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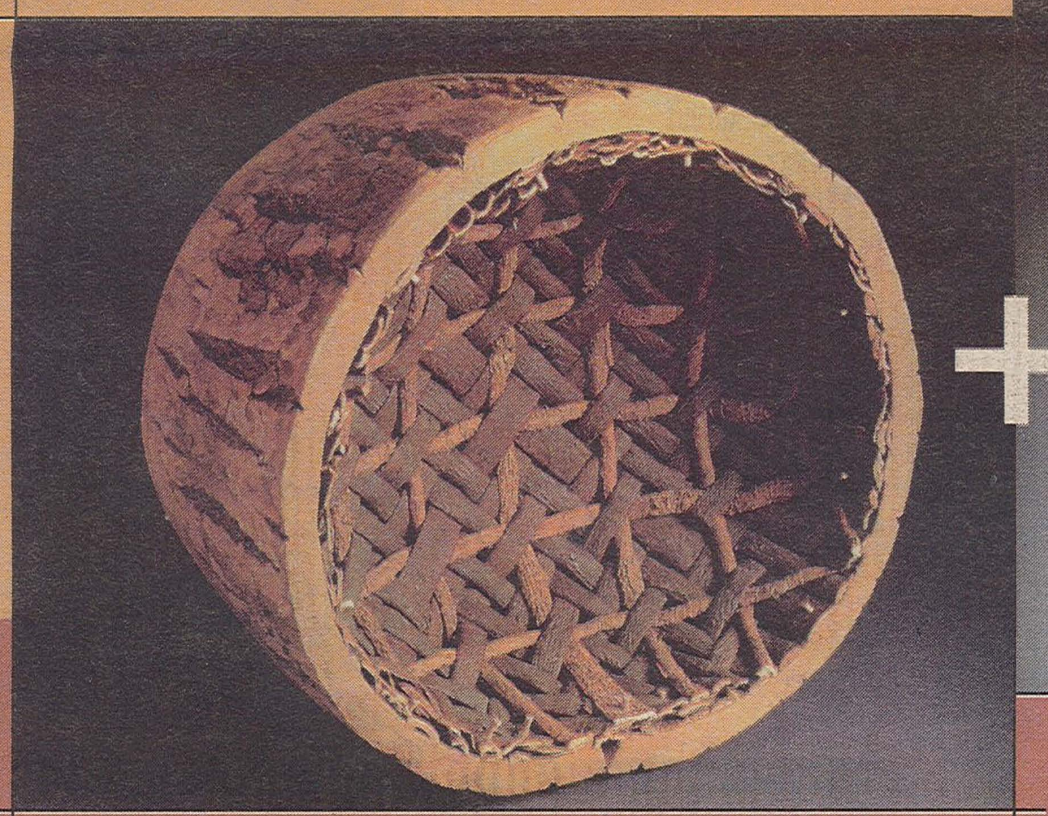

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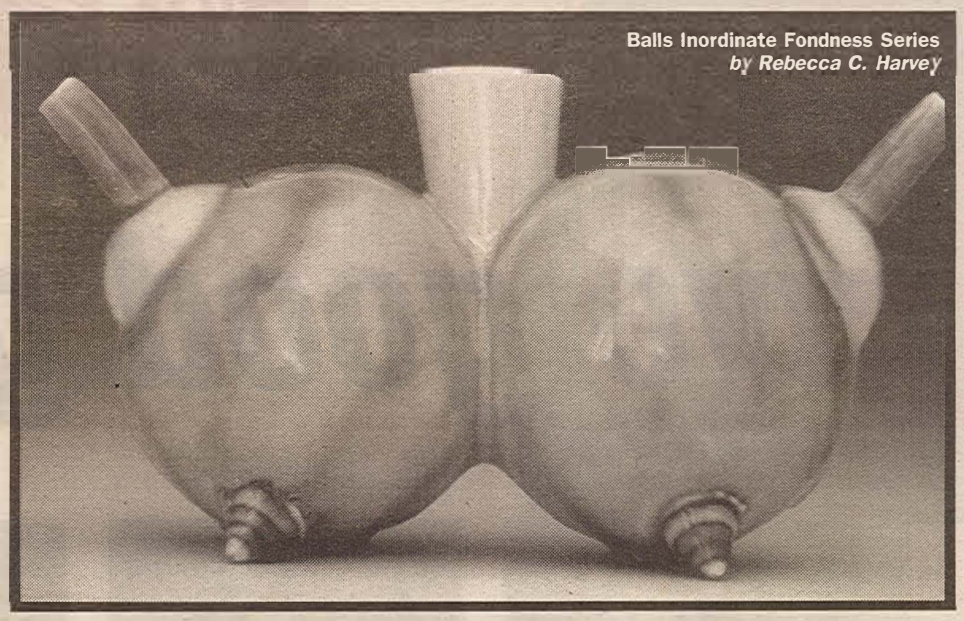
CLAY

Ohio artists push new boundaries with old materials

Fiber and clay

Ohio artists push new boundaries with old materials

by Brian Lindamood



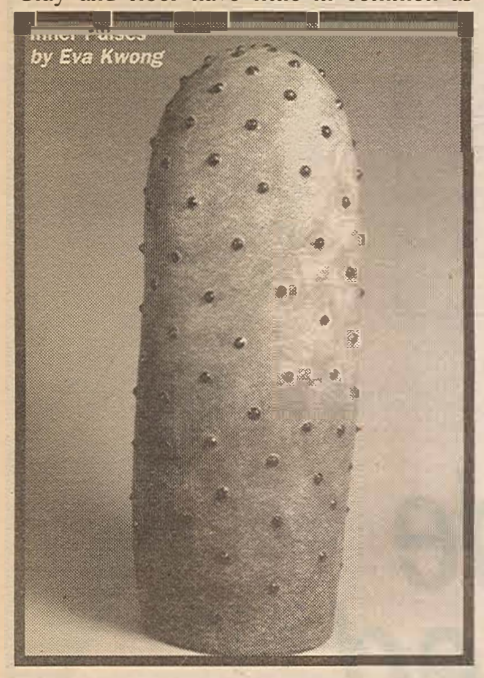
Balls Inordinate Fondness Series *by Rebecca C. Harvey*

"I often joke that if an artist's work doesn't fit into any other category, you can call it fiber art," laughed Janice Lessman-Moss, a Kent State University professor of art. "Fiber art is a very broad-based field. It incorporates a lot of different materials and a lot of different processes."

Lessman-Moss and Judith Salomon, a Cleveland Institute of Art associate professor, curated *Transcending Traditions: Ohio Artists in Clay and Fiber*, the new exhibition at the Riffe Gallery. In selecting pieces for this potentially expansive exhibit, looking for new work in very old media, the curators said they wanted art that is sensitive to traditional materials and processes of craft, but that takes those traditions to a new level.

"Because Ohio has such a wealth of ceramic artists, we tried to look for emerging artists who are starting their careers and starting to become well known, and some more established artists," Salomon added.

