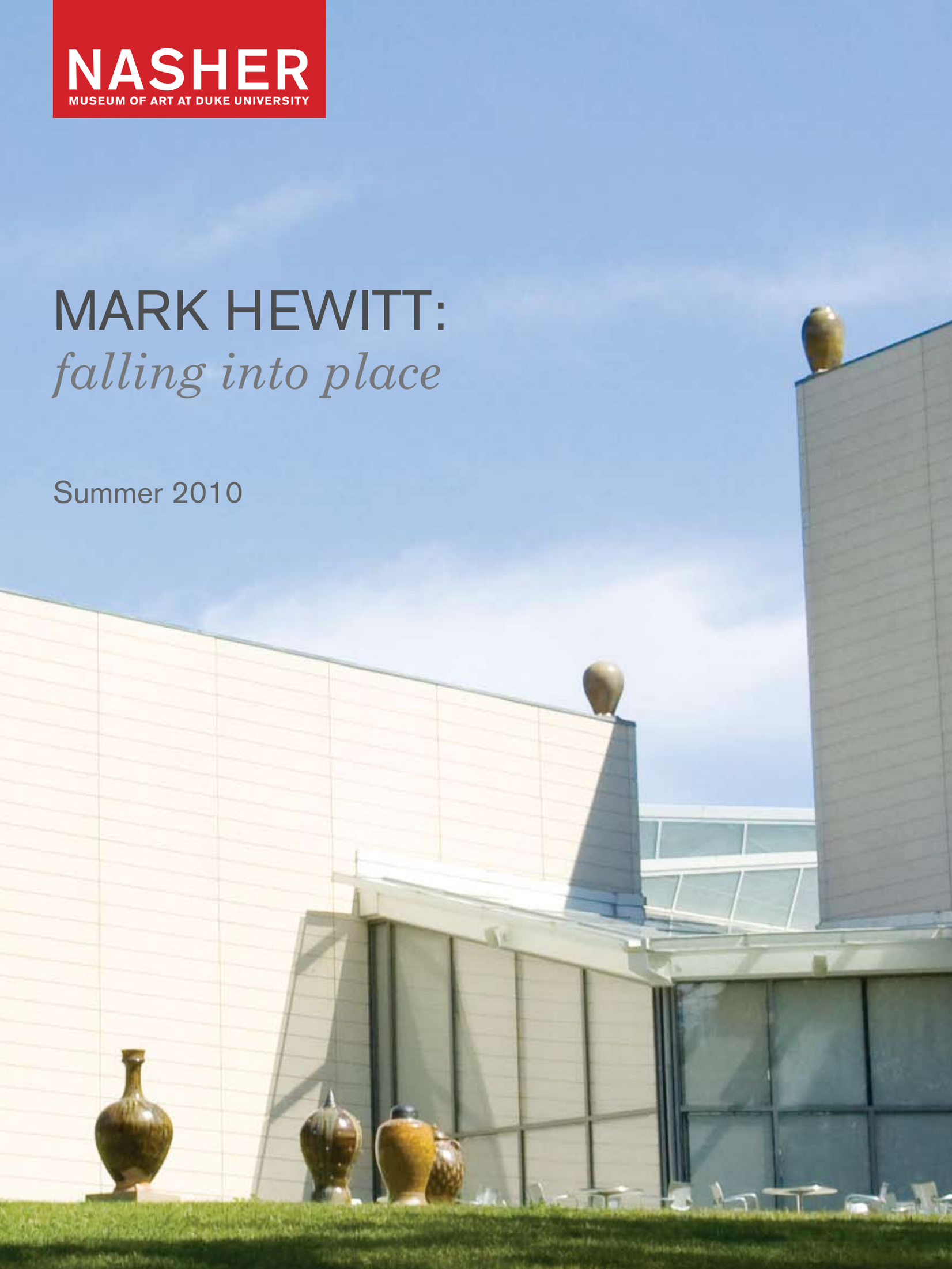
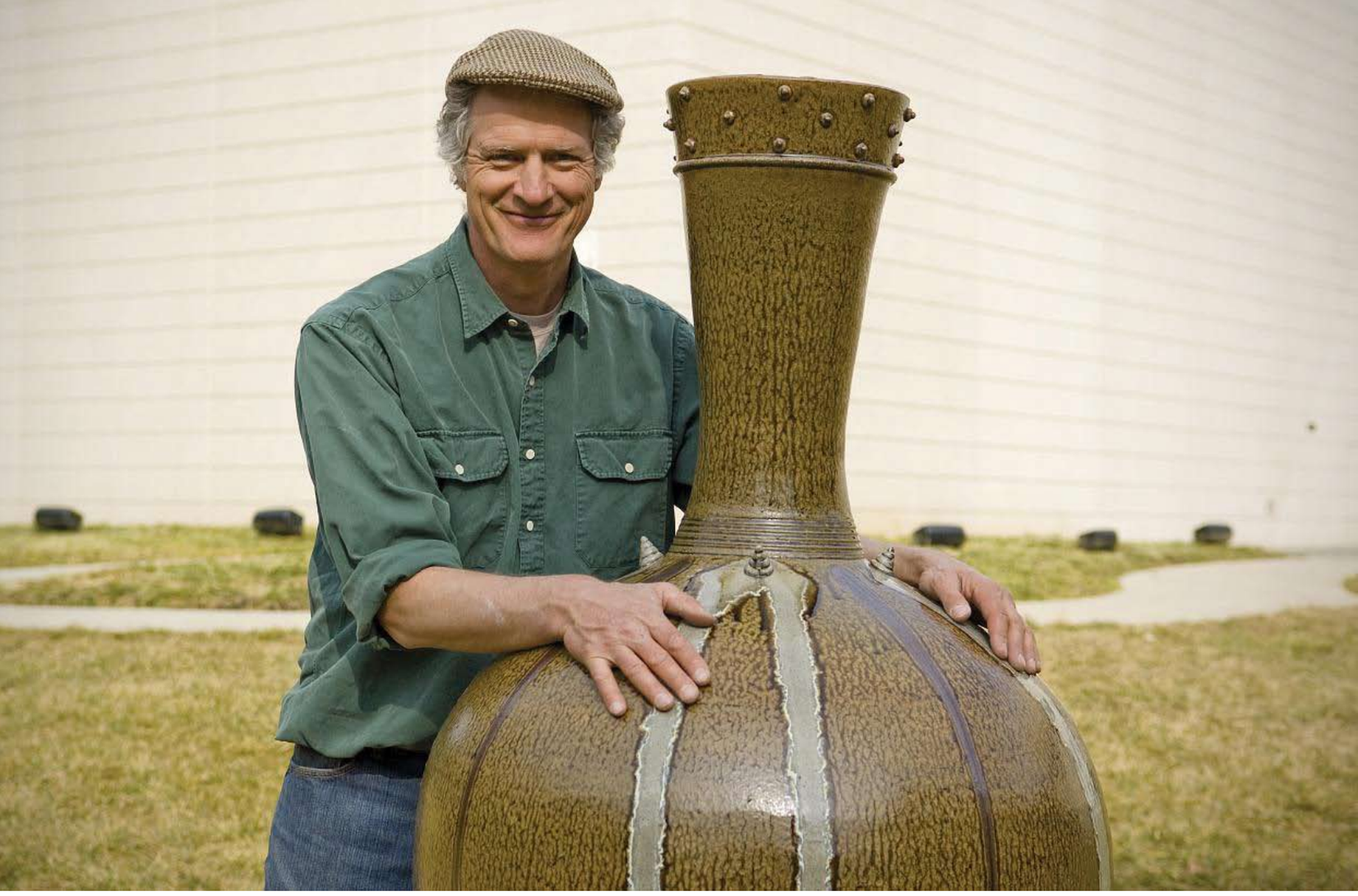
NASHER
MUSEUM OF ART AT DUKE UNIVERSITY

