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*Mark Hewitt's*  
**BIG-HEARTED POTS**



Photography by Jason Dowdle





Cover: **Beacon** 2009.  
Bulbous sentinel with an amber  
alkaline and blue glass runs.  
Wood-fired stoneware. 52"H x 30"D  
Collection of Mina Levin and Ron Schwarz

Left: **Char** 2010.(Detail)  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware.  
49"H x 27"D  
Private collection

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*Isaac's Crux* 2008.  
Large Covered Jar with incised decoration, blue glass runs, and a dark green alkaline glaze.  
Wood-fired stoneware. 52"H x 32"H  
Collection of Tom and Selina Stokes

# MARK HEWITT AT THE CROSSROADS

By Christopher Benfey

**1** Strange things happen at a Southern crossroads. Consider the red-clay town of Pittsboro, North Carolina, where Mark Hewitt turns and burns his big-hearted pots, down a winding gravel lane called Johnny Burke Road. Smack-dab in the center of town, where two highways cross, stands the Chatham County Courthouse, built in 1881 of rugged brick made down the highway in Sanford, the self-designated "Brick Capital of the U.S.A." Or rather, *most* of the courthouse stands there, since the building, except for its façade and a statue of a Confederate soldier standing at attention out front, burned to the ground during the spring of 2010. Rumors circulated like wildfire concerning a certain videotape, supposedly housed in the courthouse, that showed a certain Tarheel politician and Presidential hopeful, in a compromising position with a woman not his wife.

Or, consider that other Southern crossroads, where the great blues musician Robert Johnson supposedly sold his soul to the devil in exchange for the ability to play the guitar like no one else before him, and to write songs like "Cross Road Blues," with the immortal lines:

I went down to the crossroads, fell down on my knees.  
Down to the crossroads, fell down on my knees.  
Asked the Lord above for mercy, "Save me if you please."

Just another rumor, maybe, but if you happen to listen to Eric Clapton and Cream, in their live cover of the song recorded in San Francisco in 1968, you might well persuade yourself that Clapton really did sell *his* soul to the devil to be able to play the guitar like that.

**2** Crossroads: three young lads from Britain, Clapton and his mates, listen to old records by Southern bluesmen from the 1930s and come up with music utterly new and fresh, where you can feel the crossing in your bones of two traditions—rural and urban, African-American and alienated European, soft and very, very loud—in creative tension.

Or a young lad named Mark Hewitt, from the Staffordshire "Potteries" in the English Midlands, listens to the music of Southern potters and comes up with his own distinctive kind of ceramic music, utterly new and fresh—and very, very big.

**3** Take a long look at Hewitt's monumental *Isaac's Crux*. A pot like this lives in two different worlds. It is beautiful to look at, and Hewitt's pots have a way of migrating from private homes and gardens into museums. But *Isaac's Crux* was also made for use, and that's where the four magnificent handles and the mushrooming lid come in. The German philosopher Georg Simmel, in a beautiful essay called "The Handle," wrote about this double life of pots. A pottery vessel, he wrote, "unlike a painting or statue, is not intended to be insulated and untouchable but is meant to fulfill a purpose—if only symbolically. For it is held in the hand and drawn into the movement of practical life. Thus the vessel stands in two worlds at one and the same time." The handle marks the journey from one world to the other; it is the suspension bridge, the crossing, from the world of art to the world of use.

Hewitt prefers to call himself a "functional" potter, a maker of pots for use, as opposed to the "studio" or art potters whose work is intended for display. Even his outsized pots are targeted for use; he's more gratified to see a tree growing in one of his planters than to see it standing empty in someone's living room.

The passage from use to art is one kind of "crossing" in *Isaac's Crux*. Its name is a tribute and a memorial to the great North Carolina master-potter Isaac Lefevers, another maker of big pots, who was killed in the Civil War, leaving many

great pots unmade. But it's a tribute—or a tributary—to many other traditions as well. It's got a juicy alkaline glaze, of the kind first developed around 1800 when white and African-American potters in Edgefield, South Carolina, were trying to match understated Chinese celadon glazes, but ended up with something more like Jackson Pollock. Its got a generous crescent bulging form that you might find in storage pots from England to Korea, with a helmeted lid and beaded neck that hint of Persia. It's got a shoulder incised with a floral motif, the lines scored swiftly, gracefully adorning the form.

And it's got most of all—the hardest thing to describe—that sheer authority, that sense that this pot, this un-definable X, this *crux*, marks the spot and makes it memorable. A Hewitt pot, laid out on the grass after firing, gathers the dark Southern pines and the blue sky around it. It does what Wallace Stevens says a masterly pot should do:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,  
And round it was, upon a hill.  
It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill.

We're not talking "melting pot" here, with everything resolved into a bland uniformity. And we're certainly not talking, heaven help us, about "hybridity," that academic notion of cultural mixing that sounds a little like feed corn, or a new breed of chicken. We're talking crossroads, where the cross-currents are preserved, kept in creative tension, taut.

Strange things happen at a Southern crossroads.

**4** In Mark Hewitt's crossings, the roads branch off in many surprising directions. Clay, as it happens, is in Hewitt's bones. The primary crossroads, right at the start of his career, involved the great British Staffordshire tradition of industrial pottery, his by birthright, and reaching back to the origins of Spode and Wedgwood in the eighteenth century.

Then there was the counter-tradition, explicitly in opposition to industrialism of all kinds, of John Ruskin, William Morris, and the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Hewitt stood at the crossroads, *lived* it, and made a choice. He's still living it. Over the years, working at the crossroads with the sun going down, Hewitt has made his pact with the gods of earth, water, and fire.

**5** Hewitt is descended from brick-makers and pottery manufacturers. He was born in the English industrial city of Stoke-on-Trent in 1955. Both his father and his grandfather were directors of Spode, the manufacturers of fine china. Hewitt could easily have entered the family business (both Spode and its main competitor, Wedgwood, have since hit on hard times), but he grew up in the counterculture of the late 1960s, and he heard a different music, literally and figuratively.

"I remember being thirteen years old," he told me.

I was sitting underneath the rhododendrons at my prep school and listening to "Purple Haze," "Jumping Jack Flash," and "Crossroads" on a fuzzy transistor radio, while watching a cricket match. Players in their whites silhouetted against the severe Victorian buildings, revolution in the bushes.

Culture, you might say, versus anarchy. Or, perhaps, new imaginative possibilities replacing moribund ones.

Hewitt, a child of industry, was drawn instead to pre-industrial craft practices, the mark of the maker's hand and the chance effects of wildfire in the kiln. He read Bernard Leach's classic *A Potter's Book* (1940), with its heady combination of clear directives for how to throw, glaze, and fire a pot, and its insistence on the superiority of the clean lines and austere decoration of classic Asian pottery. Leach, along with potter Shoji Hamada and philosopher Soetsu Yanagi, was

**Grandpa** 2002.(Detail)  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware.  
44" H x 24"D  
Collection of Martha Stokes



one of the founders of the Japanese Mingei, or “art of the people” folk-craft movement. Hewitt sometimes calls his own work “mingled, mangled Mingei.”

Then, Hewitt apprenticed himself to Michael Cardew, another legendary ceramicist and author of *Pioneer Pottery*, who had been Leach’s first pupil. Cardew had worked in West Africa, grafting indigenous practices onto Leach’s distinctive aesthetic blend of English slipware (pottery decorated with colorful liquid clay before firing) and Japanese simplicity.

Backpacking through Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, hitchhiking across the Sahara—“I went down to the crossroads, tried to flag a ride”—Hewitt has traveled to the places that inspired Leach and Cardew, studying pottery methods in West Africa, Japan, and Korea, and finding a personal resonance in the generous and unpretentious big pots he saw wherever he went.

And yet, and this is the important part, Hewitt didn’t just leave the aesthetic standards of Spode and Staffordshire behind. I’ve watched him finger a Spode demitasse from a cabinet in his kitchen, feeling the precise thickness of the clay and the sure balance of form. Watching him throw pots at the wheel, with incredible speed and uniformity, you can see that his own standards of excellence match those of his father and grandfather. Josiah Wedgwood used to say that a run of dinner plates should fit together like a stack of cards, and that’s the quality one finds in Hewitt’s work.

