MARK HEWITT STUCK IN THE MUD

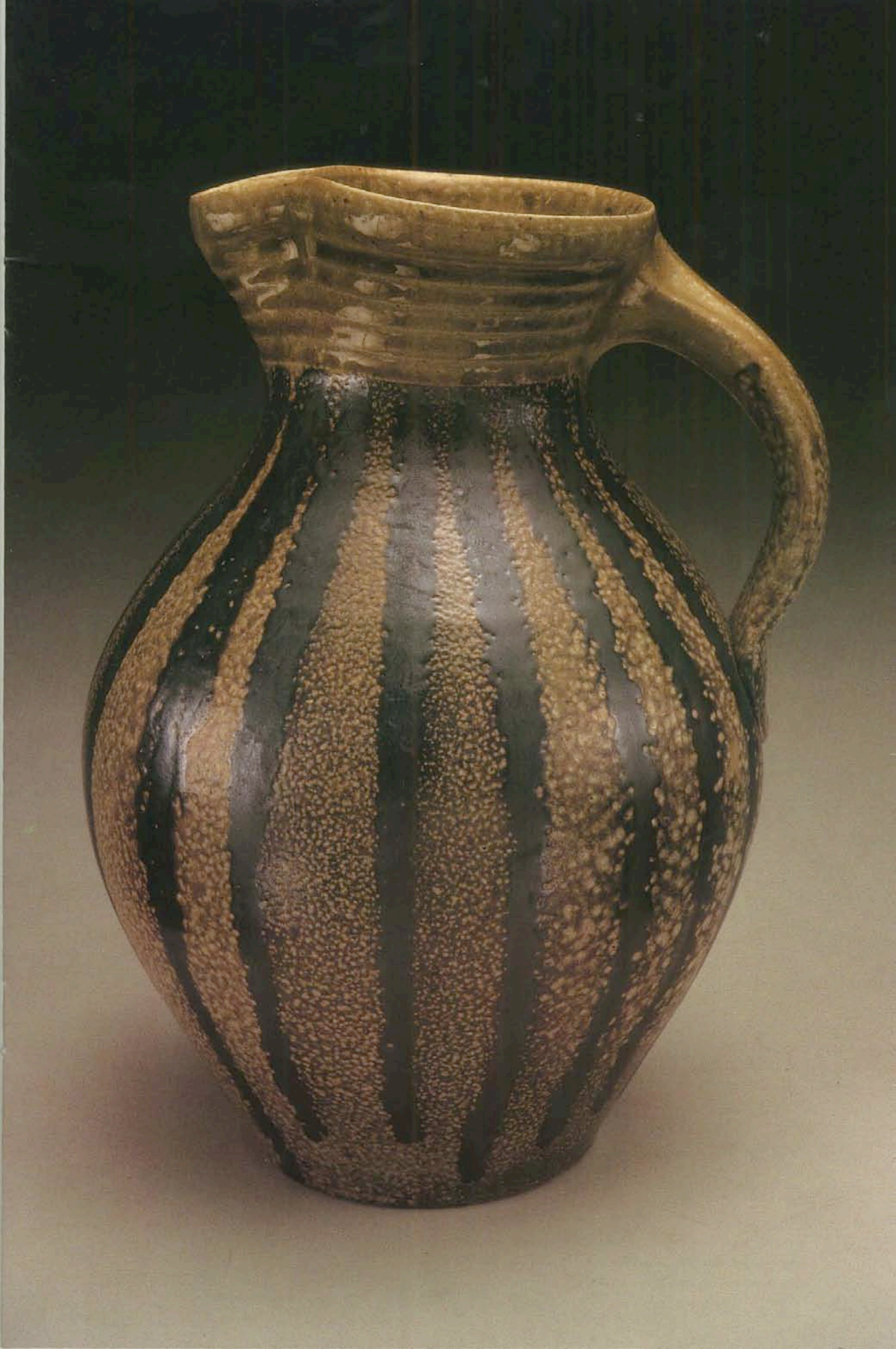
September 28 - October 30, 1992

Belk Gallery

Department of Art

Western Carolina University

Cullowhee, NC 28723

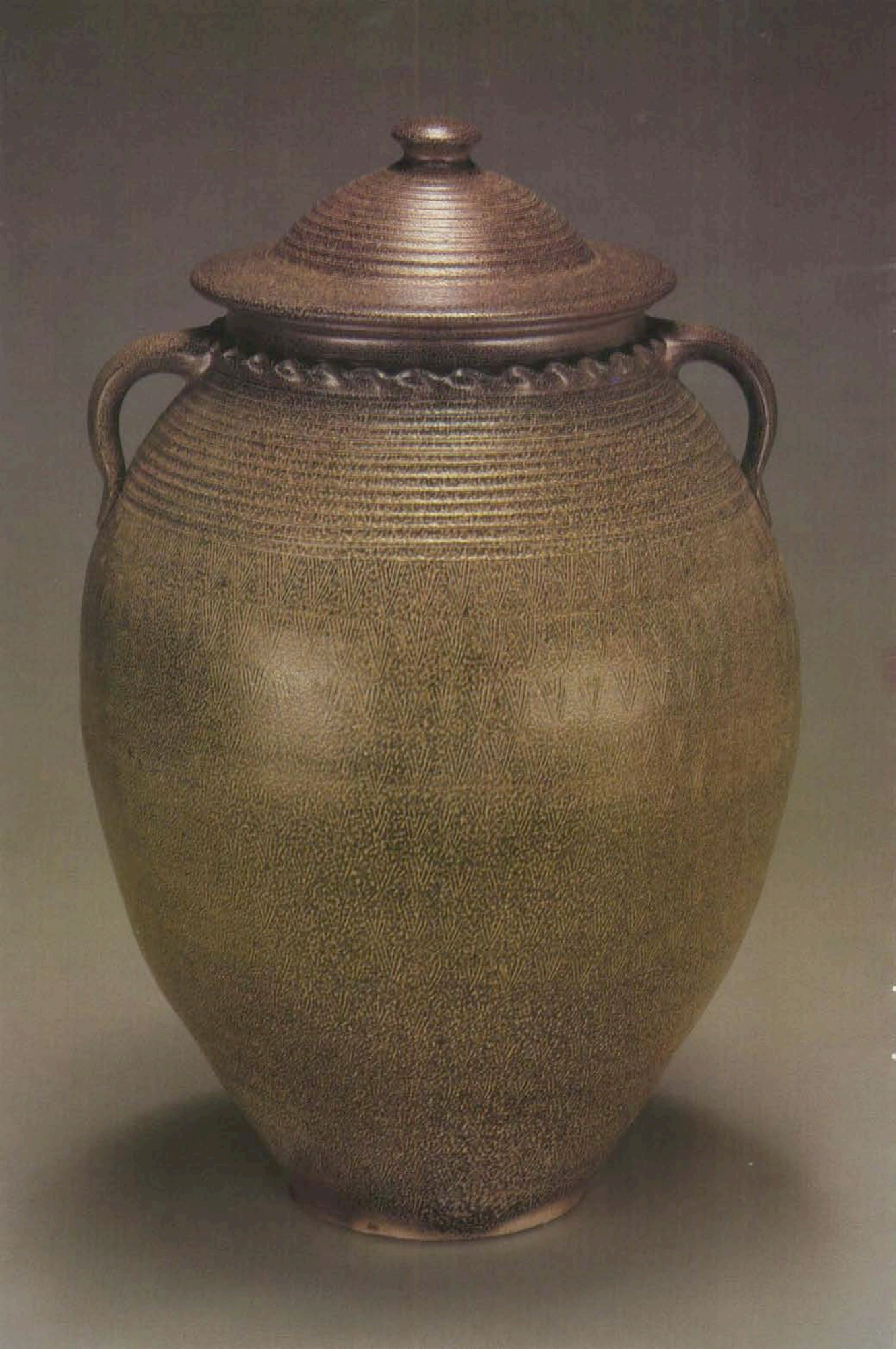


for Gene Howard, Ron Ridgeway, James Goodman,
and everyone who has helped me fire my kiln
W. M. H.

overleaf

One-gallon pitcher, salt-glazed stoneware with alkaline-glazed neck, manganese and iron drips, wood fired, 1992, Mark Hewitt. H 14"

Photography: Robin Alexander



INTRODUCTION

I met Michael Cardew in Nigeria in 1964, near the end of his final tour as director of the Pottery Training Center which he had founded in Abuja. I know of no other pottery of our time which inspires in me as fine a sense of well-being as his; and I counted it a singular privilege whenever I saw this "mud and water man," as Cardew would characterize himself, on his teaching tours of the United States or at home at Wenford Bridge in England. The news of Cardew's death in 1984 at the age of eighty-three reached me not long before my initial encounter with the work of his recent apprentice, Mark Hewitt, whose magnificent thirty gallon planters at that time commanded the courtyard of Dot and Walter Auman's Seagrove Pottery. It came as no small joy to me then to find the spirit of Michael Cardew alive, well, and greatly at home among the folk potters of North Carolina.

