealously guarding their skills would not allow people to see them starting or finishing a basket[22].

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[21] (Evans, 1979, p.20).

To survive, and satisfy local requirements, professional and itinerant basket-makers had to be able to produce a wide variety of objects, everything from the cradle to the grave. Joe Shanahan, a basket-maker who resided in Co. Waterford, recounted in an interview with Sybil Connolly how his grandfather, John, started making potato baskets for the local community, soon becoming the supplier of hampers to British Rail[23]. His sons who carried on the business found employment during World War 2 supplying baskets for dropping supplies beyond enemy lines, and later to launderettes and hurdles for sporting events. Joe and his brother Michael began making wicker-furniture in the late fifties and sixties, which enabled them to survive the decline in demand for baskets. The adaptability of basketry techniques to many different forms and functions has ensured its continuation until modern times.

Deforestation of the Irish landscape down through the ages has affected the supply of native trees - the hardwoods of oak, ash, beech and elm, and the softwood of larch. Forestry today, accounts for a meagre 1% of the country's plantation. Timber shortages affected the materials available from which to fashion vernacular furniture and architecture, resulting in the diverse use of basketry skills and materials to fill the gap. Necessity, therefore, bred ingenuity and inventiveness in the use of alternative materials which, as we have already seen, comprised any fibrous, pliant material, from hay to dock stems. Dependence on the local environment, and nature's bounty, meant close contact with mother earth, a connection which today we neglect and, according to David Shaw-Smith, "we need the wood, clay, stone and natural fibres speaking directly to us as part of our search to re-establish contact with nature"[24].

Despite the vast variety of materials used in basketry, willow is the most common, with over sixty varieties in Ireland. The most popular variety here is the "sally", often gleaned from willows growing along the roadside. Sally rods are cut-off at head height and used while still fresh and pliable. The other type of willow is referred to as "osiers" and is imported from

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[22] (Connolly, 1994, p.62).
[23] (Connolly, 1994, p.62-63).
[24] (Shaw-Smith, 1987, p.7).

England and Holland. In the case of osiers, the rods are cut-off at ground level. Willow is prevalent because it grows easily and quickly almost anywhere. Joe Shanahan informs us that willow, in July, can grow by as much as two inches per day, "you can almost see it growing", he said[25]. Rods of one year's growth can be used. Willow needs little attention and few tools for working as the rods are pliant enough to be fashioned into any desired shape by the maker.

Willow plots are known as "sally gardens" and were once a feature of the Irish landscape, most people having their own (Fig. 7, p. 32). The sally was used for domestic purposes or for employment by a hired basket-maker. Sally was planted by pushing cuttings of 25-30cm into the soil, with careful weeding and tending during the first two seasons (Fig. 8, p. 32). Barbara Kelly, a basket-maker from Co. Wexford, covers her plants in plastic for the first three years growth. The plastic keeps the weeds from choking the sally plants, as during this period the weeds outgrow the sally. After three years the plastic may be removed. Willow requires annual cutting of the more tender shoots to promote fresh growth, otherwise it grows pithy and unsuitable for basket-making.

Harvesting in Ireland occurs between November and February. The sap rises in the rods if left any longer, making them less pliable to work. Once harvested, the rods can be used dried and unpeeled for coarser work or prepared in one of two ways, depending on the requirements of the finished design and colour, as variations in colour from natural brown, fawn and white allow interesting pattern work to be done. Willows may be left standing upright in a stream until Spring, keeping them moist and pliable, then removed and peeled, using an iron stripper, giving them a white appearance. The other method is to boil the rods before peeling and the natural dye tannin, contained in the bark gives them an orange colouring, known as "buff". Willow is classed in four ways; 'white' and 'buff/boiled', as explained, 'steamed', black willow achieved by steaming rods in the tannin water after the buff has been removed. 'Brown' refers to all other varieties, whatever their colour. Before the work can begin the rods must be "graded" into bundles of similar length and width, to make the basket-makers work easier (Fig. 9, p. 33).

[25] (Connolly, 1994, p.63).

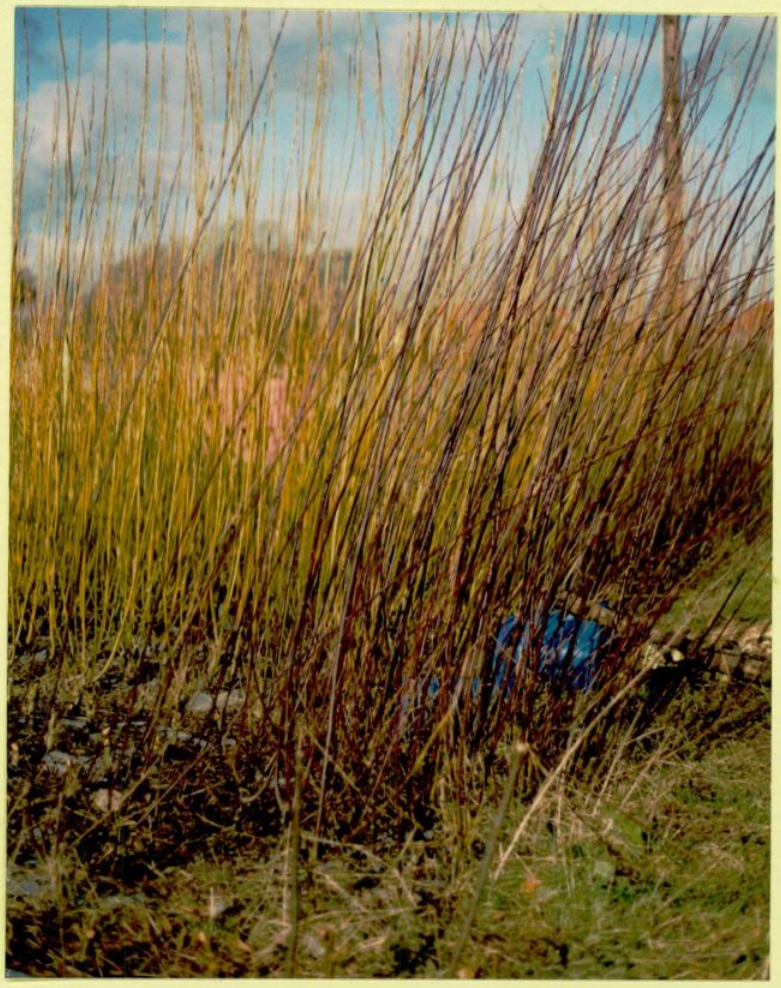


Fig. 7. Sally Garden: Showing two different coloured 'brown' willows. January 1999.

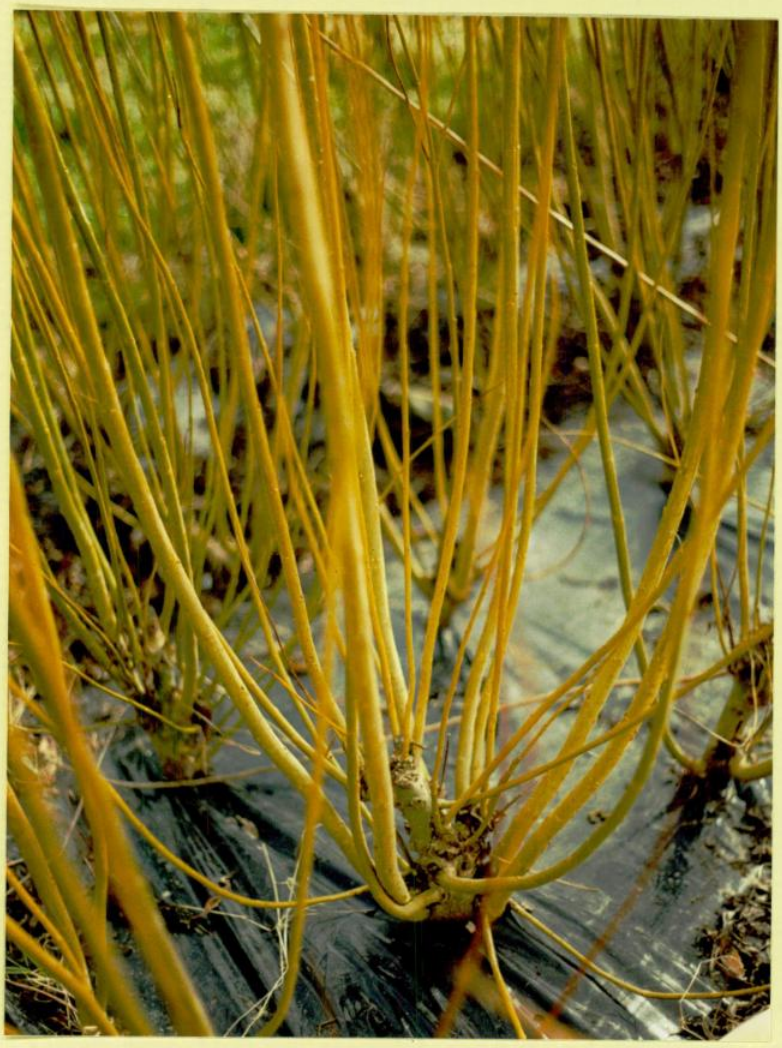


Fig. 8. Sally Garden, closeup - showing protective plastic covering.

Fig. 9. Harvesting: Cut 'brown' ready for grading.

Fig. 10. Storing: Graded 'white', 'buff' and 'brown' willow left to season in the Kelly's shed. January 1999.

Grading was originally women's work as they reputedly had the necessary patience and skill. The rods are then tied in graded bundles and stored to dry, usually upright in a corner, in the kitchen or the loft (Fig. 10, p. 33).

The basket-maker's tools are few and simple. They consist of a sharp knife for trimming before starting, and cutting-off the protruding rods once the basket is complete. A bodkin, a sharp pointed object, is used to make holes in the base to insert the upright rods which will form the "body" of the basket (Fig. 11, p. 35). The beating iron, a flat, narrowly triangular piece of iron, is used to beat the weave down during work , and to ensure the weave is at the same height all the way round the basket. The basket-maker's most important tools, however, are his hands. The eventual perfection of shape, texture and pattern depend upon the conception of form in the basket-maker's mind and his ability to impress it on a recalcitrant material[26]. Basketry requires control rather than strength and the struggle between maker and materials in intimate contact creates a tension and beauty that, arguably, surpasses that of any other craft.

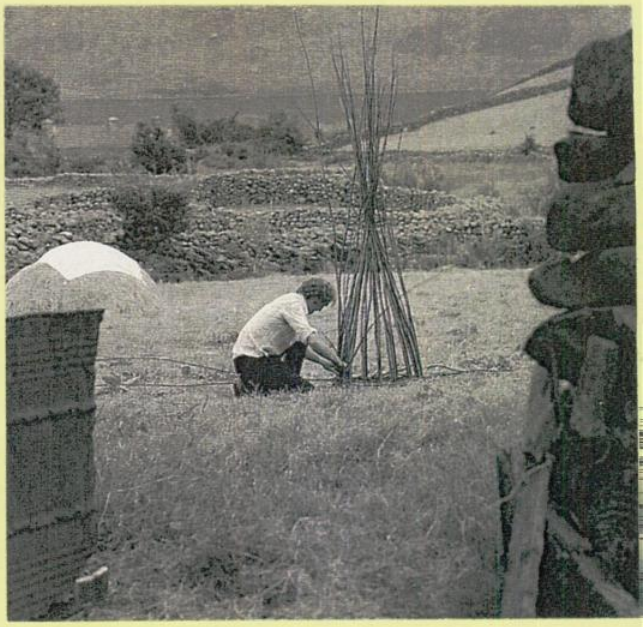
The basket-maker usually worked sitting down with a lap-board, about 3ft in length and two in width in front of him, on which he makes the basket, his tools and willow rods to one side, pre-soaked in water to make them pliable (Fig. 12, p. 35). The basket-maker normally starts with the base and works upwards in a variety of different weaves including randing, slewing, fitching and waling, each of which give a different pattern, texture and strength. The rim of the basket can be finished using a number of different techniques some of which are more decorative than others. Another, more ancient method, used for creels in Ireland, begins by pushing sally rods into the ground to a depth of six inches and at a hand's-breath apart in the shape of the basket. The basket is woven upside down, rim first and then the body, while the upright rods are twisted and interwoven to form the base. The finished basket is then pulled from the ground and the protruding rods trimmed (Fig. 13, p. 36). A good basket-maker can produce about ten baskets in a day, while beginners can make one basket on their first day weaving.

[26] (Connolly, 1994, p.48).

Fig. 11. Basket-maker's Tools: (From left to right) a bodkin, a knife and a beating iron. Underneath is the brace for holding the uprights to make a square base. January 1999.

Fig. 12. Basket-making: Barbara Kelly weaving the uprights to form the basket body. The 'gunwhale' is in 'buff' willow, nearest the base, while the remainder is 'brown', although of different colours. To Barbara's right are her pre-soaked willows and her basket-making tools, all within easy reach. January 1999.

A.



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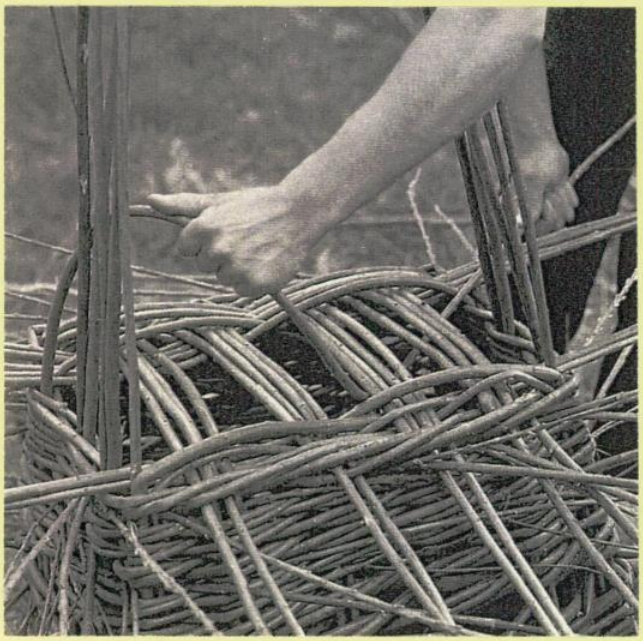

C.