MARK HEWITT:
falling into place

Summer 2010

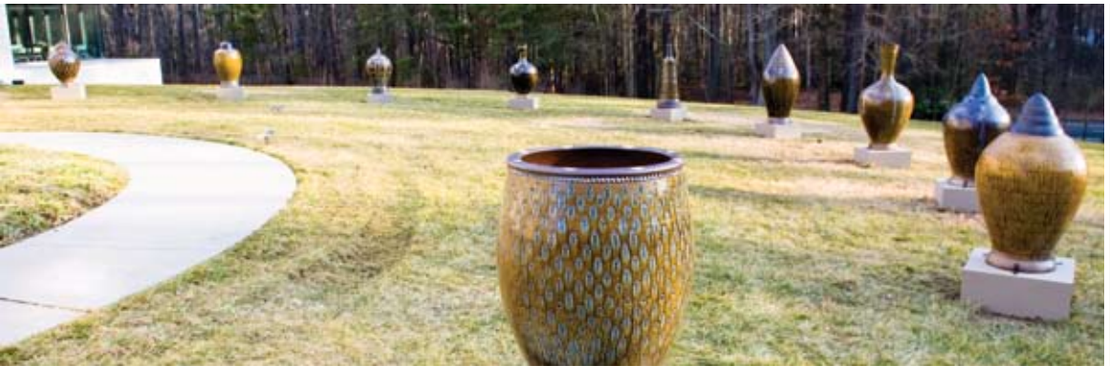




The Nasher Museum invited internationally renowned Pittsboro-based potter Mark Hewitt to create an installation of 12 of his large ceramic pots on the museum's front lawn and roof. *Mark Hewitt: Falling into Place* will be on view through Summer, 2010. For nearly 30 years, Hewitt has drawn inspiration from Asian and West African ceramics, and the native North Carolina potting traditions of Seagrove and the Catawba River Valley. Hewitt digs the clay, mixes his own glazes and fires in a wood-burning kiln on his property. For this installation, the artist selected pots from his own collection, four private collections and the Cameron Art Museum in Wilmington. The installation was conceived by Sarah Schroth, the Nancy Hanks Senior Curator at the Nasher Museum.

ABOVE: Photo by Dr. J Caldwell

RIGHT: Mark Hewitt draws inspiration from Asian ceramics, the Ancient Mediterranean world and the native Carolinian potting traditions of Seagrove and the Catawba River valley. Photo by Dr. J Caldwell.



Portrait of the artist as a young man

by Tanya Harrod

In 1981 Michael Cardew was in Wichita, Kansas, speaking at an NSECA conference. Aged eighty, he was in elegiac mood:

'And when the time comes, at last, when you finally have to stop making pots, and all the pots you made in the past have been broken in use (except, perhaps for a few which have been preserved in museums) then, people are going to ask, "where can I obtain other pots like those?' And, at that point (if you have done your life's work properly) they will be able to go to pupils whom you have taught in the past. Their pots will be different; but if the pots were given life by the maker they will be able (nobody understands how) to impart life – that is to say, pleasure – to the people who use them.'

Luckily for us, Michael Cardew did do his life's work properly. A small coterie was imaginative enough to spend part of their youth at Michael's pottery at Wenford Bridge in Cornwall, living the simple life. Mark Hewitt was one of these young people who chose to be apprenticed to this cantankerous, scholarly, hot-tempered genius.

Hewitt's background was industrial ceramic; his parents assumed he would rise to an eventual directorship within Spode-Copeland, the Staffordshire firm his family had helped run for several generations. But his undoubted interest in ceramics took him in markedly other directions.

At Bristol University a fellow student gave him a copy of Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book*, a text that proposes an alternative way of life, albeit in ceramic terms. It spoke to Hewitt's idealism - after leaving school he had travelled to India through Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, seeing first hand how the rest of the world lived. But A Potter's Book also teaches aesthetics and practice and Hewitt began to study the early Chinese pots in Bristol Museum and Art Gallery and to use the pottery studio in the Student's Union.

On November 15 1976 a touring retrospective devoted to the work of Michael Cardew opened in Bristol. Mark Hewitt was present, eager to meet Leach's greatest pupil. He saw 'a most remarkable man' with flowing white hair and shabby clothes – these were imbued with the scent of wood-smoke which Mark found 'homely and warm and, at once, defiant'.

Michael took few apprentices and chose them with care – Hewitt passed an invisible test and arrived at Wenford in early September 1977 to enter a strange new world. By the late 1970s Michael's extraordinary energy was flagging and he was much concerned with setting down his life story, in particular the tumultuous first years in West Africa between 1942 and 1948. Sometimes he just reflected on the past. Take this diary entry for April 1 1978: 'Up 8.30 Dreaming & grieving & thinking all morning'.

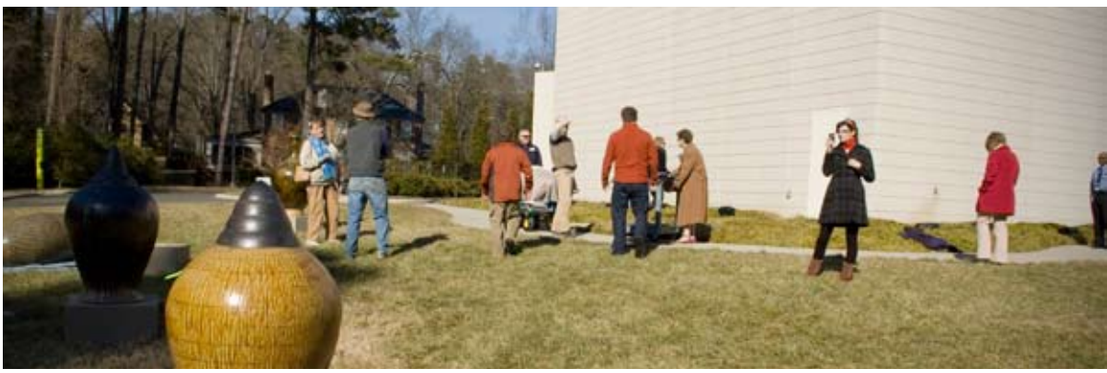
On occasion he made pots and, up to a point, engaged with his students. But at that stage his son Seth oversaw much of the day-to-day routine. Perhaps routine is the wrong word – on sunny days Michael would urge his students down to the sea or up onto the moors. Mark was often co-opted into garden work – cutting down dead trees or sowing peas.