There is much of Michael in Mark and his work, but the similarity between the two men is at heart a matter of scope, an eagerness to give each pot its due. As Cardew infused the soundness of English country pottery with the rhythms of West Africa, Mark has traveled widely and has chosen North Carolina's potters as his own. The work is the synthesis of living traditions deeply felt.

The present exhibition of the pottery of Mark Hewitt celebrates his tenth year in Pittsboro. The view of tradition is long, and seen from this perspective, Mark in his mid-thirties is a very young man. The impact of his new environment on his work, and his influence on those around him, are yet to be measured. I am indebted both to Mark and to Charles G. Zug, III, noted authority on the folk potters of North Carolina, for their lively catalogue essays exploring the relationship between the work and the traditions which nourish it. Among Zug's uncommon gifts as a scholar is the capacity to appreciate folk pottery tradition as a continuing and vigorous development, rather than history on the wane. It is this ongoing evolution in North Carolina and certain other favored areas of the world, of which Mark Hewitt is a unique and vital part.

Joan Falconer Byrd
Western Carolina University

Salt-glazed stoneware jar with roulette decoration, wood fired, 1991, Mark Hewitt. H 34".
Photography: Robin Alexander

Tradition Being Carried On: Mark Hewitt in North Carolina

My first encounter with Mark Hewitt's pottery occurred in 1984 at the British-American Festival at Duke University. I had entered one of the picturesque quads on the campus in search of Burlon Craig and Vernon Owens, two friends who were demonstrating the North Carolina pottery tradition. As I neared the potters' working area, I spotted a row of huge salt-glazed planters, running diagonally along one of the central walkways. Having studied the old utilitarian wares for years, I was used to big storage jars on the order of 10 to 20 gallons. These, however, were much larger, yet entirely graceful in form and textured with a rich brown coating of salt. I had no idea whose hand had turned them, but they seemed somehow very familiar.

What interested me was to make pots which could be used for the purposes of daily life, and to make them cheap enough for ordinary people, as I mentally called them—that is, obscure middle-class people like me and my friends and relations—to be able to use them and not mind too much when they got broken.

Michael Cardew
A Pioneer Potter

I met Mark Hewitt and his fellow English potter Clive Bowen that day, but it was some months before I drove down to Pittsboro to see where these behemoths had come from. Mark and his wife Carol had recently purchased a small farm, which proved an ideal location for a pottery. With a traditional hall-parlor farmhouse, a large barn for storage and display, and a substantial shed (ex-chickenhouse) for a workshop, the only new element was the big crossdraft kiln buried in the side yard. Like the pots I had seen earlier, the setting looked entirely natural and familiar too, very like the weathered, frame pottery shops around Seagrove and Vale.

Cultural geographers like to cite the concept of preadaptation to explain phenomena like the development of the American frontier. The Scotch-Irish, for example, accustomed to centuries of strife, hardship, and instability, are said to have been ideally suited to cope with the American wilderness and lead the way west. Put very simply, they possessed a "set of traits" that gave them "competitive advantage in occupying a new environment"

(Newton 147). From what I know of Mark—and we've become very good friends—I would have to conclude that he was preadapted to settle in North Carolina. Of course, there were elements of luck too—his coming to work for Todd Piker in Connecticut, where he met his American wife. But with his earlier training and attitudes, it seems almost inevitable that he would end up here as an integral part of the North Carolina pottery tradition.

In an autobiographical essay in *Ceramics Monthly*, Mark has described the pivotal influences on his decision to become a potter: Bernard Leach and Michael Cardew. It was the former's publication, *A Potter's Book*, that started him off, but it was a three-year traditional apprenticeship with the latter at Wenford Bridge that turned him into a potter. Much that he learned from Cardew was "by osmosis. You just were there. I had only one hands-on lesson from him. And it was how to pull a handle, and I wish I'd never had it [laughs]. . . . You lived the life—you were an apprentice in his house" (Interview). This may sound alarmingly casual and unfocused to those trained in the university, where learning is highly formal and closely regulated, and each achievement is measured out by exams, grades, and hopefully one day, an MFA. But such an informal, on-the-job education possesses a powerful logic and completeness of its own. Mark began with "mugs and cereal bowls and pint pitchers. And you gradually started making quart pitchers, and then bigger serving bowls. . . . Plus the repertoire of decoration: slip trailing and combing, and all the nuances of dipping glazes. . . . Packing the kiln and firing the kiln. Plus, of course, preparing all the materials" (Interview).