D.

Fig. 13. Illustrations showing the process of creel-making:

A. Laying sally rods into the ground for creel template.

B. Weaving the base of the creel.

C. To complete the creel bottom, the upright rods are bent over and interwoven in groups of four.

D. The finished creel is pulled from the ground.

Basketry, whether carried out by professionals, itinerant basket-makers or by small farmers for their domestic requirements, has always eulogised in shape, texture and function the maker's close connection with his knowledge of materials, natural cycles and an inherent ability to fit form to function. Picasso, for example, highlighted the importance of this relationship between nature, maker and basket in his wise observance; "the tree that has its roots in its native earth bears the sweetest fruit".

CHAPTER III

USES IN THE DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENT

"The wicker round' he said, 'the skib, in which
potatoes from the pot are poured;
The creel that brings the turf up from the bog;
The kish that hold them by the fireside:
There's no one marks them with a craftsman's
name
Scanted they are as the commons of the house"

Padraig Colum[27]

In this extract, Colum eulogises the vast variety of articles produced using basketry techniques and the uses of these objects in the domestic habitat. The vast range of these basketry objects, as we have already seen, were within the scope of the ordinary householder, who fashioned these items from materials available in his local environment. Articles were also produced by specialised craftsmen, but due to the multiplicity and common use of these objects they were held in low esteem, their users being primarily concerned with function and efficiency, rather than aesthetics. Attention is focused on the period from 1900s to 1950s, this time expanse being indicative of earlier traditions in rural Ireland before the cultural and social changes examined in Chapter 1 came to the fore in the 1960s.

Basketry techniques were used domestically in architectural construction. The use of wattle and daub internally and externally, was put to a wide variety of uses by the ingenious Irish man. This technique, as seen earlier, was carried down from early Christian times where it was used in the building of entire habitations.

"Wattle and daub" was used for internal partitions, doors and window coverings. Chimney canopies were fashioned using this technique, and when dry, were painted over with whitewash to make inconspicuous. Local variations occurred where, for example, straw ropes soaked in mud were woven between wicker rungs, replacing the more common sally. Mud coating the wattle and straw made the chimney canopy inflammable, while the floor level turf fire ensured there was more smoke than flames.

To one or both sides of the chimney canopy was a wattled shelf covered with reed or straw matting, tied down with split briar. The heat from the fireplace rose through the wattle keeping all stores dry, willow was often also stored here to season. The shelf was sometimes extended into the living area to form a second storey loft, used as a sleeping area for children. By the 1900s wattle and daub was no longer used in the complete construction of human habitations, but continued in use for building huts for turf cutters and animal shelters (Fig. 14, A+B, p. 41). In the farmyard fences and hurdles of wattle were used to pen animals. Architecturally, coiled straw was used to fashion chimney pots sewn together with blackberry briar.

Domestic and agricultural chores were carried out using baskets of different construction. The potato constituted the nation's staple diet and many of the baskets produced were centred on the harvesting, gathering and serving of the ubiquitous tuber. The most well known of these utensils being the potato skib, a saucer-shaped basket used to strain them and then placed over the pot serving as a communal self-service family table[28] (Fig. 15, A+B, p. 42). Their construction was complex and more time consuming than ordinary baskets, due to the perforations required to allow straining and was usually the work of a specialist basket-maker. The skib measured about 50cms in diameter and 10cm in height, making it large and hard to handle by the inexperienced. A large boat-shaped basket was used for transporting and storing seed potatoes for planting during harvest time (Fig. 16, A+B, p. 42). Baskets had to be well constructed and durable to withstand harsh treatment by unsympathetic farm labourers and practical housewives who used baskets for varied purposes from serving potatoes, as seen above, to bringing clothes in from the line, inverting them as seats and storing turf by the fireside.

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[27] (Kinmoth, 1993, p.201).
[28] (O'Neill, 1977, p.30).

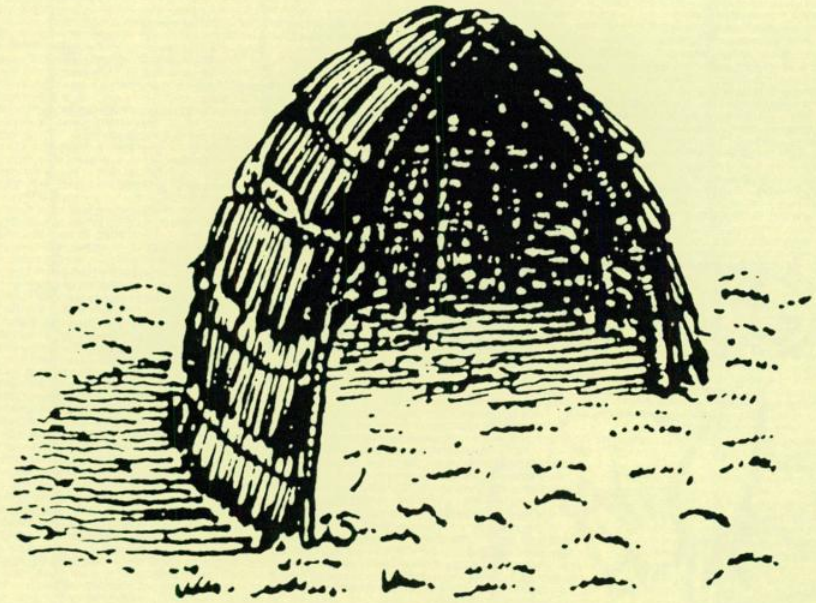


Fig. 14A. Bog shelter for turfcutters, Co. Fermanagh.

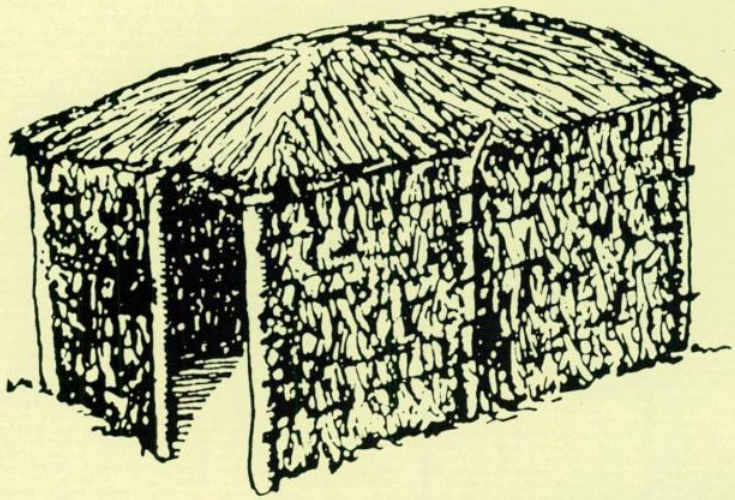
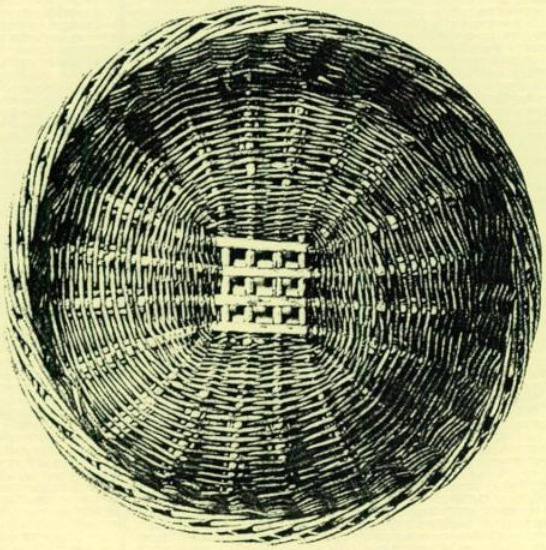
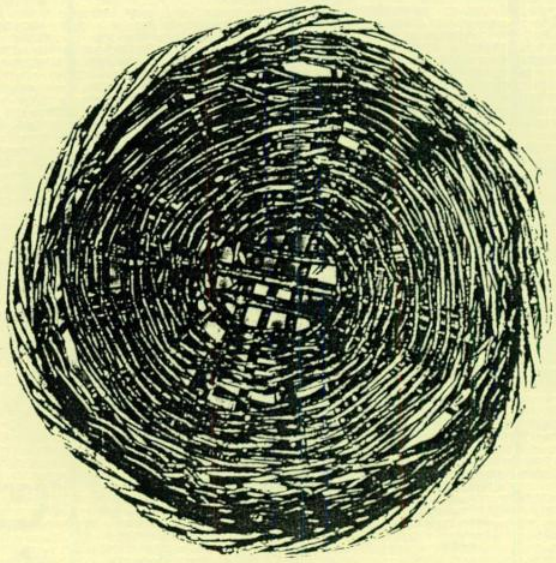


Fig. 14B. Animal shelter with wattled walls, Co. Cavan.



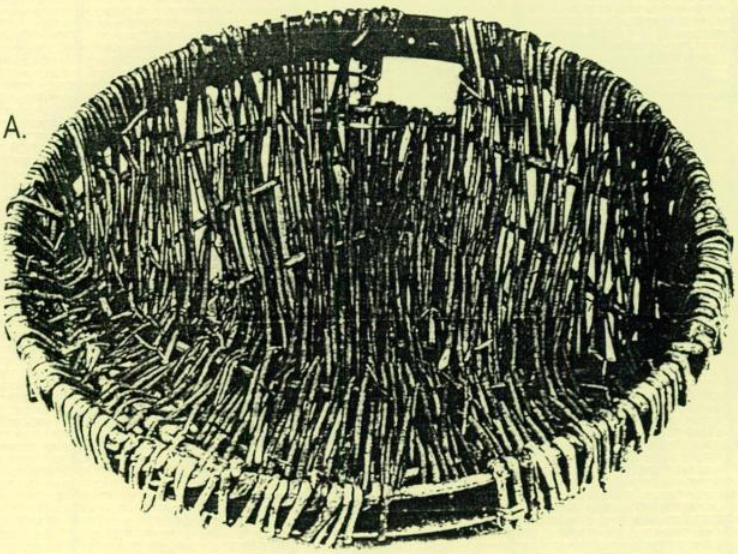
A.



B.

Fig. 15A+B (*Above Left & Right*) Potato skibs with perforated centres for straining potatoes. Photograph courtesy of NMI

A.



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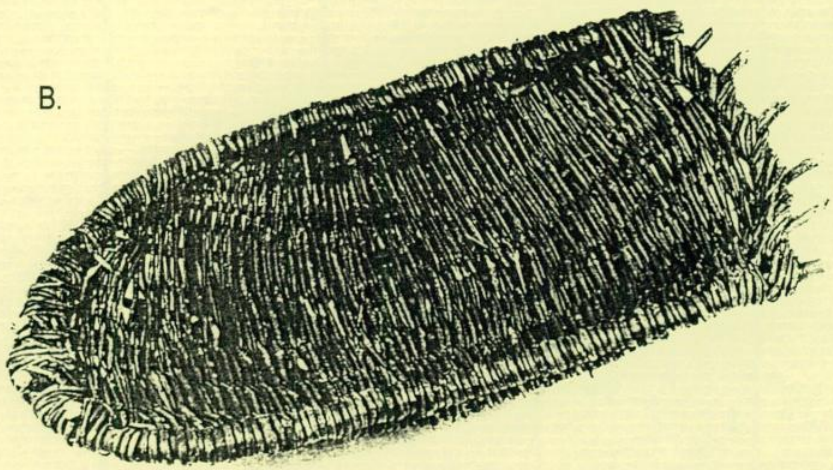

Fig. 16A+B (*Opposite*) Potato baskets, used for gathering and sowing potatoes. Photograph courtesy of NMI.

Household baskets were also made of coiled straw, known as 'lip-work'. The straw was formed into lengths of about 1cm in diameter using a cow horn to shape the straw into regular round coils. The blackberry briar, harvested in November when the sap had stopped rising, was split into sections and cleaned of pith. A seven-inch long, bone pin was used to thread the briar and sew the coils together, starting at the centre and working outwards. Coiled straw baskets were used for more delicate produce such as the holding and transporting of eggs to market, collecting berries, lined for food storage and for carrying meals to men working in the fields, as the natural insulating properties of straw kept the food warm (Fig. 17, p. 44). These baskets were called 'ciséans' on the Aran Islands[29]. Coiled beehives known as 'bee skeps', were made using this method, but this craft has become extinct due to a preference for wooden hives and machine harvesting of straw[30] (Fig. 18A+B, p. 44).

Plaited straw baskets were also popular. This method required no split bramble binding. Hen's nests employed this technique and took many forms depending on local traditions and variations. Hens were kept indoors and in these warm and comfortable nests produced more eggs and laid all-year round. This was important to the housewife, who earned an independent income from the sale of her eggs. Hen's nests were attractive pieces of workmanship and came in varied forms, from hanging nest baskets, which were suspended from a kitchen pole and served as a roost at night, (Fig. 19A, p. 45) to basket boxes conically-shaped for individual nests (Fig. 19B, p. 45) or two storied, containing four to six nesting compartments[31] (Fig. 19C, p. 45).

Temporary outdoor grain stores were also built using coiling. The straw was formed into a large rope which was then placed on the ground in a circular shape, and built up to about 3/4 feet in height. The grain was poured in level with this height and the entire construction thatched to protect it from the weather. Weighted straw ropes were used to hold down the thatch (Fig. 20, p. 48). These grain stores were also built on platforms placed above ground level to keep the grain dry and safe from vermin (Fig. 21, p. 48).

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[29] (Shaw-Smith, 1984, p.80).
[30] (Kinmoth, 1993, p.65).
[31] (Sharkey, 1985, p.136).