On all counts, the curators succeeded. Clay and fiber have little in common as



Inner Pulses *by Eva Kwong*

artistic media, though they are both natural raw materials. But the ancient substances, traditionally the stuff of functional crafts, are rediscovered and redefined here, taken from nature to the contemporary artworld with a nod to the past and an eye on the future. *Transcending Traditions* is the most eclectic exhibit this year in the Ohio Arts Council's Riffe Gallery. With more than 80 pieces from 13 artists, the show offers a real glimpse into what artists across the state are doing with materials new and old.

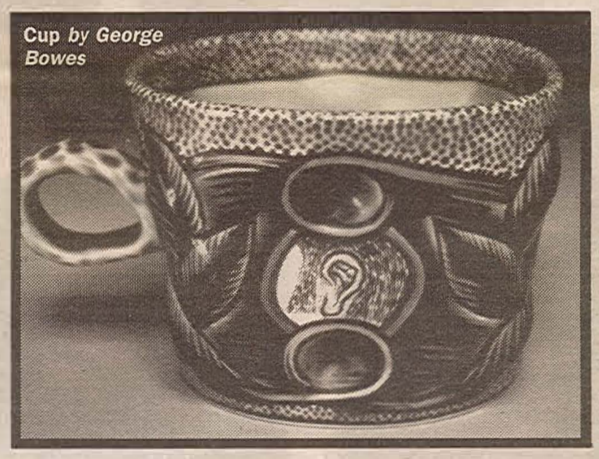
The most striking traditional/contemporary work in the exhibit is by Cleveland ceramic artist Kristen Cliffel. Her skilled use of texture and glazes lets her traditional clay realistically mimic substances like brick, wood, ivy and brass, all the while wryly commenting on the concerns of contemporary women. *All She'd Ever Dreamed Of* is a giant black leather purse, with a brass chain for a handle and a diamond engagement ring for a clasp. On the face of the purse, a picket fence forms teeth clenching a dull, gray suburban ranch home.

Black Box plays upon a similar theme. A two-foot-tall engagement ring, wrought in a dirty, shiny glaze echoing tarnished gold, contains in its oversized setting a sickly pink two-story home on a small plot of well-groomed grass. *Passage* portrays a thin, tall female figure, formed in exaggerated proportions and composed of chimney bricks. Smoke billows out of her chimney neck; between her legs is an empty hearth.

Cleveland sculptor Kelly Palmer uses clay as a fun, mirthful palette for his imagination. The outside of his large, amorphous sculptures percolate with life, as multi-colored nodules are painted with almost comic, pen-and-ink-style illustrated scenes. A peak inside one of the portals on *Saphena* reveals a whole other world fermenting within.

It's another twist on the essence of the medium. "He invited the viewer to come in and look into the pieces," Salomon noted. "In a lot of ways, he works with the inside of the clay and the outside of the clay."

Columbus' Rebecca Harvey creates small, vibrant pieces out of delicate porcelain, with bright glazes almost like a candy-coating that reach beyond their protective Plexiglas containers (these pieces are too tempting for wandering fingers). She uses geometric shapes to mimic functional porcelain vessels, like creamers, in ways that must leave owners beautifully frustrated. The press-molded pieces are like three-dimensional collages, based on



Cup *by George Bowes*

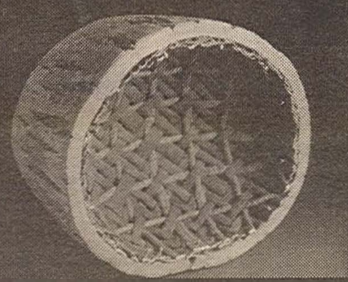
old-time pottery forms that have been reinvented.

Susan Shie and James Acord, both of Wooster, use fiber as a storytelling medium in their large, vibrant tapestries. *Tropical New York* is an almost campy, cross-cultural compendium of vignettes, as colorful, multi-layered (and mutli-dimensional) characters dance across a milieu framed by real mussel shells. The imagery injects a kind of spontaneous energy into the work. *That Old Devil Moon* is covered with myths and aphorisms about Earth's only natural satellite, the stories stitched onto luminescent crescent shapes.

Ravenna fiber artist Lilian Tyrrell offers large wool-and-linen tapestries from two different series: two *Disaster Blankets* that depict startling contemporary scenes and four *Medical Felts*. "She's using scale as a device to confront the viewer," Lessman-Moss noted. "You can't ignore the pieces." The *Medical Felts* show microscopic cells and fluids at a gigantic size, referring to organisms in the human body that can be

Transcending Traditions: Ohio Artists in Clay and Fiber
Riffe Gallery
77 S. High St.
644-9624
through January 8

From the Woods: New Work by Dorothy Gill Barnes *and* Ora Anderson: Hand-Carved Birds
Ohio Craft Museum
1665 W. Fifth Ave.
486-4402
through January 23

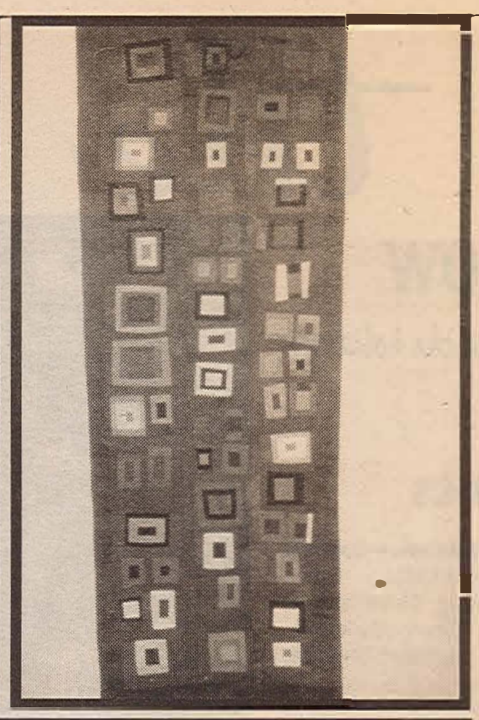


above: **Windfall Ridge Bark Bowl** *by Dorothy Gill Barnes*

below: **Sand Hill Crane** *by Ora Anderson*

very beautiful when magnified to this degree, but which are a little unsettling when one realizes what they are.

Acclaimed Worthington wood and fiber artist Dorothy Gill Barnes takes advantage of the spacious headroom in the Riffe Gallery with her installation *Worthington Mulberry Trees*. The six trees, standing from floor to ceiling, are each manipulated in different ways: one tree's bark is woven around itself; the roots of one tree are woven into a basket-like base; one is stripped of its bark, and presented as bare wood standing next to its own bark, the hollow shell echoing the tree's scars; a perfect, woven sphere, larger than a basketball, is nestled in the branches of another tree.



left: Tropical New York (detail) *by Susan Shie and James Acord; center:* Wretched Excess *by Kelly Palmer; right:* Constructions #10 *by Nancy Crow*

Barnes' work is also on display in a major exhibition at the Ohio Craft Museum. *From the Woods: New Work by Dorothy Gill Barnes* is the artist's largest show to date, featuring nearly 40 newly constructed pieces and several works in progress, and a handful of her personal favorites borrowed from collections around the country.

