

Conversation with Hanna van Aelst

Hanna van Aelst

Basket Maker

& Pierre-Antoine Vettorello

Sin-Lucas University College, Antwerp

On 09 April 2020 I recorded an interview with Hanna van Aelst who is a basket maker in Tipperary in Ireland. I discovered her work in a design store in Dublin and I was stunned by the quality of it, as well as the use of natural willow with a variety of bark colors. I remembered her name and note dit on a paper as it sounded Belgian, in a place where mostly Irish names are represented. She answered my questions at the beginning of the Covid pandemic, while seating outdoor with the sounds of birds.

Pierre-Antoine

Thanks for for accepting my invitation. And so this is part of my research at Sint-Lucas in Antwerp. You are yourself from Belgium as well, right ?

Hanna

I'm from Leuven area. Myself and my husband moved over here 17 years ago. So when we met we pretty much knew we wanted to move out of Belgium. And then once our first child was born, we moved over here and was just pretty much a mad dash, bought an old cottage and started doing a big area. And during that time I learned how to make baskets from an Irish basket maker here.

Pierre-Antoine

Basket weaving was something you knew before? Or did it like it just came up to you like this?

Hanna

It was very strange because looking back, it makes a lot of sense. But at the moment, I had no idea. So when we came over, Jeff took three months off parental leave, and we stayed with a basket maker and it wasn't planned. We had picked him kind of because he was recommended to us by friends. And he was kind of in the area we wanted to explore. And so, while we were there, I just got fascinated watching him. He was making baskets from home, in his own little workshop. He was growing his own willow. And people were coming to his house to buy baskets or to commission work or whatever. I remember saying to Jeff, my husband, *at some stage, I really would like to do that, learn how to make baskets.* And he was like, *Well, why don't you do it now?* And, and so he taught me how to make baskets and we made a few baskets together. And after those three months, then I think it was just hooked. Yeah, This back was was had flown in to me and after that, it's just I practice on my own and honing my skills and just kind of went from there. But looking back, I had this fascination that I wasn't really aware of as a child. I did I love baskets, and I remember looking at baskets and thinking, how it was made trying to figure out how the structure of basket worked and all that kind of stuff. So it was there but it wasn't conscious until actually met a basket maker. And so what he did and how he worked and he showed me.

Pierre-Antoine

You say so that it was an area that you wanted to explore. Can you tell me more about like, where it is and and how.

Hanna

the very first time we came to Ireland we were staying in North Cork, and we traveled around there we went to carry did the whole touristy thing. And the second time we came over, it was actually just kind of put the pin in a map of Ireland because we didn't really know anyone here. But we felt drawn to kind of Tipperary, mountain areas, green areas, where there were trees. So we could have gone up further north, but it felt it was a little bit maybe too barren for what we had in mind. The first times we looked around for buying places was in South Tipperary and at the time, it was actually a bit too expensive there. So we went up north. And this area is a little bit more rough, less accessible a little bit more out of the way. So we found this place here and it was within our budget and beautiful setting. A mad jump really didn't know anyone here. We did not know how this was going

to work out with a small child at the time, and we just jumped and we landed in this magical place really. I'm really really happy we did this in this lovely community. Great school. Lovely friends now all around us. So we've been we've been blessed.

Pierre-Antoine

That sounds amazing. And actually what about this jump into new community? Can you tell me more about how it was difficult or easy, like some encounters that you made that were really important for you?

Hanna

I think it would have been harder if it would have been just the two of us as adults. The thing was that we had a little child, and he opened a lot of doors. The first people we met were down in the village here, an older couple, and they would invite us over, or come over to us and bring us food. You spend hours chatting and once Victor got older, through him we met other parents. So looking back, it was Victor really who opened the doors here for us that he everyone saw our predicament and didn't just want to leave here. So they just felt like you know, we want to help them out and be involved and everyone has been very open. Even though we do things maybe a little bit strangely and differently. We grow our own foods. So it might be a bit different to what people are used to. But the community has been very open.

Pierre-Antoine

And are there other craft makers around you as well ?

Hanna

Very few actually. I got to know more makers by exposing myself, by being out there a little bit more. And there's very few in the area where I am. So really I'm kind of on my own. But I think that's the case for every craft maker. Or at least a lot of craft makers that I know. They're pretty much kind of sits in their own world. And every so often try to get out and meet other makers spread all around Ireland.

Pierre-Antoine

With lockdown rules. Everyone is living with them now because of what's happening in the world, does it change something for you or it's kind of same ? How is it sourcing some products right?

Hanna

I've been thinking about this. We've always had home as our base in that we don't really venture out that much as a maker. I don't have to. I have my own material. The only things I have to do is bring my work out and post it to shops or people who have bought it. And then as regards to the kids, there's no school so they're home. There's no activities outside of school. So that means we're very really at home all the time. But I just really feel blessed for the place where we are. And it is really enjoyable. And I just also feel really blessed that we're having this time even though I know it's really hard on a lot of people. But for me, I feel it's a time of really slowing down, a time of rest, planning. What do I really want to do in the next few months? How will I do it? So my work is making baskets but I also do a lot of teaching. So that part of my job is closed down, I don't do my workshops here now. I don't travel out to other communities to teach. I missed that part. I missed the interaction with people there. But I know at the same time it is it is for some people, a lot of people this time is really tough. So I'm grateful everything is fine here.