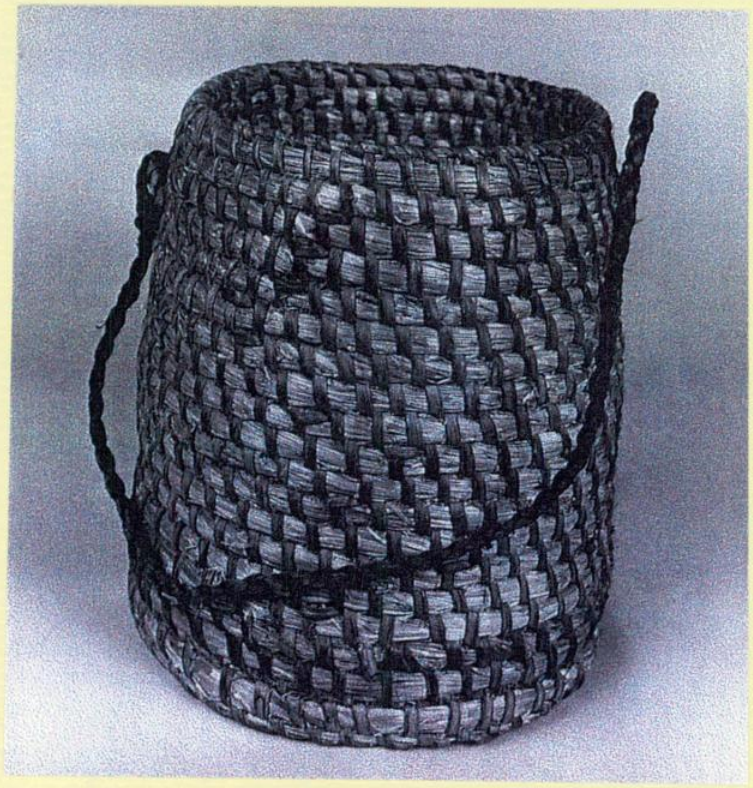

Fig. 17. 'A Ciséan', coiled straw basket used to keep food warm while carrying to field labourers, Aran Islands, Co. Galway. Photograph courtesy of NMI.

Fig. 18A+B (*Below*) Beeskep making.
A. Adding extra straw.
B. Making the hole for the briar with a pointed wooden stick.

A.

B.

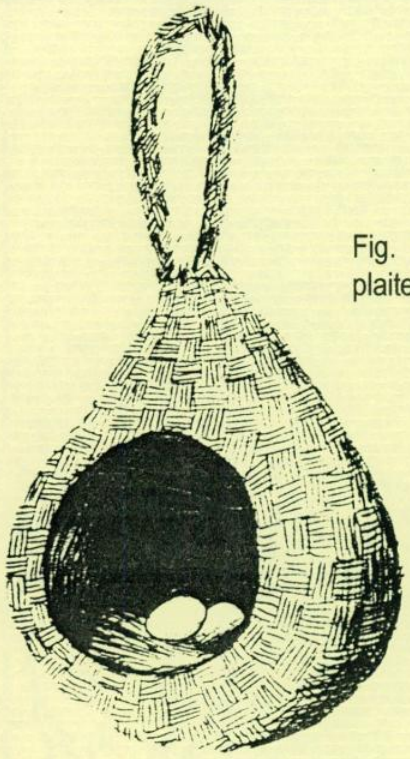

Fig. 19A. Single, hanging, plaited straw hen's nest.

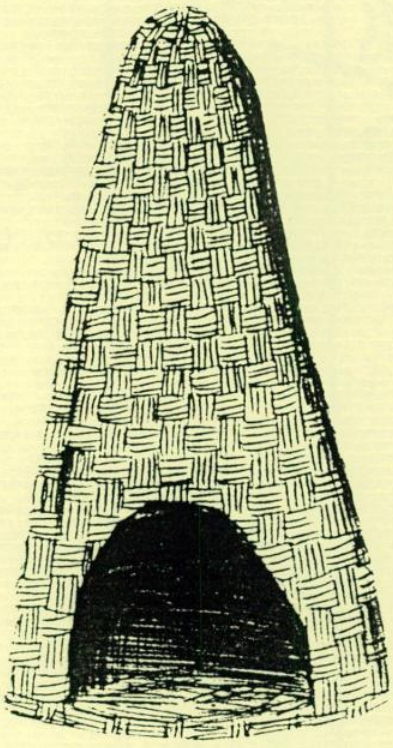

Fig. 19B. Conical-shaped, plaited straw hen's nest.

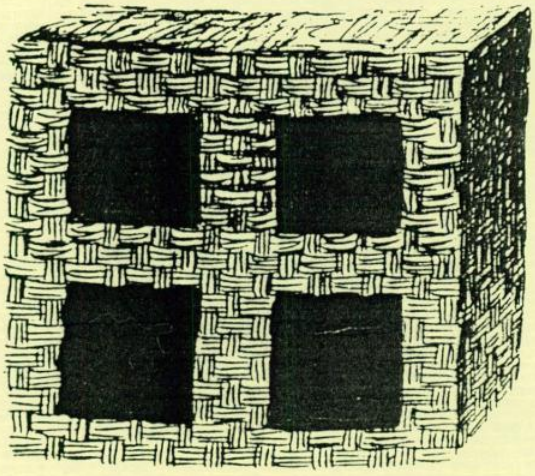

Fig. 19C. Four-tier nesting box of plaited straw.

Fishing was a common occupation in coastal areas and was often carried on by small farmers to subsidise small agricultural earnings. Fishing traps were made of wickerwork in hazel, sally, laurel or heather and included crab, lobster and eel pots and baskets to hold fishing nets. Design of pots and traps was subject to local variations. Long-line fishing for cod, skate and other large fish also used wickerwork in the construction of baskets to hold fish (Fig. 22, A+B, p. 49). Evans admires the workmanship of these baskets and comments on their antiquity, he says that these "beautifully made line-baskets of unpeeled willow have the graceful curves that one associated with the work of untouched 'primitives' "[32].

Household furniture and fittings were also constructed using basketry techniques. Plaiting and coiling, as seen earlier, of straw, oats, rushes and marram grass being most prolifically used in the production of mats for varied purposes and seating of different size, shape and form with variations occurring from one county to the next. Mats were fashioned by plaiting or coiling and came in rectangular, square, circular or oval shapes depending on the taste of the householder. Marram grass, a tough grass harvested in coastal areas, was particularly suited to floor matting due to its durability and strength.

Apart from the obvious use of mats as flooring they served many purposes, such as mattresses, either for use alone on a bare floor or on top of a settle-bed (Fig. 23, p. 50). Straw mattresses were easily folded and stored away when not in use during the day, an important element in the construction of vernacular furniture and fittings due to space restrictions in small traditional Irish homes. Straw mat pads served as low seats or as cushions on stones, built-up turf and on chairs. Curtains, door screens and indoor partitions took the form of hung mats in many homes and were often used as insulation on indoor walls. These were the poor man's alternative to the elaborate tapestries used in many castles and manor homes of the aristocracy. Plaited mats were also used as creel mats on the backs of asses. Straddles, two flat-boards used to hold the creels, were attached to the mats (Fig. 24, p. 50). Indigenous straw mats are rare today, having been replaced by cheap, imported mats from other countries.

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[32] (Evans, 1979, p.251).

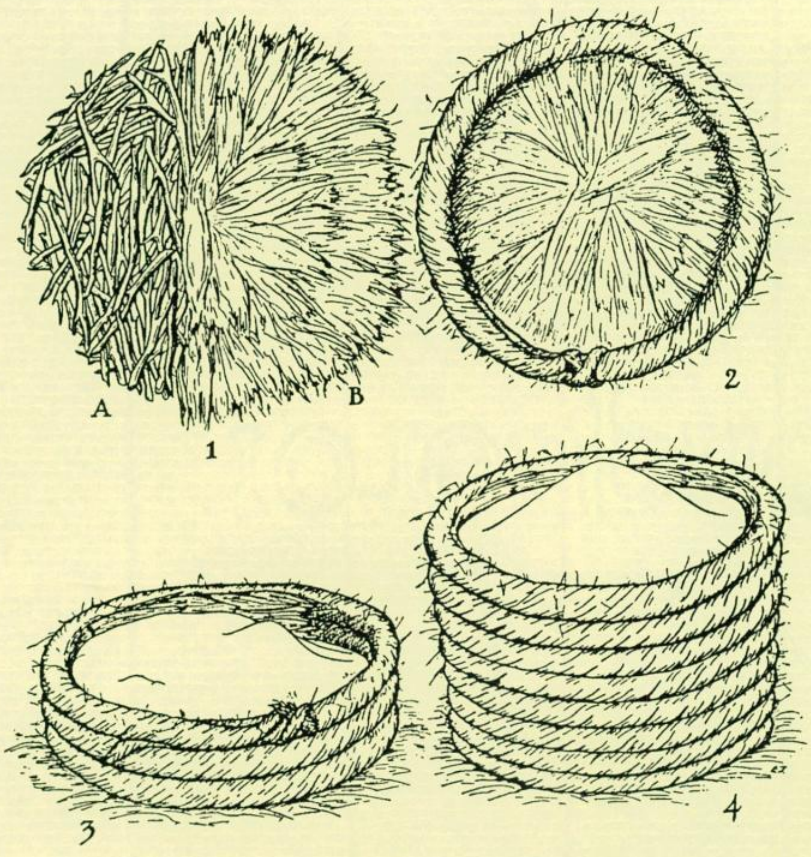


Fig. 20. Making a straw granary. Photograph courtesy of NMI.

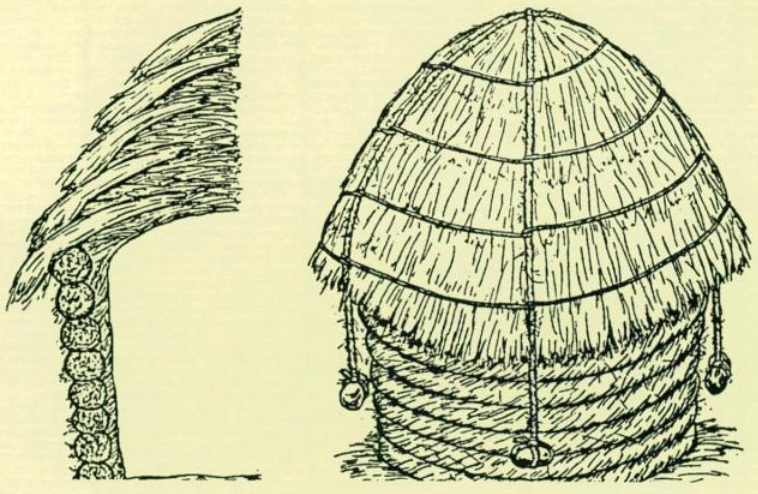
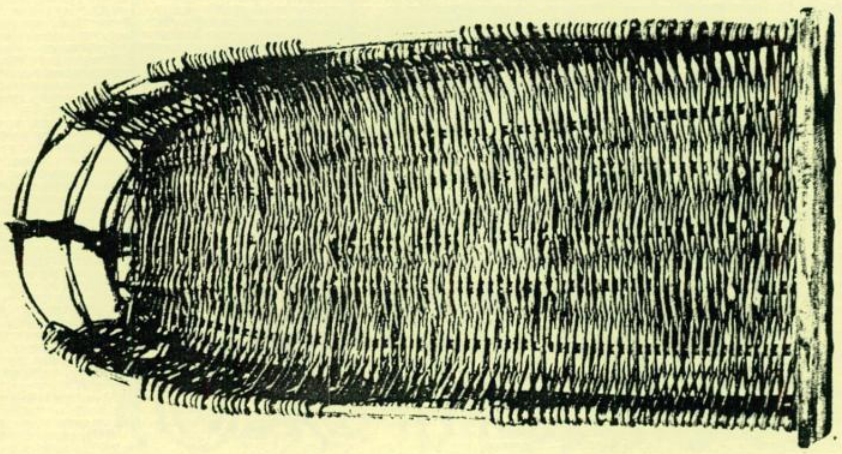
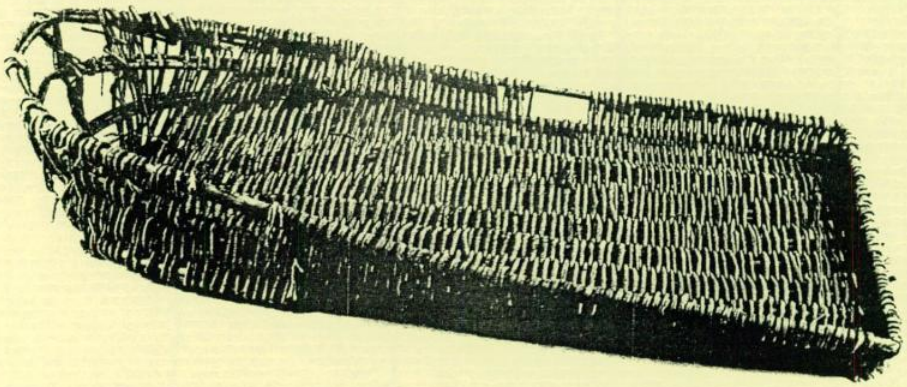


Fig. 21. Corn granary on stone stacks, Athenry, Co. Galway.



A.



B.

Fig. 22A+B. Two examples of long-line fishing baskets. Photograph courtesy of NMI.

Fig. 23. Patrick Monks making a plaited straw mattress, Nevitt, Co. Lusk c.1967. Photograph courtesy of NMI.

Fig. 24. Donkey creels, straddle and straw mats. Demonstrates how straddle and creels are worn. A belly rope/crupper, is tied around the animal's tail and under the belly to hold the straddle and mat in place.

Plaited and coiled straw armchairs and stools were once a common sight in the homes of peasant farmers. Few examples remain today due to the fragility of the materials and to their common use, people having disregarded them as cheap and unimportant. Plaited stools, known as 'bosses', employed the same technique as hen's nests and mat-making where the articles are built-up using plaits of straw. Extra straw is added to the plait at every third twist and the ends are incorporated with the ends of the previous additions, fresh handfuls of straw being regularly inserted into the plait. Bosses were packed with straw or old clothes resulting in a slightly swollen drum shape. Coiled straw bosses were constructed in the same manner as coiled baskets and bee skeps, as described earlier, and took two forms depending on locality. The first and simplest consisted of a circular seat which widened towards the base, the second was biconical in shape and narrowed, waist-like, at the centre (Fig. 25A+B, p. 52).