Many of Barnes' pieces are vessels, or variations on basket-like containers, ranging in scale from the roughly hewn, tree-trunk size of *Wide Bark Elm With Handle* to the minute avocado, mango and orange rinds that are woven and dried into delicate spirals. The structures all take their cues from nature, the pieces following the organic shapes indicated by the natural growth of the wood. The result shows respect for the organic material, but also manipulates it, enhancing the natural beauty of the tree-born vessels.

Willow With Log is a fully formed tree trunk with moss still visible at its base. Crowning the three-foot structure, the bark is woven into a basket, an open container reaching for the sky where the tree once would have continued. The centerpiece of the exhibit, *Sunbury Willow*, is an elaborate V-shaped vessel constructed of two forked branches. The rough, pale bark is woven in broad swaths, stretching upward toward an open crown. A peek inside—standing on tip-toes—reveals that the vessel is lined with another willow bark basket, this one woven of smaller strips and nestled inside the forked branch.

In *Corkscrew With Willow*, gnarly branches are presented in halves—one half stripped to the bare wood, and other half woven with bark, mimicking but elaborating on the branch's natural covering.

Pine Bark Boxes, Pair is another wonderful comment on a recreated organic feature. The pair of one-foot cubes are woven from the trees' bark, descending from the top where the bark is still attached to the trunks. The construction forms artificial bases, exaggerated trunks that thoroughly anchor the works. The pair is among Barnes' most solid looking pieces, yet the cubes are nearly hollow.

Joining the Barnes exhibit at the Ohio Craft Museum is *Ora Anderson: Hand-Carved Birds*, a collection of work by the noted Athens craft artist. Anderson, who was recognized with the Governor's Award for an Arts Patron this year, has been a lifelong contributor to the arts in Ohio. Among other support he offers, he invites Ohio University sculpture students and other artists to use the natural materials on his farm and woods for their work.

Anderson's carved birds are beautifully subtle, with an incredible attention to detail that belies the aviaphile's love of nature. The birds are shown in active positions, their gentle muscles rippling beneath fully formed feathers. Anderson's birds are often depicted perched on real branches, and the artist doesn't disguise the material he works with. The wood grain visible beneath his delicate carvings is an extension of the medium and his subjects' outdoor home, a visual marriage of art and nature.

Nature's baskets

Dorothy Gill Barnes weaves wood and bark into arbor art

by Brian Lindamood

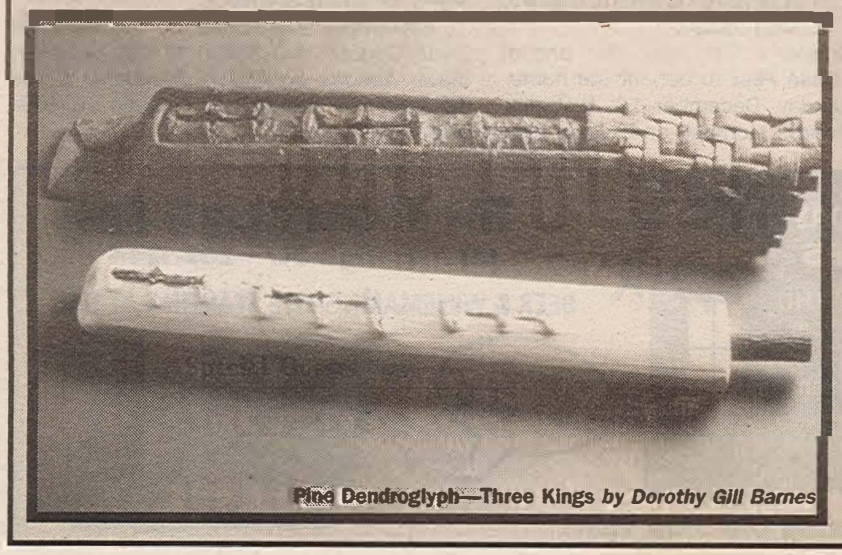
Worthington artist Dorothy Gill Barnes' distinctive style is marked by a respect and understanding of her media, elegantly integrating nature into her work. She uses the same basic materials as other basket and fiber artists—wood and bark. But Barnes doesn't try to disguise or purify these media; she uses them in their most organic form, sometimes as they're still growing.

To put it bluntly, Barnes doesn't recreate or substitute for nature's beauty. She enhances and expands upon it.

A three-time recipient of an Ohio Arts Council Individual Fellowship award, Barnes was recognized with an Ohio Designer Craftsmen Award for Outstanding Achievement in 1998 and a Governor's Award for the Arts in Ohio in 1999 after a nearly three-decades-long career. Her work has been exhibited around the country and in Europe and Japan.

Yet for all this international acclaim, Barnes is gracious and plainspoken, delightfully open in discussing her work. As evidence of her accessibility, her current exhibition of new work at the Ohio Craft Museum, *From the Woods*, features works in progress for the first time. Helped in part by the craft museum's relative proximity to her Worthington home studio, Barnes was able to display several large, unfinished pieces. It's a sort of open studio visit for the public, Barnes said. "It's an opportunity for me to show some things that I otherwise might not exhibit."

Signs next to one unfinished work explain that as the wood cures, it will warp, and as it warps, the piece will change. "I can't make it until I know what's going to happen to it," Barnes explained. "The warping could add to the design possibilities."

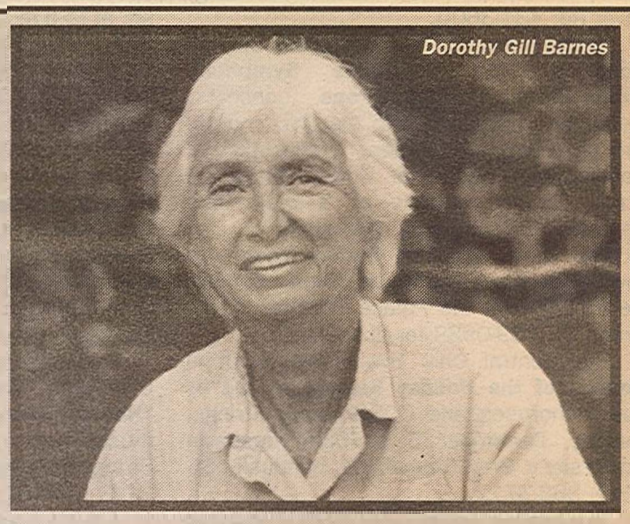


Pine Dendroglyph—Three Kings *by Dorothy Gill Barnes*

It's a good example of the role nature plays in Barnes' work. The raw materials frequently determine the outcome of the artwork, the organic media growing and responding to the artist's touch.

Barnes said her unusual choice of media comes from early interests in woodworking and sewing. While teaching a fiber arts class at Capital University in the early '70s, her work started to become more three dimensional, to the point where she could no longer fit her materials into weaving looms. "The basketry just seemed to come together with the interest in sewing and woodworking and my pleasure in nature."