6 Wishing to strike out on his own, Hewitt, accompanied by his American wife, Carol, first came to Pittsboro in 1983, attracted by the rich ceramic traditions of North Carolina, and by the abundant local clay. I spoke with Charles (“Terry”) Zug III, an emeritus professor at the University of North Carolina and the leading scholar on North Carolina folk pottery, about the sheer visionary leap and imaginative scale of Hewitt’s Pittsboro operation. According to Zug, when Hewitt found the little rundown farm with the shit-filled chicken house he just “saw it”; he envisioned the workshop and monster kiln right from the start, and soon began making the big-hearted pots that matched that primary vision.

In North Carolina, Hewitt found himself at another artistic crossroads. Folk potteries have flourished in the North Carolina Piedmont, where Hewitt lives, for two hundred years. The early utilitarian ware potters in the Eastern Piedmont produced whisky jugs and storage jars glazed a pebbly gray by throwing handfuls of salt into the flames of the kiln. During the 1920s, urban sophisticates nostalgic for rural life adapted the simple utilitarian pots, making smaller items glazed with colorful names like the orange-speckled-with-black “tobacco spit” and the greenish “frogskin.” Jugtown pottery, the most celebrated of these “Art Ware” potteries jumpstarted during that time period, was founded by impresarios Jacques and Juliana Busbee.

Jacques Busbee had an epiphany at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, noticing striking similarities in shape and glaze between Asian pottery and the North Carolina pots that interested him. Weren’t these simple Southern jugs and bowls, he wondered, a kind of cultural rhyme with the ancient pottery of China and Japan? Busbee began taking photographs of pots at the Metropolitan Museum and showing them to a young local potter named Ben Owen back in North Carolina. Owen would then adapt the shapes to the native clays and glazes.

Hewitt, steeped in the Anglo-Asian Leach school, recognized a similar connection when he first arrived in the state, which he later examined in the book accompanying the influential exhibition *The Potter’s Eye: Art and Tradition in North Carolina Pottery*, co-curated with Nancy Sweezy, at the North Carolina Museum of Art in 2005. It is unusual for a practicing craftsman to curate an exhibition at a major museum of fine arts. Hewitt used the occasion to examine the poetic attributes of nineteenth-century North Carolina utilitarian pottery, looking at them through a lens provided by Japanese aesthetes and connoisseurs, and developing a language of appreciation that adds to our understanding of this great American roots tradition.

Regional pottery traditions are rare, Hewitt says, who uses yellowish local clay dug from nearby Cameron (where, as it happens, my mother grew up and my grandfather laid brick). “They are like wild flowers that only grow in certain special soils and microclimates.”

The vision of North Carolina pottery that Hewitt conveys in his writing and in his work is audacious and compelling. He talks the talk and walks the walk; in doing so, he has bent inherited tradition into potent new shapes. His big-hearted pots are on a truly heroic scale—heroic in conception and execution. They place him in the company of the great folk potters who have preceded and inspired him.

7 To paint Hewitt as a blinkered folk revivalist, or a cloyingly quaint anachronism, is inaccurate; it doesn’t do justice to him or to his pots. His multivalent interests and background have kept his eyes open to what is going on around him in the world of contemporary art, ceramic sculpture, and studio pottery outside the folk model. His crossroads is more like an elaborate interstate junction: miss an exit and you’ve missed him.

Take for instance *Beacon* (cover image) and *Zweiunddreissig Blumen*, two of several non-functional pots in this exhibition that, in their burgeoning abstraction, are unprecedented in the North Carolina folk pottery canon. Solemn and seductive, with their scale providing a thrilling clout, they have an immediate appeal like that of Martin Puryear’s visionary sculptures, with their own intersection of folk tradition and modernist panache.

Hewitt is open to influences drifting in from outside the world of pottery while also drawn to contemporary ceramic art that playfully engages with past aesthetic practices. An obvious influence has been his friend Jeff Shapiro, from New Paltz, New York, who makes unglazed functional and sculptural ware, wood-fired for up to eight days in a Japanese-style “anagama” kiln. Shapiro, Hewitt notes, “combines medieval Japanese functional ware with an abstract expressionist sculptural sensibility. Some of his work displays a deft looseness of touch, some a sharp angularity; both strands are tied together in his kiln by the reckless precision with which he plays with the fire.”

Some of Hewitt’s favorite contemporary pots are made by ceramic sculptors doing work very different from his. He mentions, for example, Adrian Saxe, from the “Fetish Finish” school in Los Angeles. Saxe, according to Hewitt, “makes upgrades of Louis XVI gilded giftware that are sophisticated and laconic, while commenting on American opulence.” He also mentions the French-Canadian artist Leopold Foulem, who makes what Hewitt calls “Camp Minimalism.” Foulem’s work, he says, “cleverly dovetails Ching Dynasty ‘mille-fleurs,’ ‘famille jaune,’ and ‘willow pattern’ with sleek minimalist shapes.” Both Saxe and Foulem look steadily, but from an odd angle, at the industrial and imperial world from which Hewitt came. “Rather than reject it,” Hewitt notes, “they glorify it, almost to the point of mocking it through exaggeration. Their work is subversive, witty, and acid clear.”

Linda Sikora, from Alfred University, New York, is another potter who has helped Hewitt take another look back at where he came from, and appreciate decorative treatments more complex than the restrained earth tones of Mingei or North Carolina folk pottery. Sikora has a fresh take on industrial ceramics, making ornate functional pots that echo eighteenth-century Staffordshire ware—frilly, patterned, and surprisingly sensual.

These contemporary valences filter into Hewitt’s pots, large and small, keeping them fresh. Hewitt stands at the crossroads, quality coming from all directions, and doesn’t blink.

Every part of a pot’s creation has its risks, from the whirl of the wheel when clay is wet, through all the stages of handling, glazing, decorating, and drying, to the careful placement of fragile green ware when pots rub shoulders in the crowded kiln. But there’s nothing riskier to a pot’s survival than the crossfire kiln. A Hewitt pot, like Jumping Jack Flash himself, is born in a crossfire hurricane.



**Grandpa** 2002. Dark sentinel with a pierced dome, manganese slip and wavy glaze lines.  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware. 44" H x 24"D  
Collection of Martha Stokes



**Zweiunddreissig Blumen** 2010. Shapely sentinel with incised floral motif, blue glass runs, and an amber alkaline glaze.  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware. 56"H x 24"D  
Collection of the artist





**Honey** 2009. Large sentinel with incised circles, blue glass runs, dark green alkaline glaze, and a manganese slip "hive" finial.  
Wood-fired stoneware. 54"H x 32"W  
Collection of Gary Jacobs



**Nunc Dimittis** 2010. Inscribed sentinel with Latin text of the "Nunc Dimittis" prayer, a green alkaline glaze and manganese slipped finial.  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware. 57"H x 17"W  
Collection of Marilyn Arthur

8 I must have chosen the hottest week of the summer to fly down to North Carolina to watch Hewitt fire his big groundhog kiln. It was 98 degrees in the shade when I pulled into Johnny Burke Road. Hewitt and his two apprentices were carrying the final load of pots from the orderly workshop—the converted chicken barn—to the forty-foot kiln, which looked like a beached whale in the merciless summer sun. No one packs a kiln more tightly than Hewitt; multiple shelves of vases, mugs, tumblers, plates, and bowls—roughly two thousand in all—were wedged in around the huge pots that Hewitt is best known for, planters and storage jars of truly Ali Baba-esque proportions.

Accident enters the potter's domain through many doors, but none is more dramatic than the wager of the kiln. So many things can go wrong in the swirling flames of a cross-fired, wood-burning kiln. "If the fire sinks, or grows too hot," wrote the French poet Paul Valéry, "its moodiness is disastrous and the game is lost." Hewitt has come to treasure the gifts of chance, which can add to the beauty and value of a piece. Where pots accidentally touch, scars, or "kisses," may accent the form. Where bricks on the ceiling of the kiln melt in the firing, "potter's tears" may drip onto the shoulders of the pots huddled below. Quartz pebbles will blow out from the clay during firing, resulting in what North Carolina potters call "pearls." Bits of grass or twigs will flash out of the surface of the fired clay, leaving blemishes or beauty spots. "While the fire is in action," Valéry said, "the artisan himself is aflame, watching and burning."

