

Museum features Yup'ik baskets

by Holly F. Reimer

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The Anchorage Museum of History and Art is exhibiting more than 60 baskets made by a Yup'ik Eskimo, who is acknowledged as one of the most accomplished Eskimo basket weavers living today.

They are made by Florence Cle-

ment, 41, who is originally from Hooper Bay. They are from a local private collection.

"I was about 5 years old when my mother, Mary Tinker of Hooper Bay, first taught me how to basket weave. I started all the bottoms for her," Clement said.

"When I was about 10 or 11, I sold my first basket at the Hooper Bay

Store for \$2. That was a lot of money."

She has since won two first-place prizes and honorable mentions at the statewide Earth, Fire and Fibre craft exhibition.

"I'm going to teach two of my daughters how to weave baskets,

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photos courtesy of Anchorage Museum of History and Art

• Baskets may take five days to make

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Rosetta, 9, and Angelique, 5," Clement said.

Passing on the tradition is very important to Clement, as it was important to the generations before her.

Although using the basic traditional style of small, close stitches, Clement doesn't use drawn designs. Every basket is made from thoughts in her head, which makes each basket unique and beautiful.

Clement uses wild rye, which is about 2 feet in length. Although this type of grass is found throughout the state, it grows in abundance along the Bering Sea.

Her mother picks it along the shores of Hooper Bay and sends it to her so she can continue to make her baskets.

It takes hours of preparation before she can even start to make a basket.

After the grass is picked, it is stored in plastic bags. This allows it to keep for many years. It can be taken out only when needed.

The grass is run under hot water to soften it, then kept in the refrigerator to keep its natural color.

"I use Rit dye to color my grass and dampen it a little bit at a time before I use it," Clement said.

"Sometimes it takes about five days to a week to make a basket, if I sew continuously," she said.

Before the white man brought many amenities to the villages, villagers would use grass weaving to make many needed items, such as mats for their canoes and kayaks and baskets for storage.

Today, basketry is acknowledged as a form of art, in which baskets are used for something to store jewelry in or to be displayed.



More than 60 baskets by Florence Clement, above, are on display at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art.