Barnes' pieces usually begin in a forest, where she picks a living tree to work with. (She only uses trees that are already slated to be harvested or removed, often at Ora Anderson's Athens County farm: "It's very important to me that people know I don't just go out and scar any old tree.") Barnes then uses any of several techniques, such as making dendroglyphs by carving into the living flesh, or by weaving the tree's bark or branches. The artwork is created as the tree grows back around the artist's manipulations.



Dorothy Gill Barnes

She is currently working on pieces that involve taking the heavy bark off the outside of trees, and marking the second layer of bark in alternate years. "A lot of these are planned at least four months to four years before I use them," Barnes said.

"A lot of the design happens right there in the woods," she continued. "I think a traditional basketmaker would know that they were going for a particularly good, tall hickory that has straight lines, because they want uniform material. I look at these trees and pick out the ones that have characteristics I haven't seen before, so I'm challenged by a new and different form."

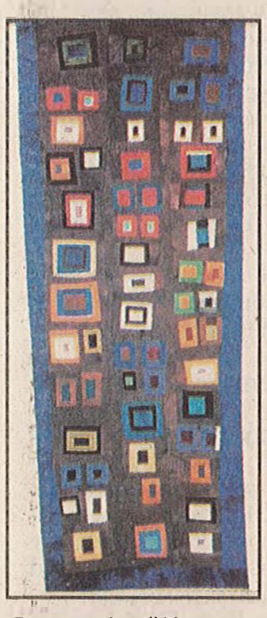
Imagination soars in crafts show

■ The clay and fiber works are often only loosely connected to their utilitarian origins.

By Jacqueline Hall
Dispatch Art Critic

The works of 13 imaginative craftspeople who have pushed their media beyond traditional limits provide a colorful and stimulating exhibition, "Transcending Traditions: Ohio Artists in Clay and Fiber," at the Riffe Gallery.

In his essay for the exhibition catalog, Bruce Metcalf, an independent jeweler and writer, stresses that all the pieces are made from the most traditional craft materials, clay and fiber, worked in most traditional ways.



Construction #10
by Nancy Crow

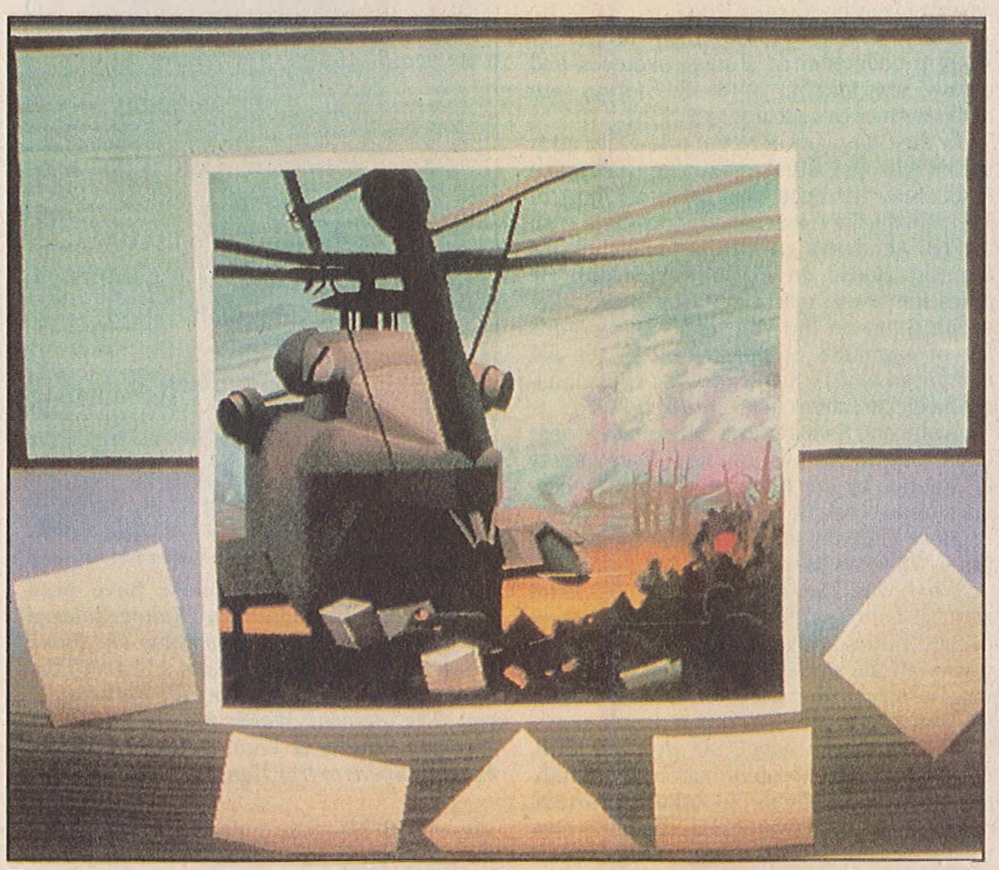
The clay is either thrown on the wheel or hand built, then glazed and fired in a kiln. The fibers are woven, plaited or stitched.

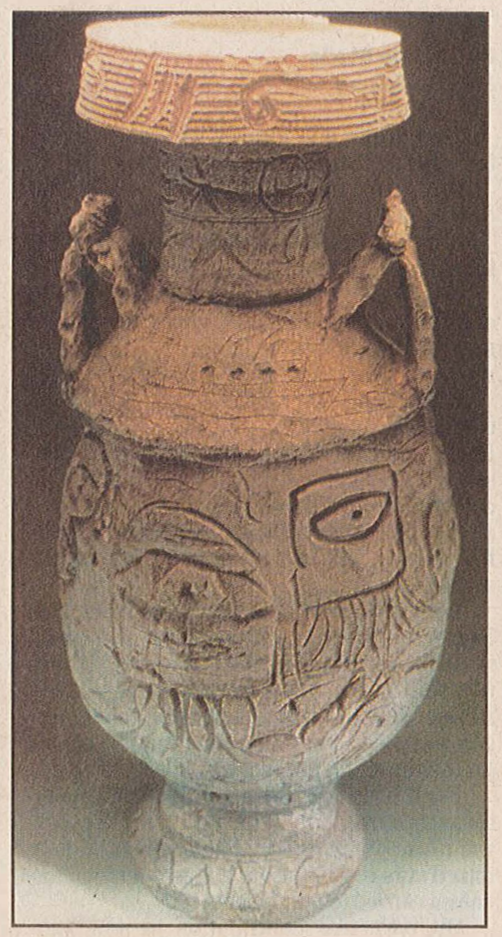
Although functional — vessels, baskets, coverlets, quilts — the works seem to exist more for aesthetic reasons or as intellectual or emotional statements than for utilitarian purposes.

