



SALLY METCALF



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I SPENT THE LAST 30 YEARS LIVING IN OREGON BEFORE MOVING TO IDAHO

three years ago. My husband and I had a lovely home there, perched atop a foothill of the Cascade Mountains and overlooking the beautiful McKenzie River. It was during these years, inspired by the stunning landscape, that I began basket weaving.

I could fill a book with everything I loved about my home in Oregon, but it was the space to roam that had the greatest impact on my work. Being in nature was exhilarating, and the abundant offerings of our land—maple and cherry bark, vine maple, hazel, walnut, kiwi and iris, nuts and seeds—sparked my creativity.

My home was already full of foraged materials when I went out and bought my first book on basket making. With that book and a bundle of freshly harvested cottonwood whips in hand, I sat down on the floor and built a basket, which I threw away the moment it was finished because I thought it was ugly. I later fished it out of the trash, though; I loved the process of collecting the whips and attempting the basket, and I had to try again. I still have that basket, and I always bring it when I teach to remind myself and others not to give up.



SALLY METCALF, a basket weaver from Hailey, Idaho, has always considered nature her studio. She forages raw materials from the landscape around her and takes inspiration for her inventive and astounding works of art from the strength of the forest, the fluidity of the sea, and her love of the complexity and precision of Japanese basketry.



It was a great leap of faith to leave Oregon and move to Hailey, Idaho, but as I have learned from my experience with basket making, you never know until you try. Now that we are here, we love living in Idaho near the Big Wood River. Our house is nestled against a wetland preserve that is home to moose, cougars, wolves, deer, and elk. The materials in Idaho are different from those in the Pacific Northwest, but no less inspiring.

Though I attribute nature with inspiring me to craft my first basket, a lifetime of experiences has made my success as a weaver possible. I spent my childhood in Los Angeles near the ocean, and sea life, particularly the shape and movement of anemones, has always influenced my work. As a girl growing up in the 1950s and 60s, I was encouraged to explore domestic arts, like sewing and bread making, and I have found these traditions invaluable in developing my skill as a basket maker. In my young adult years, I learned to sail and, more importantly for my basket making, tie knots, and I was a floral designer, which has also been useful to my art. Over the past several years, I've enjoyed experimenting with polymer clay, which I sometimes add to my baskets. As I have undertaken each of these new disciplines, I've held fast to my father's sage advice to "only do it if you're having fun," which has always led me in the right direction.

THE PHASES OF MY BASKET MAKING ARE SEASONAL. I BEGIN IN THE LATE WINTER

collecting willow and dogwood, and in the late spring, I gather bark if needed. In the summer, I rest my hands from weaving and move on to gardening, teaching, and exhibiting my work. When fall rolls around, I am ready to start the cycle again by looking through my bark and beginning the assemblage. Since most of my inspiration comes from being outdoors and studying nature, my studio isn't in one place. I use work space in my garage for cutting, drilling, sanding and forging. I wander around outside hunting for materials (surprisingly, I actually found the copper wire I use while foraging). In the winter I weave, sitting in a comfy chair by a window with my dog, Sara, napping beside me.



This is a dye bath for the reed. This color is called salmon. The color will lighten up after it is rinsed and dried.

