

# THE LIVING TRADITION

# *The Living Tradition*

NORTH CAROLINA POTTERS SPEAK

*Edited by* DENNY HUBBARD MECHAM

*Interviews by* MICHELLE FRANCIS

*&* CHARLES ZUG III

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THE NORTH CAROLINA POTTERY CENTER opened ten years ago in 1998, the culmination of more than twenty years of planning by a coalition of supporters from across the state. The mission to promote and protect North Carolina's unique pottery-making history, which guided NCPCC's founding, also guides the Center's recent documentation project: *The Living Tradition: North Carolina Potters in the Twenty-First Century*. This book, *The Living Tradition: North Carolina Potters Speak*, results as a portion of that project. Individually, each potter's story is captivating. Collectively, the individual histories weave their way into the pottery world's larger narrative, intertwining time, place, and culture.

Funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the project goals were threefold. The first goal was to document the lives of twenty potters chosen for significant contributions to their craft. This documentation includes an oral history with transcriptions and a photographic record to be housed at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill's University Libraries. Selected excerpts and images are available in this book. The second goal was to create a directory of North Carolina potters and clay artists beginning with a baseline of three hundred and fifty potters. The directory is now online. The third goal was to establish a process to continue documenting North Carolina potters beyond the life of the grant. Full archival information forms are available online or by landmail. Potters not yet in the directory may submit their contact information at any time for inclusion.

In 2005 an independent panel of ten scholars, curators, and potters convened to select the first artists from twenty studios for full documentation. The panel immediately recognized the challenge of choosing so few from North Carolina's extraordinarily large community of significant potters, but was pleased that a commitment to further documentation was in place. The panel also developed the form to be used for archival and directory use.

I am very grateful to those who carried this project to a successful conclusion. The panel members were unfailingly collegial in the decision-making process. We were very fortunate to have two seasoned interviewers, Michelle Francis and Dr. Charles Zug, both veterans of significant documentation projects. Rob Amberg's photographs carry us effortlessly into the time and place of each potter. Finally, a special word of thanks to the book designer and interview editor, Nathan Moehlmann, for his skill and guidance.

Though we gather information for posterity, the stories shared and the names that we compile today also serve us well in the present. They remind us of the richness of a creative life and the struggle all share to find one's way.

Denny Mecham, Executive Director  
North Carolina Pottery Center

*Denny Hubbard Mecham became Executive Director of the North Carolina Pottery Center in 2004. She studied at Alfred State College of Ceramics before accepting a teaching fellowship at Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan, where she completed her MA in ceramics. She later completed a MS in studio art at the College of New Rochelle, New Rochelle, New York. She was a college teacher and studio potter from 1970 to 1994, before entering the museum field.*

MICHELLE A. FRANCIS *Interviewer*

AS AN ARCHIVIST, I have spent the past thirty or so years helping to collect, preserve, and make accessible the photographs, manuscripts, records, and artifacts that tell the stories of individuals and organizations in North Carolina. In a world increasingly filled with reality TV, text messaging, and electronic fantasy games, it is even more important to document the lives of real people. Their stories become touchstones for us as we seek to understand and live in the complexity of the twenty-first century.

Projects such as *The Living Tradition: North Carolina Potters in the Twenty-First Century* are critical because they document the lives of artists. Art is one of the constants found in all cultures throughout the centuries of humankind on this planet. It is an important unifying thread that connects us to one another. The documentation of North Carolina's contemporary potters and clay artists gives us an important understanding of those individuals and the evolution of their work as artists; but, even more importantly, their stories act as a portal into the creative process that informs, guides, and sustains their life and art. There is a real hunger in today's secular culture to connect with something that can bring meaning into our lives. The creative process is not about religion, but it is about spirit, it is about the work of the soul. The more we can learn about and experience this process for ourselves the better equipped we become to incorporate it into our own lives and to begin to effect positive change in the world around us.

There is always a bit of anxiety when beginning an oral interview. One never knows if the person being interviewed will open up and talk beyond the parameters of the set questions. Without exception, the potters and clay artists I interviewed for *The Living Tradition* project spoke willingly about their work, what inspires them, what working with clay has meant to them, and what they feel it offers others – artist and non-artist alike.

Their art varied immensely, as you would expect. I was struck, though, by how similarly grounded in their work each one was. They shared a common passion and enthusiasm for working in clay and a deeply felt commitment to pass on their knowledge to others wanting to work in the medium. Together, as a community, they support and celebrate their work and their life accomplishments. I also sensed a shared feeling of gratitude that they have been able to spend their life and make their living working with a material and a process that brings them so much personal satisfaction.

