**With Her Hands: Fiber Art from Gapuwiyak**

**MARGO:** This is an art form that has been passed down from one generation to the next. It’s full of deep tradition and also new innovations and that’s what makes it so exciting.

**MARGO:** The Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Museum is the largest collection of Aboriginal art outside of Australia, and our current exhibition, With Her Hands, focuses on fiber art made by women from Gapuwiyak, a small indigenous community in northeast Arnhem Land.

**HENRY:** The kinds of fiber art objects that you see in this exhibition are really a part of everyday life in Yolngu communities, but they also carry this huge amount of cultural significance. The original fiber objects were brought by the ancestral beings themselves. Ceremonial bags are often the most cherished and significant of ceremonial objects. Now, they're not the kinds of objects that we have in this exhibition, but in in recreating these and making them every day and putting them out into the world, the women are keeping that tradition and that meaning alive.

I think to even begin to understand how important these objects are, and what they mean to their makers and communities, you have to sit down and watch how they’re made.

**LUCY:** My name is Lucy. I live in Gapuwiyak.

I learned the twining by hand. I learned by watching the old ladies and mother doing their work. I kept all that in my head, then when I was a teenager I started using my hands. I was learning so that when I had a daughter, I could pass that knowledge on.

**ANNA:** She taught me when I was 12 years old. I used to sit and watch my mum. I learn from her, then got all the knowledge and put it in my mind.

**MARGO:** Two of the artists featured in the exhibition, Lucy and Anna, were able to come to the museum to work with the students; to help them understand the techniques and processes that go into making fiber objects, and their meaning as well.

**HENRY:** This was really one of the hardest exhibitions that I've ever had to work on. Lucy holds so close to her heart all of the meaning that is in these objects; those ancestral connections are so personal, they're actually a part of who she is. They're not things that she can share with just anyone; they're not things that she can share with strangers; and they're not things that she can share with men. There was a great moment when we were doing the research when Lucy was trying to get across to the other curators the importance of one of the works in the exhibition, and she looked over to me and said, “No, you have to leave the room now,” and I had to go and sit outside the door and wait quietly until she was prepared to let me come back in.

What makes this collection so extraordinary is that many of the works were produced specifically for Louise, who was adopted into the community, who lived in the community, who sat and listened and learned with her hands.

**LOUISE:** I’m Louise Hamby, I’m a Research Fellow at Australia National University in Canberra, and I’ve been working as an Anthropologist in Arnhem Land for decades.

**MARGO:** She's built a massive private collection of fiber art…

**LOUISE:** …mats, string bags, baskets, jewelry, hats even…

**MARGO:** …that is really the best contemporary collection in the world.

**LOUISE:** I fell in love with the work when I still lived in America. I think, though, a pivotal point for me was after looking at these beautiful things in museum collections, I realized I'm not really going to know anything about these beautiful objects unless I actually talk to people who make them.

**CASSIE:** For an expert like Lucy, how long would it take her to make a basket?

**LOUISE:** Everyone asks me that question, and I say, that’s a terrible question. When you say, how long does it take to make a basket, you have to take into consideration multiple factors. There’s no shop to go and buy materials. You have to collect all the materials and if you want to have color you have to collect all the dyes. Each of the materials has to be prepared, each of the dyes have to be prepared. You have to dye the fiber and this is before you ever sit down and make a single stitch. You might spend a whole week collecting the material and not making anything.

**SILKE:** Lucy’s quite a pioneer in experimenting with dyes. I always say that if Lucy hadn’t grown up in Gapuwiyak but in maybe Germany she would be an alchemist or a doctor in chemistry.

**SILKE:** Everything for her, when she looks at a new material, is an opportunity to find out how should could use it as a color in her weaving. I think that’s really what sets her apart from other artists in Gapuwiyak.

**LUCY:** The Yolngu ladies walk past and see all the different colors on the clothesline, and they ask: what plant do you use to get that color?

**MARGO:** It’s not hard to understand Louise’s enthusiasm for fiber arts, and her love of Lucy as an artist. She has really established a place for fiber artists among the leading indigenous artists of Australia.

**LOUISE:** No one really thought about these objects as being anything other than domestic items or things that people made to sell. It’s only through working with women for decades, and trying to promote their work and have people look at them with a different set of eyes, that has made the difference. In Gapuwiyak, women are now making things for the art market, rather than for carrying honey or for going fishing. But they’re techniques that have been around for thousands of years.

**CASSIE:** Why is it important that this work continues to be taught?

**LOUISE:** A pivotal point for me was after looking at these beautiful things in museum collections, I realized I’m not really going to know anything about these beautiful objects unless I actually talk to people who make them.

**LOUISE:** I learned from lots of women, including Lucy, in Gapuwiyak.

**SILKE:** Lucy came to my place on the first day we moved into the community and said we will adopt you, you are part of our family now, and a big part of becoming family was to become a student. So Lucy was the teacher, obviously, and she was already quite famous by that point for her works.

**ANNA:** For the future, so that our community can be strong. So that one day, when my mum will be gone, I’ll be there, I will be a teacher for my brother’s kids. Because I know how to collect, and split, collect all the dyes, and dye all the colors.