

The Potter's Eye: Art and Tradition in North Carolina Pottery

by Mark Hewitt and Nancy Sweezy; photography by Jason Dowdle

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Robert Hunter

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Organized by master stoneware potter Mark Hewitt and Nancy Sweezy, former director of Jugtown (and once its head potter), The Potter's Eye is a voyeuristic journey into the world of North Carolina pottery from the nineteenth century to the present day. In tracing this history, Mark Hewitt and Nancy Sweezy evoke the canon of folk pottery traditions. Their premise—that North Carolina pottery “represents one of America’s most revered stoneware pottery traditions”—is a telling aggrandizement of this necessary utilitarian enterprise. Perhaps it is this sense of self-righteousness that makes me leery of fully embracing the North Carolina doctrine, as I would argue that virtually every state or at least every region in this country has a pottery tradition worthy of reverence.

In a sense, then, I went to the opening of “The Potter's Eye” looking to pick a fight. Arriving at the nearly full parking lot at North Carolina’s Museum of Art in Raleigh at seven o’clock in the evening, I was awed by the sheer number of attendees (at least 600)—most having paid \$30 for the lavish reception and book signing. Before the evening was over, however, my contention had turned to admiration for the well-conceived and executed exhibition, its handsome accompanying catalog, and the infectious enthusiasm of the North Carolina stoneware disciples.

Hewitt and Sweezy clearly recognize and acknowledge the worthiness of other pots; both the catalog and exhibition include selected salt- and ash-glazed pots from across time and

space. Indeed, the primary focus of their exhibit was to illustrate the connection that North Carolina stoneware has with other regional and world traditions, from salt-glazed examples from New York and New England, Great Britain, and Germany, to alkaline-glazed stoneware examples made in China, Thailand, and Japan.

The book opens with several introductory essays, the most important being “New Perspectives on Old North Carolina Pots,” in which Mark Hewitt discusses how the Japanese approach to pottery connoisseurship offers an alternative way to appreciate the traditionally manufactured utilitarian wares of the West.

In the next section, representing a major part of the book (and exhibition), Hewitt puts this position into practice in his exuberant entries for the sixty-six antique pots from the regions mentioned above. He draws on the extensive vocabulary derived from the Asian language of connoisseurship, which can be poetic and, at times, otherworldly in its description of, for example, firing clouds that “create a vivid nebula of haloed pink, red, brown, and gray” (p. 83).

Hewitt also evokes many anthropomorphic comparisons describing lips, shoulders, necks, and bellies. He likens a pitcher from Randolph County, North Carolina (cat. no. 26), to a “dignified dowager dressed up for a ball, gaunt but stately, bejeweled and defiant.

Bedecked with a double strand of rhythmic swags on its neck and shoulder, tattoos of a bird, fish and flower on its calves, and the date of the party, 1879, right on its belly, it is going out in style” (p. 73). From the description alone, a Disney animator could easily bring this object to life on the big screen.

Certainly a modern trained decorative arts curator—constrained by formalities that inhibit any semblance of emotion—would not have written the text in this way. Only a potter could have spoken so honestly and freely. Indeed, if any of the catalog entries had been submitted to me for *Ceramics in America*, I would have stricken most of the superlatives, leaving behind the who, what, where, and hows (while secretly agreeing with most every word I was deleting).

In the second half of the book Nancy Sweezy presents essays on the six contemporary North Carolina potters chosen for the exhibition—Kim Ellington, Mark Hewitt, Ben Owen III, Pam Owens, Vernon Owens, and David Stuempfle—each of whom has five objects included in the show and book. It is clear throughout Sweezy’s biographical narratives that these hardworking, dedicated, and enthusiastic artists pride themselves on being informed by the past. The common experience of mastering materials, techniques, and endless repetition is the spiritual union card that all potters carry. It is this competency that non-potting scholars endeavor to capture in their descriptive language. It is interesting that while Hewitt goes to great lengths to provide background and interpretation for each antique pot represented in the exhibit, all of the contemporary pots are represented solely by photographs. This does not mean that they are mute—I want to think this was a clever device intended to allow these pots to speak for themselves. Nevertheless, I would have enjoyed the opportunity to learn, from their makers, what makes the selected pots special.

To explore my own thoughts and feelings about the show’s assemblage, I allowed myself to gravitate naturally toward my pots of choice. My only conscious decision was to select one example from each period—antique and contemporary—that most convincingly spoke to me. My antique choice was a ten-gallon alkaline-glazed jar (cat. no. 63) made about 1860 by Isaac Lefevers of Lincoln County, North Carolina. The authors apparently thought a lot of this pot as well, as they devoted more text and illustrations to this one piece than to any other object in the exhibit. In choosing a contemporary example, I found that a Kim Ellington jug (cat. no. 68) caught and held my attention, which kept returning to admire the form and glaze.

With their exhibition Hewitt and Sweezy attempt to emphasize the similarities between contemporary potters and their historical predecessors. Hearing potters describe the aesthetic concerns of their profession makes me wonder what an early-nineteenth-century American potter might have thought. I find it hard to believe that utilitarian potters would

have focused so much attention on the individual pots. These potters were driven by production. A beautiful sight to them might have been at the board level or the kiln load level. Their pots, sold by the dozen, were made to store salted meats and caustic paints and solvents. Doctors' wives did not line up to have bragging rights for the choice selections from the latest kiln opening.

In defining the most basic difference between the products of the past and present, I would argue that the antique examples Hewitt and Sweezy chose embody unconscious aesthetic concerns, whereas their contemporary counterparts exude self-consciousness. This is not a bad thing, of course, but hugely important to keep in mind.

The book's photography is as important as the well-ordered text. Jason Dowdle has provided far more than an objective recording of the items. He has added his artistic interpretation in virtually every image. Photographing pots is hard work. There is tension between illumination and glare. The glazes, while beautiful, can defeat many photographers who try to eliminate the "hot spots" created by studio lighting. Dowdle has succeeded in allowing enough light to show the color and texture of the pots while incorporating the distinctive highlights into his artistic vision, and in this respect his photography contributes to the otherworldliness theme of the book. Many of his details of glazes could be mistaken for images taken by radio telescopes of celestial events.

For Hewitt, Sweezy, and Dowdle, The Potter's Eye is a love story, a romantic exploration of the innate qualities of vernacular pottery and potters. It suggests that looking to the past and understanding the materials, tools, techniques, and history of a ceramic tradition bring us all closer to pottery bliss. With the rich language, lavish photographs, and the pots themselves, the exhibit and book are an unmitigated success. My only regret is that this lovely show did not travel outside of North Carolina. It would have done much not only to educate but to indoctrinate others about the beauty of pots. If you missed the show, buy the book. Better still, buy two and send the other to a loved one.