In my interview with Paulus Berensohn, he speaks about some of the geochemical mysteries of clay. Amazing to learn is the fact that if you hit a lump of clay with a hammer it gives off ultraviolet light for a month. I'm not a potter; but I have worked in clay, and I'll never wedge another lump without



*Michelle Francis has worked as an archivist since 1974. She received an MA in archival management/public history from North Carolina State University in 1987. Among her many credits, Michelle has been the archivist consultant for the Penland School of Crafts since 1996 and is active in the Society of North Carolina Archivists. Michelle conducted oral interviews with traditional potters in Seagrove, North Carolina, from 1983 to 1985, including Walter and Dorothy Auman, Charlie and Grady Craven, Waymon Cole, Nell Cole Graves, Harwood Graves, Jack Kiser, Joe Owen, Melvin Owens, Brian "Duck" and Bessie Craven Teague, and James Teague.*

thinking about and sensing the energy it is sending out. Is it any wonder, then, why Paulus and countless others are drawn to the touch of wet clay beneath their fingers? Or why it is impossible to wrap one's hands around a fired pot and not wonder why it is that you just have to buy this one even though you have dozens more at home?

The Living Tradition project makes it possible for us to know and understand the legacy of those who work in clay in North Carolina. It has been an honor for me to be a part of this project. I hope those who read the interviews of these amazing and wonderful clay artists will be as inspired and grateful for their contributions to the craft as I have been in listening to their stories.

CHARLES "TERRY" ZUG *Interviewer*

I'VE BEEN OUT TALKING with North Carolina potters for thirty-five years, a "job" that I've always relished (well, except for the tedious process of transcribing the tape recordings). In my mind's eye, I can still see these interviews – sitting with Enoch Reinhardt in the kitchen of his big farmhouse, watching Burlon Craig turn five-gallon churns while he talked away, or relaxing with Ben Owen on the front porch of his house. But time has a way of passing so quickly, and these old masters are now all gone. Fortunately, their knowledge and skills live on in words and photographs, and I now recognize how easily all that could have been lost.

Thus, I was very pleased when Denny Mecham asked me to help prepare a grant proposal to the IMLS to record the current generation of potters. It's not that there isn't a lot written about North Carolina pottery these days – it seems like a new book appears about every year – but most of the recent work focuses on pots and collecting rather than the potters themselves. They contain many stunning photographs and often careful analyses of individual pieces but little exploration of the aspirations and attitudes of the men and women who made them. And most of these works are oriented toward the past rather than the achievements of potters who are now in their prime. We can't afford to lose their voices.

In doing the interviews for this project with eleven potters from Wilmington to Asheville, I continue to be impressed at how articulate potters are in explaining what they're doing. Interviewing (and transcribing) involves a lot of work and also demands considerable skills in diplomacy, but I often wonder why more authors don't do it. Granted, memory can be fickle and even unreliable at times, but facts are easy to check, and while individuals may exaggerate, they rarely try to deceive. The great virtue of such oral histories is that they give an insider's view – the very terminology that potters use to organize their work; the issues that they think deserve emphasis; the emotions and values that shape their world.

Listening to the potter's voices, I was struck by the varied roads they have traveled to make the decision to work in clay. Some were almost literally born in pottery shops; others worked through other art forms and came to ceramics later in life. Their educations were sometimes formal, sometimes highly



*Dr. Charles "Terry" Zug III began his distinguished career as a folklorist in 1968, joining the faculty at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill after receiving his PhD from the University of Pennsylvania in folklore and folklife. Though his list of publications, presentations, awards, and honors is extensive, he may be best known for *Turners and Burners: The Folk Potters of North Carolina*, published in 1986. Earlier works include *North Carolina Folk Artists* and *The Traditional Pottery of North Carolina*. Terry received the *Order of the Long Leaf Pine* in 2000, the highest civilian honor awarded by the State of North Carolina, and retired from teaching in 2001.*

informal and unstructured, but all found important mentors to guide them and provide a critical sense of direction. I was also struck by the spirit of harmony and cooperation among North Carolina potters. I heard numerous stories about the generosity and assistance of others who helped in finding proper clays, formulating glazes, or building kilns. Above all, I was impressed with how seriously our potters approach their work, the great passion and energy and thought they bring to it. And again and again, I was told how important it was to live and work in North Carolina, where a long and distinguished tradition underpins the present, and a very knowledgeable, energetic clientele supports the future.

ROB AMBERG *Photographer*

I BEGAN THIS PROJECT knowing little about potters and their ways. I had photographed numerous clay workers over the years; and I had bought pottery, been to many pottery exhibits, and knew something of North Carolina's pottery traditions. I had acquaintances who were potters and for a time had a sister-in-law who doubled as a potter. But my experience was mostly pedestrian and not unlike that of any curious cultural tourist.

My earliest discussions with Denny Mecham about this project were about time and place. Photography is largely about time – stopping time in one-sixtieth of a second increments, historical time, movement through time – and as a photographer I've always believed the best pictures happen when one is simply willing to spend time, hang out, experience the day-to-day with whomever you are photographing. The mundane activities often reward the observer with universal truths. And I've always been interested in people's life stories – how someone got from there to here. And more often than not, that becomes a discussion of place. How they came to this place or that. The role of place in their work and daily life. The relationship between a particular place and a particular time.

I realized when I arrived at Cole Pottery that I had surely been by it before. As a child in the 1950s, my family vacationed in Florida and would travel down U.S. 1 from Washington DC, passing, and maybe stopping by, the pottery along the way. Neolia would have been in her thirties then (she's eighty-three now,) and the pottery had been up and running for eight generations already. I sense it hasn't changed much. Neolia was probably working the same twelve-hour days, six-day weeks, which she does today, sustaining herself on a diet of nabs, soft drinks, and cigarettes.