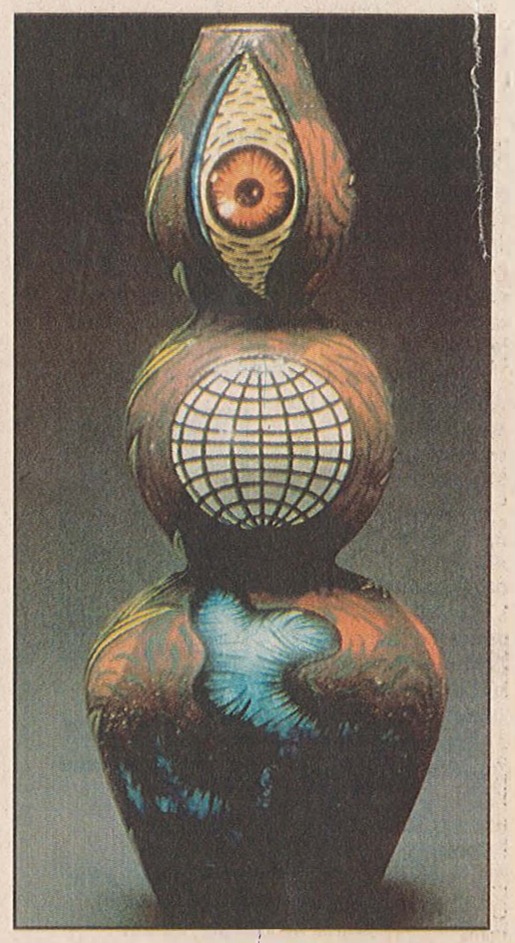
Yet, however beautiful or inspiring they may be, they remain foremost objects made by hand by artists who painstakingly learned and mastered their craft and practice it for the sheer satisfaction of doing so.

What Metcalf wrote about himself — "I love what I do. My craft makes my life meaningful" — applies to all the artists in the show.

The exhibition — curated by Janice Lessman-Moss, professor of art at Kent State University, and Judith Salomon, associate professor at the Cleveland Institute of Art — consists of more than 80 works by clay artists George Bowes, Kristen Cliffel and Kelly Palmer, Cleveland; Rebecca Harvey, Columbus; and Eva Kwong and Kirk Mangus, Kent; and by fiber artists Dorothy Gill Barnes, Worthington; Deborah Frazee Carlson, Peninsula; Nancy Crow, Loudonville; Jo Ann Gior-







From left: ***Disaster Blanket/The Irony*** **by Lilian Tyrrell,** ***See Life Amphora*** **by Kirk Mangus and** ***A Rigid Listing*** **by George Bowes**

RIFFE GALLERY

■ "Transcending Traditions: Ohio Artists in Clay and Fiber" is showing through Jan. 8 at the Riffe Gallery, 77 S. High St. Hours: 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Friday, until 8 p.m. Wednesday-Friday and noon-8 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Call 614-644-9624.

so from different perspectives and follow vastly dissimilar visions.

Some maintain close contact with the traditional vessel, although utility in their creations is not a primary concern.

Harvey's porcelain teapots may be functional, but barely so; their playful, rounded forms have a strongly sensuous appeal greatly enhanced by the sugary quality of their glazed surface. Bowes and Mangus are more interested in surface textures and decorations of their vases, cups and amphorae than in their practicality; Bowes' intensely colorful decorations and Mangus' deeply incised or raised imagery tend to supersede the vessel forms and to engage the eye in a quest that goes far beyond the objects themselves.

Cliffel, Kwong and Palmer are more daring in their approach, which makes short shrift of the traditional vessel. Their works are sculptures that address concerns far removed from the utilitarian.

Cliffel favors a tongue-in-cheek view of the contemporary woman's dreams and situation in our society; Kwong and Palmer deal with nature and the human figure, in challengingly sensuous shapes.

Fiber artists have a much wider choice of materials and come from remarkably different traditions.

For them, it is not so much the material as the process that matters — the time-consuming, repetitive process of weaving, sewing, quilting, embroidering, even transferring images.

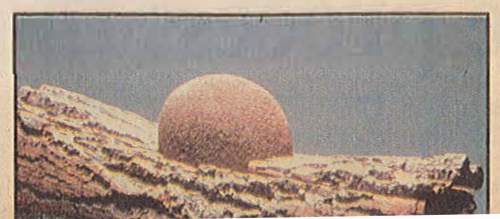
All the fiber artists in the show but one, Barnes, work on flat surfaces. Carlson and Tyrrell are weavers: Carlson favors small, exquisitely modulated surfaces conducive to meditation, while Tyrrell works on a monumental scale and creates representative images that demand visitors' attention and challenge them.

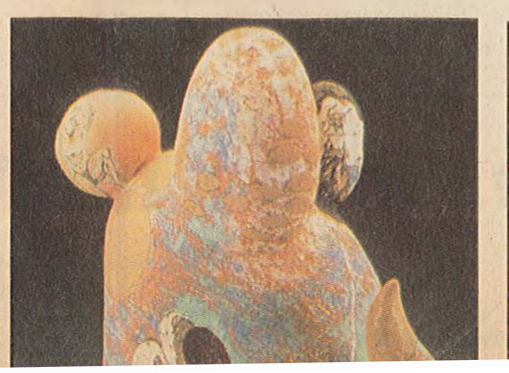
Shie and Acord are known for their elaborate mixed-media, narrative quilts that address personal, social or political concerns with great imagination.

Little Red Riding Hood
by Kristen Cliffel

Crow and Barnes favor an abstract imagery. Crow, however, works with hand-dyed fabrics to create bold, colorful geometric patterns, while Barnes prefers tree bark and natural materials for strongly three-dimensional and sculptural forms.

Both artists have achieved national recog-



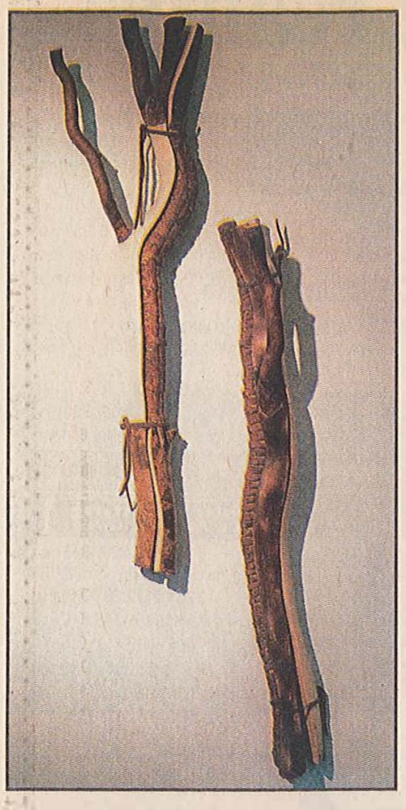


dano, University Heights; Susan Shie and James Acord, Wooster; and Lilian Tyrrell, Ravenna.

Many of the artists have participated in one-person and group shows in central Ohio and are known to Columbus collectors.

