

WOVEN WILLOW COFFINS

BY JANET MENDELSON



TOP: Mary Fraser, **Coffin with Shroud**; 2022; willow, American-grown unbleached cotton rope; French rand, 3-rod wale, four-rod waled border; 12 x 68 x 25 in.

BOTTOM: Fraser surrounded by a variety of her baskets.

OPPOSITE: A Fraser coffin adorned with flowers.



When Mary Lauren Fraser was 20 years old, she went to Scotland, her ancestral home, to wander solo. Fraser is a fiddler, and she went to immerse herself in the traditional music scene. But while there, a friend told her about someone who had been buried in a woven willow coffin. Fraser had done other handicrafts, not weaving, but it sparked her curiosity. One month later, she visited Karen Collins' casket workshop in the Scottish Highlands.

"When I walked in and saw a handmade casket, my whole body reacted," recalled Fraser. "I want to do that! I HAVE to do that!" Within weeks, she was Collins' apprentice and stayed for three and a half months. Fraser had found her life's work.

Since 2015, in Turner's Falls, Massachusetts, Fraser weaves adult and baby coffins, burial trays, and urns from willow she grows on her neighbor's land or buys

from farmers in Maine, Illinois, and West Virginia. She also teaches one- and two-day workshops, mostly in New England, so others can learn to grow the raw material and weave coffins in the traditional way.

Fraser hopes that someday funerary baskets like hers will be as readily available here as they are in the United Kingdom where a thriving cottage industry pays makers a living wage. People in this country have always wanted simple, natural alternatives to conventional burials in steel or lead-lined boxes, now more than ever as concern for the environment intensifies.

"People often ask if they are legal," said Fraser. "The answer is yes." Federal law permits the use of wicker coffins nationwide for burial or cremation. Funeral homes and cemeteries may offer the option for eco-friendly interment. Green and conservation cemeteries exist in many states.

"Willow is a good material for coffins because of its fast growth; it's useable in one year, versus 30 to 40 years for the simplest pine," added Fraser. "There are hundreds of cultivated varieties, lots of color variations weavers can play with."

"It is said that willow keeps the time," said Maureen Walrath, a coffin weaver in Port Townsend, Washington. Many species grow for 20-plus years. Every winter, the willow is harvested, bringing



TOP: Sarah Lasswell, Willow burial tray overlooking the Blue Ridge Mountains; 2023; willow, pine; 3-rod wale, French randing, 3-over-1 border

BOTTOM: Lasswell weaving a lid around a wooden center board made by the client's brother, Stuart King; 2023; willow, mixed locally sourced wood; 3-rod wale, French randing, wood carving and inlay

OPPOSITE: Caskets in progress in Lasswell's workshop on Moss & Thistle Farm; 2023; willow, hemp, pine; 3-rod wale, French randing, 3-over-1 border



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together individuals and entire communities. Harvested bundles must be sorted by size, soaked, stored, and dried, then resoaked before weaving. Then it takes a week or two to weave a single coffin. Burial trays have similar dimensions but are open on top. Every spring new shoots sprout from the soil, strengthening the first few years after planting.

Although weavers generally keep a few coffins in stock, clients don't always have an immediate need. Some plan ahead for themselves, a loved one, or a pet. Some want to work beside the maker, learning the craft, often bringing a biodegradable quilt or fabric to line the basket or personal objects to incorporate in the design. The handcrafted wicker baskets have been used as blanket chests and coffee tables, becoming a familiar part of the home until it's time to carry someone back to the earth.

"Willow coffins have a strong emotional impact," said Fraser. "They symbolize all the people who hold and care for us during our life—parents, family, community." We use baskets to carry our babies and our food. As coffins, they've been used for centuries.

Maureen Walrath, known as Mo, is a multidisciplinary artist. She moved to the Pacific Northwest in 2014 to study with her first basketry teacher, Margaret Mathewson, in the Coast Range of Oregon.

By 2017, Walrath and Fraser were the only willow coffin weavers they were aware of who offered their craft more publicly in the US. They didn't know each other, but about that time they met and soon formed a friendship in shared values and work.

In 2018, Walrath started Woven Thresholds, a project that applies the ancient craft to the weaving of "threshold vessels" (coffin/burial vessels and willow baskets). She grows and harvests all the willow she uses for her vessels in Chimacum, Washington. Walrath makes and teaches basketry locally and started an online school in 2020 called Coyote Willow Schoolhouse. She offers a



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TOP: Maureen Walrath, **Weaving Coffin**; 2024; willow; tapestry weave, French rand, chase weave, 3-rod wale, 5 behind 2-rod border, stacking, willow cordage and braiding; 18 x 72 x 22 in.

