

Mark in Place

Henry Glassie

North Carolina – a place of red clay and black pines, of sleek highways and suave conurbation – was the nurturing ground of Mark Hewitt’s magnificent artistic achievement. He digs Carolina clay and lifts it into monumental forms that swell up and stand proud, dressed in vibrant glaze. In bold form and lively glazes, Mark’s pots fit the old Southern tradition. “Ain’t got form, ain’t got nothing,” said the Georgia potter Chester Hewell, and it all depends on the glazing solution and the timed sequence of wood-firing said the Georgia potter Clete Meaders. The Southern pot’s beauties flow from work at the wheel and work at the kiln. Mark Hewitt’s pots, too, issue from labor, but in size, in formal variety, in the blended glazes that release and run into abstract-expressionist masterpieces, his pots incarnate the man’s singular spirit, his sincerity and joy: only Mark Hewitt could have made them.

Stoke was home. The house was full of pots, and Mark might have followed his father and grandfather as a skilled practioner of the industrial ceramic tradition of Staffordshire. Instead, he stepped free to embrace the tradition of ceramic modernism. In oppositional, innovative reaction to modernization, the modernist stretches beyond the fashions of the present, reaching back and out to create the future. When in collaboration Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada set the pattern of ceramic modernism, Leach reached back into the English past and out to the Japanese alternative, just as Hamada reached back into the Japanese past and out to the English alternative. The old pots remain: Leach’s experiments with cursive Japanese ornament, Hamada’s plates that were takes on

the tradition of the Tofts of Staffordshire. They inspired Michael Cardew, and Cardew taught Mark Hewitt. Like his master, Mark traveled, learning the tricks in Japan that enable him to create pots so grand that they stand outside, like temples, sturdily transforming mere space into particular places, rich with presence, with history and meaning.

The old English potteries barely survived the Second World War, but studio pottery was flourishing, and he might have remained. Mark, though, comes from a family accustomed to travel. With his bride, Carol, he settled in North Carolina to be part of a live tradition of pot making. They bought a farm near Pittsboro, where they raised their daughters and Mark built a massive kiln to fire with pine. He talked with the old-timers, with Burlon Craig, borrowing from him the spills of glass that have become a signal trait of Mark's work. An energetic, sociable, charming man, Mark cooperated with the state's scholars and potters to develop the North Carolina Pottery Center. With Nancy Sweezy, he wrote *The Potter's Eye* to accompany a glorious exhibition at the North Carolina Museum of Art. Their book compares Southern pots with old marvels from America and Asia to shape a frame for aesthetic evaluation, and it celebrates the leaders of Carolina's current tradition: Kim Ellington, Ben Owen III, Vernon and Pam Owens, David Stuempfle, and Mark Hewitt himself.

At last, accepting as master potters must, the responsibility of education, Mark has taken on apprentices. Learning through work in his shop, they have discovered – within the tradition that Mark has driven – their personal styles. Daniel Johnston added to Mark's monumentality new shapes and details drawn from his experience in Thailand. Matt Jones gathers inspiration from the ornament of old American pottery. Alex Matisse,

deft at slipped decoration, has added touches from Turkey. Joseph Sand has brought Spanish contours into his repertory of exquisite forms. All of them work in cooperative exchange, furthering the Southern tradition that has welcomed alien ideas from the beginning. Ash glaze from China was absorbed early in the nineteenth century; Cheever Meaders at Mossy Creek, Georgia, called it Shanghai glaze. In the nineteen-twenties, Ben Owen introduced the Chinese forms and glazes still used by his grandson, Ben the Third, and by Vernon and Pam Owens at Jugtown. Mark Hewitt brought Korean and Japanese ideas into the mix during the nineteen-eighties, and now Mark and his students produce masterpieces of modernism that remain honorably centered in the old Southern tradition of useful and beautiful pots that exhibit proud bodies and skins of rippling, dripping glaze.

Every day there is work, hard work; there is local clay to handle, local wood for firing. At the center, with his colleagues from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, stands this tall, handsome man from England, Mark Hewitt – in place, at home – productively, inspirationally at work, a great American master.

Henry Glassie, College Professor Emeritus at Indiana University, has written 14 books, including Turkish Traditional Art Today and Art and Life in Bangladesh, which feature the ceramic arts. He has won many awards for his work, most recently the American Folklore Society's award for a lifetime of scholarly achievement and the Charles Homer Haskins Prize of the American Council of Learned Societies for a distinctive career of humanistic scholarship.

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