Caroleen Sanders received permission from the Catawba Tribal Council for me to accompany her to the community's traditional clay site, an ordinary looking mound in the Catawba River floodplain that the Catawba have been utilizing for the better part of four centuries. It was a hot and humid day, and community elders and other clay workers joined us on the excursion. The clay itself was gray, and incredibly plastic, and didn't easily yield to the attempts to dislodge it. Ninety-two year old Evelyn George remarked that she remembered her first trip to dig clay from that same site when she was seven years old.



*Rob Amberg has been a freelance photographer from 1988 to the present, specializing in social-issue work for non-profit and editorial clients. He has an extensive record of exhibitions and publications. In 2004 and 2006 he was visiting instructor at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. His many awards include the 2002 Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award for Sodom and Laurel Album; a National Endowment for the Humanities Scholars Fellowship in 2002; the Dorothea Lange/Paul Taylor Prize, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University, 1998; and a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in photography in 1990.*

Ben Owen, Vernon Owens, and Charlie Brown also have clay in their genes, and history plays a role with Hal and Eleanor Pugh, who live and work at what was once the site of an eighteenth-century pottery. Kim Ellington continues and expands on the Catawba Valley pottery tradition.

While linked to tradition, there was also complete individuality of expression: Jane Peiser's storytelling, Michael Sherrill's combinations of metal and clay; the graceful sculptures of Jen Bireline; Norm Schulman's return to an almost pre-history form; Hiroshi Sueyoshi's delicate lines that speak of his native Japan; and Tom Spleth's elegant porcelain cups, one of which reminds me every morning that I'm a "god damn worthless son of a bitch." The only constant was the clay; everything else was an expression of place, time, and maker.

There were consistencies though. I suspect it comes from spending so much time alone, although one person suggested potters are just friendly people: regardless of the reason, potters love to talk and visit. I received great, yet sobering, parenting advice from Norm and Gloria. Nick Joerling and I discovered we both graduated from the University of Dayton just two years apart, which allowed for a lengthy discussion of southern Ohio in the late 1960s. Paulus and I explored our mutual conscientious objector claims and the role that stance has played in our lives. A planned picnic with Will and Douglass turned into a late spring snowstorm that left us scrambling to get down from their 3,800-foot perch overlooking Roan Mountain.

The touch of the clay was important to everyone, but it wasn't limited to that. Rather, everyone had a relationship with the material earth itself and elements like stone, dirt, plants, and gardens played no lesser roles in their lives – lemon tomatoes in Tom Suomalainen's garden that were faithfully guarded by his clay egrets; the deep woods surrounding Cynthia Bringle's studio; the granite boulders in MaryLou Higgins's yard that stood like older brothers to her feminine forms and faces; a salad from Mark Hewitt's garden, served in his bowl, eaten from his plate.

I now know the difference between an *anagama* kiln and a groundhog kiln. And I know more about types of clay, glaze, and slip. The details remain a mystery, and so, in a technical sense, I still know nothing of potters. But I did learn something of their ways.

NATHAN MOEHLMANN *Interview Editor & Book Designer*

MUCH CREDIT IS DUE Melanie Miller, Jim White, and Terry Zug for their transcriptions of the lengthy oral interviews and Wayne Shiver for his proofreading the book. Editing the interviews was a subtractive process in favor of a condensed form suitable for the book's length and the reader's enjoyment. What remains is the essence, as best I could interpret it, the verbatim essence: nothing has been rewritten, excepting punctuation and a rare, distracting grammatical use. The ample margins were intended to accommodate passages of interest that couldn't smoothly remain in the interviews proper. Not strictly captions, these passages reflect and refract with varying intensity both the photographs and the interviews, continuing to allow the artists their own words.

THE QUESTIONS MOST OFTEN ASKED by visitors to the North Carolina Pottery Center are "Why North Carolina?" and "Why Seagrove?" referring to the diversity and quality of pottery, the ever increasing number of potters, and the growing international reputation of the region as a pottery mecca. The answer is challenging but instructive in its complexity. North Carolina pottery today is the result of a fascinating hybrid of history, technology, and cultural and economic evolution. Although this history informs the visitor, it is the creative work of the individual North Carolina artists that truly engages them. Each potter has a unique story to tell through his or her work and words. The stories in the following pages give insight into the personal journey of twenty-three North Carolina potters set within the context of broader history and cultural influences. This volume is not a review of the artists' exhibitions, collections, or publications, but rather an exploration of how they came to be artists and of the influences that shaped their lives and art choices.

The earliest evidence of pottery-making in North America was found on the Carolina coast with the discovery of unglazed earthenware sherds dated approximately 4,500 years ago. The technique of coil-built, burnished, pit-fired earthenware pottery, evidenced by these remnants, survived the European settlement and continues today within North Carolina's Native American communities. Following European settlement, potters in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produced wares needed by a preindustrial, predominately agrarian society. From the 1750s through the 1820s, North Carolina potters of English and German descent were producing lead-glazed, slip-decorated earthenware, predominately in the Piedmont. Production of lead-glazed earthenware dominated pottery-making until the 1820s when, with the discovery of lead's toxicity, potters adopted stoneware production which dominated until the 1920s. The pieces were, for the most part, salt glazed in the Piedmont and alkaline glazed in western North Carolina, a technique which migrated north from South Carolina potteries.

