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NEW

DIRECTIONS: Examining the Past,
Creating the Future.

Who Were Joanne Segal Brandford and Lillian Elliott? The Brandford/Elliott Award Catherine K. Hunter

Joanne Segal Brandford was my first textile history teacher in the 1970s and my friend for 20 years. Last year I was introduced to Lillian Elliott for the first time when I heard an oral history interview recorded by Paul and Joanne Segal Brandford *exactly* 21 years ago this week on September 10th and 11th, 1993! Today it is my turn to introduce you to both artists using their artwork and words.

The catalyst for this project was a collection of 7 videos recorded in 1993 and preserved by Pat Hickman who was also a student of Brandford in the 1970s, and subsequently shared studios with both artists. Five videos were recorded during the exhibition "Baskets: Redefining Volume and Meaning," curated by Hickman in Hawaii. The "Oral History Interview of Lillian Elliott, 1993, Part I and II" was recorded in California. My sources include the oral history interview, Brandford's lecture "Breathing Baskets," artist statements, and personal memories.

Because I frequently include the conversations, writings and vocabulary of both artists in this paper, all such quotations are in italics throughout. For portraits of the artists and images of their work, please go to The Brandford/Elliott Award for Excellence in Fiber Art website (brandford-elliott-award.com) with a link to a 12-minute documentary film "Joanne Segal Brandford and Lillian Elliott, 1993" that was produced to accompany this paper.

At the time this paper was presented in September, 2014, Hickman's collection of recordings were unpublished. As of October 2014, the collection is in the process of being accepted by the Smithsonian Archives of American Art where they will be available for future study.

Joanne Segal Brandford

Joanne Segal Brandford and Lillian Elliott were artists, mentors and innovators as Fiber Art emerged in the 20th century. They met for the first time in the late 1960s in the Design Department at the University of California, Berkeley. Ed Rossbach was Professor of Design; Brandford taught textile history for 3 years (1966-1969); Elliott taught weaving for 5 years (1966-1971). Baskets as art became their main focus.

In one of my favorite conversations from the Oral History Part II, they recalled Ed Rossbach's first baskets. I will read a condensed excerpt:

Brandford: So, it seems to me that by the mid to late 60s, Ed Rossbach was starting to make baskets ...

Elliott: He was, but I didn't see them.

Brandford: No, no, there were some of his baskets in a display case.

Elliott: Right, I remember them. One was gessoed; it was coiled, bluish and gessoed.... It was amazing. He said he had made three baskets and that he had learned a great deal

in making them...I was sort of interested that someone I knew was making baskets and wondered why...

Brandford: When you saw Ed's baskets in that case, did you think, "Oh! That's something I could do!"

Elliott: No. (laughter)

Brandford: Neither did I.(more laughter) ... Well, I guess my point was just that it was a time when some people were beginning to make baskets.

Elliott: Well, I thought it was very interesting that Ed made these baskets... And I tried to decide then for myself what made a basket good. And, you know, it was a beginning of a whole exploration.

Brandford: There we go...

And here we are! Their story is our history.

Joanne Segal Brandford completed her BA in Decorative Art (1955) and MA in Design (1967) at the University of California, Berkeley. She dedicated her lecture "Breathing Baskets" to one of her first professors, a folklorist and anthropologist, who taught textile history in the 1950s, a time when textiles were overlooked in art history:

Miss Gayton taught that material that is the costume, the textiles, that whole very -- if you know it -- large area of study. She taught it just in the same way as the art historians would be teaching art history. That is, she would present the material, she would discuss the maker, the context of it, the aesthetics of it, and present it for us to deal with. So in my naiveté, I assumed that this was art. It never occurred to me that it wasn't. The issues that have been raised since, about whether it was art or not, have gone right over me because that's not my concern. I believed it.... I looked at it as art and never stopped being fascinated. ("Breathing Baskets" lecture, 1993)

Using collections at the Lowie Museum of Anthropology at Berkeley, Brandford analyzed textiles and, in turn, mastered weaving techniques, textile printing, dyeing, resist dyeing, knotting and netting. All the while she learned the expressive possibilities of all the textile arts.