The clay artists illustrate the diversity and dynamism of contemporary ceramics in the state. They approach the medium with obvious enjoyment of its sensuous, tactile quality and a sense of its long history. But they do

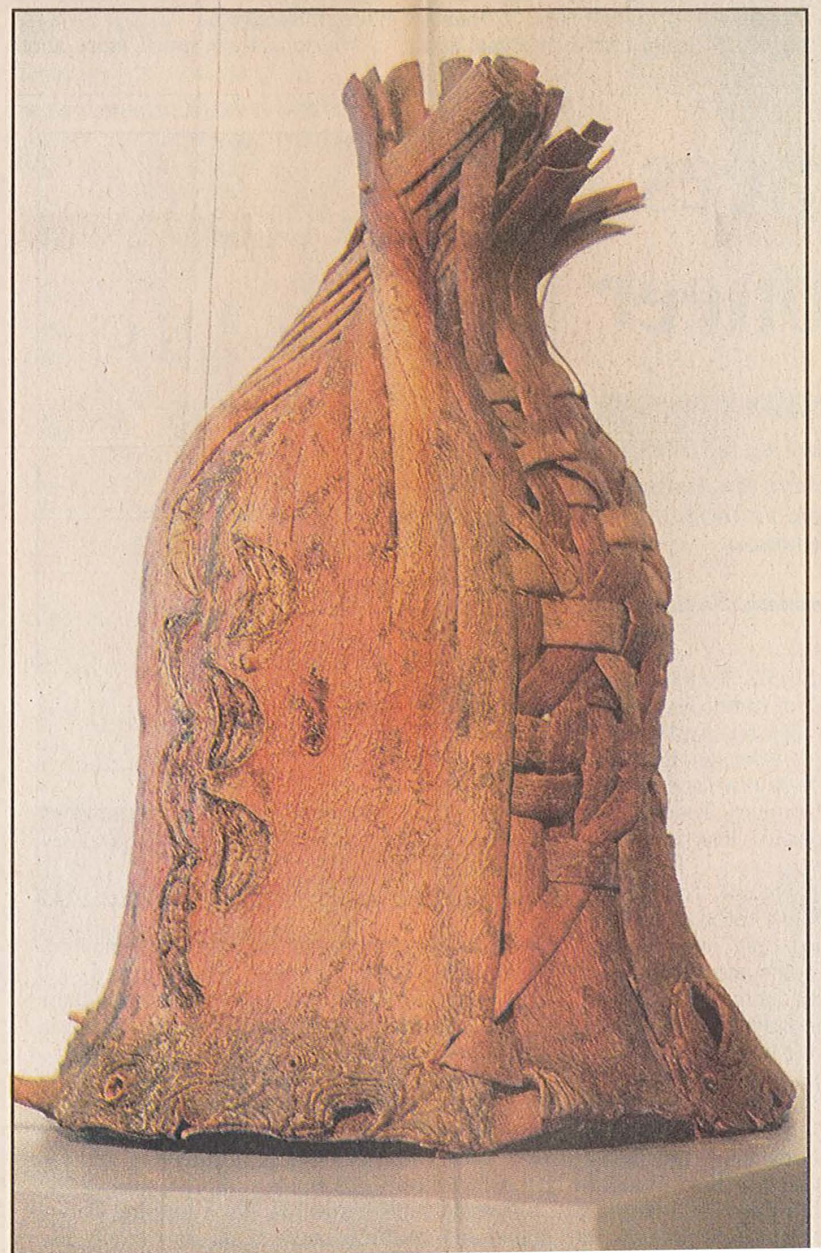
From left: *Bark Box With Stone in Lid* by Dorothy Gill Barnes, *Fierce Simian* by Kelly Palmer and *That Old Devil Moon* by Susan Shie and James Acord



ABOVE: *Mulberry With Tool Marks*

LEFT: *Corkscrew Willow, Peeled, Charred and Woven*

RIGHT: *Seven Moons Dendroglyph*



New forms from nature

Artist literally gets to roots

By Jacqueline Hall
Dispatch Art Critic

Dorothy Gill Barnes is a truly creative artist, original in her choice of material and in her approach to it.

"From the Woods," at the Ohio Craft Museum, offers a fascinating look at Barnes' unique art form, which incorporates weaving, basketmaking and sculpture. The exhibition features 50 works, most created in the past five years.

A resident of Worthington, Barnes is internationally recognized for her original approach to baskets and related sculptural objects. During the past 20 years, she has been invited to participate in shows throughout the United States and as far away as Kyoto, Japan, and London.

Her work is in many museums' collections — the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington; the American Craft Museum in New York; Schumacher Gallery in Columbus; Christchurch Polytechnic in New Zealand

OHIO CRAFT MUSEUM

■ "From the Woods: Works by Dorothy Gill Barnes" continues through Jan. 23 in the Ohio Craft Museum, 1665 W. 5th Ave. Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday and 1-5 p.m. Sunday. Call 614-486-4402.

Harvard sending art back home

■ Two works spirited out of Nazi Germany are being returned to a Russian avant-gardist's family.

By Erica Noonan
Associated Press

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — The small canvas painted with a blue rectangle and black circle may not look like much to the untrained eye. And the *Untitled* sketch of pencil lines is elegant but hardly a head-turner.

Yet these works by Russian avant-garde pioneer Kazimir Malevich are so important to the preservation of modern art that a German museum director risked his life smuggling them out of his Nazi-occupied homeland.

They've recently been the center of an international custody agreement between Malevich's heirs and Harvard University's Busch-Reisinger Museum, which has displayed the pictures in its Cambridge gallery for a half-century.

Harvard has agreed to give back the works to the artist's family, marking another victory in a growing movement to return to the rightful owners art and assets lost or looted during World War II, said Lawrence Kaye, a New York City lawyer who represents Malevich's family.

"This case is very important to modern art and art recovery," Kaye said. "It's important to the (Malevich) family to be able to assert their rights. . . . This family is trying to restore their heritage."

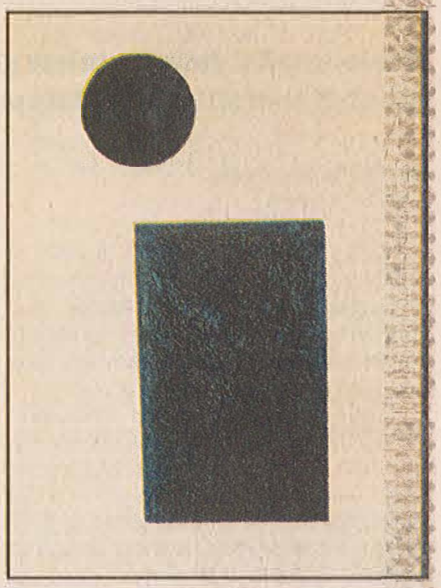
The tale of the two wayward pictures began in 1927, when Malevich moved scores of his works from his home in Leningrad — where officials often forbade public showings because they believed the art to be subversive — to Berlin, a city more accepting of the burgeoning avant-garde movement.

