Art of the Woodland Indians: An Introduction

Laundry Basket, no date, Ash and Sweetgrass
About the Exhibition
This exhibition draws from the Museum's collection of art by the Woodland Indians including excellent examples of quillwork and sweetgrass basketry from both Michigan and Ottawa artists, and prints by artists of the famed Woodland or Anishinabe style of painting.

Baskets
All Native Americans in the Northeastern United States have a tradition of making woven baskets. These baskets were used to store food, sift cornmeal, and to store other items. Storage baskets were made of hemp, maize husks, sweet grass, and tree bark. Basket materials were generally dyed before they were woven together, and in weaving the strands together, a design was produced.

The Ottawa and Chippewa tribes in Michigan made baskets from cedar root, black ash, sweet grass, birch bark, and other materials, often decorated these containers with quillwork. Indian grass or sweet grass is a favorite material of Great Lakes basket and quill artists. Using sweet grass as edging gives a finished appearance to a quilled box. Its vanilla-type fragrance is due to the chemical compound Coumarin. The scent lasts for years after the grass is picked. The fragrance is imparted to the contents of the box, which also protects it from moths, which dislike the odor.

Prints
In the early 1960s, Canadian Aboriginal art gained acceptance in the Euro-Western canon, after a long history of being regarded as craft or artifact. It was at this time that young Native Canadian artists from the Great Lakes regions banded together to form a unique style that came to be known as the Woodland or Anishinabe style of painting. These painters were noted for the outline of the figure and the content of First Nations beliefs. Morrisseau’s original conception of the Woodland style pinpoints the geography from which he worked - north of Thunder Bay in Ontario, Canada. Yet his work and his influence circled down into and throughout the United States to meet the influence of The Six Nations Artists - Onodaga, Mohawk, Senecan, Cayugan, Tuscarora and Oneida.

Discussion Sparks:
- What is the work made of?
- How was it assembled?
- Why do you think these materials were chosen by the artist?
- What similarities do you see between the basket and the print? How are they different?