Visits were paid to Bernard Leach in St Ives. In November 1977 Michael and Mark were allowed to read passages from Leach's as yet unpublished autobiography *Beyond East and West* and Michael records: 'Discussions in car, chiefly w Mark, on way home re "E & W" etc.' Fellow students came and went – Joanna, Danlami, Dawn, Tom and Thiebaut. Michael had created a commune for his old age that also did duty as an informal university.

Mark learnt how to run a pottery and how to throw quickly and accurately elsewhere. From Michael he learnt standards – looking at Michael's own pots, discussing pots in the evening at dinner, sitting at a long table by the fire. He learnt standards too by grappling with Cardew's complicated ways of preparing his materials - 'the clay was alive, it felt organic and fresh' - and from firing Cardew's demanding, unpredictable kiln. One day Michael asked 'Who made those pitchers?' and Mark realised that he was on the way to becoming a potter.

In October 1979 Mark set off for West Africa, going part of the way in Michael's footsteps, reporting back on the Pottery Training Centre Michael had created at Suleja in Northern Nigeria. He saw the women potters at work in nearby Tatiko and Kwali and sent vivid, descriptive letters which Michael carefully filed away: 'a long letter from Mark all about Tatiko near Paiko & their lovely pots - it made me cry, copiously!'

Mark, like many of Michael's students, was for a time treated as a son. In the end sons have to leave home and when Mark got back from West Africa in early 1980 he realised he should move on. He worked for Todd Piker (another former student) at Cornwall Bridge in Connecticut. North America began to exert its hold and he wrote



to Michael 'it is such an interesting place, not so much stiffness, an abundance of wood, good materials down south in North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and I am greatly intrigued with the idea of trying to set up a 'pioneering' type of workshop down there'.