Watching Hewitt during the side-stoking of the kiln, as he nervously eyed the temperature gauge and carefully slid another slat of wood into the flames, was like watching a ship-captain responding to shifting winds. It was a more delicate operation than I'd imagined, not at all like heaving coal into a steam engine. As he got ready to spray some salt into the chambers of the kiln, Hewitt shrugged, wiped the sweat from his brow, and said, "At this point, all you can do is pray."

9 It seemed appropriate, for the anxious but hopeful mood of firing, that the biggest pot in the kiln, a so-called "sentinel" based on nineteenth-century North Carolina grave-markers, carried a prayerful inscription carved directly into the clay. Inscribing words on big pots is itself a Southern tradition, reaching back to the great African-American slave-potter known as Dave, or Dave Drake. Hewitt has a special fellow feeling for Dave Drake's pots, for their absolute authority of workmanship and for the lyricism of their inscriptions. "I made this jar all of a cross/ If you don't repent you will be lost," Drake wrote on one of his pots. And Hewitt has written about how the South Carolina pottery tradition around Edgefield, where Asian glazes met indigenous whiskey jugs, was itself a "crossroads" of styles and influences. "This jar," Hewitt writes of one of Drake's masterpieces, "blends a classic British form with a luscious, modified Asian glaze and adds an illuminating African American poetic expressiveness. This is a giant of a pot."

Of course, Hewitt could be talking about himself with these crisscrossing words. Hewitt's own big pot, with a wall of fluid green screaming down its flanks, was inscribed with the "Nunc dimittis," the traditional evening prayer of the Anglican service: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace."

10 I went down to the crossroads, fell down on my knees.  
Down to the crossroads, fell down on my knees.  
Asked the Lord above for mercy, "Save me if you please."

About Christopher Benfey  
Christopher Benfey is Mellon Professor of English at Mount Holyoke College. A frequent contributor to the *New York Review of Books* and the *New Republic*, he also writes art criticism for the online magazine *Slate*. He has written three books about the American Gilded Age: *The Double Life of Stephen Crane*, *Degas in New Orleans*, and *The Great Wave*. His most recent book, *A Summer of Hummingbirds*, won both the 2009 Christian Gauss Award of Phi Beta Kappa and the Ambassador Book Award.

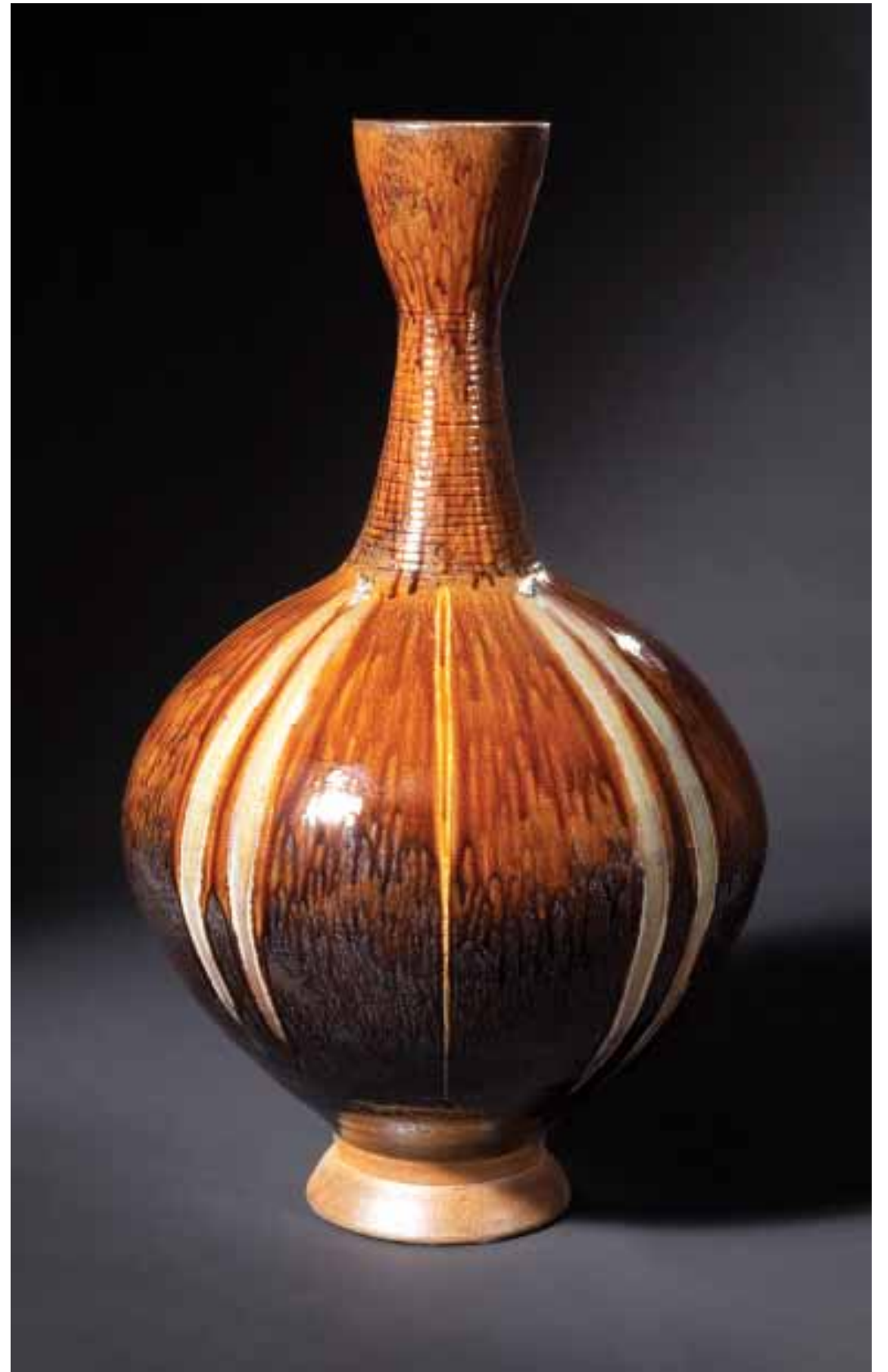
*Nunc Dimittis* 2010. (Detail)  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware.  
57"H x 17"W  
Collection of Marilyn Arthur







