

Object Lessons



**Ceramics from the
Gregg Museum of
Art & Design**

Object Lessons Ceramics from the Gregg Museum of Art & Design

October 16, 2015 – February 13, 2016

All of the pieces in this exhibition were loaned by the
Gregg Museum of Art & Design at North Carolina State University.

Narrative by
Charlotte V. Wainwright, Phd., Hon. AIA

All photographs by
Jason Dowdle
www.ncartphotographer.com

Design, layout, and printing by
Correction Enterprises

Introduction

As a high school student, I visited the NC State Fair in 1958 and 1959. The Dorton Arena dominated the fairgrounds with its swooping arches and glass walls. This remarkable building was designed by Matthew Nowicki who was a faculty member at the School (now College) of Design at North Carolina State University. An internationally famous modern icon, the arena was designed to serve the needs of the state fair and to be a symbol of a progressive North Carolina. Built for showing livestock, this graceful arena was to be part of a new fair complex unlike anything the state had seen. The other new fairground buildings were never constructed, but that has not altered Dorton Arena's significance as a visionary building linking agriculture and progress. I will always see it as a symbol of North Carolina's complex social, cultural, and political evolution. The arena's revolutionary structural design was executed by traditional building methods and is a near perfect representation of the state's ambitions and conflicts engendered by the transition from a rural, agrarian society into the densely populated and increasingly diverse state that it is today.

On reflection, it seems to me that honoring tradition while being of the moment is one of the essential aspects of pottery making in the state. Pottery makers use a language that gathers values. Traditional forms and methods join thoughtful innovations and transformations driven by talent, energy, risk-taking, relentless work, and psychological and emotional effort and need. For this exhibition, *Object Lessons: Ceramics from the Gregg Museum of Art & Design*, I have chosen work made mostly since 1988 in order to suggest some ways in which makers marry tradition with innovation.

Choosing pieces for this exhibition has been a challenge. The North Carolina Pottery Center has a modest exhibition space, and the Gregg Museum of Art & Design's collection is in storage. Many makers who are well represented in the Gregg's collection are not here because I decided to severely limit my selection to potters associated mostly with useful ware. Other considerations, including my prior research and writing on the Seagrove area potters and especially the Owen and Owens families, also acted to limit my selection of potters and pieces.

I would like to thank the North Carolina Pottery Center and its executive director, Lindsey Lambert, for the invitation to guest curate this exhibition. Roger Manley, director of the Gregg Museum of Art & Design, was agreeable to this idea, and I thank him. The staff of the Gregg, especially Mary Hauser, registrar, and Matt Gay, museum technician, were patient and supportive as they packed, unpacked, and repacked the fifty plus pieces for this exhibition. They are exemplary museum professionals. I am very glad to know them, and I thank them fifty plus times over.

CVW

A Little History

Marguerite Wildenhain, Robert Black, and Ormond Sanderson are three potters whose work comes from those years when the post-war recovery transformed so much in the history of craft and craft education and when potters across the state of North Carolina felt the energy of change. Following her education at Germany's Bauhaus, Wildenhain came to America in 1940 and briefly shared her skill and erudition at Black Mountain College in 1952.¹ Black and Sanderson participated in craft exhibitions, including ones at the North Carolina Museum of Art in the 1960s, and were the proprietors of a marvelous shop called Straw Valley, located between Chapel Hill and Durham, North Carolina, that offered modern furniture, textiles, ceramics, and glass.

Wildenhain made the lovely broad vase seen in the exhibit and called *Siesta on the Campus*. (figure 1) Perhaps she made it when she led a ten day workshop at Black Mountain College. The reclining figures seem to float around the bowl and her use of lapidary colors, the colors of cut stones, suggests they might be dreaming or hearing music. Her presence at Black Mountain College reminded me of its importance to other talented makers and educators, like Karen Karnes, Robert Turner, and David Weinreb, who had brought pottery making, instruction, and curriculum to the school.

Robert Black's large, elegant, *asymmetrical lidded vessel* – thrown and carved – is a product of the transformation in the 1950s when Peter Voulkous and his peers sought to return clay to making pure sculpture (figure 2).² William J. Brown, the Penland School of Crafts director, may have been one of the jury that chose Black's vessel as Best in Show in 1966 at the North Carolina Museum of Art.³ Black's faceted piece glitters faintly and makes me think of a meteorite that has fallen from the sky. His *tripod figure* with its three faces and sexual overtones references clay sculptures of the past, but a distance past, not the figures decorating courthouses and squares (figure 3). J. Ormond Sanderson may have exhibited two small clay boxes, golden cubes with a fabric-like surface at the same time (figure 4). Sanderson decorated the tops of the close fitting lids with holes that emphasized their nature as clay. Decorative and non-functional, they were perfect for a glass topped coffee table.