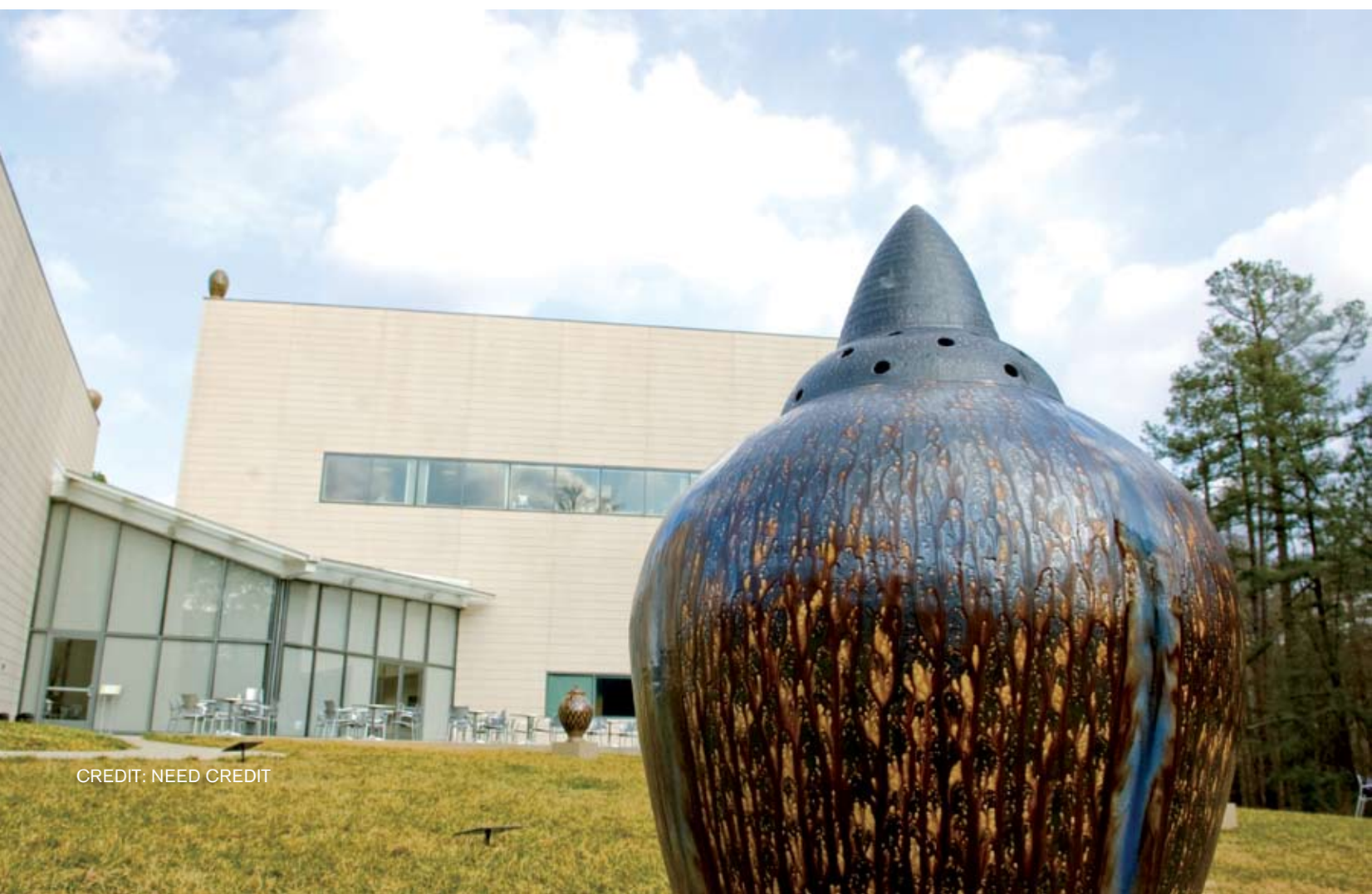
Mark's most beautiful letters to Michael were written from the Far East during 1982. In Japan he felt uneasy, unnerved by 'A veneer of politeness and courtesy'. In retrospect he preferred Korea: 'the Korean potters were so confident, happy, generous and strong. They were anti-commercial, preferring to spend time talking and laughing and drinking fermented rice wine…But when they did work they worked with a fluency that was beautiful to watch… The most important thing I learnt was that the work should be approached with a healthy delight and an easy confidence; anguish, worry and doubt have no place in the decisiveness necessary to be fluent.'

ABOVE LEFT: Mark Hewitt is firmly rooted in the traditions and utilitarianism of folk pottery. He digs his own clay, mixes own glazes and fires in his woodburning kiln. Photo by Dr. J. Caldwell.

He confided in Michael: 'My apprenticeship is almost at an end. The pots that I am drawn to more and more are the simplest ones, often unglazed, relying on strength of form alone, and on the accidents of firing'. There was the problem of eclecticism. He, like all modern ceramicists, had seen so many pots, been subjected to such a wealth of images of pots. But, he wrote to Michael, 'So long as I start with good materials, work hard making lots of pots and fire with wood in a big kiln I'm sure things will fall into place'. And so it proved.

About the author

Tanya Harrod is the author of '*The Crafts In Britain in the 20th Century*', Yale University Press, 1999. She is co-editor of the Journal of Modern Craft and is writing a biography of the potter Michael Cardew.