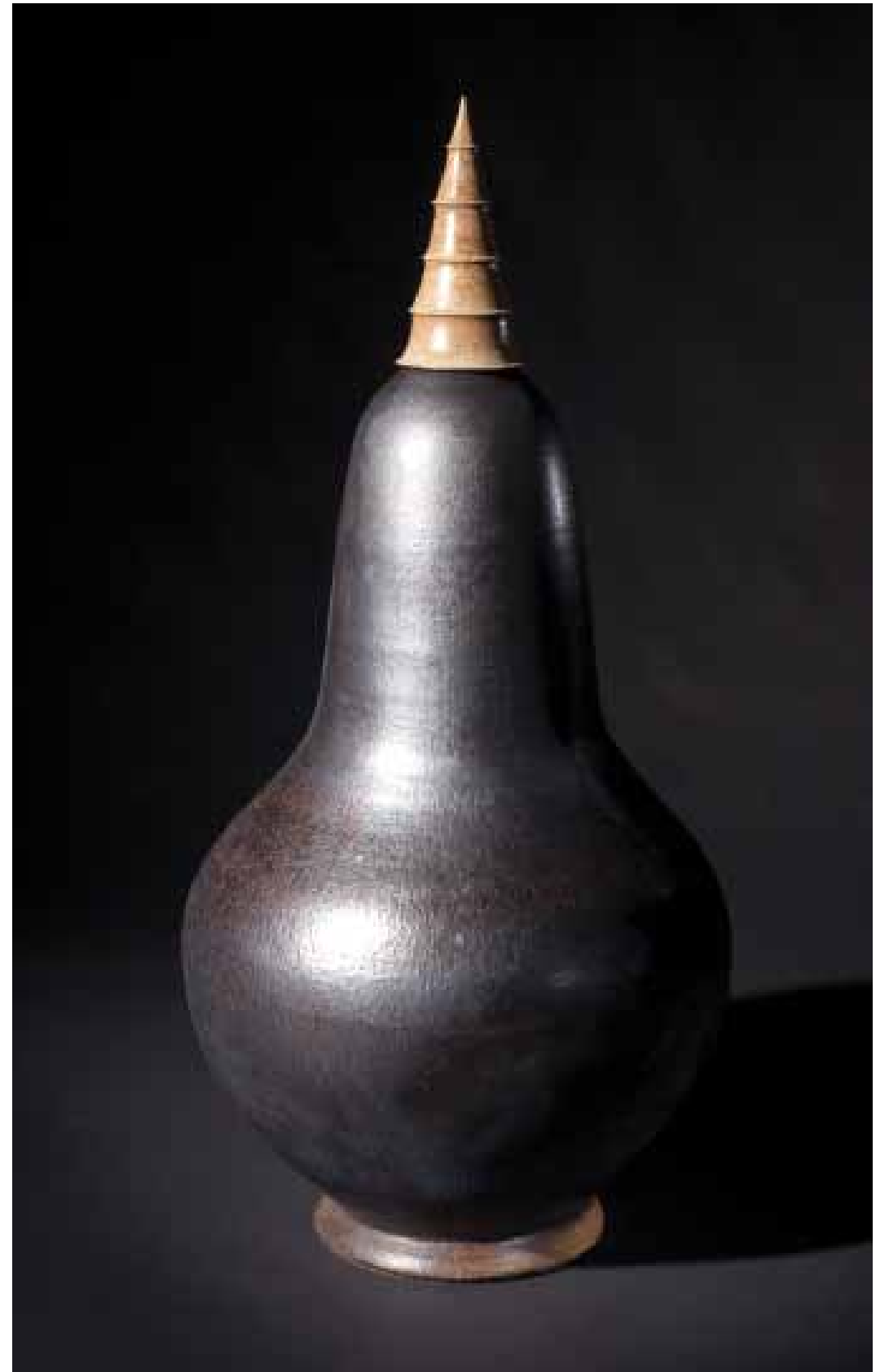
**Joey** 2009. Tall sentinel (mezuzah) with an amber alkaline glaze, blue glass runs, and manganese slip dome.  
Wood-fired stoneware. 52"H x 18"D  
Collection of Susan Rosenthal and Michael Hershfield



**Bulb** 2009. Large vase with white slip lines, pale glass runs, and an amber alkaline glaze.  
Wood-fired stoneware. 53"H x 32"D  
Collection of Marsha Courchane and Peter Zorn



**Pushing Up Daisy** 2008. Large sentinel with incised floral motif, blue glass runs, and a green alkaline glaze.  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware. 49"H x 27"D  
Private collection



**Black Pearl** 2010. Dark sentinel with manganese slip, and salt-glazed finial.  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware. 54"H x 25"W  
Collection of the artist





**Brood** 2001. Dark sentinel with triangular piercings, manganese slip, and blue glass runs.  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware. 40"H x 24"D  
Collection of Tom and Selina Stokes



**Hood** 2010. Squat sentinel with horizontal white slip-trailed lines, manganese slipped dome, and a yellow alkaline-glaze.  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware. 43"H x 25"D  
Collection of the artist

**Burst** 2010. (Detail)  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware.  
49”H x 27”D  
Collection of the artist



# A Few of My Favorite Things about North Carolina Pottery

*By Mark Hewitt*

Regional pottery traditions are extremely rare; they are like wild flowers that only grow in special soils and microclimates. A unique set of economic, historic, and cultural conditions have allowed the pottery traditions of North Carolina to survive from the early nineteenth century until now. It is little short of miraculous that alkaline-glazed pottery is still being made in the Catawba Valley, and that salt-glazed pottery is still being made in the Eastern Piedmont. Apart from the Native American traditions of the Southwest, the pottery culture of North Carolina is better developed than in any other state in America.

Ever since I arrived in North Carolina in 1983, I've been trying to figure out why this is so, and what I write below is an explanation. These are "A Few of My Favorite Things about North Carolina Pottery."

**1** It all starts with materials. For those of us who enjoy the primal poetry of gathering local materials, North Carolina is a treasure trove; we have good deposits of clay, any number of interesting glaze materials, and abundant wood. My apprenticeship with Michael Cardew in England showed me, among other things, the luxurious qualities of pots made with materials that potters gather locally and refine themselves.

On my first visit to Catawba Valley folk potter Burlon Craig, I remember going straight to his clay pile. When visiting potteries, most people go straight to the showroom; others go straight to the kilns. I go to clay piles. I remember standing on top of his clay, knowing, or somehow sensing, the spirit of the earth, recognizing that the foundation of his pottery was sound, that his clay came from right there, close by, that his pots honored his place; they were part of it. My teacher, Michael Cardew, wrote: "A good potter cannot treat his raw materials merely as a means of production; he treats them as they deserve to be treated, with love. He cannot make things merely as utensils; he makes them as they have a right to be, as things with a life of their own." Rather like stories of native peoples crawling on their knees the last few yards to sacred outcrops of hematite, or white clay, with which they adorn themselves, so too do I become ecstatic when I go to Cameron, about thirty miles from my pottery, where, at the bottom of a sand and gravel pit, I get good clay for my pots. Though I confess that I succumb to the ease of ordering special materials from ceramic supply companies, it always feels, by contrast, as though I'm getting the ceramic equivalent of overly-processed junk food.

We all know the difference in taste between a homegrown tomato and one raised in a greenhouse far away and sent in February to our local Piggly Wiggly. Well, the same applies to the flavor of pots made from local materials. One of the greatest underlying pleasures of ceramic appreciation comes from our response to a pot's material quality. A pot is a record of a material process. You pick up a pot, you feel it, you look at it, and at some level, you know it.

Black Mountain poet Charles Olson writes, "These days / whatever you have to say, leave / the roots on, let them / dangle // And the dirt // Just to make clear / Where they come from."<sup>1</sup>

Alkaline-glazed pots, and salt-glazed pots, are among the simplest to make—which does not, however, make them easy to make. Keeping things simple is very difficult, but if you do mine and refine materials locally, the flavor of that place and region is recorded in the pots you make. The greens of South Carolina and Catawba Valley glazes are luminous; they have an unfathomable depth and complexity. The clay quality underlying the salt glaze on Eastern Piedmont ware is an intricate organic quilt, patterning the surface with unending pleasure.

In addition to these finely-tuned assessments of ceramic quality, economics is involved in the material equation too. For



instance, as recently as the early 1980s, Burlon Craig spent a mere \$15 to produce a large groundhog kiln load of pots. This was spent on gas for his pick-up to transport clay from old Rhodes clay holes near the Catawba River, and to haul wood from a nearby saw mill. In a similar vein, my most recent twenty-ton truckload of Cameron clay cost me a gallon pitcher and a gallon jar, including delivery.

**2** Skill is the next item on my list of favorite things about North Carolina pottery. I think of the folk potters dotted throughout the South as rural minimalists; their production resemble a Steve Reich or Philip Glass composition, a dense tapestry of minor variations, an intricate, loving, daily ebb and flow.

A love of repetitive work echoes across North Carolina, particularly in the workshops of the old-guard folk potters, now sadly reduced in number, but including Neolia and Celia Cole, daughters of A. R. Cole, working in Sanford, who inscribe the bottoms of their pots with poems, homilies, and love notes, and whose mugs still cost \$4, and Boyd and Nancy Owens, children of M. L. Owens, who make standard North Carolina domestic ware, simple, straightforward, inexpensive. Jugtown Pottery can also be considered part of this group.