With these five pieces, we get hints of the nature of change in pottery. Missing in this exhibition is work that begins in the 1960s and early 1970s in North Carolina by people like Sid Oakley, Alice Proctor, Pepper Fluke, Paul Minnis, Tom Suomalainen, Ron Propst, and Elaine Reed. The evolution of the Gregg Museum of Art & Design's collection of work made since about 1988, however, represents a confluence of traditional with clearly new work. Along with other donors including the Friends of the Gregg, the Bernard J. and Patricia H. Hyman Ceramics Collection has played a key role in that preserving and illustrating that growth.

1. Benfey, Christopher. *Red Brick, Black Mountain, White Clay: Reflections on Art, Family, and Survival*. p. 172 The Penguin Press, New York, 2012.

2. Koplos, Janet and Bruce Metcalf. *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*. pp. 213-255. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC. 2010.

3. A photograph of the 1966 jury includes William J. Brown. (Between 2010-2012, my research on the Penland School of Crafts was funded by the Windgate Charitable Foundation, and I thank them.)



figure 1 *Siesta on Campus*,
Marguerite Wildenhain. ca.
1952. 6.25" H x 8.5" Dia.
Transferred from the NC
Museum of Art. 1998.001.130

figure 2 *Ceramic boxes*,
Jesse Ormond Sanderson.
3.25" H x 3" W x 4" D.
and 4" H x 4" W x 4" D.
ca. 1962-1965. Gifts of the
artist. 2004.024.005a-b and
2004.024.006a-b

figure 3 *Asymmetrical lidded
vessel*, Robert Keith Black.
ca. 1950s. 20" H x 16" Dia.
Gift of the NC Arts Council
via the NC Museum of Art.
1998.001.151a-b

figure 4 *Tripod vessel*, Robert
Keith Black. 1965. 14" H
x 5" Dia. Gift of the artist.
2004.024.002



Object Lessons

Private collections are invariably interesting because the objects reflect the tastes and preferences of their collectors. Institutional collections tend to focus on the exemplary makers in a given field. Objects from both sources are collected regularly at the Gregg Museum of Art & Design. When I started to choose work for this exhibition, I realized again how much makers owe to traditional pottery of all kinds. One of the greatest challenges for makers has always been whether to walk away from tradition or to use the tradition to create work that builds on a purposeful form. Vessel or sculptural, those are both limitless possibilities for someone who works in clay. Virtually every maker included in this exhibition has faced that challenge and that is one of the reasons for having the Gregg Museum of Art & Design's collection available for study. Mug, pitcher, vase, plate, teapot, grave marker, pipe, downspout, fountain, jar, bottle, chicken, figure, or face are all possible subjects. I organized this exhibition by gathering pieces that are similar, concentrating less on the individual artist and more on the artist's aesthetic represented by her or his work.



figure 5 Pair of Vases, Suze Lindsay. 2008. 6" H x 4-4.5" W x 2.5" D. Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia H. Hyman. 2010.022.020a-b



figure 6 Cylindrical lidded box, David Crane. 1997. 6.5" H x 5.5" Dia. Gift of Andrew Glasgow. 2003.034.016a-b



figure 7 Vessel, Terry Gess. 2006. 9" H x 6" Dia. Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia H. Hyman. 2011.030.007

figure 8 Lidded vessel, Christopher Baumann. 2003. 10.5" H x 8" W x 5" D. Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia H. Hyman. 2009.012.014a-b



Clay: For Home & Hearth

Terry Gess and Suze Lindsay are makers whose work, like that of David Crane, relies equally on careful attention to scale and careful attention to color and detail, making sophisticated objects that are very satisfying to see. The circles that envelope Gess's *rotund vessel* (2006) (figure 7) energize the surface and suggest that it is taller than nine inches. The small black lip of the opening, like the darker elements on the body of the pot, emphasizes this piece's symmetrical, comfortable shape. Suze Lindsay's carefully designed, constructed, and decorated *pair of vases* (2008) make a virtue of simplicity. (figure 5) The powerful vertical lines and dots are like upside-down exclamation points that emphasize the pieces' shapes. The vases seem to mirror each other and at the same time call attention to their slight differences. Lindsay's thoughtful geometrically inspired design can be compared to David Crane's *cylindrical lidded box* (1997) (figure 6). Both makers have used carefully sized areas of color. Crane's *hexagonal bowl* (2003) continued his interest in careful divisions of form that are modulated with color. (figure 9) All of these pieces are modest in size, but rich in detail. Each wants to be held, admired in the light, and appreciated for the time devoted to the work.

