



[Words that Come Before All Else - Thanksgiving Address](#), Ronni-leigh Goeman [Object 2022.0001]

Artist: Ronni-leigh Goeman and Stonehorse Goeman
Culture: Onondaga, Tonawanda Seneca, Native American
Date: 2021
Medium: Black ash, sweet grass, moose hair, and moose antler
Classification: Decorative Art
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Teaching guide by Abigail Greenfield '25

Words that Come Before All Else - Thanksgiving Address is a black ash and sweet grass basket made collaboratively by Onondaga artist Ronni-leigh Goeman and her husband, Tonawanda Seneca artist Stonehorse Goeman. The work combines traditional Haudenosaunee basket-making methods, which Ronni-leigh Goeman learned from her mentor, Akwesasne Mohawk basket maker Mae Big Tree, with carved moose antler created by Stonehorse Goeman. The title is a reference to the Thanksgiving Address that members of the Haudenosaunee confederacy give before most events as an expression of gratitude for the natural world and of the unity and harmony of the Haudenosaunee people.

Teaching Guide

Haudenosaunee Basket

Context

Haudenosaunee people have made black ash baskets for centuries; they are used both for ceremonial purposes, such as children's naming ceremonies and weddings, and practical ones, such as corn-washing. Basket-making traditions began for mainly utilitarian reasons but evolved to encompass the creation of ornate baskets that include intricate symbolism. Among the Haudenosaunee, black ash and sweetgrass are the two most traditional materials for basket-making, although sweetgrass is also used medicinally and as ceremonial smudge.

The creation of baskets from black ash like this one is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain as an art form, due both to the loss of cultural knowledge and to the plight of North American ash trees. Since the early twenty-first century, the North American ash population has significantly declined due to the emerald ash borer, an invasive beetle introduced into the United States via imported timber. In addition to the significant economic and ecological impact of the emerald ash borer, there has been a large cultural impact on Haudenosaunee and other native peoples who rely on traditional black ash harvest grounds for basketry. Black ash harvesting is typically a multigenerational event in which logs are stripped of their bark and pounded until their growth rings separate, creating long, thin strips of wood that are ideal for basketry. The loss of black ash populations threatens to disrupt traditional basket-making practices significantly, and a number of Haudenosaunee communities are working collaboratively with scientists to attempt to collect and preserve ash seeds.

In addition to the decline of North American ash trees, Haudenosaunee basket-making traditions are also vulnerable to the recent decline in availability of sweetgrass at traditional gathering sites. In the early 2000s, Mohawk basket makers who gathered sweetgrass began to express concern that the plant was becoming more difficult to find and thus that its population was potentially declining. In a 2005 study, Daniela Shebitz and Robin Kimmerer confirmed that sweetgrass was indeed disappearing and examined potential methods for its restoration.

Goeman has stated that she does not consider her collaborative baskets completed until her husband's moose antler sculptures are added to them. The moose antler used in this piece may have been harvested from the shed antlers of mature male moose, which are available each winter, or from a deceased moose. The moose antler and fur used in this piece, however, may become more difficult to obtain in the near future, as the population of North American moose is decreasing. A number of factors may explain this decline. Among them are: milder winters (resulting in higher tick infestations among moose), hotter summers (which cause more moose to suffer from heat exhaustion), and the introduction of parasites carried by white-tailed deer, which are expanding into previously moose-exclusive habitats. The general scientific consensus is that climate change has played a major role in making previously moose-friendly habitats inhospitable. However, the impact of climate change on moose populations generally remains to be determined.

Artist Background

Ronni-leigh Goeman is a member of the Onondaga Eel Clan. She was raised on the Onondaga Nation in upstate New York, and grew up surrounded by the art of basket-making. She began making her own baskets as a teenager, but her true passion for the craft began when she worked under Mae Big Tree, a renowned Akwesasne Mohawk basket maker. Goeman balances the traditional art of sweetgrass and black ash basket weaving with the addition of individual touches, including moose hair, quills, and the sculptural works of her husband, Stonehorse Goeman. They refer to their collaborations as "basket sculptures." Although Goeman is concerned by the threat to the practice of basket-making presented by the emerald ash borer, she has expressed that she feels obligated to the basket-makers who came before her to keep the art form alive.

Discussion Questions

- Haudenosaunee baskets such as this one began as functional, utilitarian pieces. What functional elements do you see in this work? What elements might be considered ornamental or decorative? Does that matter? Why or why not?
- Sweetgrass has been used by many indigenous peoples as a medicine to cure upper respiratory viruses and, in some cases, venereal diseases. It is also used for smudging to attract good spirits. Knowing the cultural significance of sweetgrass, why do you think it is often used as a material in basket making?
- Sweetgrass baskets in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were frequently sold to white Americans as tourist objects; they also provided income for indigenous communities. These baskets are now beginning to be recognized by the broader art world as an art form. What are your thoughts on the classifications of objects as “art” “craft” or “decorative”? How does your observation of Goeman’s basket affect those thoughts?
- Goeman’s baskets are unique in that they are collaborative, sculptural pieces. What does the collaborative nature of this basket do for your understanding of it?



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