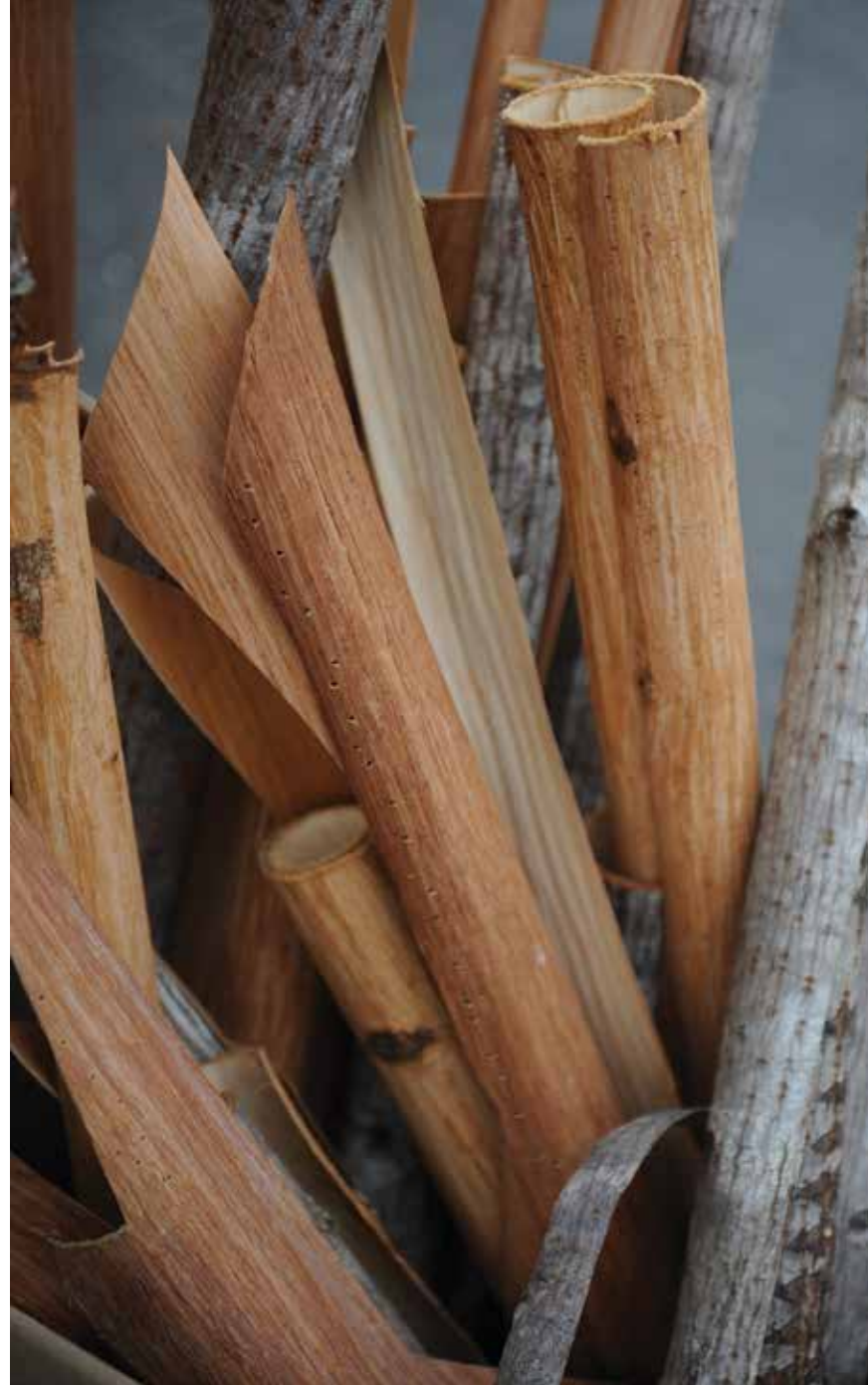


IN THE PAST, A MAJORITY OF MY BASKETS WERE WOVEN

with rattan reed, which I dyed in my barn. I make a dye bath for the reed, which will lighten up after it is rinsed and dried. During the dyeing process, I used salt to drive the dye into the reed, creating a chemical bond. After dyeing each lot, I would hang the coils on the fence posts surrounding one of my pastures to dry overnight. Inevitably the deer would come and chew off the ends of the reed to get at the salt! In a very hilarious way it taught me that a little more rinsing was necessary the next time.

These plates are made with dyed rattan reed. I dye each color using Procion fiber reactive dyes. Most of these plates are woven using plaiting and twining techniques. They measure between 15 and 20 inches. Twining is a major basketry technique, which involves two basic structural elements, spokes and weavers. Spokes are the foundation and weavers are worked over and under the spokes with a twist between each spoke form the basket.