Christopher Baumann's *lidded pot* (2003) (figure 8) provides a good comparison with both Gess's piece and Lindsay's pair of vases. All three makers rely on linear decoration to articulate and enliven their shapes. The outcome is very different in each case, and it is instructive to compare the pieces because the thickness or thinness of the lines produces a different effect on the surface of the pot and for the viewer.

Ronan Peterson's striped pot and his two vases demonstrate in three different ways how shape and surface join with color to make a small piece intricate and engaging instead of "fussy." The blue and yellow *striped lidded pot* (2009) combines two colors that are lively and playful (figure 11). The vase painted in bright circles of red/orange on green seems to be actively in motion (2007) (figure 12). The vase, with its complex skin and its two tone color scheme (2006), is powerfully tactile (figure 10). All three allude openly to the labor intensive work implicit in clay, while offering a sense of completion and refinement.

It is instructive to see Jim and Shirl Parmentier's woven *clay basket with a bamboo handle* (2000) (figure 16) in relation to Peterson's work. Here is another surface clearly not intended to fool the eye, but to take advantage of another property of clay. Imagining the time and effort required to "weave" the basket makes it more interesting because the makers have asked something from the clay that is unexpected. Weaving and plaiting are not common clay methods, but reticulation has been popular for centuries, and one can use it to complete a basket.



figure 9 Hexagonal bowl,
David Crane. 2003. 4" H x
7.75" Dia. Gift of Bernard
J. & Patricia H. Hyman.
2011.030.006



figure 10 Vase, Ronan
Peterson. 2006. 4" H x
3.25" Dia. Gift of Bernard
J. & Patricia H. Hyman.
2010.022.011



figure 11 Striped lidded pot,
Ronan Peterson. 2009. 8" H
x 3.75" Dia. Gift of Bernard
J. & Patricia H. Hyman.
2011.030.014

figure 12 Vase, Ronan
Peterson. 2007. 5.25" H
x 4" Dia. Gift of Bernard
J. & Patricia H. Hyman.
2011.030.005



Clay: For Home & Hearth continued

Marsha Owen must like flowers. *Orchid* (2002) is designed, at least I think it is, to hold an orchid, with its ethereal blossoms, with its sometimes less than lovely base hidden in this elegant slitted pot (figure 15). Owen's wide-bodied *blue vase* (2005), numbered 38, with its very narrow neck and elaborate striped pattern, demonstrates the delicate balance between body, neck, and opening (figure 18). The textile-like decoration is highly tactile, and the trumpet bell of the neck looks like an exotic flower.

Leah Leitson's *pitcher and four cups* (ca. 2002) (figure 13) are not waiting for tea from Michael Hunt's teapot (2001) below. Her skillful manipulation of the porcelain to achieve a sensuous skin, along with the pitcher's carefully balanced pouring lip and high pulled handle, feels extremely natural and alive. The coloration – dark green and turquoise – reinforces that feeling. The pitcher is the bud of a grand blossom. The four cups are buds themselves. This is a very elegant marriage of nature and function.

Michael Hunt's *teapot* (2001) seems deliberately opposite (figure 17). The teapot bulges. Its wide handle and short spout make it feel a little heavy and awkward. Hunt is, however, a fine painter. I have watched him make gestures on and in clay since he started working over a decade ago. The dots in different sizes perfectly enliven the surface of the teapot and mitigate the shortness of the spout. Consider also Hunt's big *bowl* (2007) (figure 14). It's a large, simple shape. The color is almost bland, but the gestural mark in its interior gives life to this contained space as the circle is squared again and again.

Sally Bowen Prange (d. 2007) was one of the North Carolina's premier potters. Among her highly recognizable forms was a group of pieces she called *Edgescape* that derived from her practice of slicing and rejoining the sides and the lip of a bowl to break the monotony of the edge and call attention to the shape as sculpture rather than bowl. This "*Edgescape bowl*" (ca. 1979) is also clad in her barnacle glaze which was inspired by her experiences scuba diving (figure 20). Prange continued to develop the *Edgescape* idiom and in the 1990s created another cycle of pieces using a similar technique of cutting, slicing, and rejoining the edges of the bowl and using brilliant lusterware techniques with gold leaf. She called these pieces the *Celebration* series, and the one shown here is *Pathfinder* (1993) (figure 19). It is monumental and quite arresting in contrast to her nearly monochromatic barnacle glaze.

Prange's bowls, like Meredith Brickell's *green bowl with dots* (1995), (figure 21) direct attention to the rich possibilities of bowls. Historically, the bowl is a dominant form and is used in so many different ways. Brickell's bowl is a skirt, a drapery, a whirl, a dancer, and almost looks as tasty as guacamole or mint ice cream.