All these potters learned their art, their craft, from family members. They did not go to art school; they went to work, learning as they went. Their motives for making pots may have been more financial than aesthetic, but not necessarily. Their range of expression is narrow, but their constraints do not preclude love, experimentation, imagination, and change. On a trip through the South in 1981 with my wife, Carol, I remember watching Chester Hewell in Gillsville, Georgia, throw ten-gallon strawberry pots out of the sloppiest, coarsest clay I've ever seen, and, as he was making one, he looked up at me with a twinkle in his eye, and said, "You ain't seen nothin' cruder, have you?" At that moment he might just as well have been Peter Voukos making an Abstract Expressionist ceramic sculpture. In fact if I close my eyes and think of the big stacks that Voukos made, with their slashes and holes, I picture them as strawberry pots.

Whether or not you feel that these production potters are engaged in the drudgery of factory work, or could be replaced by a Southeast-Asian press-mold operator, they display the passion, discipline, and skill common to all great artistic endeavors. These production potters have been invaluable teachers for me. I have taken the time to watch the precision of their throwing techniques, picking up tricks, stealing hand movements, watching how they move. I have become quick, and can make a good variety of thinly-potted small pots, and generous big pots, with consistency and pride. I love every one, and my skills stand me in good stead in the marketplace; in fact they are vital.

**3** Moving down the list of favorite things, we come to style. Clearly making pottery is about more than technique and repetition. It matters what you make. Excessive quantity works to the detriment of quality, and quality is always the standard to which potters must be drawn. However, combine quantity and quality with innovation (whatever the schools of pottery you belong to), and you will most likely make work that is affordable and appreciated.

In North Carolina our library of style is large, for, in addition to our emblematic "roots" traditions, we also have Penland, and Black Mountain College. I'll talk about them later.

As a member of the Cardew-ian branch of the Anglo-Asian Bernard Leach School, the style of the older, traditional pots vibrates with what my eye was trained to see. In the case of the South Carolina alkaline-glaze tradition, the pots combine European vernacular forms with Asian ash and celadon glazes, and also have an African-American inflection in both making and decorating. South Carolina pots have a lot of style. So too do traditional Catawba Valley alkaline-glazed pots, with their poised forms, sleek ash glazes, and distinctive melted-glass runs. The North Carolina salt-glaze tradition combines European and New England forms with the cross-draft groundhog kilns that produce surfaces corresponding to those on Japanese anagama-style wares. Together, these Southern pots have an underlying friendly soulfulness, and are, to me, as significant a cultural expression as the blues, or bluegrass music.

By grafting these pottery "roots" traditions together with what I learned as an apprentice in England, I produce wares that have a regional aesthetic as well as a contemporary sensibility. My Iced Tea Ceremony vessels, for instance, combine a tongue-in-cheek regional counterpoint to the Japanese Tea Ceremony with contemporary ceramic references. They

are fun to look at, think about, and to use. Sometimes I like my pots to be spare and minimal; sometimes I like them to be elaborately ornamented. I am not root-bound, but choose to use these healthy Carolinian roots as the rootstock for my own aesthetic growth.

Tradition can be new if its parameters are understood to be liberating, not confining, and if it is treated with imagination. It belongs now, just as much as the avant-garde belongs now. The one does not cancel out the other. One person's creativity is not at the expense of someone else's; individual creativity does not invalidate anyone else's creativity.

Josef Albers, the German émigré who taught at Black Mountain College for many years, objected to tradition only if it had moved from a "role of facilitation to one of inhibition." Tradition is not inhibiting if I decide to make 150 traditionally inspired, alkaline-glazed mugs in a day, endowing each one with all my attention, deliberately choosing to be restrained, allowing a single, pure note to be heard in each. Every one is an idea, and every one is a reality. Every one is a momentary bloom, with tradition facilitating the contemporary expression of a venerable root of American ceramic practice.

The title of my essay, "A Few of My Favorite Things about North Carolina Pottery," comes, as you know, from the Rogers and Hammerstein song in "The Sound of Music." You may also know the version of that song performed by the great jazz saxophone player John Coltrane, who was born in Hamlet, North Carolina. He took a wonderful song and made something new out of it that is now, itself, a classic. Many contemporary North Carolina potters continue to do the same thing, taking a classic, improvising on it, and making it their own.

But North Carolina has more than just a "roots" tradition. We also claim the progressive, experimental Black Mountain College, and its many distinguished alumni, including ceramic artists Robert Turner and Karen Karnes, as part of the rich tapestry of North Carolina's diversified ceramic heritage.

And, of course, we have the crafts school and community of Penland, and can only marvel at how it has fostered so many excellent craftspeople over the years, and how it has added an exciting range of new styles to contemporary North Carolina pottery. Indeed one of the tasks facing traditional North Carolina potters is figuring out how to absorb contemporary studio pottery practice without losing the essence of what has gone before.

It is all too easy to box ourselves into camps of potters, to be a "traditional North Carolina potter," or be a "Penland potter," or to favor the experimental legacy of Black Mountain pottery, to the exclusion of all else. How do we reconcile these differences? A recent documentary about Black Mountain College, entitled "Fully Awake," points to a way forward. It is not difficult for potters to be "fully awake" to what is around them, gracefully acknowledging, if not necessarily embracing, all the varied approaches to pottery making. Let the words of Black Mountain alumnus and composer John Cage guide us: "The first question I ask myself when something doesn't seem to be beautiful is why do I think it's not beautiful. And very shortly you discover that there is no reason."

Indeed I see the emergence of a new kind of melting pot, for some of my favorite contemporary North Carolina pots are being made at the place where Penland, Black Mountain, and traditional North Carolina pottery intersect. This nexus of experimentation can perhaps be summarized by a quote from Josef Albers, when he said, "To experiment is at first more valuable than to produce; free play in the beginning develops courage."

**4** Central to this discussion about North Carolina pottery is the potters, of course. I would like to have known Daniel Seagle and his son James Franklin, Isaac Lefevers, the Hartzogs, Chester Webster, J.A. Craven (and all the other Cravens), Nicholas and Himer Fox, and Solomon Loy and Tom Boggs. Their pots are so good; it is tempting to think that they were pretty interesting characters too. They all should, in my opinion, be given equal billing to Adelaide Alsop Robineau, Fergus Binns, and George Ohr, when writing histories of American ceramics. However, these "country cousins" seem to irritate or embarrass art critics, and more often than not, it is the better-connected, urbane, and eccentric who end up in the national anthologies. Nonetheless the work of the great nineteenth-century North Carolina potters has been celebrated and continues to be venerated for its fundamental aesthetic majesty.

Thanks to the remarkable transition from utilitarian to art-ware pottery, the list of twentieth-century potters is also long and distinguished, including Ben Owen, J.B. Cole, A.R.Cole, the Reinhardts, Burlon Craig, Bachelder, the Aumans, and so many more. Their work must also be acknowledged for its vibrant contribution to the library of style of North Carolina pottery, with wild shapes and flutings, elaborate handles, and colorful glaze experimentations. These pots contain a wealth of information.

Today you can visit potters in their studios and workshops, or wander the halls of pottery festivals, and enjoy the company of contemporary North Carolina potters as much as their pots. This direct connection between maker and customer is at the heart of North Carolina's "Mud Love." Nowhere have I heard more people proclaim, "I just *love* pottery."

**5** Another favorite thing about North Carolina is the market. North Carolina is not the only place with a reputation for being a good place to sell pots, but there are clear regional discrepancies throughout the U.S. in terms of potters' abilities to sell their wares locally. The market in North Carolina is strong partly as a result of the specific cultural history of North Carolina relating to its ceramic heritage, and partly because of the continued clustering of potters in Seagrove in the eastern Piedmont, the Catawba Valley in the western Piedmont, and up around Penland in the Mountains. These pods of potters provide an enhanced cumulative identity and a numerical economic advantage—like theaters on Broadway, or golf courses in Pinehurst, the more the merrier. The healthy market is also a function of the deliberate efforts of the state and a series of individuals who, in various capacities, actively promote pottery, in all its manifestations, through exhibitions, publications, conferences, schools, collector's guilds, and craft fairs.