Curatorial research and colleagues informed and encouraged her transition from historian to artist. Brandford described that process and credited her colleagues at Berkeley:

You would think that having access to all these beautiful historical textiles would somehow make it possible for me to make my own. But I think I was rather intimidated by those perfect baskets, those exquisite nets. They provided a background for me but it was really hard for me to imagine actually doing the work! It was later in the '60s ...that my teaching assistant was using these kinds of techniques to make artwork. Somehow it started to dawn on me that maybe I could do it too. Also my office partner ...was Lillian Elliott, and it never occurred to her that, even though I was teaching the history, that I couldn't also make the stuff.... The great art which I had seen was the great literature which I could admire and appreciate but it was Wendy's work and Lillian's assumption 'Why not?' that made it possible for me to work....I took the idea of lace and nets to see what I could do. ("Breathing Baskets" lecture, Hawaii, 1993)

Brandford further described her position vis-a-vis contemporary baskets in an artist statement from 1989:

I never used traditional basket making techniques, feeling that these ways of working belonged to others. This was a curiously conservative attitude which was at once limiting (I didn't give myself permission to make baskets) and liberating (but I could make basket-like nets and call them 'baskets'). (Artist statement for the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, 1989, in my personal collection.)

Brandford first made flexible nets of raffia. With a desire to make standing nets, she progressively experimented with yarns, raffia, rattan and monofilament.

For a series of nets made with nearly invisible parachute nylon, she expressed a fascination with *light, space, illusion* and *disappearing art*, a *surprising goal for a visual artist!* She addressed physical and psychological space with the words *ambiguity, illusion, transparency, and invisibility*. Displayed inside on a wall, it was difficult to see the nylon nets; even with good lighting, one only sees the shadow lines on the wall. This quality pleased Brandford who told me that her nets were collected by theoretical scientists who understood *elegant and invisible structures....*

The largest example is *Untitled* (1987), a triangle 11' x 7'. Hanging in the sun and breeze, it resembled a cloud of ephemeral condensation; it portrayed a fragile natural phenomenon.

Brandford was Basketmaker-in-Residence at Manchester Polytechnic in England 1986-87. It was her first experience traveling abroad; she loved the dry British humor, black tea and the BBC. Her first artwork was a response to baskets in the Museum of English Rural Life. She spoke about the responsibility she felt during this landmark appointment: *"I sort of didn't know who I was and where I was. I was very concerned about my role there as a basketmaker and also as a teacher. What was I doing there when there were basketmakers such as David Drew?"* Subsequently Brandford decided that she also had a tradition, only her tradition went back in time 17,000 years to Native American basketmakers and extended to all basket traditions around the world.

In England Brandford focused on the technique of sprang, a structure with continuous warp, integrated by warp plaiting, with only one weft required. The resulting net-like fabric has natural elasticity, flexibility and buoyancy. She wove flat tubes on looms using rattan and, according to Elliott, manipulated the flat tubes *like a magician* into three-dimensional forms.

Some titles of her baskets evoked the traditions of Native American containers, such as "Blue Bowl" (1987) and "Jug" (1991). Others were sculptural and symbolic with titles that referred to human forms, such as "Heart" (1989), and the outstanding life-size "Reclining Figure" (1992). Each was a valuable vessel.

Both artists wrote statements to inform viewers of their intentions. For the exhibition catalogue "Baskets: Redefining Volume and Meaning" (The University of Hawaii Art Gallery, Honolulu, 1993, page 44) Brandford wrote:

Baskets are often linked to domesticity and smallness, the implication being that these qualities preclude significant art work. I could counter with basket-shrines made for ritual, or I could point to house-sized baskets (used, indeed, as houses), and so I could 'elevate' baskets with religious significance or architectural scale. But all such uses/meanings refer to our humanity and consequently to ourselves and to our families, to life and to death. What can be more meaningful for an artist working in fiber, than to honor the basket, with its myriad of human associations?

Writing about baskets of sprang in the '80s and '90s, four words —*fiber, air, space, and light* — complemented her seminal concept of *breathing baskets*.

People say that my baskets breathe, that they seem to be alive, but, of course, this is what art does. Ordinary materials are worked by an artist who somehow transforms them, breathes life into them. My ordinary materials and those of all fiber artists are fiber and air. (“Breathing Baskets” lecture, Hawaii, 1993)

Lillian Elliott

Lillian Elliott had a broad foundation in art including drawing, graphics, art history, not textile history, ceramics and painting. She fondly recalled the commercial arts program at Cass Technical High School and enrichment classes at the Detroit Institute for the Arts. She completed a BA (1952) in Art Education at Wayne State University.