What Mark absorbed, above all, from Michael Cardew was an enduring sense of tradition. Cardew himself was initially inspired by the harvest jugs,

Alkaline-glazed stoneware jar, c. 1850, Daniel Seagle, Lincoln County.
H 16-5/8", C 50-1/8", 10 gal. Stamp: "DS"
Collection of the Ackland Art Museum,
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ackland Fund.

bowls, and comb-decorated baking dishes of Edwin Beer Fishley, one of the last folk potters in north Devon. In turn, Bernard Leach reinforced and extended that sensibility to the point that Cardew "reached a more or less enlightened state where the treatment of a Chinese porcelain plate or bowl speaks of clay, and of the needs, functions and expressions of human users and makers in the same language as a European earthenware pitcher or a West African water pot" (*Potter 26*). As the epigraph to this essay suggests, Cardew defined himself as a potter by insisting that his work be central to daily life. His wares were not "art," to be revered from afar on a mantel or encased in glass. "Pottery in its pure form," he affirmed, "relies neither on sculptural additions nor on pictorial decorations, but on the counterpoint of form, design, colour, texture and the quality of the material, all directed to a function. This function is the uses of the home" (*Pottery 244*).

Cardew's eloquent yet down-to-earth affirmation of tradition and purpose aptly characterizes the North Carolina pottery heritage that the Hewitts entered in 1983. Earlier, while working in Connecticut, Mark recalls that "I'd been very interested in Southern folk pots." And so he and Carol took their first Southern tour, a zigzag route that only a potter could have devised. "We went to Bybee Pottery in Kentucky. . . . Then we went over to [the Craven Pottery and Hewell Pottery] Gillsville, Georgia, and up to Burlon and over

Salt-glazed stoneware jar with cobalt initials, Masonic emblem, date, and trim, 1855, John A. Craven, Randolph County.
H 26-5/8", C 51-1/4", 20 gal. Signed in script: "John A Craven 1-55"
Collection of the Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC.

to Seagrove." Drawn increasingly to the numerous North Carolina potters like Burlon Craig, Dorothy and Walter Auman, and Melvin and Vernon Owens, Mark found "the qualities that I admire so much in pots out of the folk tradition. I like the pots that are made quickly and easily." More broadly, he discovered essential ingredients important to his work: "local clays, pots made in large quantity, simple technology, frequently fired in wood kilns, and very simple" (Interview).

Once settled in, Mark also began studying the old, historical North Carolina pots. "They've provided me with a tremendous amount of information concerning shapes, lots of visual information. . . . I love Daniel Seagle's pots—they do something to me. J. A. Craven's another one I like particularly, and [Nicholas and Himer] Fox. . . . If I can make pots with their same spirit, then I think I'll be doing all right" (Interview). Mark's admiration for these virtuosos is well founded. Their work went far beyond necessity and demonstrated unusual attention to essential form, texture, and surface detail (Zug 251-6). In thus studying the old North Carolina masters, Mark was emulating Cardew's love of Devon slipwares or African water pots and affirming the importance of the past to the present. "I like to think of the tradition being carried on," he explains. "And in order to do that, you have to plug into what's there. . . . It seems improper to me to come to an area and ignore what's there, what's been there"(Interview).

Mark's affinity for folk tradition is clearly reflected in his penchant for turning huge planters and covered jars. Here he was specifically influ-

Salt-glazed stoneware jug,
c. 1840, Nicholas Fox, Chatham County.
H 14", C 30-1/2", 2 gal. Stamp: "N FOX"
Collection of Charles G. Zug, III.

Alkaline-glazed stoneware jug, c. 1850, Daniel Seagle, Lincoln County.
H 16-1/16", C 37-1/4", 4 gal. Stamp: "DS"
Collection of the Ackland Art Museum,
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ackland Fund.

enced by Cardew (who once made a 40 pound teapot mounted on a gun carriage) and Svend Beyer (a renowned maker of bigwares described by Cardew as "more than just a potter, he is a force of nature"(Clark 81). However, these wares also reflect the large storage jars of West Africa and Asia (areas Mark has also visited) and of course, the South, where they were once critical for supplying rural families with foodstuffs to get them through the winter. Such large forms are rarely in the repertoires of contemporary potters.