Selecting the bark



A strip of bark that has been soaked and is now bendable.



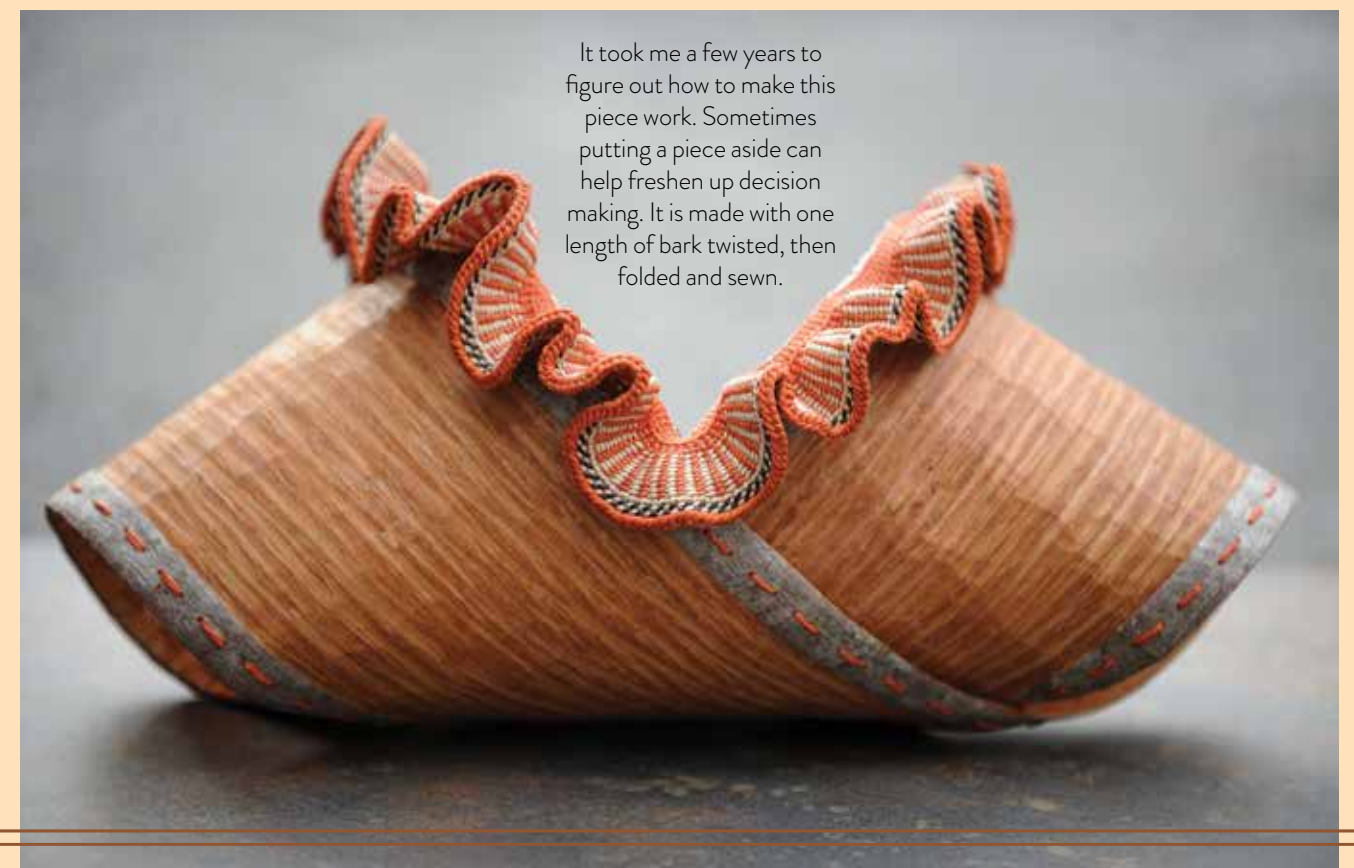
Cutting bark on the band saw



Soaking the bark

The materials I use most commonly are bigleaf maple bark, waxed linen and copper wire. I strip the bark from the tree after it has fallen and store it upright to dry, which also makes it easier to sift through when I'm ready to weave a new basket.