Conrad Weiser's *incised bowl* (1992) seems completely bound to the earth by its elaborate primitive surface decoration and slightly drooping shape (figure 23). It is as if the weight of the clay was overcome by gravity and started to slump. But what a good bowl, and for what might it be used? Food, flowers, books? This group of bowls is instructive in many different ways including surface, shape, foot, and color.

figure 13 Pitcher & cups, Leah Leitson. ca. 2002. Pitcher – 10”H x 7.5” W. Bernard J. & Patricia H. Hyman Ceramics Collection. 2002.027.001-005



figure 14 Bowl, Michael Hunt. ca. 2007. 3” H x 13.5” Dia. Gift of Charlotte V. & Stephen A. Wainwright. 2015.001.012

figure 15 Orchid, Marsha Owen. 2002. 5.75” H x 6.75” W x 5.25” D. Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia H. Hyman. 2010.022.004



figure 16 Clay basket with bamboo handle, Jim & Shirl Parmentier. 2000. 11.5” H x 6” W x 6” D. Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia H. Hyman. 2008.024.035

figure 17 Teapot, Michael Hunt. 2001. 8.25” H x 7.5” W. Gift of Jonathan Vestal Brown in memory of Donald Patrick Beaver. 2003.001.001a-b

figure 18 Blue Vase, Marsha Owen. 2005. 8.75” H x 5” W x 5” D Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia H. Hyman. 2012.060.004



Hyman Ceramics

The Bernard J. and Patricia H. Hyman Ceramics Collection: Accumulating a Representative Number

One of the advantages of a large ceramics collection for study and exhibition is that, with time, the makers included are usually represented by many more than one or two pieces. With the Bernard J. and Patricia H. Hyman Ceramics Collection that advantage is still evolving. I have chosen three pieces from four potteries – Rock Creek Pottery, Michael Rutkowsky, Brian Van Nostrand, and Conrad Weiser – from the Bernard J. and Patricia H. Hyman Ceramics Collection for examination here.

Conrad Weiser has been an established teaching potter for decades. The brown bowl made in 1992 (previously shown) is a decade older than the large covered celadon jar and nearly seventeen years older than the brown-green raku pot shown here. (figures 22, 24) All three are strong and persuasive examples of his work. His skill and confidence, as well as his knowledge of glazes and firing, have matured. The two lidded jars contrast well with each other in terms of size, color, material, glaze, and decoration. Comparative analysis such as this is precisely what makes the Bernard J. and Patricia H. Hyman Ceramics Collection increasingly informative.



figure 19 Pathfinder, Sally Bowen Prange. 1993. 10" H x 16" Dia. Gift of the artist, courtesy of Lee Hansley Gallery, Raleigh. 1996.006.001



figure 20 Edgescape bowl, Sally Bown Prange. ca. 1979. 5" H x 11.5" Dia. Gift of Nancy Fields Fadum. 1993.013.004

figure 21 Bowl, Meredith Brickell. 1995. 4" H x 12.25" Dia. Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia H. Hyman

figure 22 Lidded jar, Conrad Weiser. 2001. 11" H x 6" Dia. Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia H. Hyman. 2009.012.018a-b

figure 23 Incised bowl, Conrad Weiser. 1992. 8" H x 12.5" Dia. Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia H. Hyman. 2009.012.023

figure 24 Lidded raku pot, Conrad Weiser. 2009. 18" H x 6.25" Dia. Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia H. Hyman



Hyman Ceramics

continued

Michael Rutkowsky lives and works in western North Carolina. In 1997, the Hymans collected a *covered bowl* decorated with concentric white stripes. (figure 25) It is a useful piece, and the lid comes off. The interior is beautiful and practically begs to be seen. Two years later in 1999, a *hexagonal vase* with graphic glaze runs on the surface came into their collection (figure 28). Like the bowl, it is technically excellent and is designed to be seen as much as used. A tall, *three-handled vase* with a dark foot and lip and decorated with irregular looping lines was added in 2004 (figure 30). The looping lines, like the concentric white stripes on the lidded bowl, or the hexagonal vase, are painterly and carefully applied to his clay bodies, emphasizing both form and material.