Malevich returned home and died several years later without ever retrieving the art.

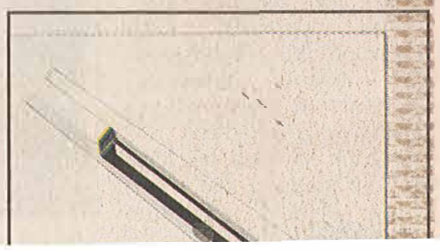
The 1915 oil painting *Suprematist Painting (Rectangle and Circle)* and pencil-on-paper drawing *Untitled* wound up in the hands of Alexander Dorner, director of the Landesmuseum in Hanover, Germany, and a passionate supporter of modern art.

But in 1933, when Adolf Hitler's National Socialist Party took control, the government launched a campaign to rid the country of so-called "degenerate art."

Hitler targeted the works of artists such as Malevich because they didn't propagandize values of robust health and good-looking Aryan citizens engaged in productive activities, said Kirk Varnedoe, chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of



Suprematist Painting (Rectangle and Circle) by Kazimir Malevich



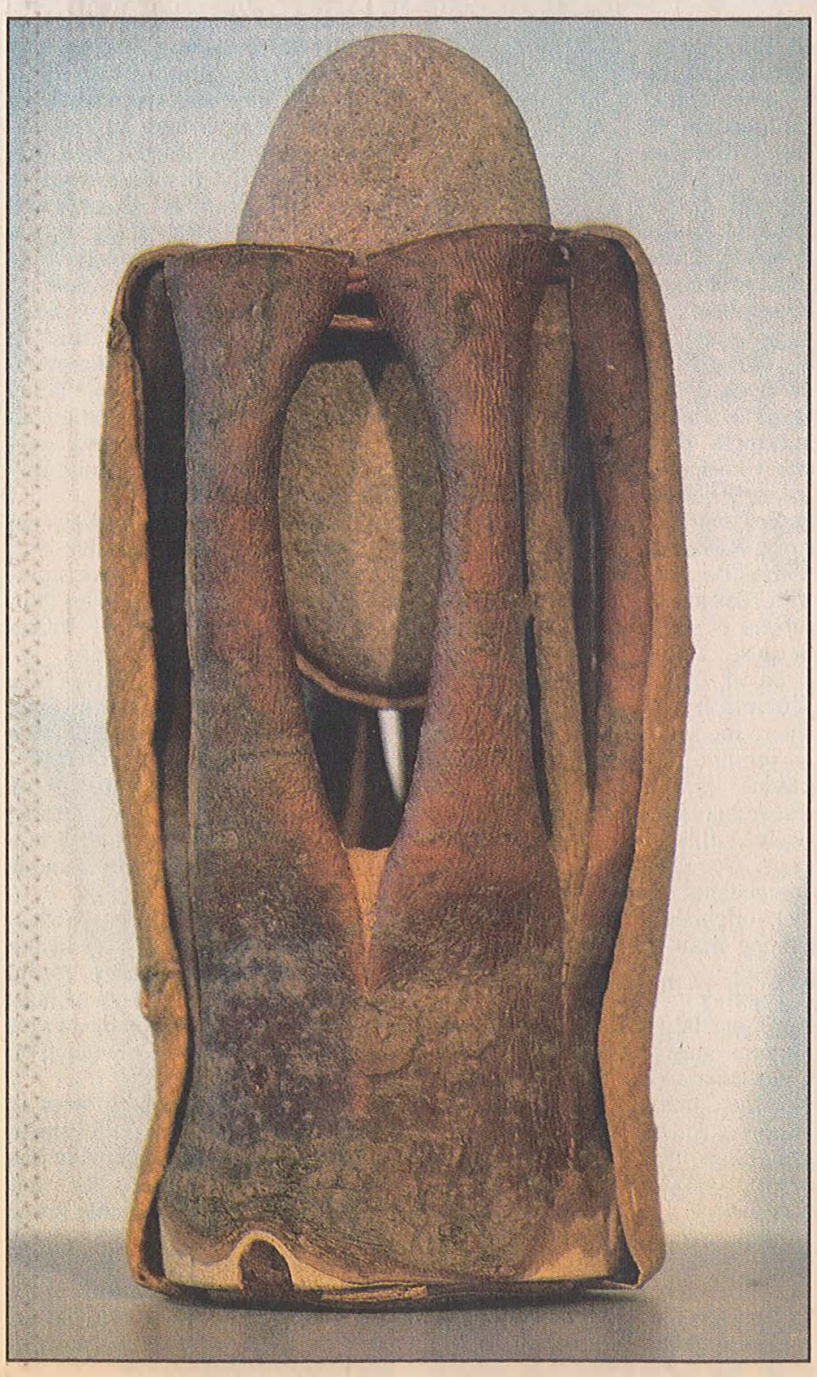
of New Zealand; in 1993, she was recognized for Lifetime Achievement in the Crafts Arts by the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington; and last year, she received the Governor's Award for the Arts, Individual Artist, from the Ohio Arts Council, and was inducted into the American Craft Council's College of Fellows.

All that recognition came as a result of Barnes' imaginative, even daring use of materials from nature. Fern stems, bark, branches, roots and stones found in explorations in the woods provide the artist with the means and the inspiration for her work.

"The unique properties I find in gathered materials," she explained in a statement, "suggest a process for each piece." Her art form could be called a collaboration between her and nature. The trees she uses are tagged for destruction, and her work gives them a new life.

Sometimes, Barnes works on location, before the tree is cut down. Such was the case with "Our Mulberry Tree Project 1996-2001": In 1996, Barnes cut a strip from the tree, which healed, leaving a very noticeable scar. In 1999, the tree was cut down with some roots intact. She is letting time cure the tree, which is in the show, and is observing its warping, hoping to use the bark and wood in a couple of years.

Here the collaboration with nature is extended to a collaboration with man, as one person helped her strip the bark and another made the slot in the tree and cut slices of wood from it.

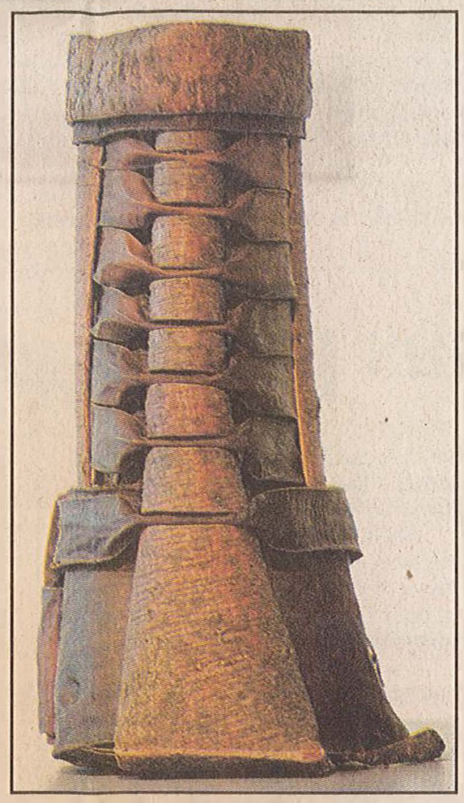


What is not used on location is hauled to her studio. *Mulberry With Tool Marks*, for example, is a little basket made of woven bark and is encased in the limb.

