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The Pottery Collections

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The Pottery Collections

Jill Beute Koverman

Since its founding in 1976, McKissick Museum has been active in the research, collection, and exhibition of traditional southern pottery. The beginning of the museum's important ceramics collection can be traced to a gift of three alkaline-glazed stoneware vessels, made in Edgefield, to the University Library in the 1930s by one of its volunteers. Included in this gift was a large storage jar with a shiny, dark brown glaze that was incised with the date August 1857 and a poem by an enslaved potter by the name of Dave; it was among the various university collections transferred to the new museum. It is fitting that ceramics and their study has remained a strong focus over the years.

In 1985, after organizing several exhibits that surveyed traditional crafts made in the South, McKissick Museum embarked upon a major survey of the alkaline-stoneware tradition of Edgefield. Supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, this project was a turning point for the collection at the museum acquired alkaline-glazed stoneware produced in South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, Alabama, and Texas, while curators traveled the South documenting hundreds of vessels and interviewing those connected to the pottery. Important aspects of this project were the addition of the survey records, oral histories, and photographs to the Folk life Resource Center and the resulting nationally traveling exhibit, Groove of Clay. Curator Cinda Baldwin's book Great and Noble Jar is still the primary reference source on this pottery.

Throughout the early years of the museum, and today, examples of other regional ceramic wares have also been researched and collected. Much of this focus has been on the Catawba potters. Examples of important work by Sara Ayers, Nola Campbell, Georgia Harris, and Doris Blue were collected in the first years after McKissick's creation. Since then curators have added items by newer artists such as Monty Brham and Warren Sanders. A recent donation by Phil and Linda Wingard has increased the significance of this collection by adding a number of early pieces.
McKissick Museum continued to lead the field in the research of southern ceramics during the 1990s. Research focused on related ceramic traditions in North Carolina, culminating in 1994 with the exhibit and catalogue "New Ways for Old Jugs: Tradition and Innovation at the Jugtown Pottery." Again research was paired with acquisitions of pottery produced at the Jugtown Pottery, North State Pottery, J. B. Cole Pottery, and numerous other potteries operating in the Seagrove area.

Between 1991 and 1992 the Museum acquired more than one hundred pieces of traditional southern pottery collected by University of South Carolina art history professor Charles R. Mack and his wife, Ilona Mack. The wares they donated complemented the alkaline-glazed stoneware research and the Jugtown research, strengthening the collection of North Carolina pottery by filling in gaps and adding to the area of Georgia-, Alabama-, and Kentucky-made utilitarian and art pottery. The collection included pottery and oral histories from the Brown family of potters in Georgia, North Carolina, and Alabama; Lanier, Cleaster, and Edwin Meaders of Georgia; Burlon Craig of North Carolina’s Catawba Valley; and the Owens, Owen, Teague, and Cole families in the Seagrove area of North Carolina. The oral histories were recorded by Mack in the field during 1981, while the pottery ranges in date from the 1920s to 1990.

The museum’s research efforts were the driving force behind its collecting and exhibition activities from 1996 to 2000; the enslaved African American potter Dave and the enigmatic southern face vessel were the focus, again resulting in two exhibitions. During this time the number of utilitarian items—storage jars, pitchers, pie plates, and the like—made by Edgefield potters Thomas Chandler, Collin Rhodes, and Dave (identified as David Drake) increased. The 1998 gift from James Barrow of two exceptional face vessels made by anonymous enslaved African American potters who worked in the Edgefield District significantly added to the depth of the ceramics collections. Collectors Tony and

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Pitcher center
Maker Unknown
Edgefield, South Carolina, c. 1850.
Alkaline-glazed stoneware, 10 in.
Museum Purchase
1999.01.00.01

Jug top right
Maker Unknown
South Carolina, c. 1840
Alkaline-glazed stoneware, 13¾ in.
Gift to the University through the South Caroliniana Library
6.2035

Face Vessel bottom center
Maker Unknown
Edgefield, South Carolina, c. 1860
Alkaline-glazed stoneware, 5¾ in.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James P. Barrow
1998.37.120.01

Face Cup bottom right
Maker Unknown
Edgefield, South Carolina, c. 1860
Alkaline-glazed stoneware, 5¾ in.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James P. Barrow
1998.37.120.02