Straw chair-making was more skilled and intricate than boss-making as explained by Claudia Kinmoth in her analysis of their construction, as it required the insertion of truncated lengths of straw in the arms and back. Kinmoth notes three methods of manufacture, the first uses only straw, the chair seat being packed with straw to give strength and stability to the structure. The straw was held in place by a coiled base the same as the top or by a zigzagging of string across the base; the second alternative was to coil the straw around a rough timber subframe; or thirdly two paralleled pieces of timber were attached to the underside of the seat to give support (Fig. 26, p. 52). This support could be used only on the chair arms or extended to floor level, where a wooden base was used to raise the seat off the ground to avoid wear on the straw base. The first method of construction was most used as a consequence of timber shortages in the country. Seat plans took varied forms from square, to circular and D-shaped. The arms were warm and snug due to the enclosed arms and backs which acted as draught excluders[33].

[33] (Kinmoth, 1993, p.67).

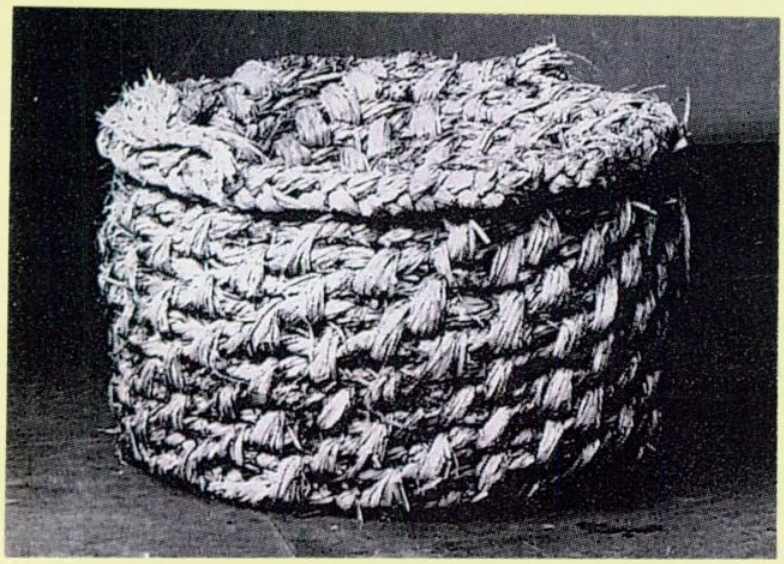


Fig. 25A+B . Straw bosses.

A. (*Left*) Plaited straw boss with straw padding, Doolin, Co. Clare, 1930.

B. (*Opposite*) Biconical, coiled straw boss, straw stuffed for support, Tuam, Co. Galway, 1932.

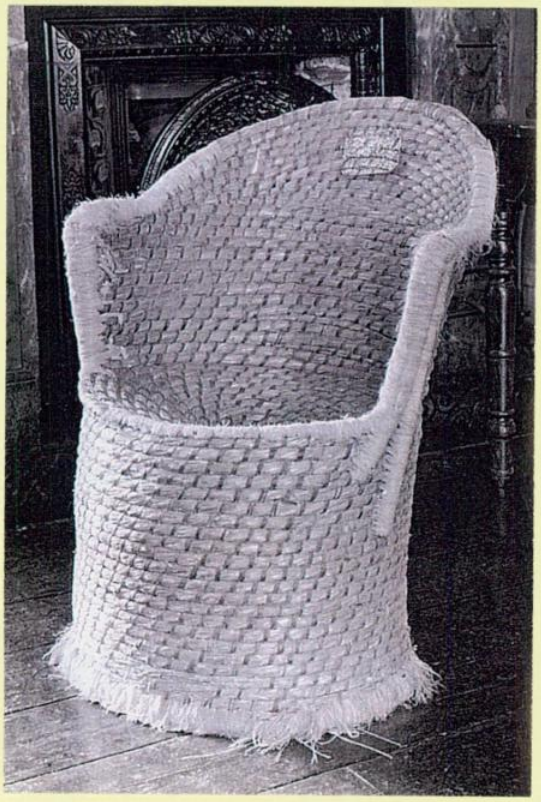


Fig. 26. Coiled, straw armchair with stripped blackberry bark, showing wooden batons.

Súgán chairs with their woven straw seats on timber frames were a truly native Irish element of home furnishing until the mid-twentieth century. 'Súgán' is the Irish for rope, and usually refers to ropes of straw or hay. Rope-making was a specialised craft in itself and had many direct uses, as we shall see later in the section on transport. It also formed the basis for many other crafts, particularly that of straw-work, as already discussed. Rope-twisting required two people, one person to feed the straw from a bundle into the rope while the second person twists the straw walking backwards away from the 'feeder' (Fig. 27, p. 54). The rope is made to about 6m long using a 'straw hook' or a 'crankled-handle' twister, a simple device of bend wire with a revolving wooden handle (Fig. 28, p. 54). The rope lengths are then wound into bundles of varying diameter, depending on the use to which the rope will be put. The rope is bound into a ball by the 'feeder' as the 'twister' walks towards him keeping the rope taut. Winding the rope into a ball-shape prevents it from untwisting.

Beech is most used to construct the frames of súgán chairs. A distinctive feature of these chairs, apart from the seating, is that the backrest is a continuation of the back legs. The seat is woven by weaving the straw across the frame, then up and down, and finally by winding it round several times from back to front, giving it a neat finish while hiding the work underneath. (Fig. 29, p. 54). This weaving pattern is distinctly Irish. The advantage of súgán chairs was that it could simply be replaced by the householder when worn out. Few examples of these chairs with their original seating remain, as sisal, binder twine and other modern cords of greater durability, woven in the traditional method, are now preferred[34].

The prolific use of wicker-work in Irish furniture and fittings extended to that of bed-making. Although no surviving examples have been discovered, due to the fragility of the materials,

Kinmoth quotes in her book; 'Irish Country Furniture', a Reverent Hall who while touring Ireland records the discovery of a "a bed of extremely neat wicker-work, sufficient to contain two grown people, shaped like a cradle; the head jutting out as if it had been one". This amazing sight can be supported by the tradition of homemade wicker cradles, examples of which still survive

[34] (Manners, 1982, p.15).

Fig. 27. Christopher O'Sullivan and his wife, Noirin, twisting oat straw rope. Christopher feeds the loose straw into the rope, while Noirin, walking backwards, twists the rope using a 'straw-hook'.

Fig. 28. Closeup of súgán twisting using a straw-hook, which consists of two pieces of wood which revolve around a bent piece of wire.

Fig. 29. Súgán seat woven using the traditional Irish method.

and is carried on in the woven cradles made today and known as 'Moses baskets' (Fig. 30 + 31, p. 56). Wicker cradles were preferred to wooden, as they were less expensive, light-weight and easy to carry[35]. Plaited and coiled cradles were also known, mainly produced by those specialising in straw work.

Ropes and rope-twisting was an important part of daily life in the home and on the farmyard. Ropes were twisted from hay, straw, bog-wood, rushes, horse hair, cow hair, heather, birch twigs and willow bark. They were used for many purposes, directly in coastal areas for tying down thatch, securing haycocks, as animal tethers and stirrups and bridles. A straw rope slung across the kitchen made a serviceable clothes line and on cold, windy days held coats securely tied at the waist. Ropes referred to as 'cruppers' were used to keep straddles in position and were tied across the donkey's belly and tail (Fig. 32, p. 57). Cruppers were bound with cloth to prevent chaffing under the animal's tail.

Transport is an essential element of farm life and before the advent of the tractor more primitive techniques were used. Burden ropes were a simple method of carrying large loads, such as hay, rye grass, furze, seaweed, rushes, wool, straw, osiers and firewood (Fig. 33, p. 57). These ropes of 2/3 ply, were used to transport loads from inaccessible places where there was no other available method. O'Neill describes the method of using a burden rope, which consisted of looping one end of the rope, laying the load on, threading the opposite end through the loop, pulling it tight around the load and lifting it over the shoulder.

Ropes also served as a basis for other crafts, as we have seen in the manufacture of mats, baskets, furniture and architecture. Similar techniques were used to make objects for transportation. The 'fáinín' was constructed of twisted hay rope, coiled and formed into a flat circular pad of thirteen and a half inches internal diameter, five and half inches externally and three and a half inches in height (Fig. 34, p 58). The pad was worn on the crown of the person's head and was used to carry milk pails, butter tubs and laundry baskets[36] (Fig. 35, p. 58).

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[35] (Kinmoth, 1993, p.165).

Fig. 30. Hooded wickerwork cradle with decorated sides. The uprights for the cradle have been fixed onto a wooden base with rockers. Inisheer, Co. Galway, 1957.

Fig. 31. Woven moses basket on pine rockers. Castlefin, Co. Donegal.

[36] (O'Neill, 1977, p.69-70).

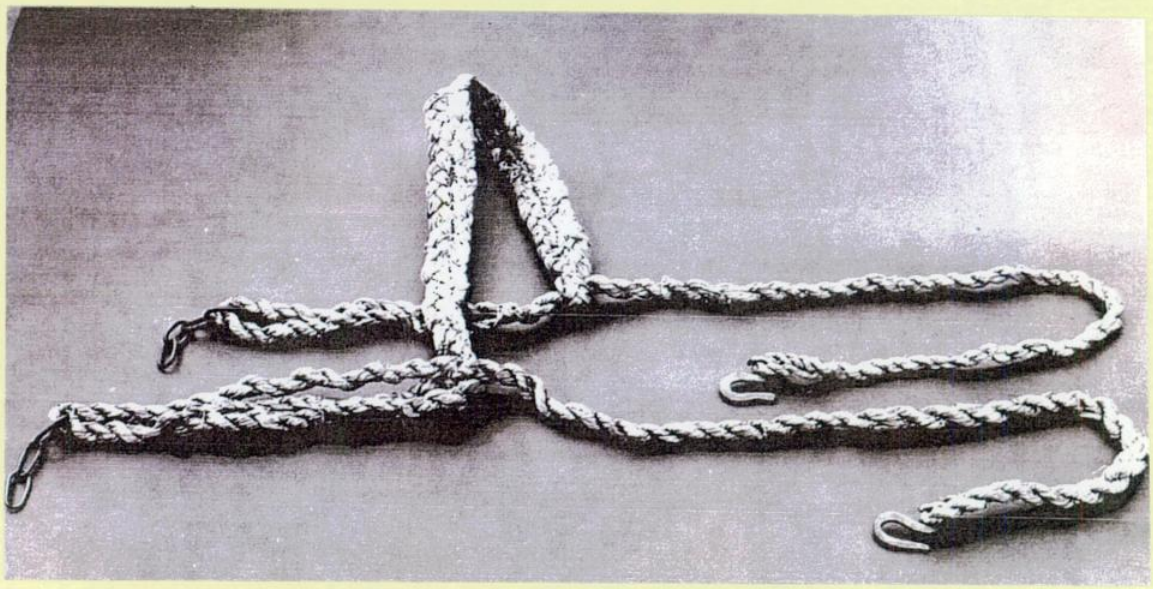

Fig. 32 (*Above*) Plaited straw 'Cruppers'. Photograph courtesy of NMI.

Fig. 33 (*Below*) Burden ropes. Children carrying straw loads with chest held burden ropes.

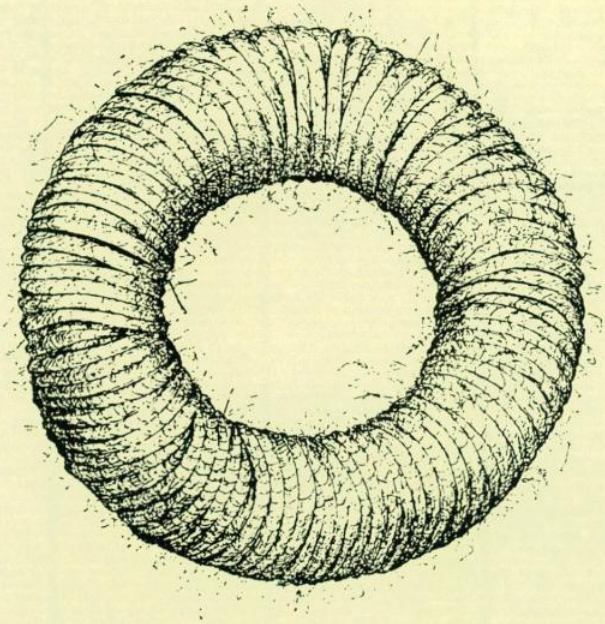

Fig. 34 (*Opposite*) A fáinín, hay rope pad worn on the head by women carrying goods, Kiltoom, Co. Roscommon.

Fig. 35 (*Below*) Women carrying baskets of goods using a fáinín.

Straw horse collars were widely known until the beginning of this century. They consisted of several oval rings of straw plait stitched together using fine straw (Fig. 36A+B, p. 60). The collar had no opening and was placed directly over the horse's head, which had been draped in cloth to prevent irritation. Alternative collars of stuffed straw were also made, both collars wore out easily and farmers had to be proficient at making them, which is why knowledge of the method has not been lost from living memory[37].

The human beast of burden was a necessary medium of transport on poor farms where there were no alternatives. Apart from burden ropes, already discussed, large back baskets were widely used. Back baskets were made in a variety of different sizes and shapes, style and method of carrying varied from one district to another and on the function of the basket. For large objects like turf or hay, baskets incorporated large open sections of wicker-work for lightness, but for smaller products such as potatoes the weave was closer to prevent loss during transport (Fig. 37, p. 61). On the Aran Islands, a sheepskin was first placed on the person's back when carrying wet loads of seaweed. Shaw-Smith describes different ways in which back baskets were worn. Some were provided with two straw rope shoulder straps and were carried like a modern haversack. When made with only one rope, the basket was carried over one shoulder with the weight resting on the small of the back (Fig. 38, p. 61). A third, and more dangerous method if the rope slipped to the neck, resulting in strangulation, was to rest the carrying rope on the chest. For smaller loads hand baskets with straw handles were used[38].