Barnes does fantastic things with bark. As she explained, bark is elastic immediately after being stripped from the tree. If she does not use it immediately, she rolls it and freezes it, eventually wetting it as if it were leather, weaving it in complex patterns, such as with *Sunbury Willow*.

In other cases, the weaving is mixed with incisions, as in the impressive *Seven Moons Dendroglyph*, "dendroglyph" referring to the scarring created by the incision marks.

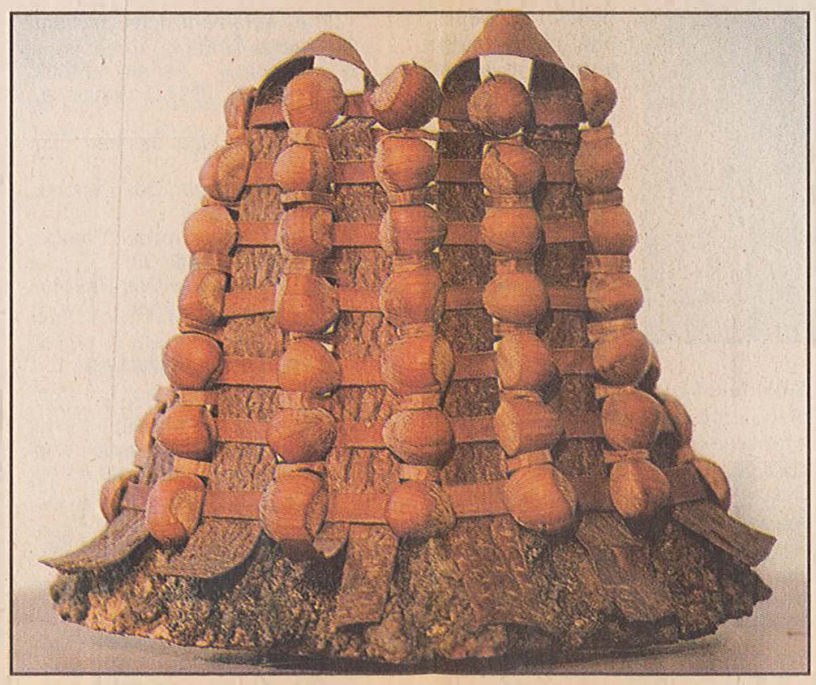
In *Corkscrew Willow Peeled, Charred and Woven*, Barnes accentuates the peculiarity of the wood by stripping it selectively, charring the strips of bark to give patina in some places and weaving them in others. In some works, she shows the "before" and "after" parts, as in *Visit to Kyoto*, where the Japanese character for "wood" was incised first, then cut out.



Buckthorn and Locust

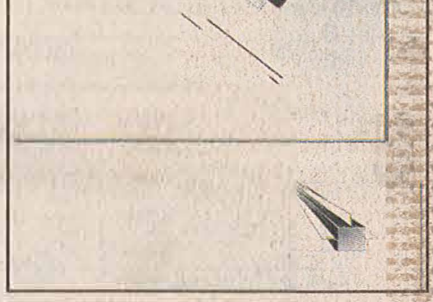
Lately, she has become more interested in the tonal modulations of the wood, and she plays with them with great success in *Buckthorn and Locust*.

The show reveals the seemingly infinite possibilities of nature's materials in talented hands guided by a daring vision. From the small baskets made of fruit peels and the patterns made by animals' marks, to the charming *Filbert and Bark Basket* and the elegant *Bark Holding Stone*, Barnes' experimentations and homage to nature seem to know no limit.



ABOVE: ***Filbert and Bark Basket***

LEFT: ***Bark Holding Stone***



Untitled

Pas, the artist's roots in communist Russia made his work even more repulsive in Hitler's eyes, he said.

"(Hitler) felt art should not challenge, that it should be comforting," Varnedoe said. "He wanted it to show the affirmative aspect of life. He disliked aggressive, deforming art."

In contrast, Malevich was an antitraditionalist who took Pablo Picasso's cubist perspective further into abstraction. He often used black and colored geometric shapes against a white background, creating art that had no references to the natural world beloved by more conventional impressionist painters.

"Malevich's work looks so simple, but it's very subtle and beautiful with an amazing sense of space," Varnedoe said.

By the mid- to late 1930s — as more and more abstract art was seized from German museums to be destroyed or sold abroad — Dorner knew the Malevich pictures were in jeopardy, said Peter Nisbet, Busch-Reisinger's curator. He also knew he faced deportation to a labor camp for his support of avant-garde art.

Dorner immigrated to the United States in 1938, secreting *Suprematist Painting* and *Untitled* in his luggage.

Dorner served as director of a museum at the Rhode Island School of Design and later taught at Bennington College in Vermont. When he died in 1957, the Malevich pictures were willed to Busch-Reisinger until their proper owner could be determined.

In 1993, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Malevich's heirs began a campaign to reclaim his work, now scattered in museums in the United States, the Netherlands, Russia and elsewhere.

In June, the Museum of Modern Art agreed to give Malevich's descendants an undisclosed cash payment and one painting, *Suprematist Composition (1923-25)*, in exchange for 15 other works that had been in the museum since they were smuggled out of Germany in 1935.

The Harvard pictures may be sold, or possibly returned to Europe. The oil painting from Malevich's *Suprematist* period could be worth millions of dollars, Kaye said.

AROUND OHIO

CINCINNATI

■ "Paul Riba, Magic Realist," an exhibit of 21 paintings from the collection of Nell Riba Hutt, will be on display Saturday-March 1 in the Cincinnati Art Galleries, 225 E. 6th St. A reception will be held noon-4 p.m. Saturday. Hours: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday. Call 513-381-2128.

DAYTON

■ "Drawing From Perception III" and "Form and Atmosphere: The Graphic Works of Paul Resika" will be displayed through Jan. 30 at the Wright State University Art Gallery, A128 Creative Arts Center, 3640 Colonel Glenn Highway. A lecture will be given by the exhibition juror, Rosemarie Beck, at 2:30 today. A reception will follow.

"Drawing" is a contemporary collection of works created with traditional drawing materials and direct observation techniques. "Form and Atmosphere" explores the artist's attitude toward the act of creation. Hours are 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, noon-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Call 937-775-2978.

MENTOR

■ The Bev Doolittle Art Festival will be held Wednesday-Jan. 23 at Gallery One, 7003 Center St. The event will begin with an appearance by the artist, creator of the "Art of Camouflage," 6-9 p.m. Wednesday. She will give a 7 p.m. slide presentation about her camouflage technique, used to hide images in her paintings. Hours: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Tuesday and Friday; and noon-4 p.m. Sunday. Call 800-621-1141.