When I find a piece I like, I soak it, cut it, and shape it. Strips of bark need to be soaked to be bendable. All bark pieces need to be cut to shape and length. Sometimes I use a hand saw. I also use an ancient band saw that my husband found in a cabinet shop near Mount Hood in Oregon years ago. It weighs a ton but we dragged it with us when we moved.



It took me a few years to figure out how to make this piece work. Sometimes putting a piece aside can help freshen up decision making. It is made with one length of bark twisted, then folded and sewn.

THERE IS SOME QUESTION AS TO
WORK IS BASKETRY OR SCULPTURE,
TO LEAVE THAT DETERMINATION UP TO

WHETHER MY
BUT I PREFER
THE VIEWER.



Cold forging a
copper pin

I drill holes and bind the pieces together with copper pins that I forge into the appropriate size for each basket. If I want to pin a base together I need to cold forge copper pins and form a head so the pin stays where I want it. I cut and grind the burr off the ends of the copper wire so when I forge the head on the pin it is smooth and rounded.

To keep the pin tight against the maple bark base, I add a stop. In some cases I use a short length of hazel branch. I don't use any glue. I rely on the friction of the stop (button) against the metal pin. It can be tricky. I have an assortment of cut branches from various woods. Each button will be drilled and sanded for a clean fit onto each copper pin.

The maple bark base is measured, taped and ready for the drill. I must measure accurately so all the holes are evenly spaced through the piece. In order to attach the waxed linen cordage to the maple bark base and after I drill holes all the way around the base, each hole is cleaned and smoothed so there are no snags when threading cordage. I finish by threading the waxed linen through more holes which I weave up the sides using twining techniques. Threading cordage is the fun part! I wax every bark base to strengthen and protect the wood.

Some of my pieces are stained with black walnut. I collect and grind the husks to a paste, mix with water and paint it on. It is very messy and stains everything! When it is dry I sand and wax it for protection.



Drilling
holes
around
the base



Applying black
walnut stain

Here is an example of a fiber sculpture that has been pinned together first. Part of the bark has been stained with a black walnut slurry, then sewn and twined.





Weaving a double walled basket of 7 and 12-ply waxed linen using twining techniques.