Many of these advocates are able to float conceptually between traditional pottery made in Seagrove and the Catawba Valley, and contemporary work being made at Penland and elsewhere, without being ashamed of either, giving each aesthetic its day in the sun. They are equally happy in the company of ceramic sculptors like Michael Sherrill, whose sculptural work commands tens of thousands of dollars, as in the company of their "country cousins," like the fabulous seventy-year-old Cole sisters and their \$4 mugs. A threshold of cultural acceptance has been crossed in North Carolina, and potters are well-received within the community at large, and are accorded a status that is more main-stream than marginal.

Of course, the healthy market is also a function of the healthy economy of the state, not to mention the quality of pots being made here in North Carolina, and the confident entrepreneurial skills of many individual potters, who readily adapt to ever-changing marketing tools and conditions.

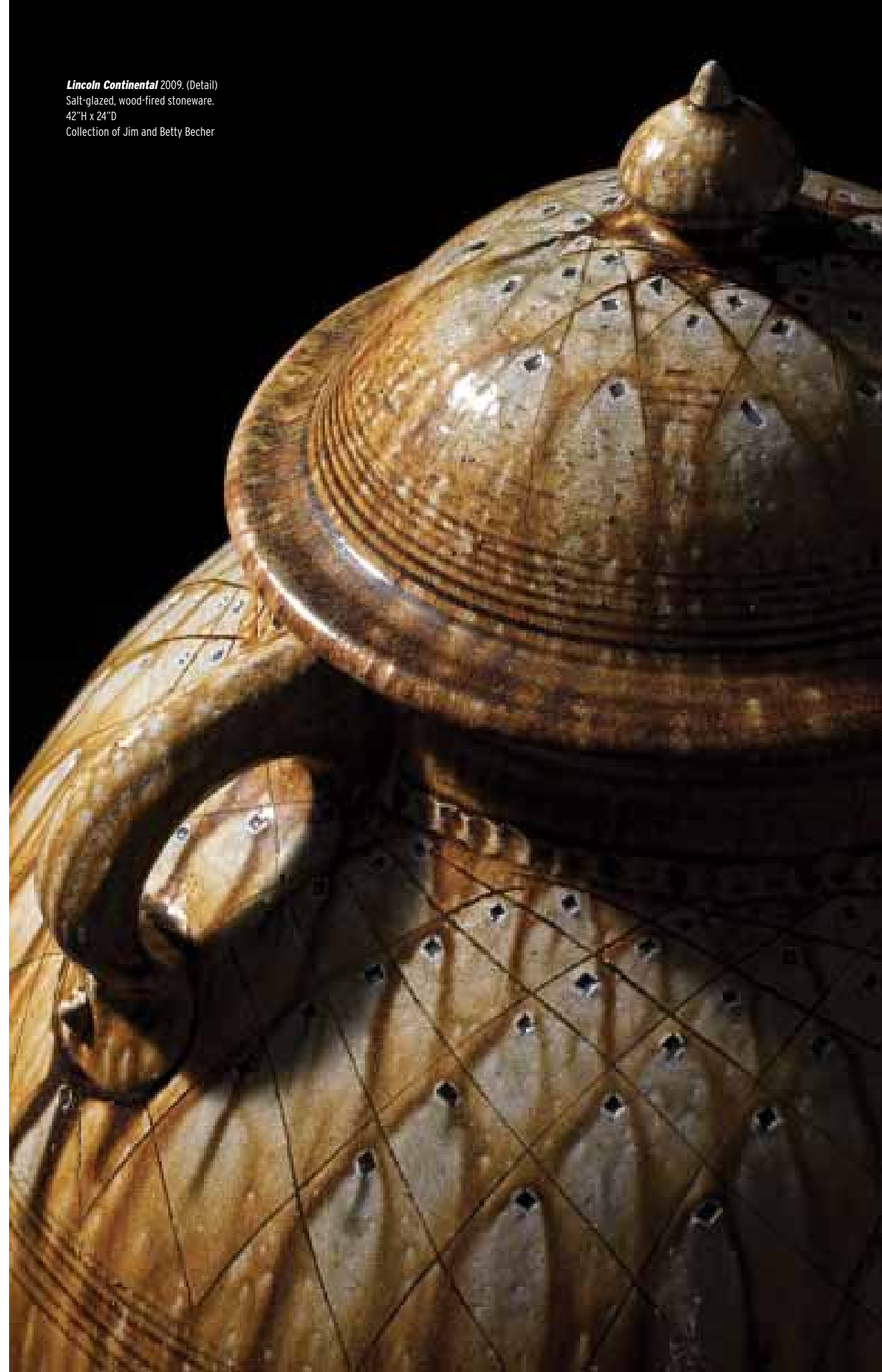
**6** All the talk, all the buzz about North Carolina pottery is rooted in the tradition, and has extended along its many branches. Black Mountain poet Robert Duncan put it nicely when he said, "We have come so far that all the old stories whisper once more." Indeed, the tradition whispers once more, but it wouldn't get far with only a whisper. Without people talking, or sometimes even shouting, what we see today in North Carolina would not be happening.

And so the last, but by no means least, of my favorite things about North Carolina Pottery is the advocacy performed by countless people across the state and elsewhere who have, over the years, boosted the profile of North Carolina pottery - talking it up, spreading the word. It is as if as though there is an unofficial Public Relations committee that has promoted NC pottery ever since the Busbees, those indefatigable promoters of Carolina craft traditions, began talking about Jugtown and Seagrove area pottery back in the 1920s—and it probably started well before then.

I'd like to honor all the people who have helped promote North Carolina pottery, all the pottery advocates who have been, and still are, responsible for putting on festivals, organizing guilds, sitting on pottery related boards, writing books, catalogues, newsletters, and press releases about NC pottery, organizing exhibitions and auctions, giving talks to civic organizations, teaching at all different levels, offering to distribute fliers around the state, volunteering for all the thankless little tasks that keep the wheels turning. The entity, the phenomenon we know of as "North Carolina pottery" would be a shadow of what it is today without all these people.

We potters benefit from this advocacy more than you'll ever know, so, from the bottom of our collective hearts, thank you!

**Lincoln Continental** 2009. (Detail)  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware.  
42" H x 24" D  
Collection of Jim and Betty Becher