Brian Van Nostrand is from West Virginia. Between 1993 and 1998, the Hymans acquired three earthenware pieces made by Nostrand: a wide-mouthed, *octagonal pot* with incised motifs and a terra cotta glaze (1993), a tall *lidded jar* with *carved designs* in a rich brown (1995), and a *lidded jar* with *geometric patterns* on the body (1998) (figures 27, 29 and 26, respectively). All three have a recessed foot and resemble each other in Nostrand's handling of the lip and lid. Nostrand is technically adept and consistent within this five year period. Now seventeen years later, it would be instructive to see what he is making. As pieces continue to be added, and the Bernard J. and Patricia H. Hyman Ceramics Collection continues to evolve, Nostrand's own evolution will become apparent.

figure 25 Covered bowl, Michael Rutkowsky. 1997. 6" H x 8" Dia. Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia. H. Hyman. 2009.012.017a-b





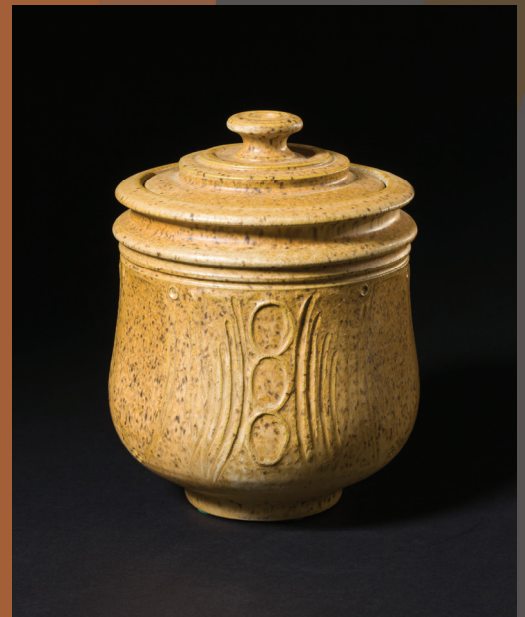
figure 26 Lidded jar with geometric patterns, Brian Van Nostrand. 1998. 8" H x 6" Dia. Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia. H. Hyman

figure 27 Octagonal pot, Brian Van Nostrand. 1993. 8" H x 6" Dia. Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia. H. Hyman. 2009.031.015

figure 28 Hexagonal vase, Michael Rutkowsky. 1999. 7.75" H x 6.25" W x 3" D. Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia. H. Hyman. 2008.024.003

figure 29 Lidded jar with carved designs, Brian Van Nostrand. 1995. 14" H x 7" Dia. Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia. H. Hyman. 2008.024.040a-b

figure 30 Three-handled vase, Michael Rutkowsky. 2004. 10.5" H x 8" Dia. Gift of Bernard J. & Patricia. H. Hyman. 2008.024.024



Hyman Ceramics

continued

Will Ruggles and Douglass Rankin, the potters of Rock Creek Pottery, left their home in western North Carolina for New Mexico about a decade ago. The wood-fired, salt-glazed stoneware they produced had a particular, recognizable, and memorable style that came from their study with Randy Johnson and Warren MacKenzie, as well as Asian affinities that they adopted and studied. The *triangular vase* (ca. 1988-2001) (figure 32) is heavily painted with slip trails that seem to flow around the piece, seemingly as if to offset its three-sidedness. The *rectangular tray* (ca. 1988-2001) (figure 31) decorated with a fish has oriental style feet supporting the tray. The large *platter* (figure 33) with three irregular red glaze runs across the surface shares the same feeling of both deliberate and yet spontaneous decoration as was used on the vase and tray. Work by Ruggles and Rankin, like that of Rutkowski and Van Nostrand, explores decoration. These are the kinds of decoration I associate with modern work whose makers have learned from their exposure to other cultures and traditions. Cultural and intellectual interventions happen and are usually invigorating. Classic examples of this are when northerners Jacques and Juliana Busbee came to rural Seagrove, North Carolina, and started Jugtown Pottery and when glazes and clay became available ready-made.

figure 31 *Rectangular tray*, Will Ruggles & Douglass Rankin. ca. 1988-2001. 3" H x 11.25" L x 10" W. Gift of Andrew Glasgow. 2002.047.015





figure 32 Triangular vase, Will Ruggles & Douglass Rankin. ca. 1988-2001. 10.75" H x 4" Dia. Gift of Andrew Glasgow. 2002.047.004

figure 33 Platter, Will Ruggles & Douglass Rankin. 1999. 3.75" H x 19.25" Dia. Gift of the Friends of the Gregg. 1999.006.001



Sculptural Vessels

Meredith Brickell made at least two large yellowish, orange-slipped, thin-walled earthenware buckets in 2003. (figure 36) Nonrepresentational designs decorate the exterior along with a steel handle attached to the body below a rough rim. This is a gestural pot. Everything about it says “created quickly” and that is a most appealing attribute in the world of potting where “sudden” is unlikely. The bucket has presence and vital energy like the shape itself, which is elementary and convincing.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Herb Cohen’s beautiful bowl (1997), just over five inches from base to rim. (figure 34) Cohen, a products designer before he became a curator and a potter, helped introduce North Carolina to its clay past by collecting traditional ware at the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina, during his time as a curator there. His pottery takes its strength and success from his nearly perfect marriage of scale, color, and decoration. The geometric pattern on the flat wide rim of this bowl and the three incised bands low on the belly reveal its clay body and perform a balancing act for the viewer just as they carefully weighs the power of the color against the large size of the bowl. Cohen’s recent retrospective at the Mint Museum confirmed what many had known for years - that Cohen is a consummate designer and maker of national significance. His bowl is also wonderful to see in relation to Brickell’s bucket. Each reinforces the value of the fine design of the other.

