Book Review: *Eighteenth-Century Ceramics from Fort Michilimackinac - A Study in Historical Archeology* by J. Jefferson Miller II and Lyle M. Stone

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BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by Stanley South

The "Introduction" to this volume clearly reviews the challenge of historic site ceramics classification and cites earlier efforts at dealing with the problems. The taxonomic tools used by these authors are the class, group, and type, and from their use of these within this report, it is clear that their criteria provide a sensible, workable means of dealing with ceramic data from historic sites. The flexibility necessary for classification of historic site ceramics is built into their system, thus avoiding the use of inflexible, unworkable sets of diagnostic criteria such as have previously been proposed by others for classification of ceramics from historic sites. The authors freely acknowledge what they consider the weakness of their system, and offer it as a step in the process of developing an efficient set of tools for handling ceramics from historic sites.

This excellent work is composed of three chapters, the first dealing with the "History of Fort Michilimackinac and the Present Program of Archeology and Reconstruction", which clearly and competently does exactly what the chapter title promises. The footnotes are not only accurate, but also provide the reader with additional sidelights, comments, observations, and explanations that result in a conversational tone that is very pleasing as well as informative. Fine reproductions of early maps and excellent quality photographs provide the reader with a thorough background perspective from which to approach the "Ceramics at Fort Michilimackinac", the subject of the second chapter.

The ceramic chapter presents the data according to the three basic classes: earthenware, stoneware, and porcelain, with eight groupings within these classes composed of ceramics that share physical and/or stylistic properties. Types form the subdivision with the groups, based on decorative style and technique. This method is designed to "categorize the ceramics within the context of the eighteenth-century culture that produced them" (Miller and Stone 1970:25). The results are seen in the seventy outstanding pages to follow, comprising the major body of the book. These pages continue the readable, well-documented format of the first chapter, with the informative footnote asides. The photographic plates are outstandingly done and carefully planned to illustrate the exact criteria of value for sherd identification and classification. The scale of these illustrations is well chosen and the predominately black backgrounds allow for maximum
emphasis on the sherds.

One small bone could be picked with the authors on some of their groupings, such as Group II, "English Cream-Colored Earthenware" and Group IV, "Fine Earthenware". It would seem to me that "English Cream-Colored Earthenware" is a "Fine Earthenware", and that the polychrome Whieldon and Whieldon-Wedgwood Types should not be the only ones within the "Fine Earthenware" heading. My suggestion would be that under the "Fine Earthenware" would be three basic types, the "English Cream-Colored Earthenware" type, the "Whieldon and Whieldon-Wedgwood" type, and a "Red Paste" type (to be discussed below).

Group III, "Coarse Earthenware", has in it some very finely executed red, black, and brown-black earthenwares such as illustrated in Figure 24c. Such fine earthenware should be, it seems to me, much better placed under the "Fine Earthenware" group where it is surely more at home than with the "Coarse Earthenware" such as is illustrated in Figure 28c. Do we not recognize such a thing as "Fine Red Earthenware"? I think that once we overcome our creamware color-prejudice, we can come to admit that potters using the lowly red paste could, upon occasion, produce some ware that can only be classified as "Fine Earthenware", not "Coarse", and that red, brown, and black is beautiful too. The authors themselves list as a "Coarse Earthenware" criterion "crude pottery", which some of the red earthenware illustrated most certainly does not fit. They state that their study has convinced them that "considerable uncertainty exists in the identification of coarse earthenwares of the eighteenth century", proving that the problem is recognized by the authors (in their usual thorough manner). I would like to suggest that this English-ceramics-based cream-color prejudice has long played a role in that any ceramics with a red paste is automatically assigned to the category "Coarse Earthenware", or "The Common Redware", or "Crude Pottery", without a second thought to the fact that in thinness, hardness, form, glaze, and quality, some of this ware is every bit as "fine" as the identical form made with cream-colored paste. We should ask ourselves whether our distinguishing between "Coarse" and "Fine" ware is based on simple color prejudice. No such color awareness is seen in the Stoneware grouping where "Red Stoneware is listed as Type C. Suppose the sherds illustrated in Figure 45 were found, not in stoneware hardness, but as red earthenware, then they would have to fall under the "Coarse Earthenware" classification of this chapter. This question is not as hypothetical as it may seem, for finely made, engine-turned, red paste, clear, brown, or black glazed earthenware fragments are recovered from eighteenth century English sites such as the fragment seen in Figure 24c. A classification of ware such as this (regardless of paste color) as "Fine Earthenware" would go a long way toward solving one of the problems pointed out by the authors as being associated with the "Coarse Earthenware" group.

The final third chapter on "Interpretation of Historical Site Ceramics" is slightly over six pages long and discusses the various
interpretations having been presented in past literature in the light of "Temporal and Chronological Interpretations", "Stratigraphic Context", "Structural Elements", "Artifact Assemblages", "Socioeconomic Interpretations", "Trade and Transportation", "Sociocultural Change", "Status of Social Level", and "Functional Interpretations". A good "Bibliography" citing a number of lesser known, obscure works reflects the depth of research of these authors, a fact clearly evident throughout this book. Four "Appendices" provide parallel data in the form of sherd frequencies and ceramic type distributions, with illustrated materials from related sites. An index and cover fly-sheet with an interpretive drawing of Fort Michilimackinac provide the final touch to this most impressive accomplishment.

Perhaps the success of this volume is due in part to the fact that the approach of the art historian specializing in ceramics (Miller) and an anthropologically trained archeologist (Stone) have been combined to produce this happy result. As Edward Jelks has pointed out in his "Foreword", "Together they have demonstrated that archeological data from historic sites can be studied fruitfully by both the anthropologist and the historian." I would like to add that the quality of this book reflects clearly the necessity for an amalgamation of the concepts and approach of the art historian with the specific objectivity of the anthropological or historical archeologist. Art historians have published many volumes on ceramics without an awareness of the particular needs of the archeologist. Archeologists dealing with historic ceramics have sometimes proceeded as though nothing had ever been published on ceramic classification. Miller and Stone have successfully amalgamated their knowledge to produce a work of such superior quality that we might be led to suspect that any improvements must necessarily come from a similar amalgamation of disciplinary backgrounds.

So well have the authors defined and qualified their topic, and so well have they achieved their goals, that their own words can be used to conclude their review:

...we remain convinced that our work represents a worthwhile contribution to the respective disciplines of historical archeology, cultural history, and ceramics history. In terms of artifact description and interpretation, socioeconomic history, and comparative data, we have presented a large amount of heretofore unpublished information. Hopefully, the ensuing years will see a continuing program of publication on the artifact collections from many North American historical sites. Such a program should result in a more comprehensive understanding of eighteenth-century North America and in a clearer delineation of the complex social and economic patterns of the period.

(Miller and Stone 1970:5)

Hopefully, too, the ensuing years will see more published products as competently executed as this fine volume.