

ABOUT: ALISON FITZGERALD



The contemporary expressive art of basketmaking has a more peaceable relationship with its traditional roots than many of the studio crafts. The appearance of a twenty-first century potato teemer, or sciathóg, for example, is not at all dissimilar to its nineteenth century antecedent. The functionality has changed from utilitarian to aesthetic, but the object retains a clearly recognisable form. This is a quality that sets basketry apart from the, often limiting, scramble among applied artists in other disciplines to reinvent their craft in a way that is perceived as innovative. The basket, repurposed as a twenty-first century art object, remains a basket.



Above / Straight linen basket

“When I first started I tried to work out what people wanted to buy. If I went to a show and sold a lot of log baskets, for instance, I would come back and make more of what sold. But nowadays I like to modify my designs to try different weaves and to experiment with blending the colours of the willow.”

Alison Fitzgerald’s baskets are both innovative and traditional. The oval forms of her potato baskets echo those that were made in considerable volume near Lough Neagh up until the 1930s, yet the understated gradations of colour and the use of different types of willow to emphasise the ribbing within the pieces give them an expressive subtlety. They are

quiet pieces: physically strong and steeped in tradition. ‘It’s difficult to know,’ she says, ‘whether you would call something a refinement of a traditional style or a new design. Basketmaking is so ancient that it’s hard to do anything completely new.’

Fitzgerald came to Northern Ireland in the winter of 1980 and lived in the ▶



Above / Flask shaped linen basket



▶ grounds of the Horticultural Research Centre in Loughgall where, incidentally, the Ministry of Agriculture was pioneering the growth of willow for biomass. She had a degree in botany, a young family, and no previous experience of basket making, but the astonishing beauty of fields of willow in the wintertime inspired her. ‘They had a collection of more ornamental willows in front of the research station, which they cut down every year to get the new growth. Some of them were suitable for basketry, and some were nice colours. I started making baskets out of those willows. I had no knowledge of basketry so I got some books from the library and tried to learn from them. It was very difficult. There were no courses at that time in Northern Ireland.’ Fitzgerald travelled to England for a five-day course on basic basketry in West Dean



College which she followed, several years later, with a more advanced course run by the Basketmakers Association. A lot of the skill in basketry is based on practise, she says, once you have some basic techniques.

In the meantime she came across the potato baskets of Lough Neagh in the collection of Úna Brown, then curator

of Address House for the National Trust, who introduced her to the basketmaker James Mulholland. ‘He was one of the few traditional basketmakers left. He was a basketmaker all his life, except for a few years in the 1960s when he thought that there was no future in it and went into pig farming. But then he came back because he loved it. ▶



Above, top and left / Willow wall designs, untitled (all)

► He liked working away on his own - I like that too. The quality of his baskets was so good that he got work just through word of mouth. He made masks for the Armagh Rhymers -that's a tremendous leap from just being a basketmaker -and he made beautiful Moses baskets. Whenever I went to see him I would learn something. I would take something that I had been trying to make and get advice. He was always very helpful in that way, although I never asked him formally to teach me. But I found that the more I learnt, the more I could learn from looking at baskets.'

By the mid 1980s, Fitzgerald was sufficiently adept and committed to her craft to set up her first workshop in Armagh, from which she worked until she moved to her current location, Priory Cottages in Benburb, in 2005. Although in the past, industrial scale basketmaking usually used peeled willow, she decided fairly early on that she wanted to work with willow with the bark on. 'That was an aesthetic choice. People made rough agricultural baskets out of the unpeeled willow, but they made delicate shopping baskets out of peeled willow. And they also used a lot of skeined willow -split and shaved into thin ribbons.' Her own work draws on the texture and rich colouration of the unpeeled willow. When she looks for further refinement she does so by using finer varieties of willow, still with the bark on.



Above / Willow wall design in circle of wild rose

Currently, she sells from her own studio, and from the SpaceCraft gallery in Belfast. Her work has evolved gently over the years, becoming more expressive in an understated way. 'When I first started I tried to work out what people wanted to buy. If I went to a show and sold a lot of log baskets, for instance, I would come back and make more of what sold. But nowadays I like to modify my designs to try different weaves and to experiment with blending the colours of the willow.' She is no longer obliged to buy willow in from England, having, over the years, persuaded local friends to grow willow for her to use. Now she has a

good supply of Irish grown willow of the varieties best suited to her work.

Fitzgerald has participated in the three major exhibitions of basketry to take place in Ireland in the last two decades: Basketmakers, which took place in the Craft Council of Ireland's Dublin gallery in 1994 and which included the work of traditional makers like Mulholland and Joe Shanahan of Carrick-on-Suir; Irish Basketmaking, Tradition Today which opened in the National Craft Gallery, Kilkenny in 2003 and toured Europe and the UK. ●

Eleanor Flegg
Craft NI



Above / Sciathòg (potato teemer)



Right / Detail of linen basket