Donkeys provided a popular means of transport, especially in rough, mountainous areas where tracks were bad. It was a slow method, but for those who could afford it, was preferable to carrying the load oneself. Special baskets called 'creels' were designed for use with the pack straddle and straw mats earlier described, to transport loads on the donkey (Fig. 24, p. 50). Donkey creels, generally of sally, were D-shaped, square or rectangular. The method of construction is of ancient lineage and has been described in an earlier chapter (Fig. 13, p. 36).

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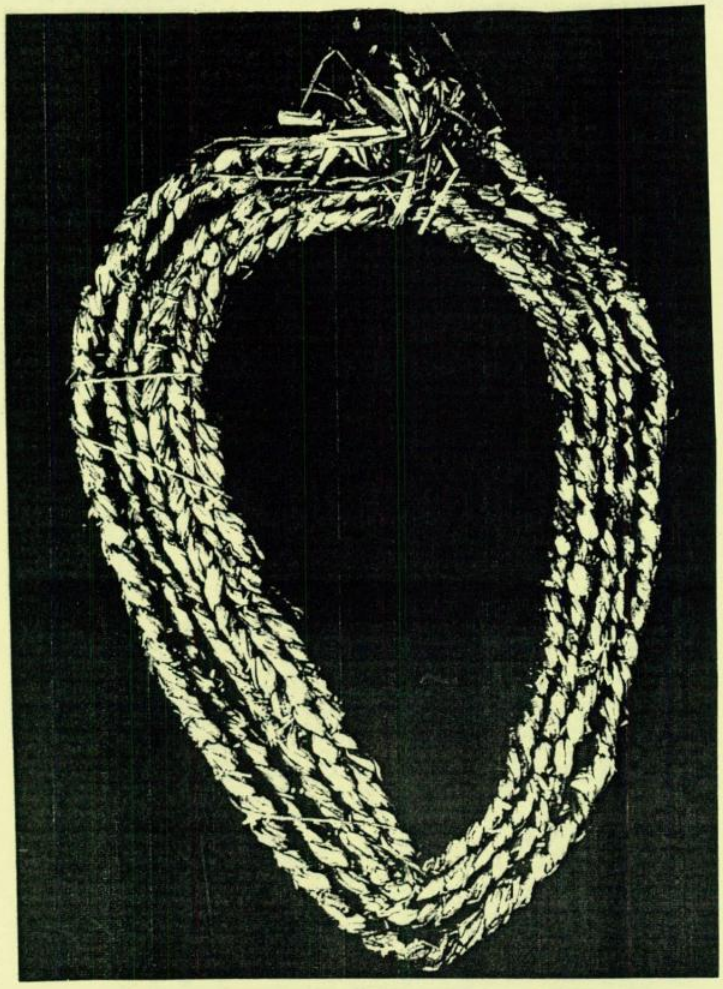
[37] (Sharkey, 1985, p.137).
[38] (Shaw-Smith, 1984, p.126).



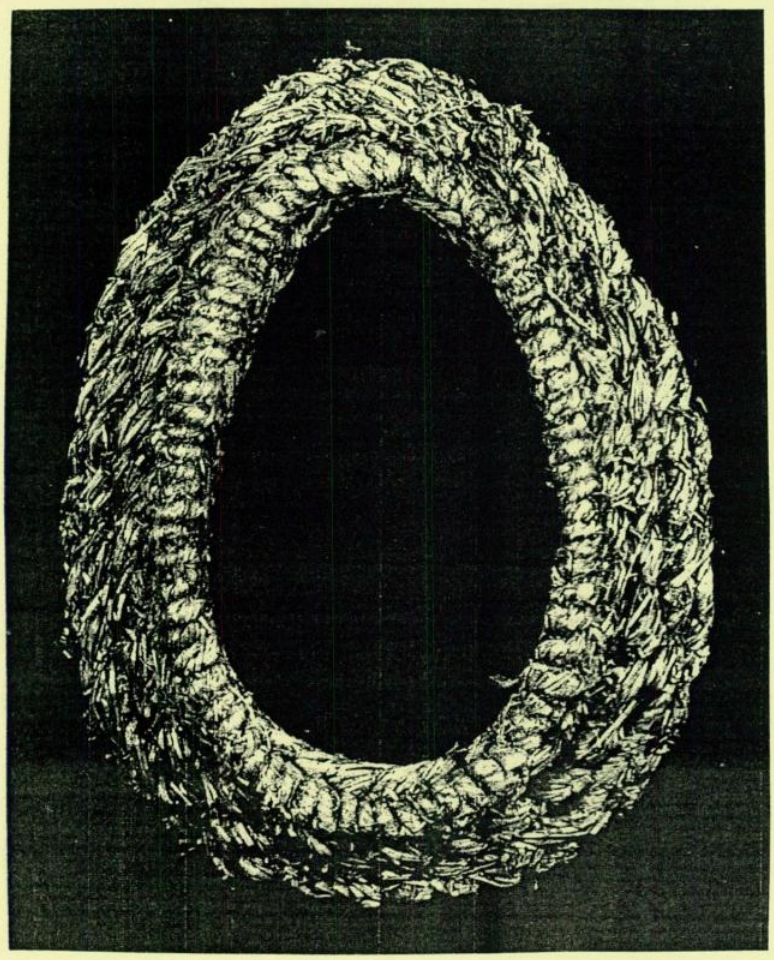


Fig. 36A+B. Straw rope horse collars, made by sewing layers of plaited straw rope together. Photographs courtesy of NMI.

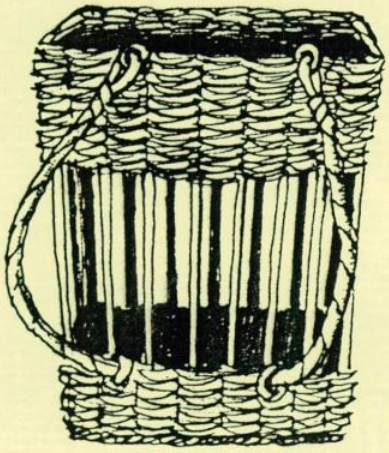


Fig. 37. Double strapped back basket with spaced weave.

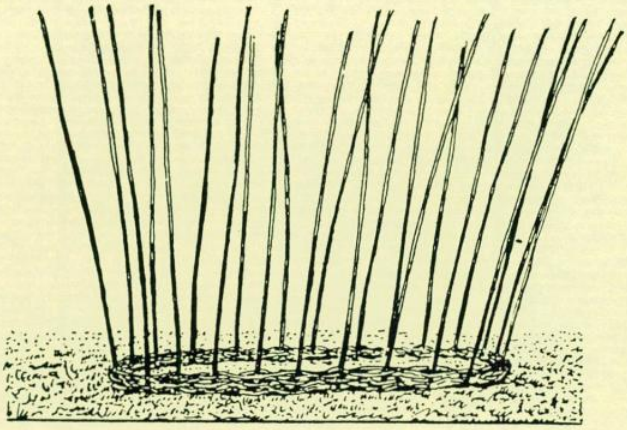
Fig. 38. Man carrying a turf basket over one shoulder.

Animal baskets were similar to those carried on human backs. Very large baskets referred to as 'kishes' were used for transporting turf, firstly on a slide car and later on four-laced cars.

Traditional Irish curraghs employed basketry techniques in its construction, the curragh itself was like a large hide-covered basket. Curragh building employs similar methods to those used for creels. Evans gives a detailed account of how these boats were made, based on James Homell's study of "British Coracles and Irish Curraghs", and his own personal observation. The boat builder starts by marking two semi-circles of two foot radius into the ground using string and pegs, their centre points being about twenty inches apart. These measurements, six ft. by four ft., determine the mouth of the basket, a measurement based on the average size of a cow hide. The two circles are formed into an ellipse, along which are fixed at a slight slope, into the earth to a depth of six inches, seasoned hazel rods at gaps of nine inches. An extra rod is added at the bow end for strength where the weight of the kneeling paddleman will land. A strong weave of sallies, a 'gunwale' is woven at ground level. Opposite rods on either side are bent over with their thin ends pushed into the ground for temporary security (Fig. 39, p. 63). The fore and aft rods are bent in the same manner while heavy stones are evenly distributed on the basket to keep the bottom flat. The frame is then left to set for two to three days. The stones are then removed and the laths tied at their intersections with a continuous twine and the frame re-weighted. At the last intersection the thin rod ends are broken off in a manner that will not cause any damage to the hide.

The basket is removed from the ground and inverted, while the hide that has been softened in the river, is sewn to the gunwale, using twine. The paddler's seat is positioned at the centre of the basket and secured using sallies to the gunwale, while looped sallies form a chain-rest for the fishing net. The projecting rod ends are hammered down by the seated boat builder, thus tightening the skin. The rods are trimmed to within an inch of the gunwale onto which is woven a protecting mouth of hazel rods which is then tied and covered with canvas to keep the net from damage when in use[39].

[39] (Evans, 1979, p.235).



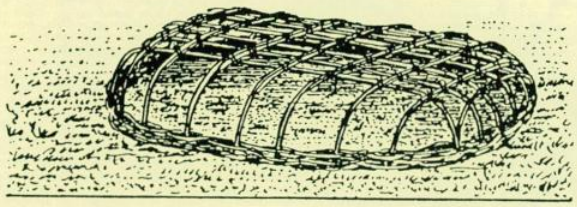


Fig. 39 (*Left*). Stages of curragh construction.

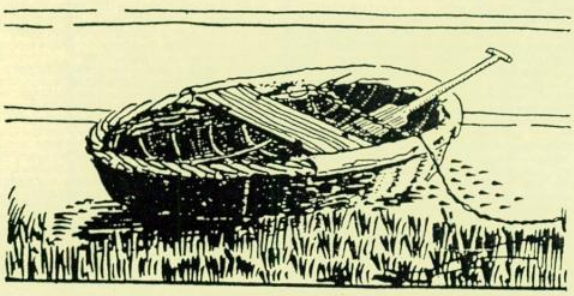


Fig. 40 (*Below*). Curragh in use.

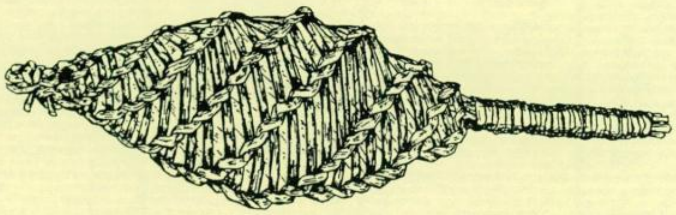
The result is a light-weight boat which floats on top of the choppy Atlantic waters and inland rivers, making it swift and nimble (Fig. 40, p. 63). These light boats have, for years, been the only link between the Aran Islands and the Mainland, cattle, horses, food and other essentials being transported to and from in these slight-looking baskets. The boats were a very simple craft, as we have seen in their construction, but they were made with great expertise and care by skilled craftsmen, whose families had carried on the craft for centuries.

Basketry techniques were employed for more than utilitarian purposes in Irish homes. Children with their love for imitating adult occupations, learned to produce their toys from locally available materials using these methods. The fact that these necessary skills were passed on to children in a playful, fun way meant that knowledge of the craft endured. Adults used their basketry expertise to fashion Christmas presents and toys. Baby rattles were made from osiers or rushes, with two hazelnuts inside and used the same technique as corn knots (Fig. 41A+B, p. 65).

Children entertained themselves by making small rush baskets for wild strawberries, nuts and for catching tiny fish called 'minnoes'. Baskets were also made from other materials including birch twigs, dock stems, ragwort and thistles. Green rush cages were made for butterflies by bending long rushes, held upright between the fingers, over others placed transversely (Fig. 42, p. 65). One side may be left open and a dock leaf used as a door. The rush ends were bound together to form handles[40].

Bird traps were also made from wicker-work by lashing interlocking perpendicular twigs together with a continuous twine and holding it with a forked stick attached to a loop protruding from the traps so that when the bird entered, the trap was sprung and snared the bird (Fig. 43, p. 65). Bird cages were fashioned like a conical shaped round basket using a loose, spaced weave (Fig. 44, p. 65). A hinged door was made from parallel twigs inserted into two perpendicular rungs and tied to the cage using string. The uprights were bound together at the

[40] (Evans, 1979, p.209).



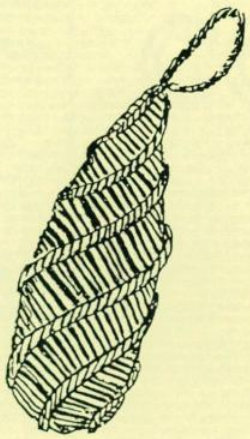


Fig. 41A+B. Children's rattles.

A. (*Above*) Osier rattle, Ballinakillan, Co. Galway.

B. (*Left*) Rush rattle, Co. Mayo.

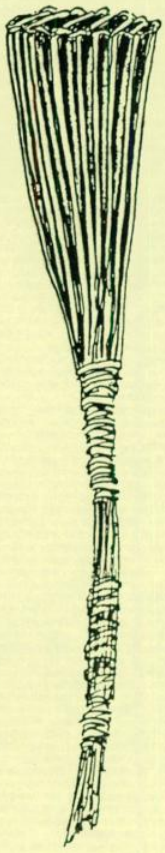


Fig. 42 (*Right*) Rush butterfly cage, Co. Down.