BOTTOM: Maureen Walrath, **Karen's Vessel**; 2021; willow, rope; tapestry weave, French rand, chase weave, 3-rod wale, 5 behind 2-rod border, stacking, willow cordage and braiding; 18 x 72 x 20 in.



variety of courses including one on tending a relationship with willow and the living world. Walrath said her "How I Hold You: Willow Coffin/Soul Boat Course," makes the craft more accessible to folks.

Through Fraser, Walrath met Sarah Lasswell. Lasswell had previously worked in international public health, in both infant mortality research and HIV prevention. She'd been in the Peace Corps twice, in Morocco and Romania. In 2018, she started a cut-flower farm near Asheville, North Carolina, and began growing willow to control erosion. Although not a basket weaver, she was deeply moved by a photo of a willow casket she saw online. She decided to learn more and found Fraser Baskets online. She became Mary Lauren Fraser's first apprentice in 2020.

OPPOSITE: Maureen Walrath, **How I Hold You, How I Would Have Held You**; 2023; multimedia exhibition: willow, rope, plant-dyed silk and cotton (winged burial shroud), plant dyes (madder root, alder, leaf, indigo), gouache and graphite illustrations, zines; tapestry weave, French rand, chase weave, 3-rod wale, 5 behind 2-rod border, coracle/creel weaving; 18 x 72 x 22 in., winged burial shroud 72 x 192 in., paintings 22 x 24 in.

Back at home in Appalachia, Lasswell sold the first coffin she wove. "We have a lot of green burial options here in Southern Appalachia and people have been very supportive of my work," she said. "Most funeral homes that provide green burial services import woven caskets from Asia. That creates a big carbon footprint, and labor conditions there are unknown. Most US casket weavers work directly with families, but funeral homes are starting to show interest in offering local casket options as well."

Lasswell weaves in an old root cellar. A herd of goats, as well as her teenage son and his friends, wander in and out as she weaves.

"Working in different countries, I saw many ways of death care and memorials but nothing like a willow casket," said Lasswell. "Being involved in a hands-on way can be transformative for those who are grieving. When people find out what I do, everybody wants to talk about death, about the people they've lost, and their own plans for their bodies. But it wasn't until we buried a dear friend of mine in one of my baskets that I got to see how much being closely involved meant to family and friends."

To comply with standards set by the nonprofit Green Burial Council, the coffins may contain only natural fibers like cotton, linen, hemp, silk, or wool. Several of today's craftswomen sew or provide liners, pillows, and shrouds. Compostable cotton or hemp rope handles and strong base slats made from

TOP: Maureen Walrath, detail from **How I Hold You, How I Would Have Held You**: A Willow Coffin/Soul Boat Course; 2024

BOTTOM: Sarah Lasswell, willow casket in autumn on Moss & Thistle Farm; 2022; willow, cotton, hemp, pine; 3-rod wale, French randing, 3-over-1 border



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local spruce or pine are allowed. No materials may contain resins or harmful gases. Embalming fluids are forbidden. As decomposition rapidly takes place, all carbon is contained in the soil. Sites are often marked by a carved rock or a GPS tag. The whole process is eco-friendly inside and out.

Fraser, Lasswell, and Walrath worked with New Hampshire green burial advocate Lee Webster to start a guild. The Funerary Artisans Collective is a free online resource with an interactive map of North America where consumers can find their nearest craftsperson.

“What brought us together was there aren’t many of us in this country. We’re all unique in many ways but we share a vision of community, forming a network of coffin makers. We are keen to collaborate rather than compete,” said Walrath.

Eventually they hope weavers throughout the US will learn that willow coffins don’t have to be transported far. They now know of only a few others doing this work.

“It would be great to have death and dying practices less gate-kept by the funeral industry and more community supported,” said Fraser. “You don’t have to spend as much as the average person now does on funerals.”

Mary Lauren Fraser fraserbaskets.com

Sarah Lasswell mossandthistlefarm.com

Maureen Walrath woventhresholds.com | Coyote Willow Schoolhouse coyotewillowschoolhouse.com

Funerary Artisans Collective funeraryartisanscollective.org

JANET MENDELSON is a freelance writer and the author of *Maine’s Museums: Art, Oddities, & Artifacts* (Countryman Press). She especially enjoys writing about travel and the arts and welcomes readers’ story ideas. janetmendelsohn.com