By the mid 1800s, the Industrial Revolution was gathering momentum, particularly in the Northeast and Midwest. Large-scale handcrafted pottery production in those regions was rapidly replaced by industrial processes of press molds and casting. However, in North Carolina, though some mills were being built by the late 1800s, an agrarian economy continued to dominate, and potters in more isolated rural areas such as Randolph and Moore Counties continued to produce their wares by traditional methods, using both earthenware and stoneware clays. But by the early 1900s, prohibition and the influence of new technologies, including tinned food and refrigeration, were adversely affecting the traditional potters' market even in North Carolina.

The Industrial Revolution and the resulting loss of handcrafting traditions,

*Nathan Moehlmann is founder of Goosepen Studio & Press, which publishes books under its own imprint and for cultural institutions. He graduated from the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill and Wake Forest University with a BA and MA, respectively, in English literature.*



# PAULUS BERENSOHN

I

**P**aulus Berensohn (1933–), at seventy-five, continues to inspire people to live a creative life and to share his own inspirations with yet another generation. In his classic text *Finding One's Way With Clay: Pinched Pottery and The Color of Clay*, published in 1972 and re-issued in 1997, the humble pinch pot becomes a vessel through which the individual is challenged to integrate the discipline of pottery-making with intuition and sense of discovery. Paulus invites the reader to use the clay pot as a vehicle for imagination and craftsmanship with a transpersonal aesthetic. In 1998 he was elected an Honorary Fellow of the American Craft Council.

His influence reaches far beyond the pages of his book through his life's work as philosopher, weaver, book-maker, journal keeper, dancer, potter, teacher, and mentor. Years ago he became involved in deep ecology. Based on the ideas of Arne Naess, this ecocentric movement actively encourages the understanding that society must develop an ethic that respects nature and the inherent worth of all other beings of all species. With a belief in a reciprocal and participatory life with a more than human world, Paulus often "tithes" back to the earth, ceremonially burying unfired bowls to be reclaimed by the land.

A native of New York City, Paulus grew up under the influence of the progressive-education movement and its emphasis on the importance of experiential learning. With his early love of dance, Paulus performed professionally with modern dance companies and on Broadway. In the mid 1950s he met a remarkable circle of avant-garde artists, many of whom were members

of the vibrant intellectual and artistic community of Black Mountain College. His friendships with Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, and John Cage led to an introduction to potter Karen Karnes, an important voice in the resurgence of studio art. On a visit to Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine, he began a lifelong friendship with M. C. (Mary Caroline) Richards, author of the pivotal book *Centering*.

Founding Director of the Wallingford Potters Guild, Paulus says he has spent forty years "hanging out at Penland and Haystack." *Finding One's Way With Clay* is dedicated to Bill Brown, Director of the Penland School of Crafts, "because of what he has built at Penland and for his real support, encouragement, and friendship," and to Martha Graham, "the first person who demonstrated to me the essential importance and significance of revealing the innerness of being in our work."

Today he continues to challenge himself and those around him to seek receptive paths to personal truth and transpersonal communication. In 2007 he presented workshops and a lecture sponsored by the Harvard University Dance and Ceramic Centers using clay, stories, poems, movement, and healing images to engage the audience. At the Xiem Clay Center in Pasadena, California, and other places, he offered the talk "Clay: The Ecstatic Skin of the Body of the Earth" in which he spoke of the urgency for artists to address an earth in jeopardy and in need of our gratitude, our praise, and our caring. After forty years, Paulus is still sharing his vision of a healing participatory consciousness with life through the arts.

**"WHAT I'VE LEARNT FROM CLAY  
IS TO IDENTIFY WITH ITS LIFE,  
RATHER THAN WHAT I CAN MAKE OUT OF IT."**



INTERVIEW  
FEBRUARY 20, 2007,  
AT PAULUS'S HOME,  
PENLAND, NC

**MICHELLE FRANCIS:** The primary reason, of many other good reasons, why we asked you to be a participant in this project is because you have approached clay differently than most clay artists and potters, and you've shared that perspective with people.

