Artist creates woven wonders from pineneedles

Text by Athena Smith-Dupre

The art world had yet to realize the potential of pine needles when Andrea Thompson came upon an isolated Indian tribe in Yosemite National Park 15 years ago.

The California tribe befriended this stranger — probably the first white woman they had ever seen — and taught her the ancient art of weaving pine needles.

Thompson brought the knowledge home to relatives in Acadiana and Mississippi, and began perfecting a style all her own. “It's an old art, one of the oldest we know of,” she says, “but I wanted to make it into something more now.”

The contemporary look she was after took form with new colors and patterns. She branched out from traditional baskets into sculptures, jewelry, furniture and ornaments.

While visiting her mother in Acadiana this summer, Thompson acquainted area residents with the ancient-cum-modern art.

At first glance, the finished pieces resemble pottery. The intricate weave creates a smooth finish that holds up indefinitely. “I make pine needle buttons and coat them with liquid plastic,” Thompson says. “You can pop them right into the washing machine.”

Thompson gathers her pine needles in the wooded areas of Mississippi. She separates a few bundles to be colored with natural or commercial dyes. (”It’s hard to collect enough nuts and berries,” she explains of the store-bought formulas.)

Working the needles into a piece of art takes an average of six weeks' time. A finished piece may fetch as much as $1,000 at market.

To handle to demand for art sales and exhibits, Thompson has enlisted the help of her mother, Louise Theaux Strom of Breaux Bridge.

“We work!” declares Thompson. “Sometimes we weave for 16 hours a day.”

Two of Thompson’s creations are displayed as ornaments on the National Christmas Tree in Washington D.C.

Photos by Donna Trahan

Above and left — Andrea Thompson works on a wall hanging of pineneedles. Every Monday she instructs clients of the Lafayette Senior Center on the ancient art of pineneedle weaving, which she learned from an Indian tribe in California.

Her collection of pineneedle art includes pitchers, baskets, jewelry and small items of furniture. In the foreground (above) a nearly completed table of Persian design.

The pottery base of the pitcher (above left) is completed with a spout and handle of woven pineneedles.

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