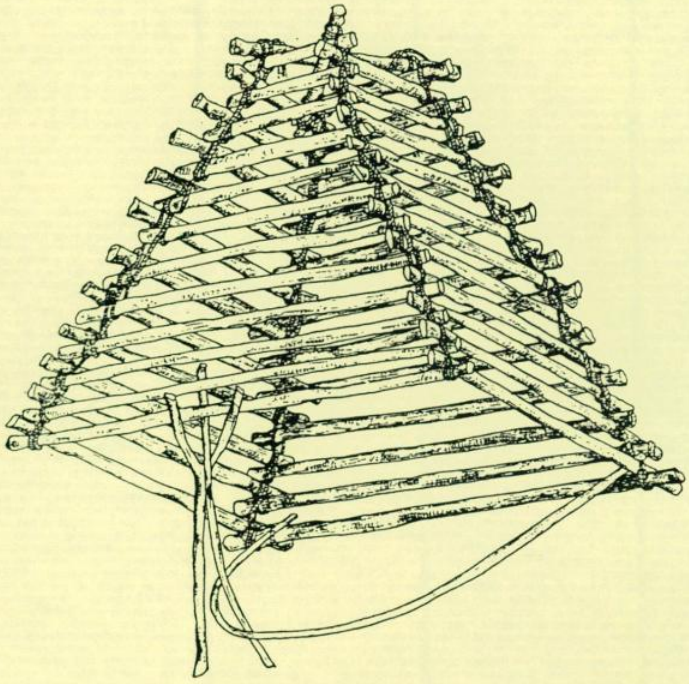


Fig. 43. Bird trap, Kileagh, Co. Westmeath.

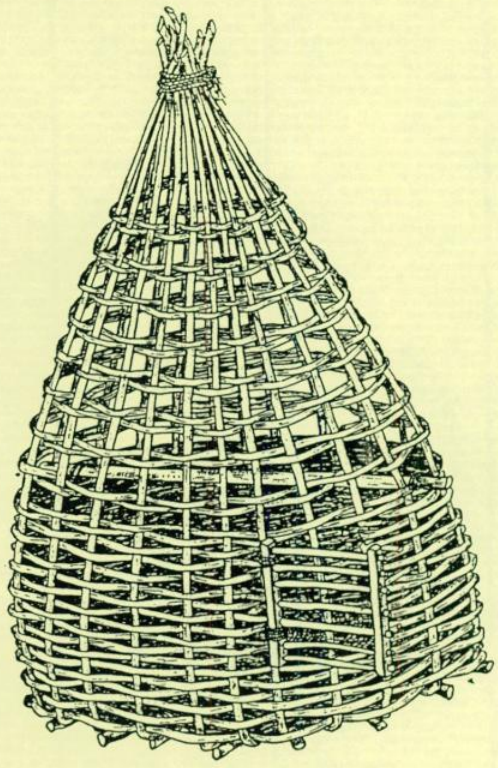


Fig. 44. Bird cage, Clonascra, Co. Offaly.

top using string. Kinmoth records how a Mrs. Hartley, on her travels in the 1930's, noted a caged bullfinch hung in the porch of a Wexford farmhouse, kept for its song and colour[41]

Apart from these delicate and amusing items certain times of the year and events required the production of 'ceremonial toys' and dress. Harvest was always a time of celebration on small farms and harvest knots were made. These corn knots were of various design and shapes, some being more intricate than others, depending on the skill and taste of the maker. Complicated knots may use four or six strand work, but the simpler, ordinary knot using two ply, made by bending the straw over each other at right angles. These knots were formally love tokens but later became used for decorative purposes.

Saints days were celebrated and honoured by the making of emblems, St. Brigid's Day being the most well known. On St. Brigid's Eve, the last day of January, rushes were made into protective charms called St. Brigid's Crosses (Fig. 45, p. 67). These crosses were believed to protect house and livestock from danger and fire. The crosses were hung over house and barn to keep evil spirits away. Crosses took various designs but all were woven from left to right, following the sun's orbit. These crosses and other items such as Brigid's Girdles, two strand straw ropes with crosses attached were worn as protective belts, while bridéogs; straw dolls representing the Saint, were used in ceremonies. Young girls carried these items in procession around their local neighbourhoods.

Dress was another important part of these ceremonies and festivals. Hats made of plaited and woven straw and rushes were worn at Halloween, Christmas, weddings and other feasts. Hats varied in style and some were worn over the face as masks (Fig. 46A+B, p. 68). Straw masks were made by children at Halloween and were called 'vizards'. 'Strawboys' disguised themselves in entire suits of straw and appeared at feasts and weddings claiming the right to dance with the bride and entertaining the crowd (Fig. 47, p. 68).

[41] (Kinmoth, 1993, p.202).

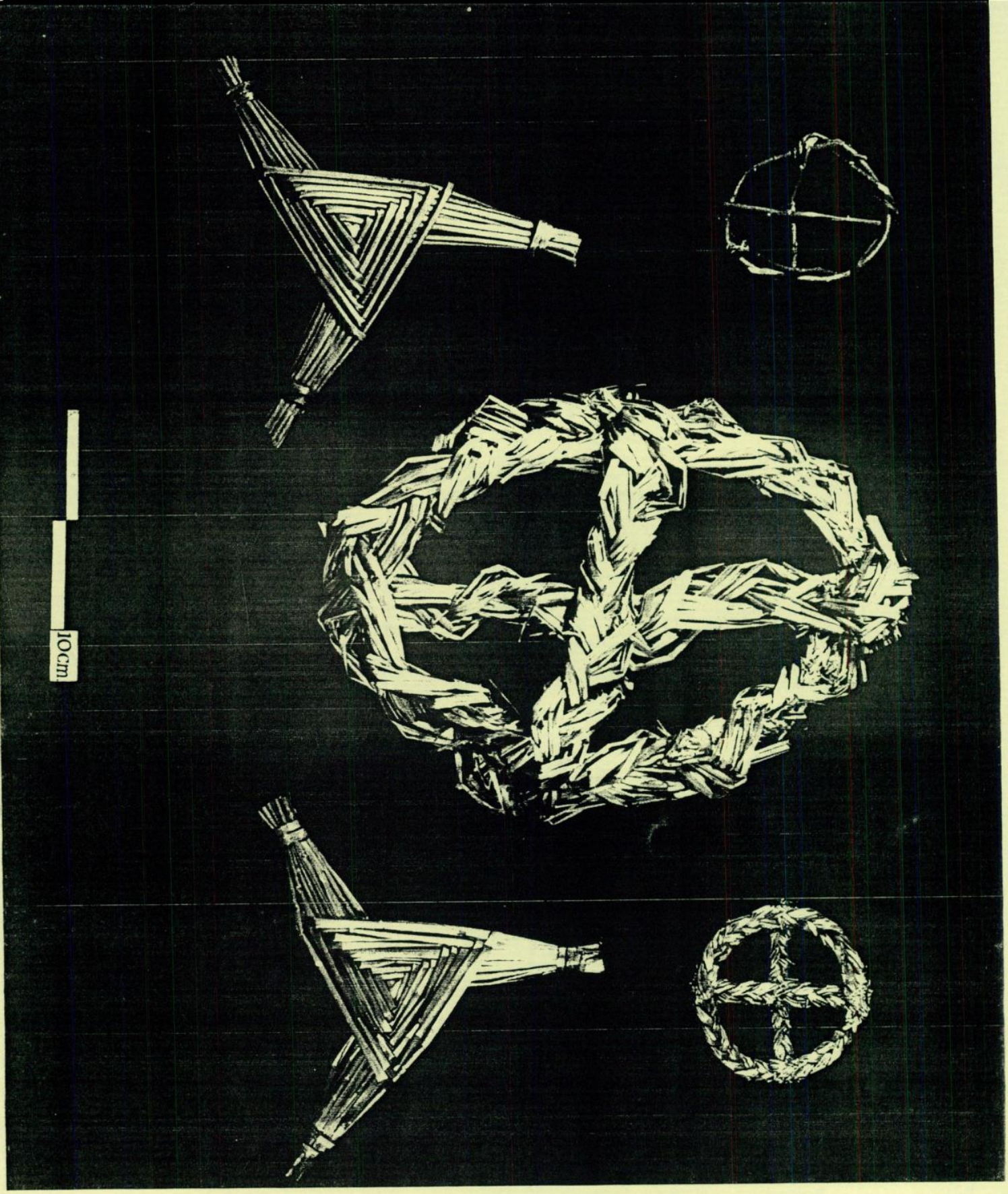


Fig. 45. A selection of St. Brigid's Crosses. Photograph courtesy of the NMI.

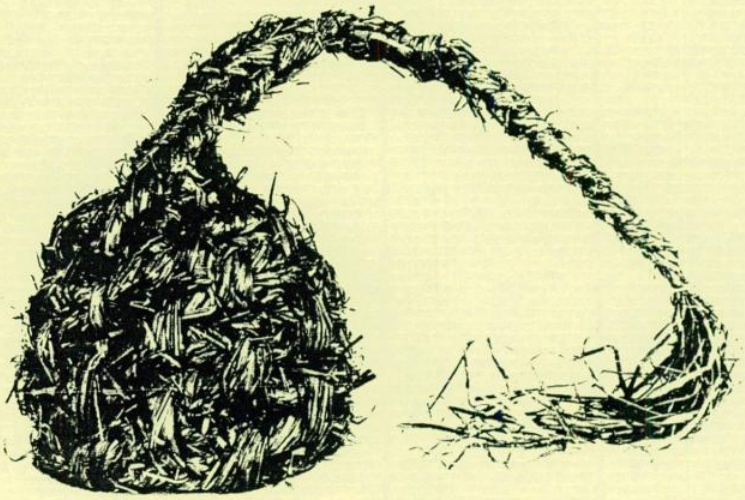


Fig. 46A+B.
A. (*Left*) Straw Mask
B. (*Above*) Straw Hat.
Photograph courtesy of NMI.

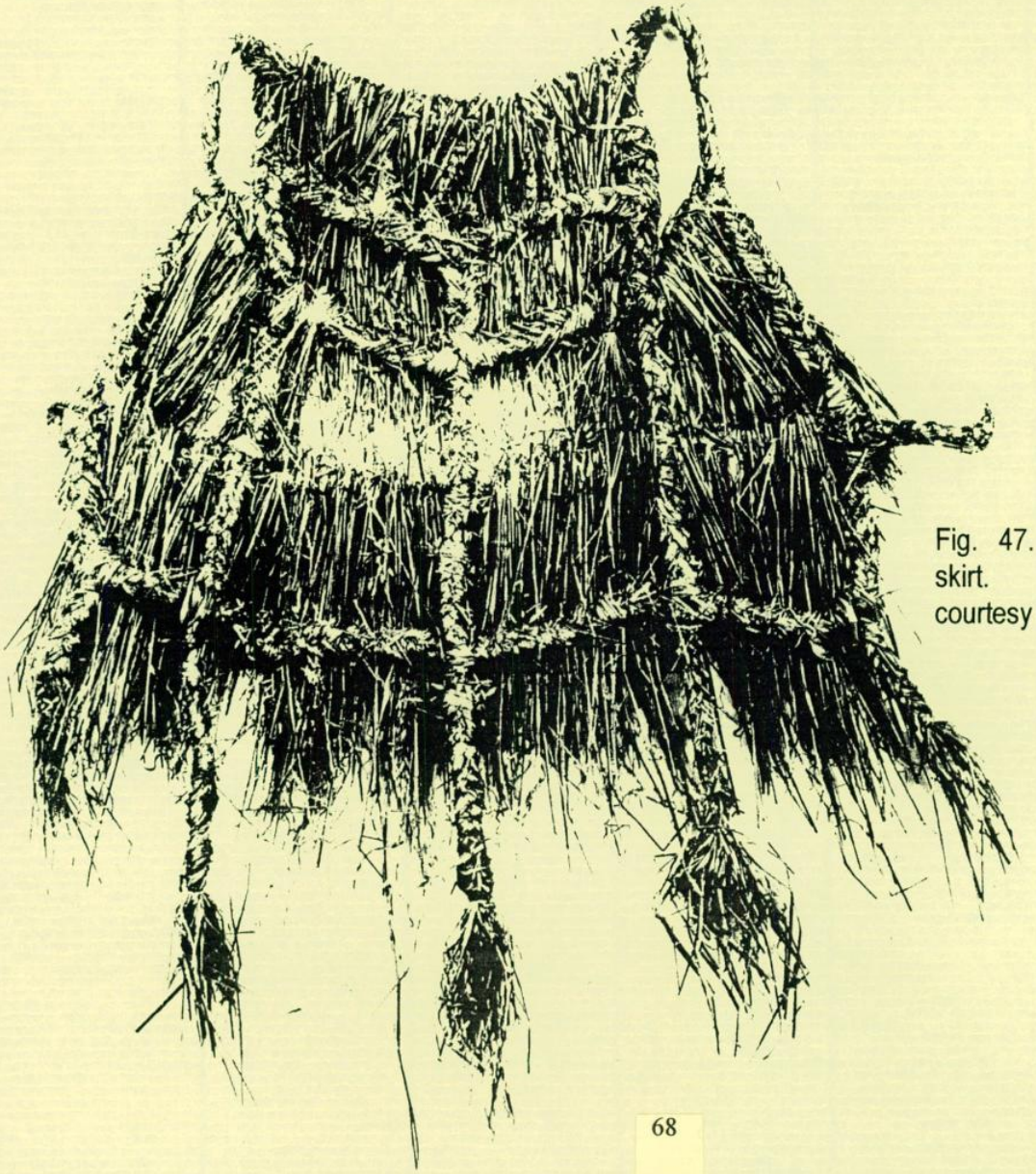


Fig. 47. Strawboy's skirt. Photograph courtesy of NMI.

The ingenuity and creativity of the Irish people is easily seen in the extensive fields of use to which basketry methods were put and the numerous materials employed. A vast understanding of these techniques and of the properties of the materials used was necessary in order for such widespread use. The Irish peasant has acquired this knowledge as a result of living a self-sufficient lifestyle and the inheritance of expertise gained from years of employment passed down for generations. O'Neill paraphrases the wide uses to which these simple materials and techniques were adapted: "From bed to chimney hood, from egg basket to toy rattle, the ubiquitous osier found many uses in the traditional Irish home"[42].

[42] (O'Neill, 1977, p.33).