Mark continues a wide range of domestic utilitarian forms, many with slip decoration, but his work has changed in important ways since coming to North Carolina. The dense brown coatings of salt that I immediately admired in 1984 were developed here. Cardew dismissed salt glazing as "ignorant," and Todd Piker used it only sparingly to create a "light flashing"(Interview). Mark's models range from nineteenth-century Northern potters like Frederick Carpenter of Boston to the rich local salt glaze tradition, which continues unabated in the Seagrove-Jugtown area. In addition, Mark has developed a Southern alkaline glaze, concocting a blend derived from Burlon Craig and Lanier Meaders of Georgia. Also from the Catawba Valley, he now turns forms in swirl (using contrasting clay bodies) and decorates many pieces with melted glass runs, a technique that originated in the Seagle and Hartzog families in the early nineteenth century (Zug 394-6, 78-9).

Perhaps the only Southern influence Mark has actively resisted is the face vessel. Although he has "been offered hundreds of dollars to make a face jug, name my price," he has refused to make a single one. And in resisting this fad for what he terms "collectibles and curios and whimseys," he reaffirms the principles absorbed at Wenford Bridge—"the sort of pots that I like to make are ones that you

can use." This is the essence of traditional pottery, which builds on the past and serves genuine contemporary needs. Ultimately, Mark ascribes much of his success to the many knowledgeable North Carolinians who attend his quarterly kiln openings. I don't think I could sell the sort of pots I make in many other places than here. This place is like Japan. It's not as intense in its appreciation, but it's the only other place I know of"(Interview).

Charles G. Zug, III
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Works Cited

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Stuck in the Mud: Potting Within The North Carolina Folk Tradition

I am not Southern, nor am I folk, but the pots that I make and the way that I make them place me somewhere within the tradition of folk pottery in North Carolina.

When I first moved here in 1983, I had only a smattering of knowledge about the depth of the Southern folk pottery tradition, but it nonetheless felt as though I was coming home. Born into an industrial pottery family in England, it was only after I became a student of Michael Cardew that I became fascinated by the complexities of folk pottery from around the world. Upon moving to North Carolina, it was not long before I was drawn to examine in depth the nature of folk pots made in North Carolina. History and geography ooze powerfully from the land. Burying myself in this Tar Heel mud was, and is, to pay respect to all the potters who have gone before.

At their best, North Carolina's folk pots display a massive serenity stemming from great clarity and relaxed proficiency. They are summations of all the virtues inherent in traditional pottery, dignified and eloquent, vibrant and calm. At their worst, they display an unconcealed hurriedness that still manages to reveal a cursory deftness and direct purposefulness far removed from the prissy caution of more "elevated" ceramics. Handles are wiped on so vigorously as

Salt-glazed stoneware planter with roulette decoration, wood fired, 1992, Mark Hewitt. H 16" D 22"

to make flamboyant expressionism redundant, stones and twigs burst forth with uncontrived effortlessness.

Traditional pots, habitually lumped uniformly together, display a variety as consistent as that of humanity. To read these pots with sensitivity is to be taken into the lives and times of their makers. To live with a Daniel Seagle pot is to live with a man of majestic rural assurance; to live with an A. R. Cole is to live with a more complicated and colorful virtuoso.

Whether looking at Moravian earthenware, the salt glaze, or the alkaline glaze, at the heart of North Carolina folk pots is what I call intuitive classicism, or, alternatively, rural minimalism. Upon seeing a Seagle pot you know instinctively that it is good, that it has quality. The classicism comes not from the intellect, but from the deeper recesses of the heart, the hand and the earth itself. The minimalism comes from productive simplicity, from an economic system based on the notion of "reasonable efficiency" and from a reduction of extraneous movements that pares down form to its purest. These pots are Songs of the Earth.

The traditional pots of North Carolina have many of the same qualities as pots that I admire and have been in contact with from different parts of the world. Rather than looking for uniqueness and individuality, I am drawn to pots that are generic and universal. I like simple folk pots made in large quantities, using local materials that have been fired in wood kilns. This is by no means a formula for good pottery, but, for me, these elements are a necessary beginning. I see the same qualities in a Daniel Seagle jar as I do in a Korean kimchi jar or a West African water pot. Likewise, a Nicholas Fox jug has many qualitative associations with a Japanese Tamba jar or a bottle from La Borne in France. They are made without artifice, they are pots, not

statements. The pots that I make are a synthesis of all these folk traditions, so my place within the North Carolina tradition corresponds with the way that North Carolina's pots relate to folk pots from around the world. The context is expanded, but the place is the same.