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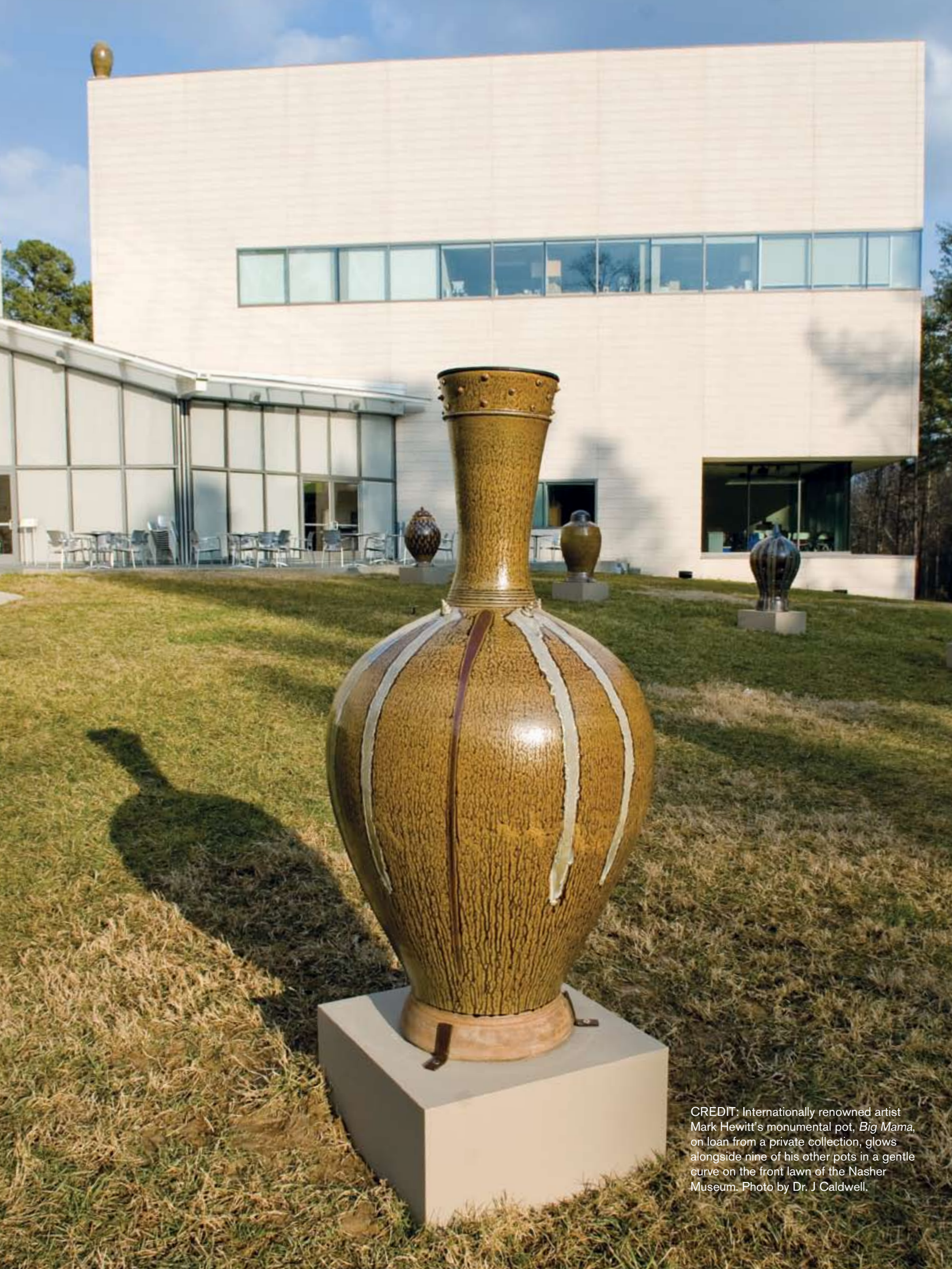