CHAPTER IV

CONTEMPORARY BASKETRY

Change is an unrelenting cog in the wheel of history and life. It is an inevitable occurance, continually taking place as man moves up the ecological ladder, always seeking and striving to improve his state.

Historical and National change are reflected in the daily lives of communities and individuals throughout the world. Change may be slow to reach many areas, but it will eventually take hold as people are enchanted by the dream of something better. Evaluation of present conditions may result in rearrangement of traditional values and habits, the old is made to fit the new or discarded in its favour.

The craft of basket-making has paid witness and been subject to these alterations in the human condition throughout its long history. Basketry has evolved from a home-based craft using locally available material where productivity and function were perogatives to a creative medium for the art of individual expression.

Today, basketry is not concerned with function as in the past, but is concerned with altering the public's perception of the medium as a method used simply in the production of containers. Focus is placed on engaging new audiences and new practitioners through adapting traditional techniques, incorporating new materials and branching into new outlets, including furniture, public and private sculpture, jewellery and creative objects of desire[43].

Modern basket-makers may be divided into two groups: fulltime professional basket-makers and those employing it as a creative hobby. Those acting as fulltime professionals sell direct to their customers or through retail craft outlets. Kelly Kraft, operated by the two sisters, Irene and Barbara, from their home in Co. Wexford, is one such business. The sisters produce a wide range of willow baskets for modern domestic use, baskets can be made to order (Fig. 48, p. 72). The Kellys grow their own willow and also import from England, often incorporating local materials from the surrounding countryside. The sisters give day classes from their home and weekend courses in Kilkenny once a year.

[43] (Morris, 1998).

Fig. 48. Kelly Kraft: A selection of baskets using different types of willow, made using traditional methods.

Fig. 49. Willow Sculptures: by Barbara Kelly. Barbara uses a random weaving technique to produce bird sculptures.

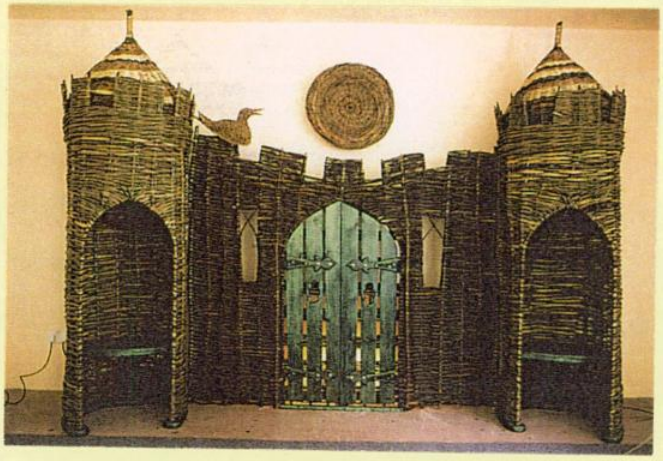
Recently, they have branched into new areas, combining their basketry skills with that of a wooden furniture maker to produce unique, sophisticated, modern furniture and also willow sculptures of wild and domesticated birds (Fig. 49, p. 72).

Many of today's basket-makers are not content to simply follow in the footsteps of their predecessors but wish to give their work identity through individual artistic expression. Traditional techniques and materials form the basis for their work but they are concerned with pushing the boundaries of the medium, rediscovering and reinventing the possibilities. They allow the materials to define, communicate and guide them to unventured ground.

One avenue that allows the basket-maker free scope is sculpture. Woven sculpture for public and private interiors has opened new avenues of function. 'Greenmantle', the Tipperary based partnership of Lynn Kirkham and Paul Finch, produce woven sculptures of dogs, sea-horses and ravens in which they "capture the spirit of the animal rather than being anatomically correct". These one-off pieces of sculpture are described by the duo as "baskets with heads and legs"[44] (Fig. 50, p. 74).

Kirkham has recently joined forces with an Irish bronze sculptor and is in the first stages of experimenting with casting her willow-work. The casting process was highly successful in capturing the characteristics of basket-making, even to the spaces inherent in the basketry medium. The bronze casts are replicas of her willow structures, only differing in weight. This creates new marketing possibilities for Kirkham, who can now market her work as permanent art pieces and can compete with sculptors for private and public art commissions, as temporary art has, as yet, not become popular in Ireland.

[44] (House and Home, 1998).



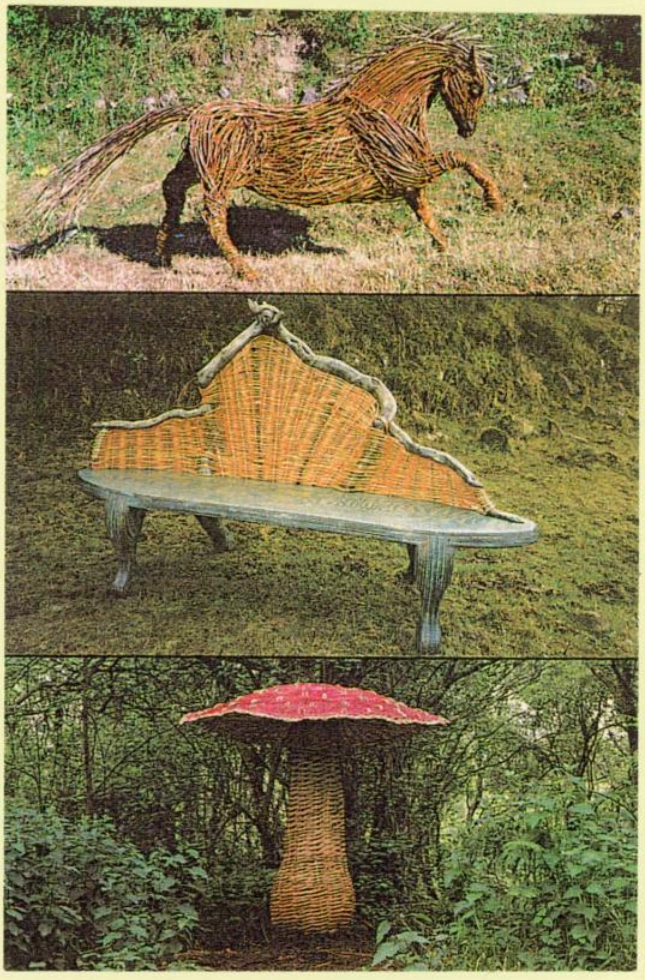


Fig. 50. Woven sculpture by 'Greenmantle' designs 1998/9

Not only have basket-makers moved into sculpture but trained sculptors have been quick to recognise the potential of the medium in which "volume, linear organisation, motion and rest are all expressed with great freedom"[45]. Land Art has become a popular phenomenon in the second half of this century and the basketry medium is perfectly suited to this art form. Concern is focused on the need to protect and preserve nature and the awakening of the public's conscience. Sculptures are built on-site, using natural materials to reflect the transcience inherent in nature's cycles.

Tallaght Arts Centre, in 1997, invited an American sculptor, Patrick Dougherty, to create a piece of outdoor, public sculpture on their grounds. Dougherty, working in willow, uses a technqiue called 'snagging', not a formal basketry technique, but one employed by animals in the erection of their habitats. This technique works with the natural characteristics of the materials, which, when bent "can be threaded into and through a matrix, then released, so that it will spring and hold tightly in the correct position"[46]. Dougherty designs and builds on-site, drawing inspiration from the surroundings. His Tallaght sculpture was a forty foot high woven tower complete with door, windows and turret, constructed around an on-site tree (Fig. 51, p. 76). With a diameter of eight feet and a circumference of twenty-six feet, the tower created a real stir of excitement and astonishment for passers-by and all inhabitants of the Tallaght Community.

Non-organic materials like wire and plastic have become popular mediums for use in woven sculpture and other three-dimensional objects such as jewellery (Fig. 52, p. 77). Wire comes in numerous colours and sizes which, if desired, can be after-treated using electroplating, oxidation and melting which can create exciting textures and colours. Wire frames can be soldered together creating a strong base structure around which other materials can be interlaced. Soldering secures large woven wire structures by soldering each interconnecting wire. Gold and silver wire can be used to fashion beautiful jewellery using basketry techniques to create unique and highly unusual styles (Fig. 53, 54, p. 77).

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[45] (Ilse Newman, 1997).
[46] (Dougherty, 1997).

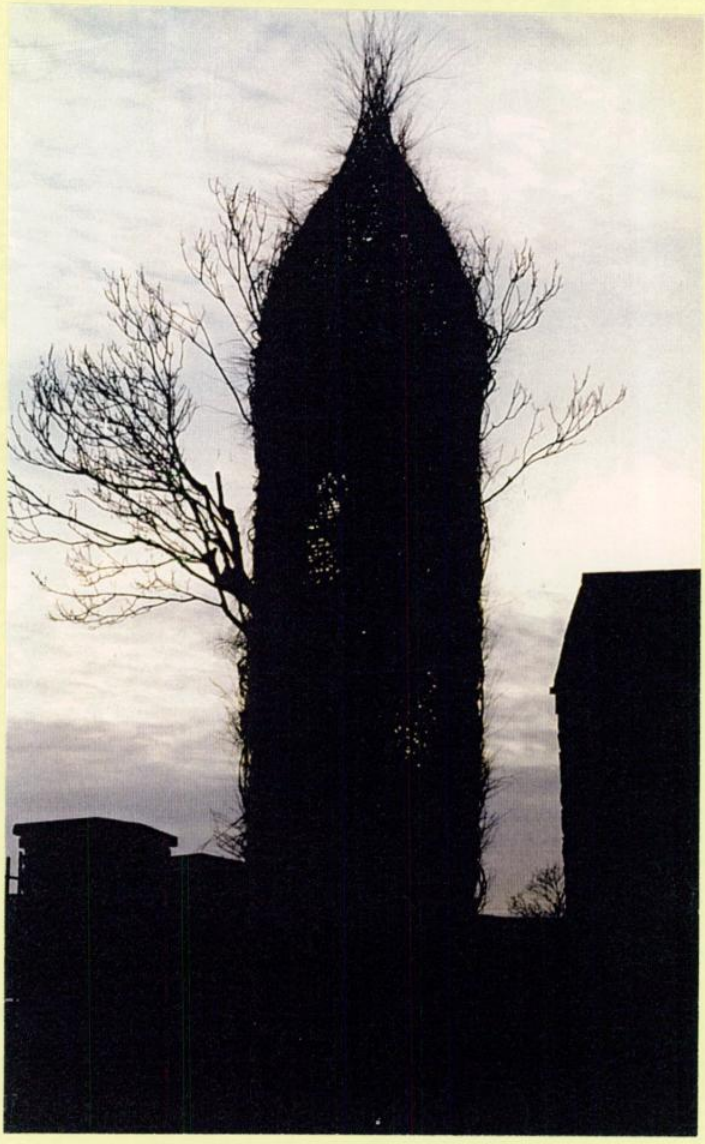


Fig. 51. 'Round Tower' by Patrick Dougherty, Tallaght, 1997.

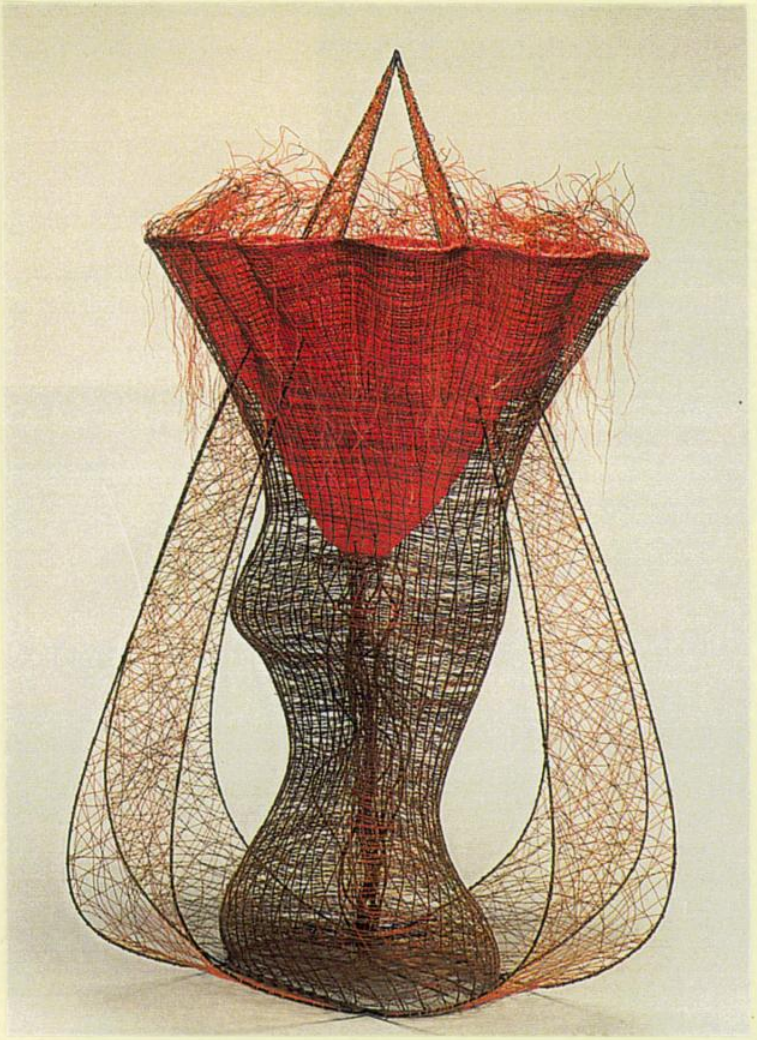
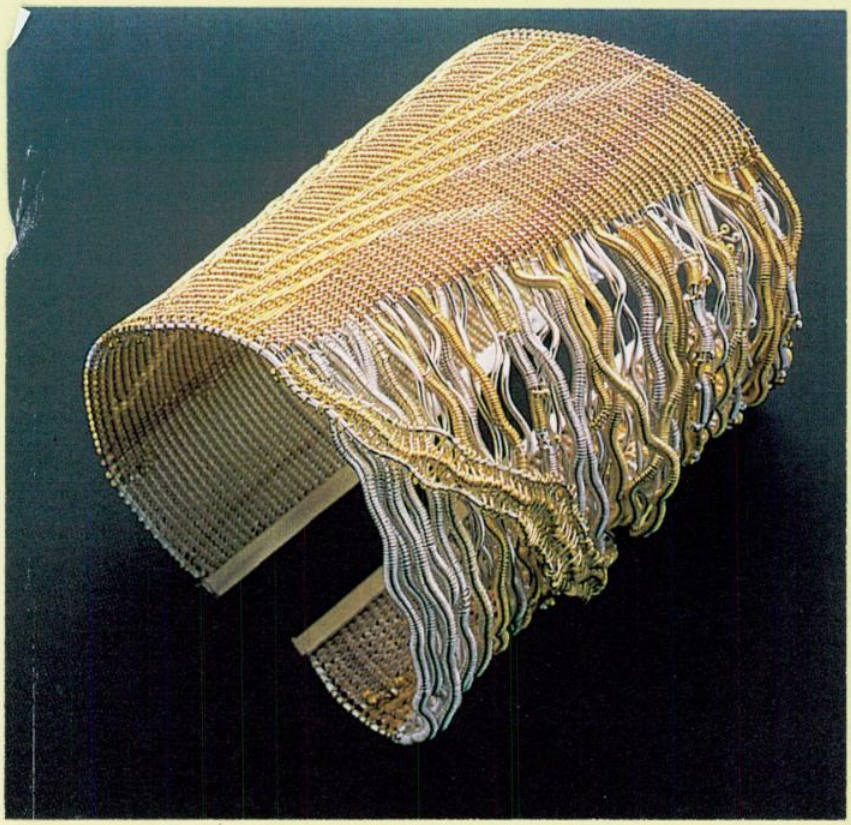
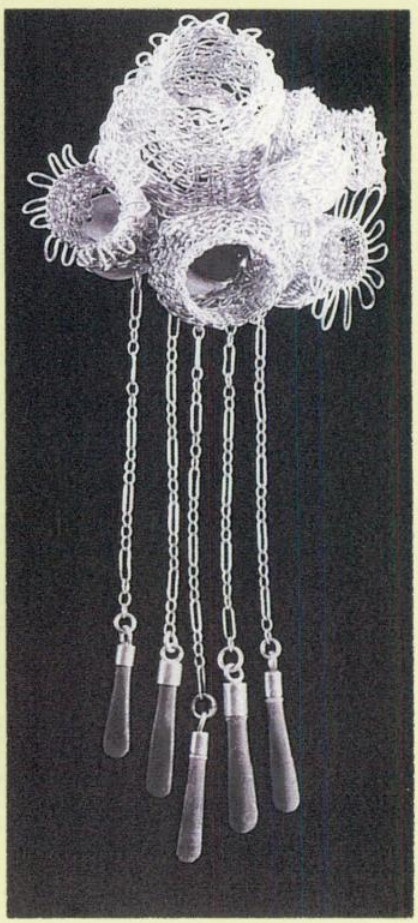