Pierre-Antoine

You mentioned you are training people you did some workshops, like where would they be from? From which locations?

Hanna

I run monthly workshops. It would be during the weekend. They could range from a beginners workshop to a workshop on a particular technique, our advanced workshops. So once a month in the community hall here, we are maybe two kilometers away from the actual village center. And in the center, it's a very tiny little village. There's only a church and a pub and a community center. People come from all over Ireland, most of them are Irish. Plus some day traveled from Cork, Dublin, Northern Ireland. This is just to learn how to make baskets. Sometimes people come from England, America, people travel to come down to learn how to make a basket. It brings the world to me. It's really nice.

Pierre-Antoine

And so you I mean you say do you grow your own fruits and vegetables but so I believe you grow as well your own willow ? What was the decision behind it ?

Hanna

Well, if you're serious about basket making you kind of have to grow your own material. It is not available to buy. Well it is but it's hard. So traditionally people would have grown their own willow as well. And they wouldn't have had to grow much of it. That's what I did at the very start when I didn't have enough. I outsourced my willow from the UK when I started up. It's a completely different thing if you start growing your own material, so if you're completely involved in the entire cycle. I can grow varieties that I want. So willow comes in different varieties, which means different bark colors that I can work with in different places, different textures as well. They're in real oh that I can work with so if I'm buying I can choose to take whatever is there. I love that part. Over the years we have selected more than 20 different willow varieties and they're selected specifically for their bark colors. Their flexibility, the texture, the way they grow. And that gives me kind of my palette I suppose when I'm making baskets and all the textures and colors I can choose. That's an important part of my making is those colors and those textures, of course. But there's also something different that I found that once you are involved with your own product or your own material from the very start. I watch all the beds, I look at all the the willow growing and in the end in the autumn, we'll be harvesting all the rods, I have to grade them, sort them by size and then before I make, I have to soak them and you know hold up that whole process makes

Pierre-Antoine

It sounds very satisfying to follow the process from the from A to Z. It's like you control all the different parts I believe with Nature. it's a collective work to grow this willow.

Hanna

That's beautiful. That's a really nice way of putting it because that's really how I feel. It is not just me. It comes from Nature. And I have the pleasure to then afterwards work with it. And make something else out of it. That is also still Nature. But it has my hand with it.

Pierre-Antoine

Do you work by yourself?

Hannah

I do work by myself. It's just me.

Pierre-AntoineA

In relation to the gestures that you learned with the basket maker that you've met when you when you move to Ireland, how would you described these gestures ? Did they evolve through time or are they still methods that are very ancient ?

Hanna

We're just looking at within willow. Because there's loads of different techniques you can think of when you're making baskets. But when we just think of willow, I think it goes back a long way. And no one really knows who invented it, or who started it or who thought of those techniques. When you do make baskets, you just see that it makes complete common sense to use those techniques for the material you're working with, which is willow. So no one really knows. What I learned is basic basket making techniques still used, they actually came from Northern Europe. You have some willow work in America but but they use different techniques. More recently people have been playing a little bit and inventing different ways of using willow so you've seen slightly different techniques as well which are really nice but it still comes down to those very old techniques.

Pierre-Antoine

When I saw when I had my training with in Connemara. It struck me how terminologies were related sometimes to other countries such as *German wale*, this other technique from Perigord. It's strike me how complex and multicultural it is.

Hanna

Yes, it is. If you dive deep into it, it is really interesting because you have like a *French randing* and you have an *English randing*. And so there's like the Perigord basket. It's just only done in the Perigord area in France. Joe Horgan has done a whole book about Irish baskets. There were Irish techniques as well. It is because he's made the book they're still around, you can still use them. I use them in the skib, the one you saw in the shop. There are some regional kind of flavors and maybe you can look at it like a dialect, techniques that were used in just specific areas. Its nice to go and play with it a little bit, incorporate them into your own work and see what happens.

Pierre-Antoine

In term of aesthetics, is basket weaving adapting with influence from abroad from different continents? Like through this process of globalization ?

Hanna

It's hard to say I think it's it's different for every maker. But I do see trends. I just see certain techniques that are very popular for maybe five or six years and then there's a new technique that is really popular, and then everyone needs to make it and everyone needs to learn this. It's a good thing that we can share a little bit more at this time with social media and the internet it's easier to see what other makers are doing. It broadens our mind a little bit. And inspires you at the same time to do better to try different things. It's only a good thing.

Pierre-Antoine

Before doing basket weaving and moving to Ireland did you have any background in Art or craft or techniques that you learned?

Hanna

Not really. I was still very young. I just finished school. And I worked a little bit in some local shops before moving to Ireland. I did go to a Waldorf school or Steiner school where the craft was part of the curriculum. I had some kind of taste of it there. As always, very good. I always wanted to, I was always making and drawing and all that stuff.

