

## New book takes closer look at baskets and their makers

by WCU Administrator | Nov 12, 2009 | All News, Arts & Culture | 0 comments



Anna Fariello believes that artifacts – somewhat like windows – can act as passageways to a culture’s soul.

“Material culture can be a window onto the changes that occur in social and cultural history,” said Fariello, an associate professor and chief architect of the [Craft Revival Project](#) at Western Carolina University’s [Hunter Library](#).

An author, editor and former research fellow at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Fariello most recently turned her attention to Cherokee basketry, a thousands-year-old tradition, passed from mother to daughter, that she believes is integral to Cherokee culture. Fariello’s new book, titled “Cherokee Basketry: From the Hands of our Elders,” studies Cherokee baskets and basket-makers who lived during the first half of the 20th century.

Fariello will hold two book signings Saturday, Nov. 21, in honor of her new book, “Cherokee Basketry: From the Hands of our Elders.” The events will be at 11 a.m.-1 p.m. at Osondu Booksellers, 184 N. Main St., Waynesville; and 3 to 5 p.m. at the Asheville Art Museum, 2 S. Pack Square, Asheville.



The project reinforced Fariello’s understanding that for Cherokee people, “the making of things is significant to their culture and their identity,” a concept foreign to many people in contemporary, mainstream culture, she said. The Cherokees’ use of natural resources as basket materials gave Fariello an appreciation of the environmental sustainability and ecological balance also inherent in the culture.

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians played a significant role in the craft revival, a regional movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that produced a wealth of objects, identified traditional skills, and revitalized handwork production in Western North Carolina. With a grant from the State Library of North Carolina, Fariello originally set out to expand the information available on the project’s site, which chronicles the movement and its impact on Western North Carolina through text and images. Fariello worked with the Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual and the Museum of the Cherokee Indian in Cherokee with the purpose of making their collections available online. A grant of \$47,000 from the Cherokee Preservation Foundation added a second element to the project: to research and more fully document basketry in those collections.

While the project did not start out as a book, Fariello said it seemed the logical conclusion. “The book takes scattered elements and arranges them for a more complete picture,” she said.



“Cherokee Basketry” examines specifics about basket-makers themselves, how baskets were made, and what they were used for. Archival photographs illustrate “Cherokee Basketry,” published by The History Press of Charleston, S.C. At right is a singleweave rivercane storage basket made by Lottie Stamper (1907-1987). (Photograph courtesy of Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual.)

“I hope that this book has a broad audience,” Fariello said. “I think it can serve as a classroom text for Cherokee studies or the visual arts, and I also think it will have a broad public appeal for anyone interested in regional culture, especially the influence of the Cherokees on Western North Carolina.”

Fariello credits the book’s creation to a team of people. Jason Woolf, who holds a master’s degree in history from WCU, and Kate Cater wrote captions, checked facts and verified sources. Project staffer Lucas Rogers photographed the contemporary baskets that appear in the book. James “Bo” Taylor, archivist for the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, opened the museum’s archives for research. And members of WCU’s [Cherokee studies program](#) – Tom Belt, Robert Conley, Andrew Denson, Jane Eastman and Hartwell Francis – shared their expertise.

Dana Sally, dean of Hunter Library, and Vicki Cruz, manager of the Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual cooperative, deserve special thanks, Fariello said. “Ever since Dean Sally arrived, he has recognized the importance of preserving the region’s cultural heritage through documentation and offering wide access to the information via digitization,” she said.

Fariello and Sally agree that projects such as the Craft Revival site fulfill the mandate of [UNC Tomorrow](#) – an initiative for the state’s institutions of higher learning to respond to current and future challenges facing North Carolina – to “apply, translate, and communicate research and scholarship to broader audiences.” In particular, the site and library projects follow the UNC Tomorrow recommendation to “create a mechanism for applying research and scholarship to addressing significant regional and statewide issues.”

Cruz’s help was so steady and unwavering that Fariello didn’t realize its extent until the project was complete. “Vicki was there every step of the way,” Fariello said. “She made sure that Cherokee families had a chance to review what I wrote about their relatives.”

Earlier this month, Fariello presented books to Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Chief Michell Hicks and the Tribal Council. Later this month, Fariello and Sally will be on hand to give 200 copies of the book to Cherokee School Superintendent Joyce Dugan for teachers to use in the Eastern Band’s new K-12 school.

The project was a great service to the Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, founded in 1948. (Above right, Etheyn Conseen holds a rivercane basket at the cooperative entrance in this photograph courtesy of the Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual.) The arts cooperative has a permanent collection of more than 100 baskets that continues to grow. “Before the archive organization, the only recorded information in our permanent collection was a handwritten line about each item,” Cruz said. Now the co-op’s archives are digitized and include contemporary photos, as well as information about dimensions, materials and patterns, and the artists themselves. Fariello also worked with co-op employees on the care and display of the baskets, and about recordkeeping when a new piece enters the collections.

Cruz said she eventually plans to use her new knowledge to document the work of contemporary basket-makers. “The daughters of basket-makers Agnes Welch and Eva Wolfe, they’re basket-makers too, and now their daughters are starting to weave,” she said.

The basketry book is the first in the “From the Hands of our Elders” series, a three-year project to document Cherokee arts. The next book, funded with \$87,770 from the Cherokee Preservation Foundation, will focus on Cherokee potters and pottery during the first part of the 20th century. A book on Cherokee woodcarving and mask making is scheduled to follow.

For more information about the “From the Hands of our Elders” series or the Craft Revival Web site, contact Fariello at (828) 227-2499 or [fariello@wcu.edu](mailto:fariello@wcu.edu).