

Pottery of the U.S. South: A Living Tradition.* Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico. October 24, 2014–January 3, 2016.

Reviewed by Kirstin C. Erickson

Pottery of the U.S. South, housed in the generous Bartlett Gallery of Santa Fe's Museum of International Folk Art and on display through January 3, 2016, is an impressive exhibit guest-curated by folklorist Karen Duffy. It aims to expose the visitor to the pottery traditions of the Piedmont Plateau's "clay country," with special focus on northern Georgia, North Carolina's Seagrove community, and the Catawba Valley. It portrays Southern pottery as a "living tradition" first developed by this region's British and German settlers to meet the necessities of their agrarian lives, yet flourishing today in forms that resonate with, and persistently innovate on, the art form's Southern Piedmont roots. Duffy's exhibit seeks to orient the viewer to the history and variety of Southern stoneware, and it succeeds magnificently—through the stories, voices, and stunning works of 43 of its makers.

The collection features 89 pieces, the majority of which were amassed by Duffy over a three-year period. The exhibit reaches its audience through a variety of modes and media: large, wall-mounted placards describing materials and methods and introducing the potters themselves; maps of the region; mural-sized photographs that cultivate a sense of place; case labels that disclose the artists' perspectives; as well as film, video clips, and interactive iPads.

The visitor first encounters a title wall with an introductory statement, an inset case featuring five jugs, and a series of historic and contemporary photographs projected onto a large screen. Navigation through the exhibit is intentionally flexible. If proceeding to the right, the visitor learns about the wheels at which potters stand to "turn" their pots, the Piedmont's rich clays, and the region's abundance of soft and hardwoods used to fire kilns or create ash-based glazes. The visitor is able to view the black-and-white film, *The Meaders Family: North Georgia Potters*, identified as "the earliest study of American folklife conducted by the Smithsonian." This documentary features renowned potters Cheever and Lanier Meaders at work in their North Georgia home.

If instead the visitor enters the exhibit through its center opening, he or she is confronted by three vessels from the late 1800s: a three-gallon food storage jar sealed in a thick glaze of wood ash and crushed glass, fashioned by Catawba Valley native Sylvanus Hartsoe; a salt-glazed whisky jug made by Seagrove's William Henry Crisco, and a syrup jug created by North Georgia's Wiley Meaders. These examples witness an exacting attention to form and function, index a rich history of artistry, and make for an arresting first impression.

From the exhibit's center, the visitor is drawn into either of two side rooms, each inviting acquaintance with these talented makers and their works. Some pots are out in the open; others are in freestanding or inset exhibit cases; all of them are well illuminated and contextualized. Several themes echo throughout the larger exhibit. Heritage and the transmission of tradition are

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evoked through the works and photographs of multi-generational potting families such as the Lucks, Hewells, and Meaderses. The utilitarian foundations of Southern stoneware—butter churns, crocks, jugs, jars, and pitchers, variously used to transport whiskey, to store sorghum molasses or coffee, to pickle vegetables, and to preserve meat—are reinforced through continuities in form and design. The exhibit also highlights innovation and global connectivity, both historic and modern: the viewer learns that the alkaline glaze which came to be called “Shanghai glaze” was developed in China and adopted by Southern potters in the 1820s; and the visitor is invited to regard a host of vessels whose makers, like Ben Owen III and Daniel Johnston, have studied in Japan, China, or Thailand. These makers use (and actively re-imagine) East Asian motifs, forms, and techniques in their own work.

While designing this exhibit, Duffy was advised by fellow folklorists Henry Glassie, John Burrison, and Charles (Terry) Zug. Profoundly ethnographic and equally attentive to the viewer’s emotional experience and the exhibit’s teaching mission, *Pottery of the U.S. South* is clearly the result of careful, long-term fieldwork. The visitor learns about the region’s history and about materials, design, and the imperatives of environment. She gains an appreciation for the region’s (multiple) “Jugtowns” and assimilates new vocabulary: “groundhog” or “railroad tunnel” kilns, “turning” (as opposed to throwing) pots, “burning” (rather than firing). The visitor comes away with a sense of the area’s prevailing aesthetic, the impact of tourism, and the serious attention paid to the transmission of knowledge to apprentice potters.

In the right corner room and central to my own experience of the exhibit is Michel Bayne’s Tribute Pot, an imposing, 18-gallon vessel created to honor the potters of South Carolina’s Edgefield District. The pot’s front quotes from a poem penned by David Drake, a “gifted slave potter-poet” who “often inscribed rhymed couplets” on his own pots. This particular poem was written in homage to Drake’s mentor, Abner Landrum. On the back of the pot are, according to Bayne, “the 90 names of all the enslaved, free, and indentured women and men who potted in Edgefield District of South Carolina in the 19th century.”

Bayne’s Tribute Pot, at once beautiful and haunting, stimulates in the viewer a hunger to know more about the ways in which African Americans influenced Southern pottery. The vast majority of potters working in today’s Southern Piedmont are white, yet this same room features the work of Winton and Rosa Eugene, an African American couple who employ non-traditional methods to depict Southern shotgun and mill houses on stoneware.

Throughout the exhibit, the visitor encounters multiple examples of the Southern face jug, darkly glazed vessels that sometimes feature white clay eyes and teeth fashioned from broken porcelain. Playful, whimsical, or troubling, face vessels became especially popular among tourists and collectors of folk arts during the 20th century. The viewer learns that “among the earliest Southern face jugs are ones made in the early 1860s by enslaved African Americans in South Carolina.” It is through these face jugs (and especially in the artists’ statements that accompany them) that the exhibit achieves its highest degree of multivocality. Jerry Brown views face jugs as “happy,” and Grace Nell Hewell revels in the creativity they inspire: “Oh, I love to make a face jug! . . . It’s just imagination.” Others, like Kim Ellington, express ambivalence: “I have mixed feelings about face jugs. I enjoy making them now and then for the sculptural aspect . . . but they get all the attention. And the art of this Catawba Valley pottery is so much more than

that.” And for Matt Jones, face vessels demand an honest confrontation with the past. Describing his Face Jug with Tears, he explains, “to me, the Southern face jug is all about slavery, about people brought to this country by force. The tears and sadness is for them, for the suffering and indignities they endured. And it’s for me as well, as a Southerner. Making these helps me to deal with the sorrow, and the shame.”

Karen Duffy’s exhibit peels back layers of history, providing a glimpse of the local worlds that demanded such forms. She skillfully communicates what Stephen Greenblatt calls resonance: “the power of the displayed object to . . . evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged” (1991:2). Yet Duffy does not forsake Greenblatt’s second imperative—the cultivation of wonder. The utilitarian nature of Southern pottery does not diminish the fact that displayed here are works of artistic virtuosity; the height of what is achievable in pottery, and much of it highly experimental. The exhibit invites the visitor to behold magnificent works—Michel Bayne’s Tribute Pot, Alexander Matisse’s Ometto Grave Marker, and the Song Dynasty-inspired bottle made by Ben Owen III, among many others—vessels that have the power “to stop the viewer in his or her tracks. . . to evoke an exalted attention” (Greenblatt 1991:42).

I admit that I am neither a curator nor an expert in Southern material culture, but rather an academic anthropologist interested in expressive culture, vernacular arts, and the politics of representation. I did not know what to expect when I agreed to review this exhibit. Yet during my brief visit, I gained a solid understanding of the history and artistry underpinning the pottery traditions of the Piedmont Plateau and was deeply moved by what I experienced. *Pottery of the U.S. South* stands as a remarkable testament to Southern potters and their works.

Reference Cited

Greenblatt, Stephen

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