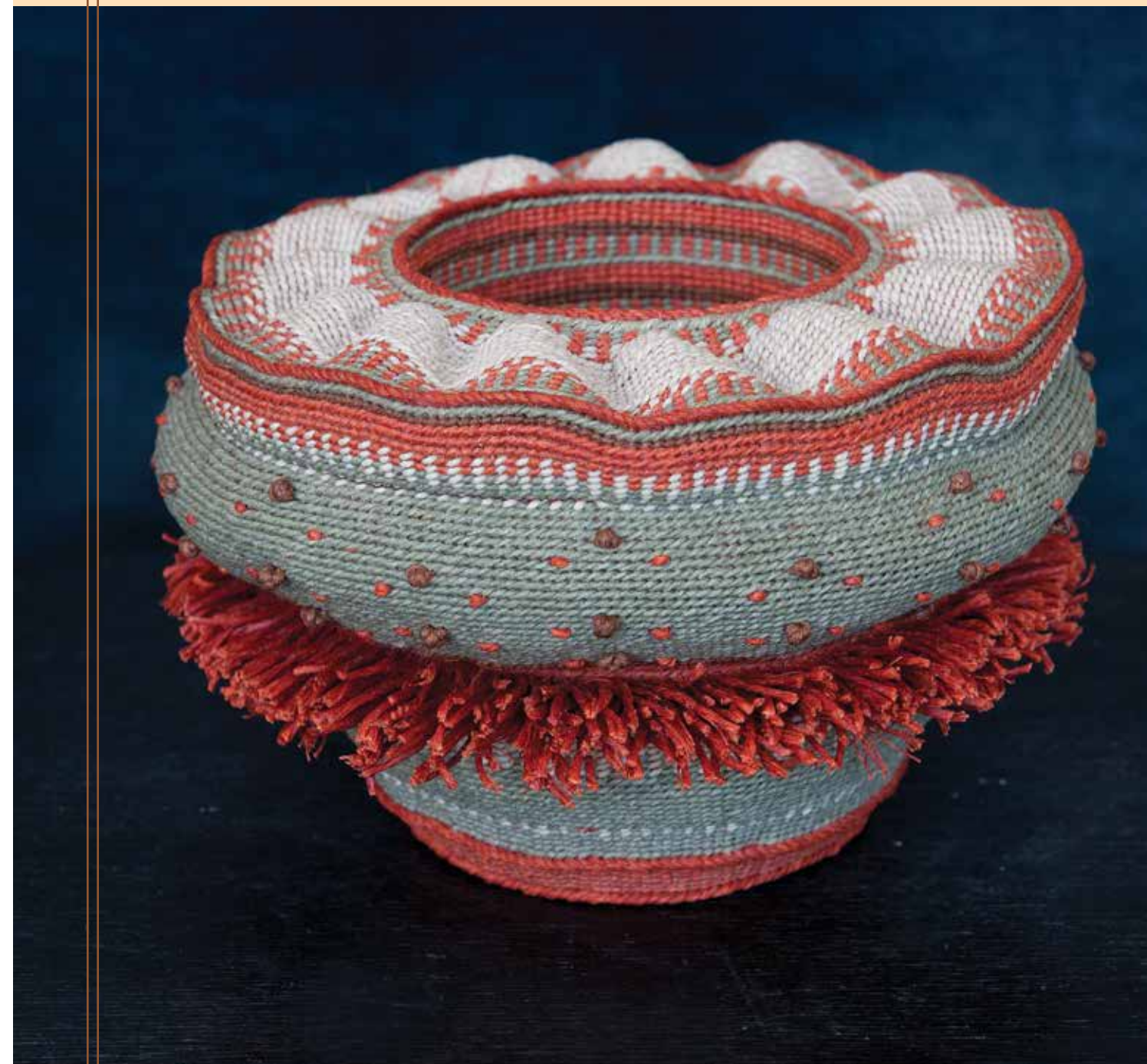
I ALWAYS START MY BASKETS WITH THE SAME AMOUNT OF SPOKES, 32. I ADD BY 4.

That way I have complete control over pattern decisions deep in to the project. When I end up with hundreds of spokes I don't want to go back and count spokes.

I use an assortment of waxed linen cordage in various sizes and yummy colors! Some of my baskets are constructed entirely of waxed linen. For those pieces, I weave both inside and out to form a sturdy, water-tight, double-walled piece. Not only does weaving on the inside of a basket make it stronger, but it adds weight to the basket. An inside wall also offers another surface for the application of pattern and texture.



Looking down inside a double-walled basket in progress. It is 4½" deep.



THERE AREN'T ENOUGH HOURS IN EACH DAY FOR ALL THE IDEAS BACKED UP IN MY HEAD!

Here is a perfect example of how sea creatures influence some of my work.



It is important to me that I make my art for me first: in the end I have to love each piece. On a grander scale, however, basket weaving as a fundamental human tradition has connected me to other weavers around the world, even though I don't know them personally. Every basket I make reminds me that there are others, tracing back to the dawn of human existence, who have woven together materials using the same motions of their hands that I still use today. It is truly a timeless craft that binds us together as people.



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These two taller baskets are double walled. They have different patterns inside and out. The blue piece is woven with 7-ply waxed linen cordage and the shorter piece is of 3 and 4-ply cordage.



Tiny waxed linen plates. Some complete, some not quite finished. All measure at least 2" in diameter.