In using many of the same shapes, materials and recipes as the old folk potters, I am able to splice together elements of technique, shape and decoration from different parts of the world to produce a hybrid style that is both individual and yet common. Musically speaking, it would be more World Beat than Bluegrass.

Traditions, in an age of individual expression, get too speedy a dismissal. If by tradition you mean a static, repetitive, stifling, conservative prison, then they certainly are not good. But if by tradition you mean a dynamic set of the highest possible skills, values and ideals in which an individual is allowed to flourish to the fullest of his or her creative potential, a potential no less than that of someone outside a tradition (for we are all constrained by the time and society in which we operate), then traditions are good. At its most restrictive, a tradition merely reproduces what has gone before. At its loosest, the dynamic essence of a tradition allows for continued and infinite creation and variation. How an individual responds to a tradition depends both on the individual and the tradition.

To work within a tradition is also about having connections with the other potters of that tradition. I have tremendous respect for the folk potters of North Carolina and have been greatly helped and encouraged by them. The late Dorothy and Walter Auman, Vernon Owens and his father Melvin, and Burlon Craig have provided support in terms of information, materials and equipment. But most importantly, to be with them and witness

their enthusiasm and commitment is to be inspired. I remember Dorothy telling how her father, C. C. Cole, would admonish his helpers to "Treat the clay as if you were going to eat it." I see Vernon moving clay on the wheel as easily as he breathes, and Burlon pedaling his treadle wheel in dignified protest against more modern, "easier" ways. These people are individuals producing individual pots within the loose confines of a rich and continuing tradition. They are good company.

And yet their pots, and mine, are produced within a context far different from the one which produced Daniel Seagle and his pots. No longer made for a rural, self-sufficient people, folk pots today are made to be seen, not merely used. Economic and social conditions in North Carolina allow for the making of any sort of pot, from functional to sculptural. But I sometimes stop to wonder what sort of pots Seagle would be making if he were alive today. I think it is possible, and certainly desirable, to make a mug that has the same quality, the same monumental spirit as a large Seagle jar. Just as a violinist is able to draw a bow across a string to play a single note that makes the soul cry, so too can a potter make a mug that raises the art of drinking to an act of passionate communication between the soul of the user and the soul of the maker.

Mark Hewitt
Pittsboro, North Carolina

One gallon casserole, thrown clay swirl, salt-glazed stoneware, wood fired, 1992, Mark Hewitt, H 11"

Mark Hewitt

1955, Born in Stoke-on-Trent, England.
Father and Grandfather were directors of Spode, Ltd.,
fine china manufacturers

Education

1977, B.A. in Geography,
University of Bristol, England

Professional Experience

1976-79, Apprenticed with Michael Cardew,
Wenford Bridge Pottery, Bodmin, England
1978-79, Studied traditional potteries in West Africa
1979-82, Apprenticed with Todd Piker,
Cornwall Bridge Pottery, Cornwall, Connecticut
1982, Studied large pot and kiln construction in
Taiwan, Japan and Korea
1983, Established W. M. Hewitt Pottery, Pittsboro, NC;
built 900 cu. foot wood-burning kiln

"Stoke Gets In Your Eye,"
salt-glazed stoneware planter with glass runs,
wood fired, 1991, Mark Hewitt. H 30".
Photography: Robin Alexander

Selected Recent Exhibitions

Surroundings Gallery, New York, NY 1982
North Carolina Museum of History, Raleigh, NC 1986
Rocky Mount Arts Center, Rocky Mount, NC 1987
Louisburg College, Louisburg, NC 1987
Wilson Arts Center, Wilson, NC 1988
Salem College, Winston-Salem, NC 1989
Green Hill Center for North Carolina Art, Greensboro, NC 1989
Lill Street Gallery, Chicago, IL 1990
University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City, IA 1991

Permanent Collections

Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC
North Carolina Museum of History, Raleigh, NC
North Carolina Arboretum, Raleigh, NC
North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC
Seagrove Museum of Folk Pottery, Seagrove, NC

Ongoing Production

Large garden planters and storage jars, from ten to thirty gallon capacity, and a full range of tableware; stoneware clays and glazes independently mined in the Pittsboro area; principal glazes, the traditional Southern alkaline glaze and salt glaze

Publication design: Jon Jicha
Exhibition curator: Joan Byrd

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