Kinship and community were important in the development and diffusion of the alkaline-glazed stoneware tradition during the nineteenth century. The glaze developed by the Landrum family in Edgefield, South Carolina, was made from ash or lime. Edgefield potters produced containers used primarily for food preservation and preparation. As these potters migrated west and to other areas in the Southeast, they in turn spread the alkaline-glaze tradition into Georgia, North Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi.
Storage Jar
Inscribed: In July 6–1837 / for Mr. John
“Monday”
Attributed to David Drake (c. 1800–1860)
Edgefield, South Carolina, 1837
Alkaline-glazed ironware, 21.6 in.
Museum Purchase
1997.39.00.04

David Drake, known as “Dave,” is one of the most famous of the Edgefield potters. He is known for both his technical skill in turning very large vessels as well as his witty and sometimes poignant verses, often incised along the sides of his wares. Born into slavery, Drake first worked at Harvey Drake’s Potteryville factory and then later worked for the Landrum family. His public display of literacy was in violation of a legal system that prohibited the education of slaves.

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Wedding Vase
Earl Robbins (1922-)
Cawawa Reservation,
Rock Hill, South Carolina, c. 1985

Earthenware, 16 1/2 x 8 1/2 in.
Museum Purchase
6.2199
Mortar and Pestle
Inscribed in iron slip, "John Trapp / Edgefield District / January 13-13 1846"
John Trapp (?-1876)

Edgefield, South Carolina, 1846
Alkaline-glazed stoneware, 6¼ × 7¼ in.
Gift of Tony and Marie Shunk
1997.39.103.02

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Overleaf

Coffee Set
Attributed to Thurston Cole (1921-1966)
Charles Cole Pottery, Moore County, North Carolina, c. 1935
Glazed earthenware; Coffee pot, 6 × 5 in.
Gift of Charles and Ilona Mack
1992.12.00.60–71

One of the oldest families of traditional potters in North Carolina is the Cole family. Thurston Cole, son of Charles Cole, worked in the family pottery until his death in 1966. The C. C. Cole Pottery continued in operation until 1971. Thurston Cole is noted as a prolific and very talented potter.

Face Cup
Maker Unknown
Edgefield, South Carolina, c. 1860
Alkaline-glazed stoneware, 5½ in.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James P. Barrow
1998.27.120.02

This face vessel is attributed as the work of an enslaved African American potter at the Thomas Daniels Pottery in Edgefield District.
Urn
Arthur R. Cole (1892–1971)
Rainbow Pottery, Sanford, North Carolina, c. 1935
"Chrome red" lead-glazed earthenware, 18½ in.
Museum Purchase
1997.20.00.01

In 1926 Arthur Ray Cole left his father's pottery in Seagrove, North Carolina, to open the Rainbow Pottery in the nearby town of Sanford. He renamed it A. R. Cole Pottery in 1943. After his death in 1974, the pottery then became Cole Pottery and is still in operation today.
Marie Shank, early supporters of the museum’s interest in southern folk art, continued to aid the museum’s collection and research efforts through the contribution of a number of pieces of Edgefield pottery, as well as research files and photographic collections.

Individual potters have also been the focus of museum interest. Billy Henson worked with museum curators as he established his pottery and ultimately reinvigorated the pottery making tradition of his family. The collections contain several of his pieces. Steven Ferrell’s work represents the growing interest in Edgefield pottery, and works by Billy Ray Hussey and Otis Norris show the contemporary resilience of traditional origins.

Today the museum continues to support traditional southern potters by collecting, documenting, and exhibiting their work and by serving as an important resource for the study of southern pottery through the Folklife Resource Center.
Lion Figure
Billy Ray Hussey (1955–)  
Robbins, North Carolina, 1998
Glazed earthenware,
6 1/8 × 7 3/4 × 4 in.
Gift of the Artist  
1998.17.11.01

Billy Ray Hussey from the Seagrove area of North Carolina began to produce face vessels in his early 20s and then branched out to produce more figurative pieces. Variations of his lion figurals in the style of Solomon Bell, an eighteenth-century Shenandoah Valley, Virginia, potter, are some of his most well-known works.