Elliott chose to complete her MFA in ceramics, not textiles, at Cranbrook Academy of Art (1955). She made this decision after a participating in a summer weaving program at Cranbrook; she described it as *disastrous* due to *the isolation of private studios, challenging countermarch looms, and an emphasis on industrial design*. Ironically, her first job was Fabric Designer at Ford Motor Company in Michigan. While she acknowledged the position was *impressive* professionally, she was very happy to leave because it was *restrictive* and *not imaginative*.

Elliott was self-taught in textile arts. After moving to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1960, she attracted attention with her embroideries, appliquéés and needlepoint tapestry; as well as a purchase award by the American Craft Museum and a Tiffany Grant. When Rossbach invited Elliott to teach weaving at Berkeley (1966-1971), she was completely surprised and recalled with laughter that she had never taught weaving and needed a refresher course!

Elliott and Brandford discussed the ongoing *problem* with calling their artwork *baskets* because the public expected something besides what they presented. Elliott explained her position as follows:

When I say baskets...I think I am making artwork. I am not making baskets particularly. I'm making something which includes enclosed form. There is no way to describe that...I don't want to call it sculpture. I am not trying to elevate it to an art form. If I want to be doing pure sculpture, I could be doing pure sculpture. It's just there is a reference to a notion of what other people have done in the past with enclosed forms. But I am intentionally breaking the rules. I'm breaking from tradition. Baskets have a long

tradition....The easiest and least pretentious title that I can give them is baskets. (Oral History, Part II)

For Elliott, it was absolutely essential that individual baskets express a quality or idea that was *compelling or disturbing or interesting*. When she asked herself *how little was needed to communicate a volume*, the resulting works looked like spatial drawings made with rattan. She called the series *linear baskets*. One example is “Drawn Form,” 1984.

Disappointed by the public’s expectation that textile art should be *soft, cozy and home sweet home*, Elliott asked herself if she could create *a strong and violent message about the Vietnam War*. The result was a linear basket painted black and entitled “Goya” (1979). To Elliott the technique represented Abstract Expressionism because it captured the spontaneous gestures of drawing in space, and she compared her work to that of Robert Rauschenberg.

Elliott continuously explored new ideas and materials. She favored the techniques of twining, plaiting—that is, random plaiting—and sewing. She used whatever materials were available commercially including tree barks, zippers, tubing, cane seats and international packing materials. Elliott also *salvaged* her own discarded baskets; today we would say *recycled*.

Elliott developed an important bark cloth series when the material was available. Clearly influenced by her training in ceramics, the work often resembled hand-built pots. The series combined all her interests: sculptural form, drawing, painting and textile arts. Two examples are “Cantilever”, 1992, and “Appliqued Form” 1993.

There is another body of work, a collaboration with Pat Hickman over eleven years, but that is a subject for another time.

The essence of Elliott’s work was three-dimensional form to express an idea. Baskets were sculptural. Linear baskets presented an illusion of volume. Constructed baskets defined enclosed space.

During the exhibition in Hawaii, Elliott described the concepts of *penetrability and space*:

I think I am really working with an elusive notion of enclosed space which is not enclosed.....So it is both a refuge and an illusion of refuge, because you are never totally sheltered within the space. (Oral History, Part II)

Subsequently, Elliott connected *penetrability* to the concept of *air* and Brandford’s *breathing baskets*:

Elliott: [One of] the really good qualities of very beautiful spun yarn was that there was air inside, and that, if you squeezed it, it was resistant and resilient and it jumped back. It had a voice too. It wasn’t just that you made this; it spoke to you by having this resilience. I love that idea. And, I realized after a while that, if you wove air into your textiles, it didn’t weaken them. In fact, it added another element and it almost strengthened it because they expanded what they were doing. It wasn’t just you against

the world, making this tight, hard, strong thing that would last forever. I think that some of that penetrability notion extended into what I do as three-dimensional.... I know Joanne works a lot with breathing, with the idea of breathing baskets, and I feel for me it is sort of moving outward and letting some space participate in the baskets...

Brandford: Oh, I really like that. It speaks to me very much.

Elliott: I know your whole notion of breathing baskets.

Brandford: Yes, it's the same thing.

(Oral History, Part II)

Brandford and Elliott had roots in textile history and art history, textile arts and studio arts. Their artwork and words continue to be fresh and meaningful today

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