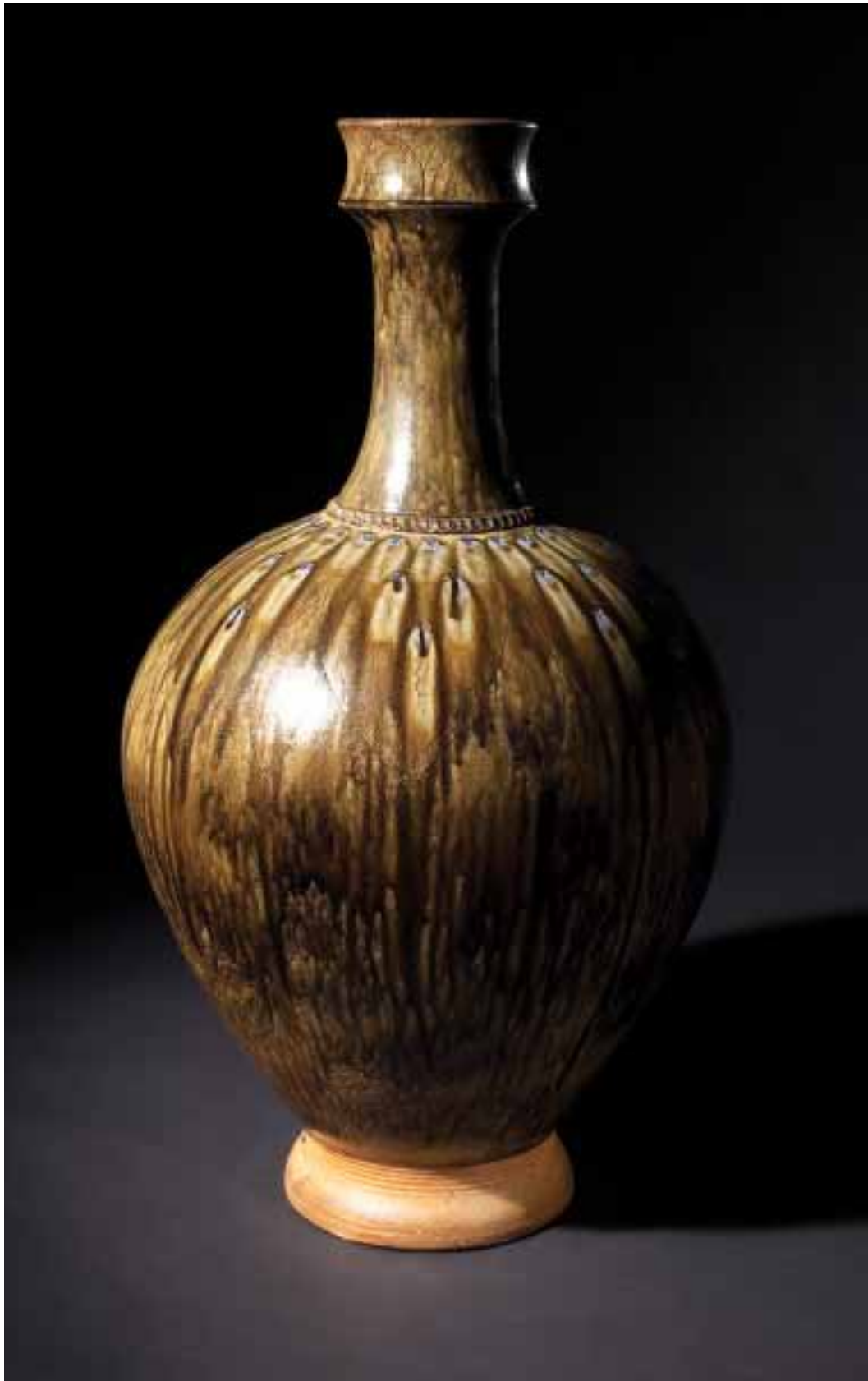




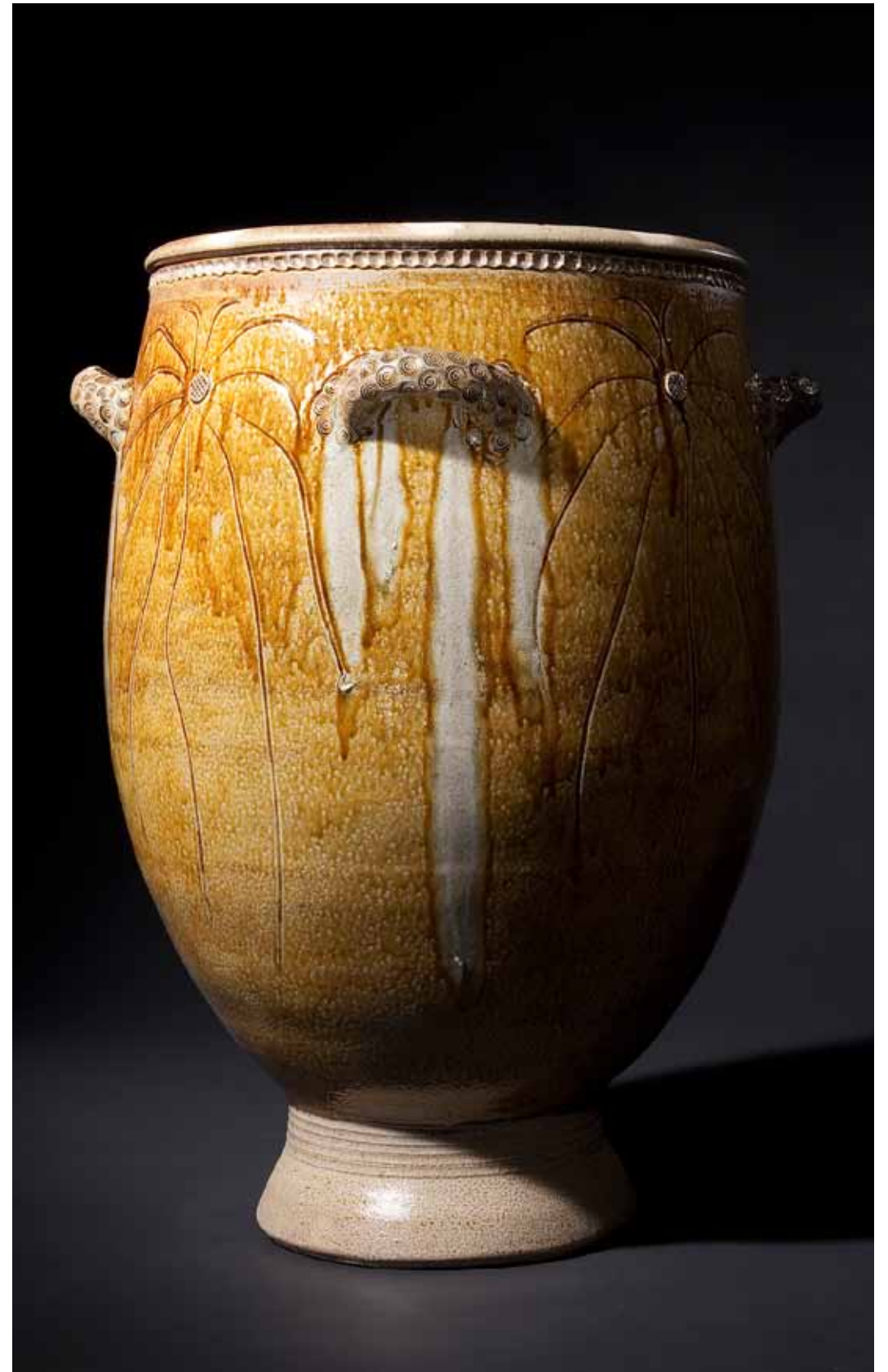
**Char** 2010. Large planter with manganese slip under a yellow alkaline glaze, and multiple blue glass runs (fired upside down).  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware. 32"H x 24"D  
Collection of the artist



**Curvy Curvaceous** 2009. Shapely sentinel with iron slip bands, yellow alkaline glaze, and a manganese-slipped cone finial.  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware. 59"H x 24"D  
Collection of Gary Jacobs