**PAULUS BERENSOHN:** Yes.

**MF:** And I think that's really –

**PB:** I've only begun. *[laughs]*

**MF:** You've only begun. You're continuing to share.

**PB:** Oh, yes. Well, I'm learning more and more about the life of clay.

**MF:** How did you come to clay to begin with? I know that you started out as a dancer.

**PB:** Yes, that's a long story. Where shall I start with it?

**MF:** Wherever you want.

**PB:** When I was four and a half years old, I overheard a friend of my mother's – my mother was complaining that I was asking to study dance. My mother's friend said to her, "But, Edith, to dance is to spring from the hand of God." And that was my first art lesson. It was like a Zen koan, and it still operates in my life. And then I did eventually become a dancer, and one night I was in a Broadway musical dancing, a very serious one, and we had just finished a very energetic dance, and I had a few moments to rest, you know, to stay in character, but to rest. And I heard a voice from the other part of the stage, saying, "Well, this is dancing on a stage, Paulus, but what is it to dance in life?" That was a staggering

question. I didn't know where it came from. But that alerted me. And two weeks later, after a rehearsal with Merce Cunningham, he drove us to the Gate Hill Community, which was a community founded by ex-Black Mountain College teachers – John Cage, Merce Cunningham, M. C. Richards, Karen Karnes, Stan VanDerBeek – amazing people. And once a year, they gave a picnic for the New York art community. We got there early, and I walked around, and I discovered the pottery studio. And Karen Karnes was working on the wheel, and I stood outside the window, in back of her, and watched her throwing. She sat on her wooden wheel like a queen, with a long back. And she threw with the best use I've ever seen a potter – when she brought up the column of clay, her shoulders didn't go up, she didn't get small, which alas most potters do. She just lifted the clay, and it was like on her breath. But what really knocked me out is that she then reached for a sponge in the slop bucket, and lifted it, without taking her eye off the profile of the clay, and then brought the water to the clay. Well, that gesture, I said, "I want to learn that dance." And so I told that to a couple of friends. I said, "I would like to study with Karen Karnes." And they said, "Well, she doesn't teach beginners, but her shopmate, M. C. Richards, is teaching at Haystack Mountain School this summer.

**MF:** When was that?

**PB:** Oh, that was in the late '50s – yes, maybe '58. Am I thinking right? No, it was earlier. I'm very bad on dates, but it was long ago. *[laughs]* And I got a sabbatical from the musical, which was very unusual. And I went to Haystack for three weeks, thinking I would go three weeks. And I had met M. C. Richards. She occasionally would come to Merce Cunningham's studio, after the advanced class late in the afternoon, to meet him to go to dinner together. And I thought she was Greta Garbo, because M. C. was a profoundly beautiful woman, and she wore, in those days, big hats and pants, which women didn't. But at that picnic, when we were leaving, she put her nose in the car and said, "I'm M. C. Who are you?" And I said, "My name is Paulus." But then several of our mutual friends – Merce and Remy Charlie – told M. C. that I was coming to her workshop at Haystack. And it was the first summer that Haystack was at their current, extraordinary – I don't want to call it campus or vehicle. It's very magical. It's a very magical place. When I arrived there, it's like coming to Penland. The first time

you think you're going to the end of the world. It was just at dinner time, and M. C. had saved a place for me, and we started to talk, and we became each other's best friend instantly. And the two telling relationships I have to clay happened on the first day. M. C. started the class with a ten-minute talk about centering. She started to talk about the image of centering clay, and it was fantastic. But at one point, she looked up at me, and she said, "It's not a matter of having taste, Paulus, but of having the capacity to taste what is present, to behold." Now that was a revelation to me, because I was born and grew up in New York City on the edges of the art community. I have two brothers who are artists – my older brother was a child prodigy cellist – and they were always saying to me, "You could never be an artist. You have no taste."

**MF:** Oh.

**PB:** And I thought taste was something that you had to make up, or develop, whereas what this woman was saying to me, was, to taste is to behold, is to look, is to let in. Is to let in. Well, that was – again, like the first Zen, it's been a koan for me. That night, in response to a question that Fran asked – they were having a quick conversation, Fran and M. C. – and in response to a question to her, she said, "Well, Fran, it's not just pots we're making. It's a life we're creating." And I heard that as "Your life that you're creating," but in the forty years subsequently, in my life with M. C., it was life that she was talking about, the collective life, that there was something about the craft arts that was larger than object. Now that bug in my ear – I didn't know what she was talking about at the time – very, very much affected the way I have worked with clay and with weaving and with drawing and with making books and with poetry and with stitchery and all the crafts that I have inquiry into.

Anyway, so those two things that she said to me were almost enough to get me going. And I had also, because I followed my child prodigy brother into the same school, all the teachers – when he was in kindergarten, my mother took him to a matinee of the New York Philharmonic, and he came back the next day and on the blackboards filled the whole room with every single musician, with every instrument. And my mother was called to school. They said, "Your son is an artistic genius." But he objected and said, no, it's the music that he wanted, so they started him on viola da gamba. But when I came to school, that had been lacquered on the board, so every teacher –



**MF:** Oh, no!

**PB:** Well, my parents thought, well, maybe we should send him to another school. So for two years, because of a neighbor, they sent me to a school called the City in the Country School in Greenwich Village on West Twelfth Street. Very much under the influence of John Dewey, who was a philosopher who I still – you know, his was learning by doing and hands on.

It was a fabulous school. They worked on the core curriculum, so each grade had an activity. The second



## KIM ELLINGTON

**G**rowing up in Hickory, North Carolina, Kim Ellington (1954–) remembers making his first rough pot out of creek bed clay. More than forty years later, he still works with the clays found near Hickory, pounding rock and clay into a powder with a hammer mill, processing in a mixer, and using the pug mill to prepare it for throwing. Mentored by Burlon Craig in the Catawba Valley traditions, Kim immersed himself in learning the craft that produced the great historical pieces stamped with names such as Seagle, Lefevers, Ritchie, and Reinhardt. As a contemporary potter, he works within the continuum of tradition, but is not bound by it.