Other large vessels selected for this exhibition mix more traditional forms with inventive sculptural forms. Cynthia Bringle, a nationally recognized potter and teacher, made a thirty-three inch tall sculpted and carved vessel in 2001. (figure 38) At a distance, its long neck and high handles give it the presence of a human form. On close examination, the detailed decorative work makes it even more powerful because carving animates the body with light and shade. Her lidded jar (2005) is a more traditional form, but the faceted body, carefully made lid, and modest handles enrich the shape, demonstrating that there is no hard line between “traditional” and “contemporary.” (figure 35) Each of the following pieces may further tangle any attempt at drawing a hard line between “traditional” and “contemporary.”

Michael Kline’s twenty-one inch tall vase (2007) is elegant. (figure 37) A pattern of birds, leaves, and vines in natural colors carries the eye around the piece suggesting motion, much like the carving on Bringle’s carved vessel. The colors also add weight to the vase which seems to stand on tiptoe almost as in anticipation of flight.

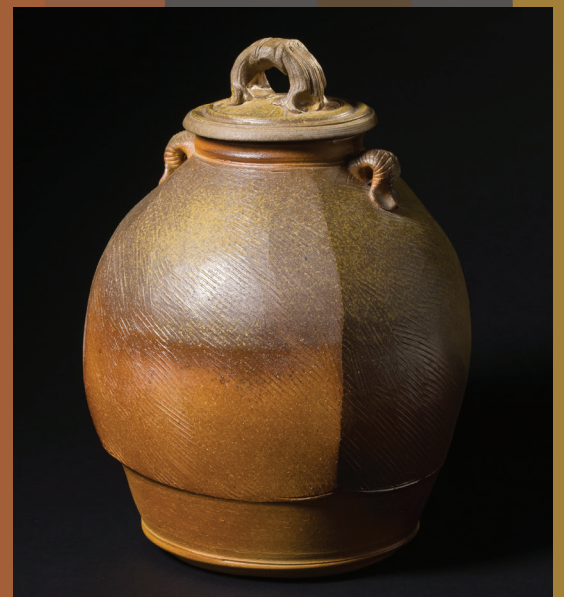
figure 34 Bowl, Herb Cohen. ca. 1997. 5.25" H x 16" Dia. Harrelson Fund Purchase. 1997.028.001

figure 35 Lidded jar, Cynthia Bringle. Date unknown. 15.5" H x 10" Dia. Gift of the Friends of the Gregg. 2005.031.001a-b

figure 36 Earthenware bucket, Meredith Brickell. 2003. 20" H x 15" Dia. Gift of the Friends of the Gregg. 2003.023.001

figure 37 Vase, Michael Kline. Date Unknown. 21" H 5" Dia. Palmour Endowment Purchase. 2007.045.001

figure 38 Vessel, Cynthia Bringle. 2001. 33" H x 10" W. Gift of the Friends of the Gregg. 2001.026.001



Sculptural Vessels

continued

Kim Ellington of Vale, North Carolina, eschewed the role of a contemporary potter and instead became a traditional maker in the style of Burlon Craig (d. 2009) of North Carolina's Catawba Valley. Ellington's use of traditional forms and ideas, as evidenced in the *four-handled alkaline-glazed eighteen inch jar* (1997) with glass runs, have provided him with a clearly expressive and increasingly rich language. (figure 40) The modest blue *bowl* (1997), made in the same year as the jar, is a signal that Ellington cares for and relies on traditions while he systematically makes objects that are new, yet reference the past. (figure 39)

Jack Troy's large stoneware *jar* (ca. 2000) compares nicely with Ellington's jar, as well as Bringle's carved vessel. (figure 41) Troy's use of a natural ash glaze and markings from the sea shells used to support the jar in the kiln make it seem slightly two-sided, which is not usually a desirable quality. One side of the pot is rich in color; the other side more subdued. This pot is also wood-fired, and together the three pieces – Troy's jar, Ellington's jar, and Bringle's carved vessel – demonstrate why potters like wood-firing. Wood-firing produces many different results, some anticipated and some not.

