

## The Anishnaabe Baskets at the Birmingham Museum

Donna Casaceli

The Birmingham Museum recently received a generous donation of Indigenous-made baskets from Michigan, Canada and New York from a local collector. Several of them had the original makers' names attached, giving us the opportunity to learn more about their origins and 'hear' the stories they can tell us.

"Anishnaabeg" refers to the three Great Lakes Indigenous tribal groups that share many linguistic and cultural traditions; the Odawa (Ottawa), Ojibwe (Chippewa) and Potawatomi. Traditionally, the baskets were—and still are—an integral part of Indigenous life. They are used to store food, are given as gifts, used to help secure babies to carriers, and used in ceremonies. In Anishinaabe culture, basket-making is a communal endeavor. The techniques and methods of basket making are passed from one generation to the next and are considered tribal "carriers of culture." Traditionally, they are made of locally available materials such as birch bark, spruce root, sweet grass, and hand-split black ash. Additional decoration may involve vegetable dyes, porcupine quills, or beads. The Birmingham Museum is fortunate to have examples from traditional basket makers of all three tribes in our recent acquisition.



Gladys Pigeon Sands, small vegetable-dyed black ash basket, 1980.

This trinket basket made by **Gladys Pigeon Sands (1906-1985)** of the Match-e-be-nas-she-wish Band of the Potawatomi Tribe of the Anishinabek Nation is constructed of black ash splints and sweet grass. The natural dye colors have faded on the outside from exposure to UV

light, but the vibrant greens and reds can still be seen within. Sands, the granddaughter of Chief White Pigeon, was a survivor of the infamous Mt. Pleasant (Michigan) & Haskell (Kansas) Indian Boarding Schools, which attempted to completely obliterate all tribal language and culture. As an adult, she worked for many years to preserve and teach traditional black ash splint basket making, and sold her baskets to support her family.



Emma Manitowash, vegetable-dyed black ash market basket, 1980.

This market basket was made by **Emma Manitowash (1926-1997)** of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa of the Anishinabek Nation at Peshawbestown, Michigan, near Traverse City. Made for the tourist trade, the basket is constructed of black ash splints, black ash wood, and sweet grass. Manitowash was a skilled craftswoman who also worked in textiles. One of her quilts was displayed at one time at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.



Benjamin Shinos, vegetable-dyed black ash storage basket, 1975-85.

**Benjamin Shinos (1940-2021)**, of the Zhiibaahaasing Band of the Ojibwe and Ottawa Tribes of the Anishinabek Nation, was born in Canada and

migrated to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan as a young child. This storage basket is a representation of his fine skill in basket weaving. His baskets are very well known and displayed as representative examples of traditional basket weaving by several Anishinaabe tribes.

The black ash tree is an integral part of the Anishnabeg basket weaving tradition, which has survived in spite of threats to wipe it out along with other cultural traditions. Yet there is a new threat to this important and time-honored craft: the emerald ash borer.

To learn more about basket weaving, its cultural significance, and the emerald ash borer threat, this video showcases the Pigeon family, and Gladys Pigeon Sands' daughter, Sidney Martin: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBM5BcUxeXM>.

Celebrating our  
Indigenous Heritage

Native American Heritage Month, November, 2023 &  
Beyond



## Bibliography

"Black Ash Basketry: A Story of Cultural Resilience." Great Lakes Lifeways Institute, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBM5BcUxeXM>. Accessed 31 Oct 2023.

Burkhart, Emily. "Saving Black Ash Trees and Native American Basket-Weaving: Cherish Parrish's Carriers of Culture." Artshelp.com, 2021. <https://www.artshelp.com/native-american-women-carrying-culture-saving-black-ash-trees-and-indigenous-basket-weaving/>. Accessed 31 Oct 2023.

Clifton, James. *People of the Three Fires: The Ottawa, Potawatomi, and Ojibway of Michigan (Workbook and Teacher's Guide)*. Grand Rapids Inter-Tribal Council, Michigan, 1986. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED321956.pdf>

"Keeper's [sic] of the Fire: The Pokagon Potawatomi Nation: A Joint Exhibition of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indian Nation and the Museum at Southwestern Michigan College, June 21-Dec. 29, 2006." John N. Low, ed. *The Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians*, <https://www.kankakeevalleyhistoricalsociety.org/Kankakee%20River%20History/Books%20and%20papers/Pokagon%20history.pdf>.