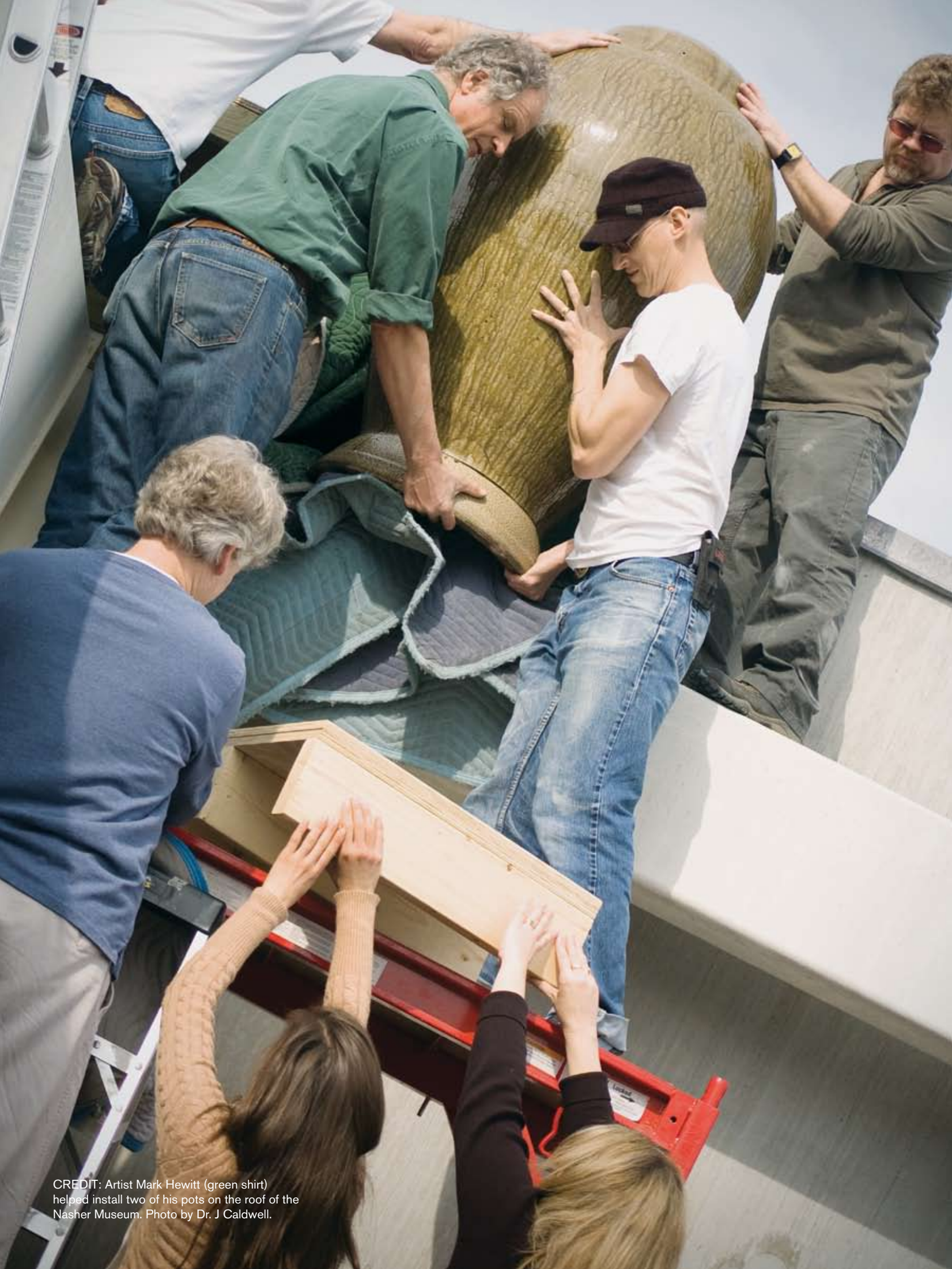
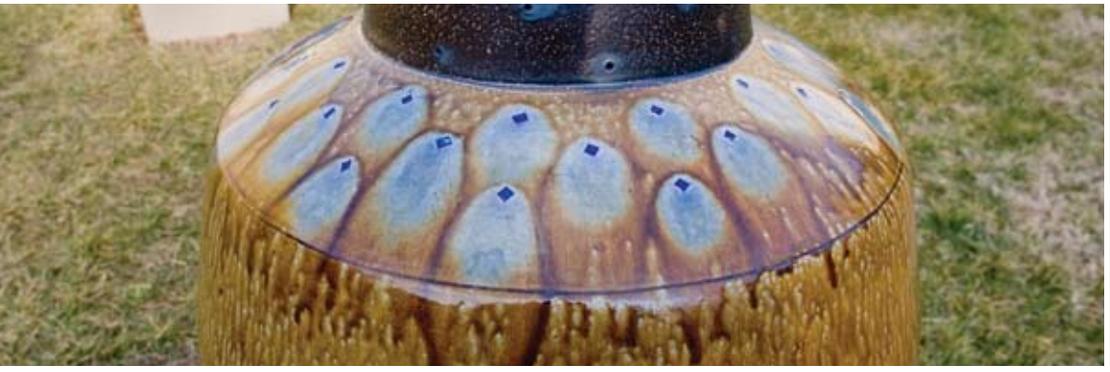


