



A LEAF A GOURD A SHELL  
A NET A BAG A SLING  
A SACK A BOTTLE A POT  
A BOX A CONTAINER

RUTH ASAWA  
MARIA BARTUSZOVÁ  
ALETTA JACOBS  
MARUJA MALLO  
MARIA SIBYLLA MERIAN  
SOPHIE TAEUBER-ARP  
TOSHIKO TAKAEZU  
BRIDGET TICHENOR  
TECLA TOFANO

In her 1986 essay “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” Ursula K. Le Guin takes up anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher’s radical reframing of the genesis of human culture to illuminate the capacious power of storytelling. Fisher suggests that human invention has its source in the acts of gathering and care that have typically been overlooked in favour of heroic, masculinist narratives of domination over nature. Rather than the hunting arrows and spears that are often identified as the first human technological inventions, Le Guin reminds us that our ancestors’ first creations were surely vessels for holding gathered nuts, berries, fruits, and grains, along with the bags and nets used to carry them. “We’ve heard it, we’ve all heard all about all the sticks and spears and swords, [...] the long, hard things,” Le Guin writes, “but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story. That is news.” Le Guin’s text invites us to take up the vessel as a metaphor for thinking through technology and the writing of narrative, acknowledging that stories are neither Promethean nor apocalyptic, but rather containers that open spaces for the expression of life. Taking up Le Guin’s potent metaphor, this display is conceived as an iconology of vessels in various forms – including nets, bags, eggs, shells, bowls, and boxes – and their symbolic, spiritual, or metaphorical links to nature and the body, whether realised in bag-like sculptural shapes, volumetric ceramics, or scientific explorations of bodily reproduction. Taking into account the arguments of some feminist critics against symbolising the female body as a container – specifically, one for carrying children –, this presentation considers the vessel as not only an empty conveyor of other objects, but a potent metaphorical device and expressive tool of its own.

Sophie Taeuber-Arp’s design objects, for example, are functional containers that are imbued, via their abstracted ornamentation, with the ethos of modernity. The womb-like sculptures that Ruth Asawa weaves from metal wire remain open and transparent, without definable interiors or exteriors and in constant negotiation with their surroundings. In contrast, Toshiko Takaezu’s vividly glazed porcelain and stoneware ceramics are fully enclosed, evoking planetary bodies or the fertility and mystery of nature. Volumetric forms are explored as vessels for carrying life in Maria Sibylla Merian’s meticulous studies of Surinamese insects and flora, with particular attention to nature’s sculptural genius, and in the bodies of the fantastical carapace-like creatures that inhabit Bridget Tichenor’s paintings. The recurring motif of the egg – a vessel that is both produced by and creates new life – in Maria Bartussová’s ovoid plaster casts is met by the more literal papier-mâché models of the womb used by Aletta Jacobs in her pioneering anatomical studies. Tecla Tofano’s ceramics, meanwhile, imbue a traditionally gendered and devalued medium with potent political and feminist imagery, while Maruja Mallo turns concave shapes of shells into precarious portraits of sensual bodies.

Sculptures hanging in the living room of Ruth Asawa’s Noe Valley home, 1991.  
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