

## r o b   b a r n a r d   e s s a y s

## A BASKETMAKER IN RURAL JAPAN

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The life of Hiroshima Kazuo, the last professional basket maker in the mountainous Hinokage region on the island of Kyushu, is the subject of *A Basketmaker in Rural Japan*, a book which served as the catalogue for the recent exhibition of Hiroshima's work at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (November 20, 1994 to July 9). Louise Allison Cort and Nakamura Kenji give us not only a sketch of Hiroshima's life but also a cultural and socioeconomic context that allows us an unvarnished glimpse of the man's struggle to become a respected basketmaker. This is important, I think, because we Americans have a tendency to romanticize the life of rural craftsmen like Hiroshima (what I call the Unknown Craftsman syndrome). We often erroneously assume that their achievements are the result of an uncomplicated life in a totally supportive social construct in which "tradition" replaces the need for "creative" solutions to problems they encounter in their craft.

Cort and Nakamura dispel that sentimental view by not sugarcoating the circumstances that led Hiroshima to basketmaking. They recount how, at the age of three, he suffered a dislocation of the right hip that left him with a permanent limp. His lame leg made it impossible for him to make the long walk to another village to attend school and also precluded him from performing rigorous farm work. The desire not to spend the rest of his life as a burden to his family is what led him at an early age to an apprenticeship with an itinerant basketmaker. Cort and Nakamura, quoting Hiroshima, also demonstrate that the social status of the basketmaker in Japan is far from the image most Americans have of the craftsman in that country as a National Living Treasure. "It saddens me," he says, "that bamboo work is done only by ill people, handicapped people, and people disdained by the rest of society."

Hiroshima's baskets challenge the preconceptions we in post-modern fine art and craft have about what art can and should be. I say challenge, because all the painters, sculptors, craftspeople and critics I know who saw the exhibition were completely taken by it. They seemed mesmerized not only by the beauty of the objects, but also by how supposedly contradictory qualities can coexist in a perfectly natural and harmonious way. These baskets were simple, for example, in their intention – to serve a specific domestic use – and yet visually, technically and emotionally complicated. There was no "message," yet they seemed to communicate on a level that is rare in all but the best painting and sculpture. It was impossible to dismiss them as simple craft, even though that was the rationale for their existence, because that interpretation could not explain the remarkable resonance of Hiroshima's work. I am not sure exactly what these baskets said to those who saw them at the Sackler. I do know, however, what they did not convey – false sentiment, intellectual dishonesty, self-conscious affectation or contempt for their audience.

Such work as Hiroshima Kazuo's defies analysis and categorization. Like most great art it transcends its own ordinariness and points to something far more profound. It causes those of us who experience it to feel a certain awe and at the same time a sense that perhaps we, too, might be able to reconcile the contradictory aspects of our own lives. In other words, it gives us hope.