Another innovative maker, Michael Sherrill, might be the definition of "contemporary" because of his relentless efforts, including making tools, to create his work. The two *bottles* here (ca. 1994) are fine examples of his ability to turn a functional idea into a pure sculptural form by altering scale, neck, handle, and skin. (figures 42, 43) One would never pour from these bottles. Sherrill's subsequent fifteen years have been densely creative as he has made large sculptural works for public spaces, translating the natural world into porcelain.

figure 39 Bowl, Kim Ellington.
1997. 4.5" H x 7.5" Dia. Gift
of Bernard J. & Patricia H.
Hyman. 2008.024.010



figure 40 Four-handed jar, Kim Ellington. 1997. 18.5" H x 14" Dia. Gift of the Friends of the Gregg. 1998.025.001

figure 41 Jar, Jack Troy. ca. 2000. 20.75" H x 15" Dia. Harrelson Fund Purchase. 2001.015.001

figure 42 Tall bottle, Michael Sherill. ca. 1994. 18.25" H x 4.5" W x 2" D. Gift of Andrew Glasgow. 2004.022.003

figure 43 Short bottle, Michael Sherrill. ca. 1994. 7" H x 5" W x 2" D. Gift of Andrew Glasgow. 2004.022.001



Sculptural Vessels

continued

The same might be said of Tom Spleth who not only works in clay, but also is a painter. Like Sherrill, Spleth has spent time at the Kohler Company exploring ceramic production as a means to create an artistic language. Spleth is considered the re-inventor of slip casting which he used to make this *pleated porcelain pitcher* (2000). (figure 46) His remarkably tactile, light, and elegant pitcher is designed to be used. His thirty-eight inch “bottle” (1996-97) is not a bottle, but a piece of sculpture, a “monster pot,” as Burlon Craig, himself no stranger to large pieces, might have said. (figure 47) Spleth pushes accepted definitions to make expressive works in clay.

Mary Lou Higgins uses the human figure as her means of expression. As she draws and paints on large vessels, figures emerge from the clay and gain footing on her pots. She uses very natural poses and expressions which engage the viewer in determining the meaning of her work. *The Shadows of Time Rise Before Us Now* (1992) is a clear invitation to discover a narrative in the expressive faces and bodies of the figures. (figure 45) Perhaps the answers may be found with careful attention and thought.

Sculptures by Lydia Thompson are as memorable as they are enigmatic. *The Gathering* (2004) presents a head and shoulders emerging from a spiky form that may or may not be natural. (figure 48) She gives us cold colors and closed eyes as the head turns away from the viewer. This piece was one of a series she made for *Four Women in Clay*, a previous exhibition at the Gregg Museum of Art & Design. Thompson has been influenced by African work as well as earlier modern sculpture.

Clara Couch (d. 2004) usually made her pieces by coiling and smoothing her shapes and then using a light glaze, tint, or paint. Her facility and patience were quite successful. Her *bowl-like sculpted spiral* (2003) ends at a separate ladder whose purpose might be either to go down, or climb up. (figure 44) This not quite symmetrical bowl and ladder may be representative of a kiva, a ceremonial Pueblo or Hopi underground space. The work seems to evoke thoughts of a spiritual search, such as one associated with a kiva or sacred space.

figure 44 *Spiral Sculpture*, Clara R. Couch. ca. 2003. 6.25” H x 15.25” Dia. Gift of the Friends of the Gregg. 2004.052.001a-b



figure 45 *Shadows of Time Rise Before Us Now*, MaryLou Higgins. 1992. 25" H x 13" W x 12.5" D. Gift of the artist. 1992.022.001

figure 46 *Pleated porcelain pitcher*, Tom Spleth. 2000. 11.25" H x 9" W. Gift of the Friends of the Gregg. 2000.017.001)

figure 47 "Bottle", Tom Spleth. Date Unknown. 38" H x 12.5" Dia. Anonymous gift. FIC302.001)

figure 48 *The Gathering*, Lydia Thompson. 2004. 22" H x 21" W x 5" D. Gift of the Friends of the Gregg. 2004.014.010



Sculptural Vessels

continued

The *Object Maker* series by Virginia Scotchie was conceived by the artist to make forms that are independent of function. Viewers sometimes find these objects frustrating. This one, *Pink Knob Platter*, is not quite pink and certainly is not much of a platter. (figure 49) Scotchie's objects in this series may come in intense as well as cool colors and are frosted and very tactile. The objects may be arranged in different numbers and combinations on shelves and platforms. That the objects are virtually nonreferential, made without regard to the identity of the form, a narrative, or a function, is an achievement. Think about it.