Pierre-Antoine

Would you say in your style or craft technique or technique would come from Belgium or would be influenced by your heritage somehow?

Hanna

That's a good question because I'm drawn to a little bit more. I haven't done a lot of that. But I'm drawn to a little bit more like a finer in that with smaller willow. In Ireland, there's a lot more work is done with bigger, heavier willow, because that was mostly what was available here. Kind of rough work. So I'm kind of drawn more to finer finished shopping baskets. Even in my sculptures, you can see that I tried to. There's a lot of detail in there. And I think that comes from there. I think that comes from the more *continental* way of weaving, which is like the French Way. There's in Belgium, there's very little of it still around. But it used to be there. It was also more details like a French basket can be. It's interesting question, and definitely something I think about every so often.

Pierre-Antoine

You public or your students coming for workshops are from Ireland, UK, America. Me I'm so my background is European with some African heritage from West Africa and I was searching in basket weaving and I saw that it's definitely global, it's used everywhere in the world. You do have baskets in all parts of the world. When I went to Connemara I was somehow confronted with my heritage and this local techniques and I was trying to somehow bring my personality into my work. I'm just wondering if you've got some examples or experiences with extra European craft makers that would have joined your workshop or maybe you traveled somewhere to learn about basket weaving from another perspective.

Hanna

I haven't traveled a lot myself but what I have seen is that people all over the world use material that they had locally available. So in Northern Europe, that would have been willow and if you go further south, from Spain and Africa. That would have been grasses, and that would have been anything they could find that was flexible and workable. So that's what makes it for me fascinating. Using materials other than willow that are locally available and trying them out. That connection to place is something that I find it's more and more coming into my work. We have we have settled here from Belgium but this connection to this place growing willow here from this place is what makes my work and and it's the same for all the other baskets makers I think what makes their work special is this. Their connection to their place where they live. Their land.

Pierre-Antoine

When I was in Connemara with Ciaran and Joe Hogan, I found this book. It's was a text by Jessica Hemmings. She's a researcher, and works in Sweden. It's an article called *instability of culture*. I'm going to send it to you later. There is this quote :

It is an understanding that culture is constantly exchanged and adapt. This shifts are apparent in the material world around us increasingly through contemporary objects that are influenced by cultural references from distant but connected corners of the globe.

She writes about transnational aspects of craft and how it's influenced by different cultures. And so what as well like a part of my research, related to a social political context. Through my observations, I saw that Ireland is opening itself to a new kind of immigration, from other parts of the globe, outside of Europe, with refugees coming from Syria and different parts of Africa and Asia. I'm reading, searching on how craft could play eventually a role in this meetup with culptures. It came from probably a very genuine and utopic way, but I still believe that craft can can play a certain role.

Hanna

That is interesting you say that because I actually worked with a group of Syrian women about two years ago, who were resettled here. And it was very challenging, it was very leveling in a way. Syrian women and Irish women together supported by the government. They were doing crafts together. The aim was to help families to settle here using crafts, which was a beautiful idea.

Pierre-Antoine

Can you tell me more about, about this experience? You said there were some challenges. How was it organized?

Hanna

I was working for the ECB, which is an adult education board here in Ireland. They were tasked with helping this particular group which is in my area. The Adult Education Board has different craft makers that would go out and teach local communities which was what I was doing at that time. I was teaching two hours a night per week to this group. It was ten weeks, but then it was extended again for another eight weeks. When I went in the first time, there was so many people, there was like 25 people or more. So we had to split the group into two as well. Because craft making is very hands on to teach. You can't teach in the group can be in a big group. It was lovely, those Syrian women had been making crafts themselves. They were making crochet, they were knitting so they were used to making stuff with their hands, which is a thing that I always see if people have done something with their hands before they're going to be able to make a basket more easily. Language was an issue, obviously. But making a craft, I could show it to them instead of actually explaining it to them. I had to learn some simple words. I learned to count in their language. I learned to say in front or behind in their language to be able to explain things a little bit more easily. And it was lovely. We had a lot of fun a lot of laughs. It was a beautiful then to see Irish women, helping the Syrian women or the other way around, trying to explain what I was explaining and all that stuff was happening and what's going on so it worked really well.

Pierre-Antoine

In this time of Covid it is difficult to see perspectives ahead but what do you wish for you and your family, loved ones for the future ?

Hanna

For us as a family, it has brought us closer together. We are doing things together more. We work in the garden, seeds need to be planted, we did a lot of work in the willow beds, clearing them and tidying them up. Everyone is helping each other with their own projects.

Pierre-Antoine

Do you guys have specific tasks ? How do you organize ?

Hanna

Yes, we do have tasks because there are different abilities, different ages. The weather has been dry lately but if it rains again we will be all inside.

Pierre-Antoine

Online you propose some workshops to harvest the willow which I found very interesting and quite rare. I liked this proximity you propose towards the material.

Hanna

This is indeed getting stronger and stronger in me. I only use my own willow now and I see more and more the benefit of that. Over ten years we have been growing it now. There is quite a bit of experience there that I find not everyone has so it is something I can share. There is a big interest in growing willow now.