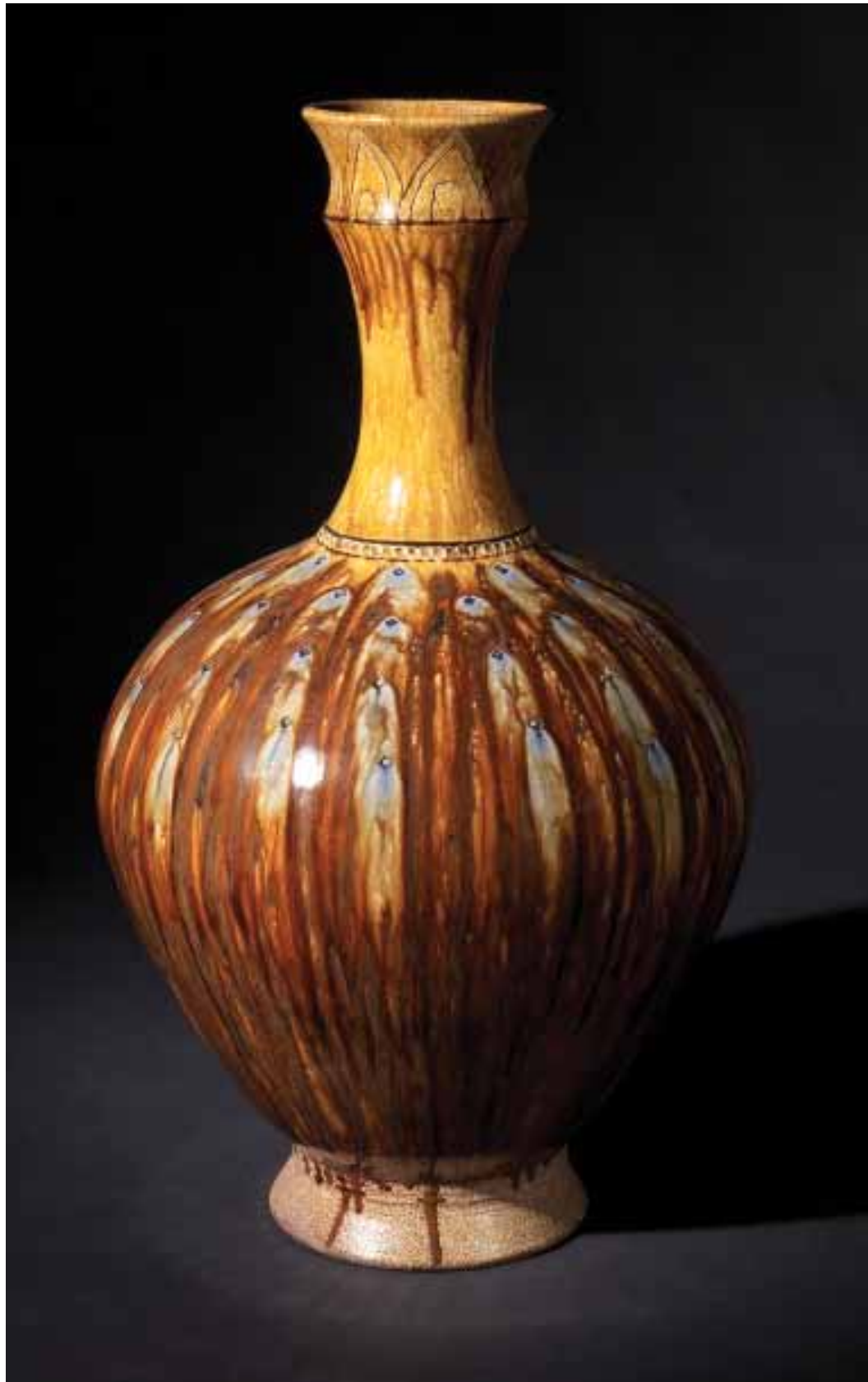


***That's What I'm Talking About Too*** 2007. Large vase with incised floral motif, blue glass runs, and a green alkaline glaze.  
Wood-fired stoneware. 52"H x 28"W  
Private collection

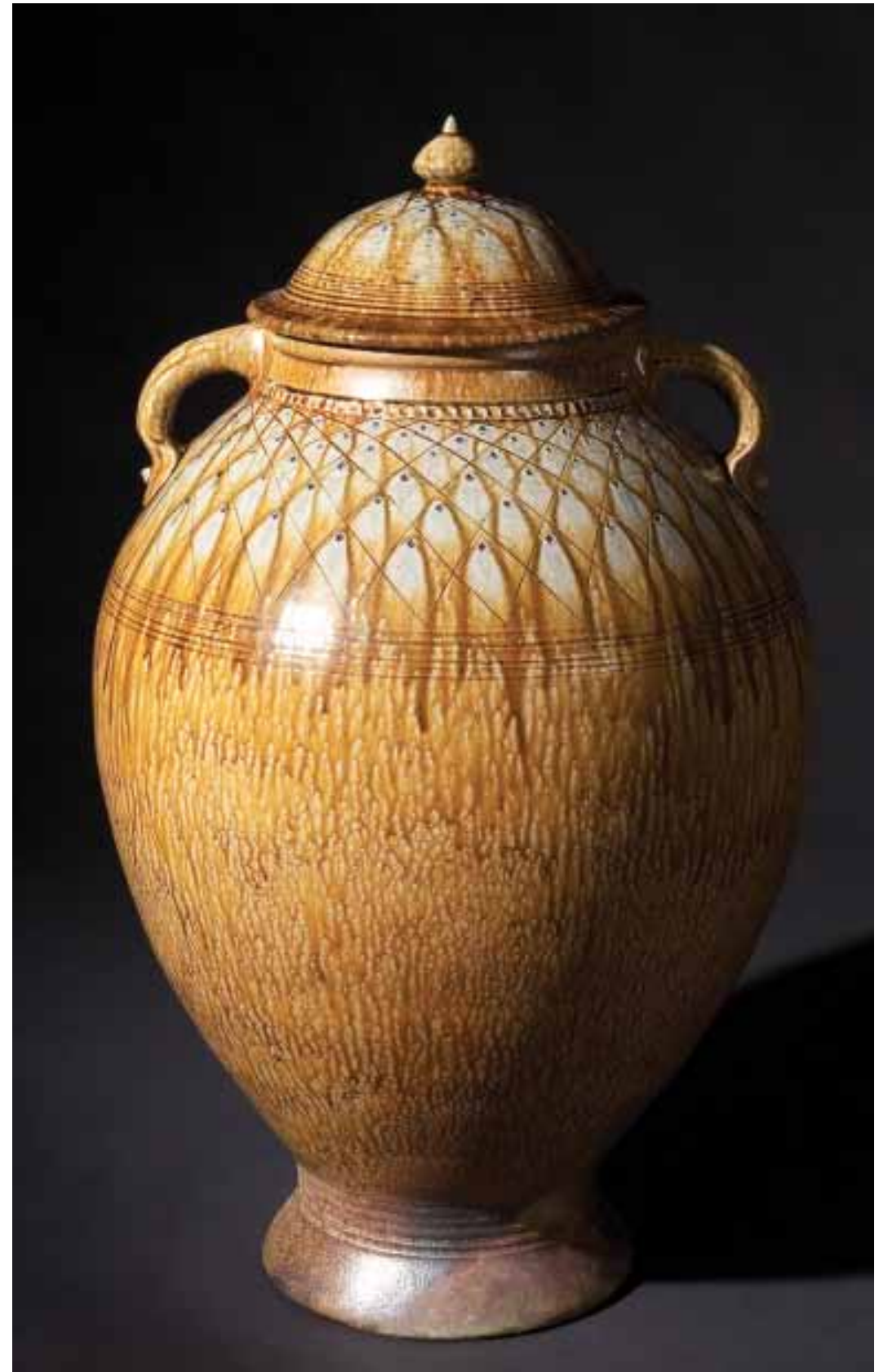


***Burst*** 2010. Large planter with incised floral motif, stamped handles, yellow alkaline-glaze, and pale glass runs.  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware. 49"H x 27"D  
Collection of the artist





**Eye Train** 2007. Large vase with manganese slip under a yellow alkaline glaze and blue glass runs.  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware. Dimensions 44"H x 24"D  
Collection of James W. Crow



**Lincoln Continental** 2009. Large covered jar with incised lines, blue glass runs and a yellow alkaline glaze.  
Salt-glazed, wood-fired stoneware. 42"H x 24"D  
Collection of Jim and Betty Becher



## Donor List

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Marsha Courchane and Peter Zorn	Bobby Kadis	Katherine Reid
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Mina Levin and Ron Schwartz		

## About the Photographer

Jason Dowdle is a still photographer living and working in Central North Carolina. He has specialized for over a decade in shooting the work of artists and craftspersons.

"I am truly lucky to live in an area with so many great artists close by, including many superlative potters. I've had the great privilege of photographing Mark Hewitt's work for nearly a decade. Mark is a wonderful artist to work with, always pushing me toward more creative and evocative ways of seeing his work, and seeing pottery in general. I try to bring this back to all the work I do, always looking for ways to use lighting and composition to create innovative, dramatic, and engaging photographs."

All of the photographs of Mark's work here included were photographed with a Canon 5D Mark II using Canon Ultrasonic 50mm and 80mm lenses. Exposures ranged from 1 to 4 seconds, f-stops from f11 to f22. All the lights were Arriflex fresnel "hot" lights. There were no strobes used for this photography.

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup>From "Archaeologist of Morning," 1970

This Catalogue documents the exhibition  
*Mark Hewitt: Big-Hearted Pots*  
The Ogden Museum of Southern Art  
New Orleans, Louisiana  
January 13, 2011 - April 10, 2011

Photographs by Jason Dowdle

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Back Cover:  
Mark Hewitt with *Isaac's Crux* (2008)