Jen Bireline has been devising successful narratives with her hand-built, painted, and patterned torsos for a decade. *Bound Wing* (2001) is a carefully abstracted body that by its posture and surface design suggests healing found in waiting. (figure 50) One naturally thinks first of the broken wing of a bird, and the foot of the sculpture does stand in grass. The mind then progresses – your wings have been metaphorically clipped, and time will be the healer.



figure 49 *Pink Knob Platter*,
Virginia Scotchie. ca.
2003. 4.25" H x 26" L x
22" W. Gift of the artist.
2004.045.001

figure 50 Bound Wing, Jennie Bireline. Date unknown. 36" H x 23" W x 8" D. Gift of Rudy & Peggy Jo Kirby. 2007.030.004



Conclusion

This essay barely scratches the surface of the complex content of the fifty plus pieces drawn from the Gregg Museum of Arts & Design's collection that are included in the exhibition *Object Lessons*. When they are unpacked for the exhibition, they will be completely new to me as well as the audience because that is one of the joys and virtues of pottery – every time you see a piece you can see something new and different about it if you look hard enough. The makers in this exhibition are not for the most part traditional potters, although there is some continuity with the past. I hope this exhibition will demonstrate how very much is to be learned from direct hand/eye contact with these pieces and with the Gregg Museum of Art & Design's collection as a whole.

Charlotte V. Wainwright, Phd., Hon. AIA
July 4, 2015

Bibliography

This bibliography is deliberately short because the volume of writing about North Carolina's ceramic history continues to grow, so I will just note a few critical works.

Nancy Sweezy's *Raised in Clay: The Southern Pottery Tradition* (1984) and Charles N. Zug's *Turners and Burners The Folk Potters of North Carolina* (1986) are the "mother and father" of most of us, and it is here one could begin their exploration of North Carolina Pottery. The late D.W. Morton's *Handmade: A History of the North State Pottery 1924-1959* (2003) represents the kind of monograph one imagines will exist for a hundred and more talented makers. Stephen C. Compton's recent study, *Its Just Dirt! the Historic Art Potteries of North Carolina's Seagrove Region Art Pottery* (2014) is a fine introduction to a particular aspect of the field. Other publications from museum exhibitions such as the North Carolina Museum of Art's *The Busbee Vision* and *The Potter's Eye*, the McKissick Museum's *New Ways for Old Jugs: Tradition and Innovation at the Jugtown Pottery*, and the Gregg Museum of Art & Design's *Four Women in Clay*, offer valuable and changing perspectives on our heritage, our present and the context for *Objects Lessons*.

Working on this short essay took me specifically to the following publications:

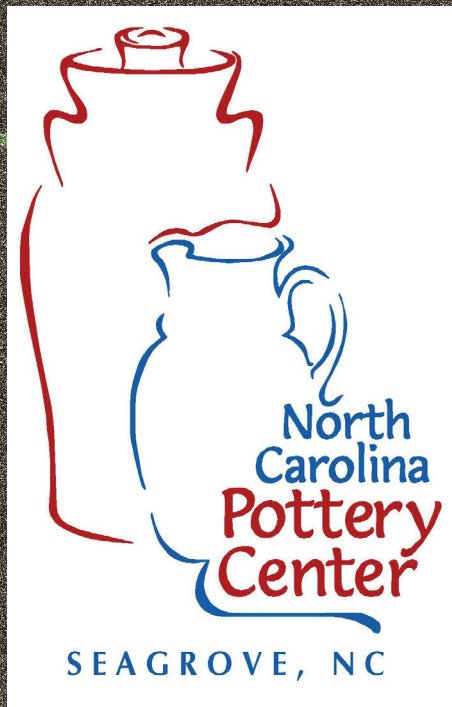
Benfey, Christopher. *Red Brick, Black Mountain, White Clay: Reflections on Art, Family, and Survival*. The Penguin Press, New York, 2012.

Brown, Charlotte Vestal. *The Remarkable Potters of Seagrove: The Folk Pottery of a Legendary North Carolina Community*. Lark Books, Asheville, NC. 2006.

Koplos, Janet and Bruce Metcalf. *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*. pp. 213-255. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC. 2010.

Mecham, Denny Hubbard, ed. *The Living Tradition: North Carolina Potters Speak*. North Carolina Pottery Center by Goosepen Studio and Press. Conover, NC. 2009.

Perry, Barbara Stone, ed. *North Carolina Pottery: The Collection of the Mint Museums*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC. 2004.



Promoting public awareness & appreciation of an ongoing tradition in North Carolina.

Open Tues. - Sat., 10am to 4pm

PO Box 531

Seagrove, NC 27341

336-873-8430

www.ncpotterycenter.org

info@ncpotterycenter.org

Find us on Facebook!

Funding for the North Carolina Pottery Center and its mission is made possible through the generosity of our membership, the Mary & Elliot Wood Foundation, Windgate Charitable Foundation, the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, and the John W. and Anna H. Hanes Foundation. Support also comes from the NC Arts Council, a division of the Department of Cultural Resources, with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts.