

# basketry+

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KARL LONN

# LOIS RUSSELL DRIVEN BY CURIOSITY

It is often said that an inquisitive disposition is indispensable for a life of art and adventure. Lois Russell is an apt example, as her work has been driven by her voracious penchant for discovery from the moment she stepped into her first workshop.

Before basket making even occupied a passing thought in Russell's mind, she had already explored fiber art in several mediums, including quilting, rug hooking, knitting, and others. Then one phone call catapulted her creative journey—and life—in a new direction. Russell's mother had taken a basketry workshop. Upon her return, she immediately called her daughter and told her that she simply "had to give basketry a try!" Often mothers know best, and in this case, the adage definitely rang true.

Taking her mother's advice, Russell found a workshop at DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts, that was being taught by Judy Olney. As it turns out, Olney's workshop provided the entrée that launched Russell's basket making career. In her words, "I could not have found a better beginning teacher. Judy taught me the basics of shaping and other core skills. Sally Santuosso also was teaching at DeCordova during that time. Her approach was more global. Being exposed to the combination of both approaches was just what I needed, just when I needed it."

That first workshop was the kick-off to a cascade of critical learning experiences, as Russell developed her skills. She has learned from many leaders in the community, including Jackie Abrams, Lissa Hunter, Kari Lønning, Marilyn Moore, Kate Anderson, Nancy Moore Bess, and several others. The class setting also served as an introduction to the basket making community.

In Russell's words, "I loved baskets, the architecture and engineering of them. I worked with Jackie Abrams, Flo Hoppe, and others. Whenever I could get away for a weekend or a week, I found out who was teaching someplace in the country and I would just go. So, I got this really broad education in basketry. Every time I learned something new, I felt like I was putting another tool in my arsenal, so I could continue to explore more aspects of basket making." Russell ultimately decided to concentrate on using waxed linen to create twined vessels.

As her skills improved, so did her engagement with the basket making community. By the time Russell came to basketry, she had already taken on leadership roles in several community organizations. Over the years, the craft community has benefited from those early experiences. During that time, she has taken on various

board positions and has served as president of the National Basketry Organization. Russell also acted as chairman of the board and secretary for the Craft Emergency Relief Fund (CERF+). She currently serves on the board for the Society of Arts and Crafts and Penland Craft School.

Russell's inquisitiveness has served her well over the years, including in developing her signature style. She builds pockets of undulating bumps that draw the eye along the work, offering a topography unique to her own vision. Russell's pieces could be considered three-dimensional landscapes. In the words of artist and teacher Nancy Moore Bess, "Her work, which I love, reflects her passionate, committed personality. I think her unique, multicolored pieces are Lois and a clear reflection of her! I smile every time I see one."

Russell said, "I am not a conceptual artist. Instead, I start with a technique, then once I have mastered it, I think about what is important for me to make. Clearly, I love landscapes. Once I saw a David Hockney painting in his sketchbook and realized that what I am always responding to is the landscape and I am very aware of the horizons.

"I did a whole series where the pieces became worlds for particular animals, specifically endangered ones, such as bees, polar bears—and now I'm about to do one about blue whales. I also am inspired by patterns and colors outside of the natural landscape. You can find them in buildings, clothing, many [other] manmade things, too. It's about training your eye to really look carefully. I ask myself, 'What am I really seeing?'"

Russell continues to refine her ability to see patterns and unique compositions through photography. When "you are looking through a lens, you are putting a frame on something and doing a lot of composition. You can capture a pattern, almost abstracting what is in the camera," she said. She also is exploring collage and is building distinct patterns through cut and sorted images.

She is drawn to Aboriginal patterns, and is doing more coiling, embroidery, and hooking with unique materials. Russell is pondering all of these experiments and how she will bring them into her twining work. "This is the way I got to my personal style. I set a challenge. For example, I recently wondered, 'Can I hook a basket?' Sometimes these experiments work and sometimes they don't. But I keep asking the questions and learning."

The NBO board members are pleased to select Russell as a recipient of this year's Lifetime Achievement Award. Her contributions have affected basketry in many ways, and this award is well-deserved.



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OPPOSITE PAGE:  
**Outback**; 2018; waxed linen; twined; 8 x 3 x 3 in.  
THIS PAGE  
TOP LEFT: Lois Russell  
TOP RIGHT: **Habitat: a.melliflora**; 2015; waxed linen; twined; 10 x 8 x 8 in.  
CENTER: **Chitchat**; 2014; waxed linen; twined; 6 x 9 x 4 in.; in the collection of the Kamm Teapot Foundation  
BOTTOM: **Blub Blub**; 2008; waxed linen; twined; 14 x 14 x 14 in.





# DAWN WALDEN

## SPIRITUALITY + ARTISTRY ENTWINED

**D**awn Walden's basket-making work artfully combines her traditional roots with a contemporary sensibility. She draws heavily on her Ojibwe heritage: she learned her basketry skills and extensive materials knowledge from her elders. Those skills are inextricably tied to traditional Ojibwe spiritual beliefs and rituals. Spirituality is very important to the Ojibwe because spirits guide them through life.

"Dawn Walden once told me that one of the largest revelations of her life was her close observation of weaver birds making shelters," said Randall Morris of Cavin-Morris Gallery. "Those wild, beautiful pieces of hers that break the mold of even artistic baskets came from her Ojibwe heart in that the hours spent alone in the woods and fields gathering for her art, her struggles to keep healthy and alive, her close observations of seasons, animals, and plants are all synthesized in her beautiful Native heart. She is a dedicated gatherer, she watches the seasons, the marshes, the fauna and their information is integrated into her way of making. There is great pain in it and there is great joy in it. It is not physically easy. I consider her a constant teacher of animist life."

Through the years, Walden has added studies in commercial art and stone sculpture to the skill set she learned from her elders. Together with her Native roots, Walden's expressive, contemporary style has had a lasting impact on the basketry community. In Walden's words, "Each new work is an accumulation of my studies in sculpture, Great Lakes ethnobotany, observations in nature, and the internal journal into my spiritual beliefs and culture of the Ojibwe people."

Walden's work is known for its layered, complex construction and sculptural sensibility. The humble materials belie her affinity for and openness to nature. Walden gathers and processes all her own materials, bark, porcupine quills, and driftwood.

According to Walden's longtime friend Jane Sauer, an artist and former gallerist, "She has been an inspiration to artists because of her use of natural materials. When I first saw her work, what attracted me to it was the sculptural qualities, and how she used a natural material in traditional ways but was able to make it incredibly contemporary. I marvel at how she used the wholeness of the materials and segmented them. For example, the roots likely represent something spiritual to her."

Despite having made many inroads with collectors, Walden has largely stayed outside of the art world. This has been an important factor in maintaining originality. She preserves her purity of vision and has not emulated other artists. What she developed grew out of her own spirituality, knowledge of materials, and the skills that she has developed over the years.

Many of Walden's pieces capture the viewers' curiosity with a crevice of interior webbing that draws the eye further into the piece. In Sauer's words, "The interior structure that she creates and weaves upon is amazing."

Walden's environment continues to provide daily inspiration. It is a thickly forested wilderness in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. In seclusion, she finds the state of mind necessary for her work. "I'm unplugged, have no human contact," she said. "I'm completely open to nature ... I think of the elements and animals ... The song of the hermit thrush sounds like a silver bell."

Walden's work is a magical combination of random weaves juxtaposed with chaos. "The roots are important and the roots are the grounding element—that's what embeds every plant to the earth. I believe that is a guiding light for her," said Sauer.

Walden is a rare artist who cares more about making the work than selling it. Her spirituality drives her work and she is not pressured by commercial forces. The National Basketry Organization is pleased to select Dawn Walden as a recipient of this year's Lifetime Achievement Award. Her work speaks to collectors, curators, and makers, making an impact on a wide range of admirers.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Dawn Walden, **Restless (#2 in the series)**; 2015; cedar bark, cedar roots; 21 x 12 x 18 in. Photo courtesy of Cavin Morris Gallery

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TOP LEFT: Gathering birch bark. Sometimes Walden walks miles, bringing materials out of the woods into the studio.

TOP RIGHT: Working on **Random Order** series, available through Cavin Morris Gallery.

CENTER: **Ebb and Flow I**; 2014; porcupine quillwork on birch bark; 15 x 24 x 24 in.

BOTTOM LEFT: **Radiate**; 2014; cedar bark, cedar roots, and stone; 24 x 48 in. Photo courtesy Cavin Morris Gallery.

BOTTOM RIGHT: **Nesting Tendencies (part of Random Order series)**; 2014; cedar bark, cedar roots; 18 x 28 in; to be shown at Muskegon Art Museum, Extreme Fibers exhibition, August 2015. Photo courtesy of Cristine Burns.

