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Conference Report: African Impact on the Material Culture of the Americas

Submitted by John P. McCarthy, IMA Consulting, Inc.

On May 30 through June 2, 1996 the Diggs Gallery at Winston-Salem State University, Old Salem, and the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts jointly sponsored an interdisciplinary conference, African Impact on the Material Culture of the Americas, held at Winston-Salem State University. The conference included 28 paper presentations organized into eight panels, a discussion panel, field trips, and a museum exhibit opening, all focused on the effects of African culture on material culture in the New World. While not strictly focused on African-American archaeological research, the conference included several presentations by archaeologists, and most of the presentations were of interest to anyone concerned with the material world of African America. Conference attendees included professional archaeologists, ethnographers, folklorists, historians, curators, art historians, and educators and a large number of interested lay people from the area.

The conference opened on the afternoon of May 30th with a bus tour of African-American sites in Winston-Salem led by architectural historian Langdon Oppermann. "Shot gun" houses and African-American churches were featured. It was evident that "urban renewal" programs and "code enforcement" problems with substandard plumbing and electrical systems were ongoing issues affecting architectural preservation in the Winston-Salem area, despite the area's successful preservation of its early German-American history at Old Salem and other nearby sites.

The paper presentations started on Thursday evening and continued through Saturday afternoon. The sessions were entitled: Baskets, Gourds, and Pottery: African Crafts in the Material Culture of British Colonial America, Research Evaluation and Reconsiderations, Impact and Contact: Archaeological Evidence of African Cultural Presence in North America and the Caribbean, Belief Systems: Religion and Ritual, The Diaspora and Cultural Impact in the Southeastern United States, Burial and Funerary Practices, Textiles and Dress, and Images and Symbolism. The introductory panel, Baskets, . . . provided an overview of the field of African-American material culture studies that was a fitting introduction to and a context for the more specialized papers that followed over the next two days.

Archaeology was very well-represented at the conference. The seven papers presented by archaeologists included: Pots at the Crossroads: Research at the Crossroads, Leland Ferguson, Tobacco Pipemaking in the 17th Century Chesapeake: African Inspirations in a New World Art and Artifact, Matthew C. Emerson, Poplar Forest's Schist Smoking Pipes, Hannah B. Canel, Stringing it all together: Beads as Cultural Indicators in the Archaeological Record, Cheryl J. LaRoche, The Material Culture of African-American Healing, Ywonne D. Edwards, An African-Type Medicine Man and His Grave Goods: A Burial from a Plantation Slave Cemetery in Barbados, West Indies, Jerome S. Handler, and my own African-Influenced Burial Practices in the Antebellum North: Material Evidence of African Identity at the Cemeteries of the First African Baptist Church, Philadelphia, John P. McCarthy.

The paper sessions were followed by an open and wide-ranging discussion moderated by John Michael Vlach and Anthony Parent. One theme that emerged was the need to disseminate the results of research to descendent communities, and especially to youth.

In addition, the opening of the exhibit *Forget-Me-Not: The Art and Mystery of Memory Jugs* on Friday evening at the Diggs Gallery (featuring over 50 decorated jugs) and a closing barbecue supper provided lots of time for informal discussion and visiting with colleagues. A field trip to Milton North Carolina took place on Sunday, but my travel arrangements did not allow me to take part.

Eighteen years have passed since the 1978 publication of John Michael Vlach's path-breaking *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*, widely known in the field of African-American cultural studies as the "slim red book". In the intervening years, the study of African culture in North America, and of material culture in particular, has broadened and matured considerably. While I learned little that I felt was really "new" during the conference, it was very exciting to see such a wide range of material presented and discussed in a open, interdisciplinary setting. The conference, in fact, had something of a festive atmosphere that Matt Emerson characterized as "celebratory" during one of our several conversations during the conference. The conference was, in fact, an opportunity to review past achievements and consider future directions for research and education, and in so doing, it celebrated a real "coming of age" and legitimization of the study of African culture in America.

For more detailed information on the conference, the possible publication of the papers, and how to order the catalog of the memory jug exhibit, contact Ms. Sally Gant, Director of Education, Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, P. O. Box 10310, Winston-Salem, NC, 27108, (910) 721 -7360.

References Cited

Vlach, John Michael
1978 *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.