CREDIT: Internationally renowned artist Mark Hewitt's monumental pot, *Big Mama*, on loan from a private collection, glows alongside nine of his other pots in a gentle curve on the front lawn of the Nasher Museum. Photo by Dr. J Caldwell.



CREDIT: Artist Mark Hewitt (green shirt) helped install two of his pots on the roof of the Nasher Museum. Photo by Dr. J Caldwell.



Mark in Place

by Henry Glassie

North Carolina – this 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 reaches 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.

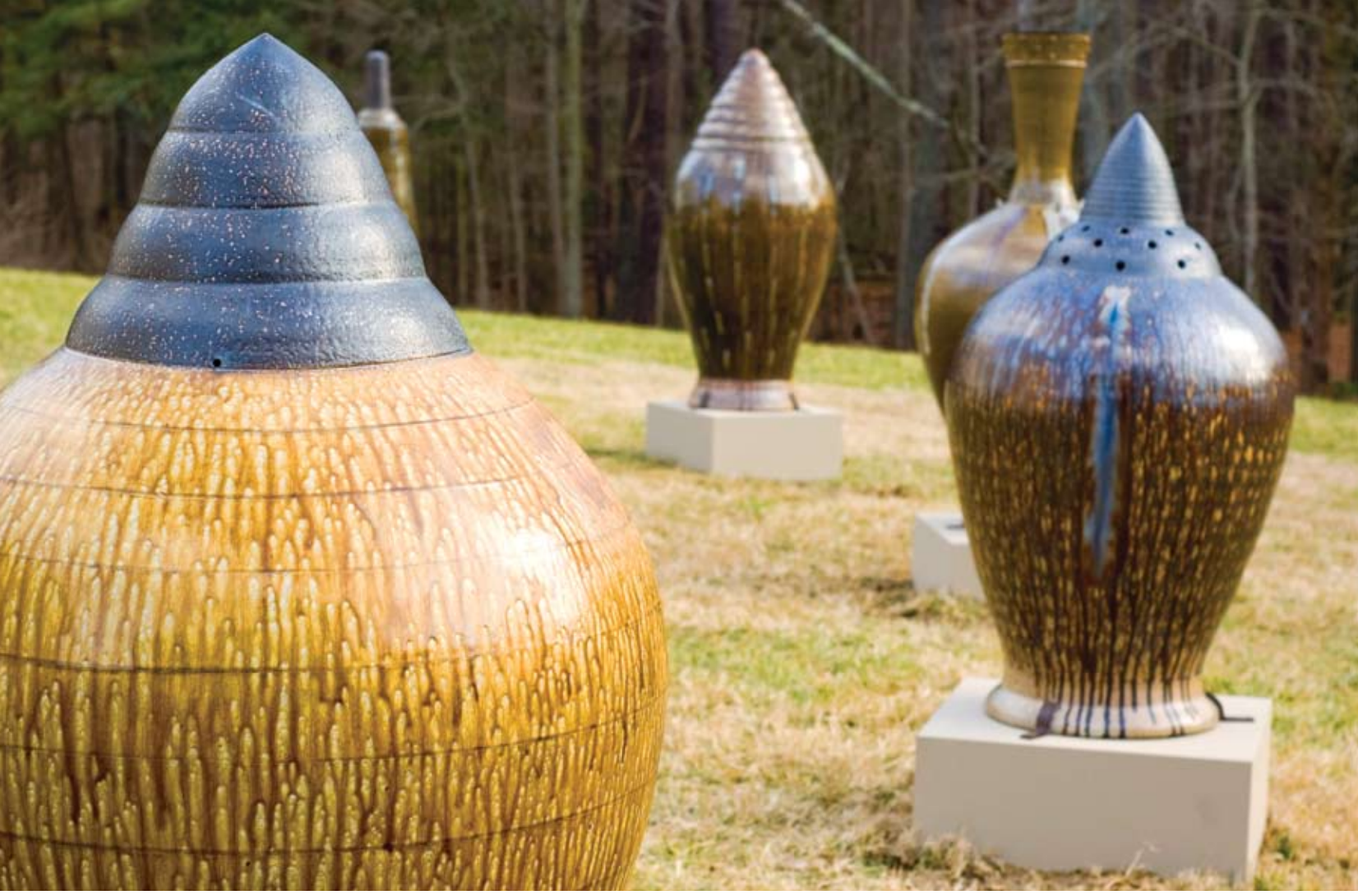
The old English potteries barely survived the Second World War, but studio pottery was flourishing, and he might have remained. Mark, though, comes from a family accustomed to travel. With his bride, Carol, he settled in North Carolina to be part of a live tradition of pot making. They bought a farm 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. The 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.

About the author

Henry Glassie, College Professor Emeritus at Indiana University, has written fourteen books, including *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia*; *Irish Folktales*; *Turkish Traditional Art Today*; *The Stars of Ballymenone*; *The Potter's Art*; and most recently, *Prince Twins Seven-Seven: His Art, His Life in Nigeria, His Exile in America*. He was won many awards for his work, including the Chicago Folklore Prize, formal recognition from the governments of Turkey and Bangladesh, and the Haskins Prize of the American Council of Learned Societies for a lifetime of humanistic scholarship



Thank You

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ABOVE: The daring placement of Mark Hewitt's huge ceramic pots creates an organic transition between the museum's modernist architecture and the surrounding woods. Photo by Dr. J Caldwell.

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