Fig. 52 (*Left*) 'Alliance', by Thelma Coles. Sculptural form in coated and uncoated copper wire. The open wire frame maintains the form without extra support (19 x 31.5 x 84cm).

Fig. 53 (*Below Left*) Twined Bracelet by Barbara Patrick.

Fig. 54 (*Below Left*) Barnacle Brooch by Joanna Rhoades, in 26-guage fine silver wire. A series of miniature basket shapes are sewn together with silver wire to form the brooch (4 x 5cm).





Irish basket-makers have been slower to adapt to change and modern trends in the craft than their American, Scottish and British counterparts. A recent basketry exhibition held at the Scottish National Museum hosted a number of Scottish based crafts people experimenting with new forms, materials and techniques. The show included traditional style willow baskets and straw kishes by Laurence Copeland - a 'kish' is a unique Scottish back basket. Miniature coiled baskets of linen, raffia, cotton, silk and pine needles were shown among baskets incorporating natural hedge grow materials, shells, hand-made paper, fleece and red ceramic clay (Fig. 55, 56, 57, p. 79). The work was superbly crafted, inspiring and thrilling for those interested in the medium and eye-opening for those unaware of its possibilities.

Mainstream popular culture has adopted the use of basketry in traditional and modern materials. Shops like Habitat have rekindled the trend for woven furniture and fittings. Basketry items have become objects of desire for many householders with which to create an individual and interesting home. Interior magazines are heralding the "New Woven Look" both in organic and man-made fibres, advertising woven flooring, slippers, lampshades, cushions and even woven salt and pepper canisters (Fig. 58, p. 80). Although many of these objects are imported from foreign countries the move creates increased outlets and encouragement for traditional basket-makers such as Lois Walpole, who produces wacky, fun, woven shopping baskets and containers (Fig. 59, p. 81). Walpole combines natural willow and cane with colourfully painted cardboard, plastics and other materials from the urban landscape[47].

The climate is looking up for basket-makers as new outlets emerge for their products as society rediscovers the beauty and potential inherent in the medium and apply it in a new context to today's world.

[47] (Craft, 1984).

Fig. 55 (*Above Left*) 'Pandora's Box' by Anna King. Coiled pine needles with silk, paper and beads. Photograph courtesy of the NMS, November 1998 - January 1999.

Fig. 56 (*Above Right*) 'Shell Form II' by Anna King. Miniature forms of linen coiled with raffia. Photograph courtesy of NMS, November 1998 - January 1999.

Fig. 57 (*Opposite*) Basket sculptures by Valerie Pragnell, of willow, handmade paper and ceramic clay. Photograph courtesy of NMS, November 1998 - January 1999.

Fig. 58. 'The New Woven Look', natural weaves are appearing in the most unlikely places including walls, floors and everything in between.

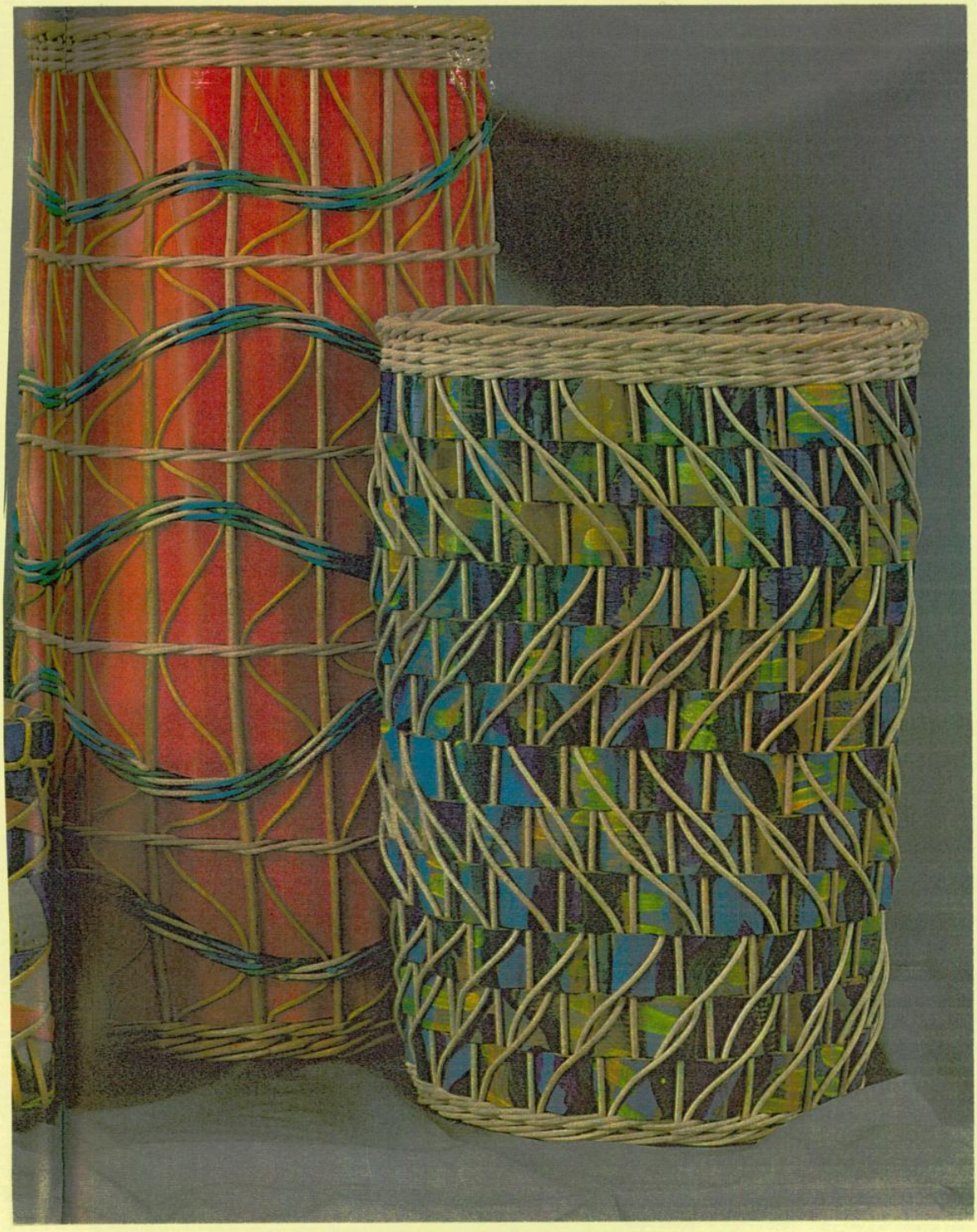


Fig. 59. Baskets by Lois Walpole

CONCLUSION

Basketry is, to appropriate Sonfist's phrase, "a paradox ... where simplicity meets with extraordinary complexity and beauty"[48]. This simple technique used to fashion beautiful natural materials, is a paradox, in that, this craft, so extensively woven into our social history has been largely neglected by today's society. Yet, it holds us in sway, we cannot totally reject it, it calls to something deep within, our minds recall, our hands reach out to touch, clinging to some forgotten memory; our ancestral heritage.

Its simplicity inspires us, the uncomplication of a craft where the only inspirational link between maker and materials is the hand. A primitive sophistication and satisfaction as old as man himself prevails it. "The satisfaction of moulding a natural material with one's hands, the eye and the hand working in unison to create a shape, to think and to form it slowly"[49].

In the past, the medium was used for productivity in the domestic and farming environment. Form reflected function and materials were gathered from what was available locally. The householder produced what was required to meet the demands of daily chores, therefore he had to be proficient in producing the wide variety of items required to fulfil these tasks. Self-sufficiency meant that costs had to be kept to a minimum, ensuring that the home became the centre of productivity.

Political, social and cultural changes between nineteen hundred and the nineteen fifties transformed the face of Irish society. These changes included mass education, social welfare implementation, technological improvements and the growth of service and consumer industries. The advance of these alterations was to change society from a rural based community to an urban, individualistic, open, affluent one. Where social mobility, rather than survival, is the driving force of many peoples lives.

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[48] (Sonfist, 1983, p.259).
[49] (Wright, 1977, p.9).

Popular culture and the mass communications network forced the issue of identity construction. Through consumerism they present us with a plethora of options from which to freely choose one's identity or change an existing one for a newer, more popular choice. Identity is formed through difference, difference in age, gender, income and class. In our attempt to be different from our predecessors, we reject traditional values and habits, which have remained embedded in our history for generations. Adolescents in their search for identity abandoned the restricting lifestyles of their parents and older generations. Moving to urban areas in the quest for social freedom and the improved living standards promised by popular culture and the media.

The consequences of these social and cultural changes in terms of basketry were, firstly, the rejection of natural materials for cheaper, imported fibres. Secondly, the abandonment of the medium in favour of more fashionable mass produced items serving the same purpose, but which helped one to construe identity as they differed from what one had grown up with. Consumerism purports the theory that by purchasing these items rather than making them one is making a social statement. The media constructed the situation where everything one consumes and every action can be construed as an act of will and an expression of identity.

Public perception of basketry is simply as a medium of producing vessels and containers, while historical evidence stands proof to the versatility and adaptability of basketry techniques to a wide variety of purposes, as already examined. Many people today, would be surprised to discover the uses to which this craft was put by our ancestors in Ireland's recent past. In the production of objects, basketry, if freed from the stigma of poverty, would be well suited to urban lifestyles and living. Items like 'bosses' would prove an exciting and artistic alternative to modern bean-bags and solve problems of space in city apartments, being small, light and easily stacked and stored when not in use.

Contemporary basket-makers are concerned with raising the profile of the craft. Function has become of secondary importance, as they too try to create their own identity. Creative freedom and individual expression is used to differentiate them from the work of their predecessors and from their peers, resulting in the adoption of new materials and techniques to traditional methods and the application of basketry techniques to new areas including sculpture, jewellery and as objects of desire; thus, raising public opinion of the craft resulting in the creation of new markets and raising the awareness of basketry as a creative, artistic medium, to win new practitioners and to ensure its survival[50].

Society is beginning to question the values and morals presented to it by the notions of popular culture. Recently, a trend has evolved in the art world of a concern for nature and the use of natural materials. According to Sonfist, "art always reflects the questioning of a society by itself and often takes an active role in the search for the answers to these questions"[51]. This enquiry into social attitudes and man's eventual destiny will create a climate in which, basketry, as a medium of honesty and integrity will once again flourish.

Basketry's key to survival lies in the construction of difference as a marketing strategy which works to the benefit of the producers, difference created not by a neglect of past traditions, but by embracing them. The wheel has turned, one cannot go back, but we can adapt, improve and re-interpret the past to serve new functions and services in society today. In the prophetic words of T.S. Elliot:-

> "What might have been is an abstraction
> Remaining a perpetual possibility
> Only in a world of speculation.
> What might have been and what has been
> Point to one end, which is already present.
> Footfalls echo in the memory
> Down the passage which we did not take
> Towards the door we never opened
> Into the rose garden"[52].

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[50] (Morris, 1997).
[51] (Sonfist, 1983, p.6).
[52] (Lyons, 1982, p.227).

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