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Preface

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PREFACE

Not long ago, our friend, Jay E. Cantor, a student of 19th century things, who is now associated with Christies in New York City, attended a symposium of the American Studies Association, where he heard Dr. Henry H. Glassie make the statement that the Shakers had been invented by Edward Deming Andrews.

"If that is so," he said to the folklorist, "then Henry Glassie invented 'The Folk.'"

"The Folk," if not invented by anyone, have become, at least, a force to be reckoned with. The mere placement of "folk" before a word like "pottery," bestows upon the latter an importance and aura of respectability unknown a decade ago when museum curators were apt to characterize American ceramics as "one of the minor decorative arts."

On the crest of the wave of enthusiasm following the publication of several books on the subject and the upward spiralling of prices at auction, "a rare opportunity to researchers and collectors of folk pottery" to attend a conference on American redware and stoneware at the Rochester Museum and Science Center, was offered in October 1977, chiefly due to the efforts of George R. Hamell, Associate Curator of Anthropology, at that institution.

The pre-conference brochure added: "Attempts will be made to identify and define regional pottery making traditions in Eastern North America; to identify their underlying Old World origins; to demonstrate indirect or direct relationships between some of these traditions in Eastern North America; and to attempt to identify distinctly 'American' characteristics of form, glaze, decoration or techniques of manufacture."

Had the impossible dream been realized we would be presenting here the definitive work on the subject instead of a group of papers. Yet the Rochester conference was a meaningful first step toward attaining the outlined goals and was most useful, perhaps, because it gave anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, folklorists, curators, collectors, and antique dealers the chance to talk about American redware and stoneware, face-to-face for the first time.

Donald A. Winer, Curator of the Pennsylvania Collection of Fine Arts, William Penn Museum, Harrisburg, observed, "Just 25, even 20 years ago, I wouldn't have believed such a conference possible. Why there are people here actually interested in Southern pottery. When I lived in Alabama and went out looking for country pottery, I was told nice people didn't talk about things like that, and that from the president of my museum board."

It is unlikely we shall encounter again in the same lecture hall, the calibre of experts such as Donald Blake Webster of the Royal Ontario Museum; Bradford L. Rauschenberg of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts; Norman Barka, a archaeologist from Williamsburg; Georgeanna H. Greer, the kiln scholar from Texas; and John A. Burrison, the folklorist, who has done so much to rescue Georgia pottery from oblivion. Most of the speakers were the doers and discoverers working in the field today.

In the speeches themselves, a recurring complaint was the lack of technical information available on how early American pottery was made—the characteristics of clays, the components of glaze, etc.

During the question and answer period, James R. Mitchell, who had been "boss potter" of a bone china manufactory at the short-lived Carborundum Museum of Ceramics, spoke of the numerous difficulties encountered by his men in attempting to recreate 19th century wares.

Afterwards, there was a lively argument as to whether country redware potters bought lead for their glazes from drygoods merchants who stocked it as a component of paint, smelted it from raw ore, or shaved it from discarded household implements such as sash weights or sinkers. As no one could produce documentary evidence in support of any of these positions, the matter was left unresolved.

By means of the new interdisciplinary approach, we may some day learn if any or all of these views are valid. We may learn what effect variations in kiln structure, as described by Georgeanna Greer, might have on the pots being burned inside; what would happen if a kiln of German design were used to fire English-style ware; and why two

kilns on adjacent lots were both used by the Yorktown pottery for making lead- and salt-glazed ware, rather than than one for each purpose.

That the "team" effort can be successful is evident from the writings of Norman Barka about the Yorktown project. The paper he delivered at the Rochester conference is published here and contains much technical information about potting as well as some good definitions, including the proper differentiation between "throwing" and "turning."

A decade or so ago, the origin of an unmarked pot was attributed on the basis of decoration, color or glaze, or where it was found. Today, knowing that itinerant cobalt decorators worked for a number of potteries, that trade routes were far flung, and that similar forms were made within a wide region)such as the New Jersey/New York/Long Island area—we are no longer so confident.

It was announced at the conference that an attempt had been made to type the fingerprints found in the glazed ware of an upstate New York pottery, but that the results had been inconclusive.

So, having considered the totality of a pot—the set of its handles, the bottom and interior finish, the glaze, body, decoration and shape—we should perhaps be willing to settle for regional identification alone and not have to keep asking, "Who made it?"

In addition to the regional reports on American redware and stoneware at the conference, there were two lectures offering an overview of the subject the first, concerning early traditional American ceramics by Susan H. Myers, Curator of the American Ceramic Study Center at the Smithsonian Institution; and the second, on the development of the American pottery and porcelain industries, by James R. Mitchell, Director of the William Penn Memorial Museum.

The latter was proclaimed to be the only speech that would deal with "industrial" wares as distinct from "folk" pottery. But every speaker had his or her own application of the word "folk," which frequently violated the territory of "industrial" pottery. It was used to describe the molded sewer tile animals of Michigan, cobalt decorations on salt-glazed stoneware, and the mass-produced crocks of Ohio, Illinois, and Canada.

To "strict interpreters" of "folk" pottery, any molded, mechanically-aided or assembly line pieces should neither be seen nor heard of. Yet who would dispute that a John Bell redware lion is the quintessence of American folk pottery, even though all four known were cast in a mold, their "coleslaw" manes pressed through a burlap mesh, only touches of manganese (or iron oxide) were daubed on, and their toenails scored, by hand.

Potters were rarely artists and less commonly decorators. Few had the genius or whimsey of the Kirkpatricks of Anna, Illinois, or George Ohr of Biloxi, Mississippi—and even they made use of molds, dies, coggle wheels, and whatever energy-saving device they had at hand, often combining several methods of manufacture in a single product, and freely adopting the designs of others, as often as inventing them.

No 19th century potter would have understood the distinctions devised by modern connoisseurs of his craft, nor comprehend why some of his wares should be elevated and spotlit, while others be ignored.

Further, considering that the best decorations on stoneware may have been the work of "professional" artists, rather than potters, the whole argument self-destructs.

John Burrison defined it best, after all, when he said (*The Meaders Family of Mossy Creek,* 1976:3) that in folk pottery, ". . . the production techniques, forms and glazes were handed down from one generation of potters to the next, maintaining a continuity of tradition relatively unresponsive to change. . . . The pottery designs . . . determined largely by function, were slowly refined as they were transmitted through the generations, becoming the shared property of families, communities, even regions of potters."

The Rochester conference went beyond the confines of any one category of American ceramics, affording a multi-faceted, interdisciplinary view of the regional pottery of the Northeast.

Its healthy eclecticism contributed, no doubt, to its unqualified success.

As this first volume of papers goes to press, we look forward to the publication of more of the fine presentations from the Rochester conference.

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