Kim left home as a teenager and completed a tour of duty with the United States Army. In 1978 he enrolled in the Professional Crafts Program at Haywood Community College in Clyde, North Carolina. Following a two-year program focused on studio art, he settled in Hickory, rented his first shop in the downtown area, and began to make functional ware. Early studio production was supplemented with slip cast lamp bases for Hickory's furniture market. The furniture industry's waste wood also provided the free fuel for his first small wood-fired kiln.

Irene Reinhardt Gates, daughter of Enoch Reinhardt, was the first person to talk with Kim about Burlon Craig and the "old ways." Visitors to his shop often brought in historical pottery, further introducing him to Catawba Valley traditions. Kim was intrigued by the work but was still without a frame of reference. He says he was

overwhelmed on his first visit to Burlon's, unaware until then that such a tradition still existed. Burlon began sharing his knowledge with Kim, teaching him the pre-industrial complexities of stoking the kiln, firing without benefit of modern pyrometric cones, identifying good native clays, making alkaline glazes, and improving his throwing skills. Kim felt himself drawn to the "timeless, intuitive, and self-reliant methods of the Catawba Valley."

As Kim's interest in the Catawba Valley tradition continued to grow, Dr. Robert Hart offered him the opportunity to construct an authentic groundhog kiln at Hart Square. Bob Hart had begun his rescue and restoration of log structures in 1978, now the largest collection of original log buildings in the United States. Kim fired the Hart Square kiln three to four times a year from 1988 to 1998. He completed the transition from studio to Catawba Valley style work, and in 1999 built his current kiln at his home in Vale. A modification of the groundhog, the twenty-six foot structure has side stoking holes and is tapered at the back to fit the chimney.

Burlon Craig, who passed away in 2002, is credited with reviving a pottery tradition many thought lost. During his lifetime, Burlon had doubts the old ways would survive his passing but lived to see Kim embrace and carry on what he valued. Today, Kim continues to adapt and change within the tradition and now teaches others as he was taught. In 2005 he was one of six potters invited to participate in *The Potter's Eye*, the first major exhibition of North Carolina pottery presented by the North Carolina Museum of Art.

**TERRY ZUG: "DID HE TEACH YOU AS SUCH, KIM?"**

**I MEAN, HOW DID HE TEACH YOU?" KIM ELLINGTON:**

**"WELL, AT THAT POINT IT WAS JUST TIME TO STOKE."**

# WILL RUGGLES & DOUGLASS RANKIN



**A** confluence of cultures brought Douglass Rankin and Will Ruggles together as apprentices at Randy Johnston's pottery in Wisconsin in 1977. Known as innovators in pottery-making, kiln design, and firing techniques, they have designed and built or contributed to the building of many kilns around the world, including the noborigama at the North Carolina Pottery Center. They attribute much of their direction as potters to the Leach-Hamada tradition, which came to them by way of Warren MacKenzie and his student, Randy Johnston.

Bernard Leach met Shoji Hamada in Japan in 1918. The two traveled to England, establishing Leach Pottery at St. Ives, where in 1920 they fired the first three-chambered climbing kiln seen in the West. Japanese potters had used the noborigama (chambered) and the anagama (single-chamber) kilns for centuries, modifying the original Chinese and Korean designs. The concept of *mingei*, or craft of the people, was an important point of reference at Leach Pottery. A Japanese folk art movement founded by Soetsu Yanagi, with the support of Leach and Hamada, *mingei* celebrates the beauty of unpretentious utilitarian handcrafted objects made for everyday use. Inherent is the idea that the spirit and environment in which an object is made is directly connected to the quality of the object. Warren MacKenzie apprenticed with Leach from 1949 to 1952 and carried the artistic spirit derived from *mengi* to a new American audience when he began teaching at the University of Minnesota in 1952.

Growing up in Fayetteville, North Carolina, Douglass (1948–) remembers childhood trips with her mother to

Seagrove and Jugtown and holding pots by the Coles or Ben Owen Sr. She first worked with clay at Duke University, building a small raku kiln as part of an independent study project. Graduating with a degree in botany in 1971, she later took a class at the University of North Carolina–Greensboro with Keith Lambert and worked for a time in Nellie Smith's studio in Fayetteville. Encouraged by Marilyn Hartness, Douglass became a core student at Penland and learned to throw under the demanding instruction of Cynthia Bringle. At Penland, she met Warren MacKenzie and Randy Johnston and in 1976 began an apprenticeship with Randy.

Will Ruggles (1956–) came to clay in 1974 during his first year at an experimental school, Grand Valley State College, Allendale, Michigan, under the guidance of Bill Strickland. It was at Grand Valley that Will first attended a Warren MacKenzie workshop. From 1975 to 1976 he traveled to Taiwan and Thailand to study the arts and culture of Southeast Asia. When he returned, he traveled to Minnesota where Warren suggested Randy Johnston as a possible mentor. Will apprenticed with Randy from 1977 to 1978.

