

36. *Chicken in a Basket*

In this response Curator of the Crafts Study Centre, Greta Bertram, delves into the origins and cultural history of a traditional type of poultry basket called an ose. Collected by celebrated craft expert Muriel Rose, this kind of basket became popular in display circles, design circles, and even fashion circles.

Poultry basket, Ose, 1945–1946



Poultry basket purchased from Highland Home Industries in the mid-1940s and said by information from the Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas to be a classic Kilmuir example (MERL 60/770).

The ose and Muriel Rose

The MERL is home to three examples of an 'ose', or 'Skye basket' as it came to be known. The ose is an unusual type of frame basket, traditionally made from split willow, in which the pouch of the basket forms the handle. Depictions of these baskets can be found in illuminated manuscripts dating from the twelfth century onwards, and they were used to hold doves at the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, as celebrated at Candlemas. There are also twelfth century references to bigger versions being used by builders for winching stone and other material. In Scotland, they are said to have been used to carry broody hens from one croft to another, as the design means that, once the hen is inside, it can't move its wings and thus can't get out.

The use shifted from poultry basket to shopping basket following the inclusion of one made in Kilmuir, Skye, in the *Living Traditions* exhibition mounted in Edinburgh in 1951 as part of the Festival of Britain—although they had been popular in craft circles before this. Bridget Bardot later used one as a handbag, turning them into fashion accessories. They were soon made in vast numbers all over Britain, as well as abroad, and were eventually mass-produced in plastic.



Similar basket, the origin of which is less clear, but is also likely to be British (MERL 2000/25).

Of the three examples in The MERL, one is thought to have been made in Poland and at only 16.5cm tall is described as a child's shopping basket; and another, although larger at 28cm tall, is described as being probably too small for a shopping basket. However, the third, at 38cm tall (the standard height for these baskets) is a classic Kilmuir example. It was purchased by Muriel Rose for the British Council's craft collection in the 1940s from Highland Home Industries in George Street, Edinburgh.



Small example probably made in Poland and intended for a child (MERL 67/94).

In 1960-61 over 360 examples of traditional craft products from the British Council collection were donated to the MERL. A major part of this collection was prepared immediately after World War II by Muriel Rose for the *Exhibition of Rural Handicrafts* which toured Australia and New Zealand in 1946-47.

Muriel Rose (1897–1986) is a legendary figure in the craft world. She first worked as a gallery assistant, before establishing her own gallery in 1928. The Little Gallery in Ellis Street, London, exhibited and sold the work of the leading artist-craftsmen and women of the day. During this period, she was also an advisor on quilting to the Rural Industries Bureau (RIB) in a scheme to help the socially and economically depressed mining areas in Durham and South Wales.



The Little Gallery, as founded by Muriel Rose (Courtesy of Crafts Study Centre, University of the Creative Arts).

The Little Gallery closed at the outbreak of the Second World War and, together with the potter Bernard Leach, Rose came up with the idea of taking an exhibition of British crafts to the USA, and the British Council employed her to do just that. The *Exhibition of Modern British Crafts* opened at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1942 and toured the USA and Canada until 1945. Its message was propagandist by nature, and was intended to demonstrate that despite the War, the country was able to preserve an English way of life. And it was after this exhibition that the British Council purchased its collection of crafts.

The *Exhibition of Rural Handicrafts*, in partnership with the RIB, the National Federation of Women's Institutes and Highland Home Industries, began its tour of New Zealand and Australia in 1946. Like its predecessor, it too was a selling exhibition, aiming to encourage a market for British crafts throughout the Commonwealth. Yet, as the introduction to the catalogue states, the exhibition also aimed to provide technical knowledge and inspiration to visitors; to display craft processes which could be undertaken in the home or school; and to show how these British practices could be relevant to daily life on the other side of the world as a leisure pursuit for the free time created by machinery. Alongside showing crafts that were still being practised in the British countryside, the exhibition also showcased Britain's 'modern agricultural science and engineering' through photographs of

recent developments in agricultural machinery. However, Rose had always been determined at the Little Gallery to enable craftspeople show their work in the same way as painters or sculptors, and this approach was also present in this exhibition, as echoed by H.J. Massingham's foreword in the catalogue, which urged the visitor to appreciate the beauty of these everyday useful items.

The exhibition featured a display of a wide range of baskets, from fishing baskets and agricultural baskets to coal scuttles and delivery baskets—and even airborne panniers for dropping supplies behind enemy lines—but The MERL's one does not, in fact, appear in the exhibition catalogue.



Supply-drop pannier of a type used during the Second World War and used in the *Exhibition of Rural Handicrafts*, which toured overseas (MERL 60/449).

Rose went on to hold the prestigious post of Crafts and Industrial Design Officer at the British Council 1945–57. She was one of the major driving forces behind the organisation of the Dartington Hall conference in 1952 that attracted international attention from potters and textile artists. In 1955 she published *The Artist Potter in England*: the book that presented studio pottery as a defined movement for the first time. Later, she was instrumental in setting up the Crafts Study Centre, securing donations for the museum, and was founder Trustee.

The Crafts Study Centre at the University for the Creative Arts in Farnham is home to a large collection of archival material relating to Muriel Rose, but there is sadly very little from her time with the British Council.

Author's note: With many thanks to Jean Vacher, who wrote much of the information about Muriel Rose in her chapter in 'Muriel Rose: A Modern Craft Legacy', published by the Crafts Study Centre in 2006 (see link below).



Detail showing basket work on the handle of the British Council ose basket (MERL 60/770).

Further Information:

For information about the British Council ose basket – [MERL 60/770](#)

For the other similar baskets at The MERL – [MERL 67/94](#) and [MERL 2000/25](#)

For more about the Crafts Study Centre (CSC) – <https://www.csc.uca.ac.uk/>

For more about the Muriel Rose archive at the CSC – <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/data/gb2941-mra>

Further Sources (online):

Jean Vacher (ed), *Muriel Rose: A Modern Craft Legacy* (Farnham: Crafts Study Centre, 2006) (full text available at: <https://issuu.com/studiohyde/docs/murielrose>)

Dawn Susan, 'Hen/Ose/Skye basket', *Woven Communities: Basketmaking Communities in Scotland* website (University of St Andrews and Scottish Basketmakers' Circle, 2021) (see: <https://wovencommunities.org/catalogue/types/hen-basket/>)