From 1978 to 1980 Douglass and Will were joint owners with Willem Gebben of Hillcrest Pottery in Wisconsin. In 1980 they moved to Buladean, North Carolina, and opened Rock Creek Pottery, themselves becoming mentors through their life, their pots, and their kilns for innumerable students seeking ways to bring creative vitality to the post-industrial world. After twenty-seven years, they closed Rock Creek Pottery in 2007. They recently opened Three Rock Pottery near Santa Fe, New Mexico.

“WHAT IS IT? IT'S THAT QUEST THING AGAIN. THE NEED TO HAVE RELATIONSHIP WITH SOMETHING THAT WE FIND DEEPLY MOVING. THE LEVEL OF BEAUTY THAT'S BEYOND DESIGN, THAT'S GREATER THAN DESIGN.”



clay responding to me, just blew my mind. I thought it was so beautiful, the fluidity of it. The next quarter, I set myself up for all pottery. The teacher there, Bill Strickland – he died maybe ten years ago of cancer – he was a great teacher because he totally loved making pottery. We built oil-burning kilns and wood-burning kilns. We learned to scrounge materials and do all this stuff that a lot of more developed school programs don't get the opportunity to experience because they're more defined. This one was just wide open. I'd been there maybe seven or eight months, and they had this guy from Minnesota come, Warren MacKenzie, to teach a workshop. And me and like maybe three other guys in the class were just like, "That's it." We were making pots, and we loved it. And we were liking Asian aesthetic, and we were liking this sort of Yanagi, *mingei* approach. Well, it comes from tea, really. The sort of Zen approach. In part of Japan, it would be called *wabi-sabi* – the appreciation of what occurs naturally, as opposed to maybe more refined making. Warren was of that tradition. He studied with Leach. And Leach was like best friends with Hamada and Yanagi and all that. We were looking for something to do with ourselves, aesthetic-wise, and that was the answer. Later I went to Asia on a foreign study program. I was gone a year and a half total. I think I came home the bicentennial year. My girlfriend at the time wanted to go up to River Falls, Wisconsin, to study with a weaver up there, Jody Slocum. And I thought, well, geez, I should go up there because MacKenzie was up there and he was my favorite potter. And I thought, well, maybe I can get in with him somehow. He was teaching at the university then, in Minnesota. So I asked him for an apprenticeship. I was young, bold. I just went up to him and said, "Can I apprentice with you?" He already had this guy. He said, "No, you can't," but I said, "Well, can I study with you at the university?" And he said, "Well, what do you want to do? Is your objective to teach or to make pots?" And I said, "Well, I want to make pots." And he said, "Well, I would think about whether you want to go to the university or not then. I mean, you could, but maybe you should just start making pots because that's what you want to do, and that's the best way to learn about making pots." He gave me, like, five different potters' names and I visited them, and one of them was Randy Johnston. And I went to see Randy, and I thought, I might like his pots better than Warren's, I don't know. These were new to me – I didn't

know about these potters. But Randy had studied with Warren, and then he studied in Japan with Hamada's apprentice, Shimaoka. So he kind of brought in that Asian thread more deeply, I think, than Warren had, at least in subtleties of form. And I really liked that in Randy's pots, particularly the way he worked with the inside of a bowl and the rim of a bowl. And so I asked him, and he says, "I don't know. I might say yes, but I've got this girl [Douglass] from North Carolina coming up to apprentice in a couple of months." And he was afraid to – he never had an apprentice. And I said, "Well, could I come and help you fire? Or I could help you mix clay. I could do anything." And he said, "Yeah, that would be great." And I said, "Could I watch you throw sometime?" And he said, "Sure, yeah, yeah." And so occasionally I would go over there, and I just started building a kiln at our old farm house. And then test-fired the kiln, and I'd been helping Randy. And then Douglass was there probably for a while. And I'd help you guys fire and help you mix clay, and I'd hang out when Randy was throwing, maybe once a week or something like that. But we got to be good friends, and I think it was then that, right after I fired, that Randy said, "You should just come work with us because we get along fine and you hang

out here. Let's just do it." And that's kind of how we got together: Douglas was there. She met him through different avenues. I guess I was with Randy a year and a quarter, and you maybe a year and a half?

DR: Yeah, I think something like that.

WR: I think we left together.

DR: Right, because we did the workshop in Banff.

MF: You were born in Fayetteville.

DR: Yes. And my parents were quite a bit older than most normal parents were fifty-some years ago. My mother had pretty fancy taste. We had china, but she, like a lot of people in Fayetteville, was really interested in pots and would go to Seagrove and to Jugtown. I remember being up there and going to the Cole Pottery. We would rummage around, and my sister and I could pick out things. We were down building the kiln for the Pottery Center and we went over to Ben Owen's. He had us over for dinner, he and his wife, and he has that part of his shop now, a sort of historic section, and he had a picture of his granddad throwing in this little, dark shed. I realized I had been there when I was a little kid. I hadn't remembered it till then, but I remember seeing this man throwing in his nice little muddy, kind of almost like a dirt dauber nest [*laughs*] and thinking that's pretty cool.

MICHELLE FRANCIS: So, Will, let's start with you, and if you could just begin by telling us a little bit about how you came to clay.

WILL RUGGLES: Well, I went to an experimental school in Michigan called Grand Valley State College to study tai chi and Taoism in '74, I think it was. Sound right?

DOUGLASS RANKIN: I think that's probably right.

WR: There were people from all over the country because this was a great tai chi teacher. And we were all there to resolve ego in this practice of tai chi. And one day in the midst of this, I looked around the room, and I thought of myself and most of the people in the group as probably the biggest ego-heads I've ever seen, anywhere. I had this bizarre sort of epiphany about spiritual materialism, how proud we were of this way we'd been developing. I was seventeen. I said, "I'm out of here." And I had a lot of friends in the pottery, just people that I liked, so I'd hang out there at night during this sort of crisis. And one day, somebody said, "Well, you should try it," because I was really intrigued by what they were doing with the clay. And they gave me a ball of clay and they showed me how to fix it and put it on the wheel, and I made a really nice pot, right away. It was nice to me, anyway. They were amazed too. It was easy for me. It was – I don't know, it just felt natural. It was so exciting because it was like active meditation, and I was really into meditation. Yet it was free of all of that stuff, of spiritual power or something. And this amazing, creative act, this interaction between my hands and my mind and clay, and me responding to the clay and the

INTERVIEW  
APRIL 4, 2007,  
AT DOUGLASS &  
WILL'S HOME,  
BULADEAN, NC

WR: "Warren [MacKenzie] opened our eyes to that possibility of looking deeply, or experiencing deeply, beauty through these traditional art forms." DR: "We figured that these old pots are the ones we really like. They didn't have mechanical wheels. And we had these wooden kick wheels that Randy [Johnston] was using, which were Japanese adaptations of a Korean design, so we built those. And we wanted to make our clay by hand and fire with wood."

DR: "We're used to living in a wild place. And we always think, what would you do if you lived in town? But we realize that a lot of what we do here is interact with this place. We look out and we see the Roan at certain times of day."

WR: "And it's not a picture. It's a life form."



## NEOLIA COLE WOMACK



**N**eolia Cole (1927–) is an eighth generation potter and daughter of Arthur Ray Cole. She and her sister, Celia Cole Perkinson, were recipients of the 2003 North Carolina Folk Heritage Award, which recognizes the lifetime achievement of outstanding traditional artists. That same year, a retrospective of their work, *Enduring Excellence, Enduring Wit*, was held at the North Carolina Pottery Center. Neolia and Celia are members of a remarkable group of Cole women who broke the gender barrier in the traditional North Carolina pottery workshops. Her first cousin Dorothy Cole Auman (1925–1991), daughter of Charles Cole, operated Seagrove Pottery with her husband, Walter, both recipients of the North Carolina Folk Heritage Award in 1989. Second cousin Nell Cole Graves (1908–1997), daughter of Jacon B. Cole, operated J. B. Cole Pottery with brother Waymon after their father's death in 1943, receiving the Folk Heritage Award in 1996.

Neolia's father moved the family from Seagrove to Sanford in 1934 where he established his pottery and sales shop on U.S. Route 1, reasoning, correctly, that the traffic to Florida would provide a ready-made market for their wares. One of seven children, Neolia helped with chores in the shop and by the age of eight was learning to throw on the kick wheel by watching her father. By the age of twelve, her first thrown pieces were accepted for the sales shop. A. R. was an exacting teacher, and she recalls that anything she or her siblings made that did not measure up was quickly broken. The workshop did not

have a pug mill in the early years, and the children's least favorite job was to pick rocks and sticks out of the clay to prepare it for throwing.

During World War II, Neolia and her father ran the workshop by themselves. Her mother, Pauline, continued to manage the business affairs. After graduating from high school in 1944, Neolia worked at the pottery full time. In the early 1940s, they shut down the wood-fired groundhog kiln and began to use a more efficient oil-fired tunnel kiln, firing a kilnload every other week and holding kiln openings on Saturday beginning at seven o'clock in the morning. She remembers the cars lining up as early as two o'clock in the morning and the occasional customers fighting over pieces.

The pottery suffered a devastating fire in 1962. After rebuilding, the family faced another challenge when they were forced to relocate in 1971 because of a road building project. After thirty-eight years at the original site, Cole Pottery re-opened at its current location in 1972. A. R. Cole passed away in 1974. Neolia also lost her husband during this difficult time. The pottery closed while affairs were put in order. Neolia opened the pottery again in 1976, the first year Neolia and Celia began to sign and date pieces. They transitioned to electric kilns beginning in 1977.

Another ruinous fire destroyed the pottery in 1992. Once again, the workshop was rebuilt. Celia has retired from the shop, but Neolia continues today, making all her own glazes and using clay from the Smithfield pond site to create the forms she has thrown for almost seventy years.

“HE SAID, ‘YOU’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE DOING THIS.’

AND CELIA SAID, ‘WHAT DO YOU MEAN?’ . . . AND HE SAID,  
‘WOMEN ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE MAKING POTTERY.’

SHE SAID, ‘WELL, BY GOD, I AM!’”

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