

NORTH CAROLINA'S

pottery

Mark Hewitt, *Cereal Bowl (detail)*, 2001, salt-glazed stoneware, 2½ x 7¼ in., Collection of the artist. Hewitt has studied Asian influences on early American pottery. "I'm just 'connecting the pots,'" he says.

tradition

By Michelle Eggleston

The North Carolina pottery tradition goes back more than two centuries and has become known worldwide. The first potter known to have settled here was a German who arrived in

Rowan County in 1755. Moravian potters followed and worked in the Winston-Salem area. Potters concentrated themselves in the relatively isolated Piedmont region of the state rather than the more heavily settled coast, because the coastal area clay was mixed with sand and organic matter not suitable for mass-production pottery. Also, coastal communities could acquire urban utensils more easily from Europe or New England. Inland, there was more need for pottery and less competition.

From the Revolutionary War period to about 1820, the most common form of pottery made here was simple earthenware (or redware) made from surface clay. Few pieces of redware from this period survive today because the material was fragile and lasted only a few years. Peter Craven, who figured in the Chatham and Orange county-area Regulators Movement against colonial rule in the 1760s, is believed to be the first of the Craven family in these parts who turned out pots that today are prized among collectors.

By the late 1700s, North Carolina potters began using some of the large clay deposits suitable for a sturdier stoneware. They applied what's known as a salt glaze adapted from glazes developed in Europe and New England. The resulting pottery was more durable than redware, easier to keep clean and healthier to use. They made crocks, jugs, cups, bowls, pitchers and other utilitarian pieces. But besides their focus on utility, many of these potters clearly enjoyed the decorative and ornamental possibilities afforded by creatively combining the elements of earth, water, wind and fire.

During the Civil War there was a demand for large, durable containers to store foods that could be salted or pickled and sent to the troops. At the

end of the war the potter's market shrank back to its immediate community. In the later 1800s, factory glassware and tins became increasingly more affordable, lighter and some thought more sanitary than pottery. By the late 1800s, most potters had resumed farming to supplement their pottery business. The whiskey jug market kept some pretty busy through the turn of the century, but when Prohibition was adopted in 1918 the jug market also began to wither.

By 1920, some potters began to shift from making utilitarian wares to "artware" objects like vases, ornamental pots, centerpieces, tableware, decorative objects, novelties and cemetery markers. These pieces could be sold in gift shops, garden shops or roadside shops to tourists, collectors and wholesalers. In the late 1920s and 1930s there was a major shift to new forms and techniques. Potters experimented with glazes and new colors. Technological advances helped speed up production and guarantee uniform quality. New kiln designs improved their efficiency and capacity. By the 1950s, the electric turning wheel further transformed the craft.

Both the traditions of the past and the experimental, artistic styles of pottery coexist in today's North Carolina pottery culture, and it continues to thrive. As it happens, many of today's potteries are located in areas served by Touchstone Energy cooperatives. Rural Randolph and Moore counties (Randolph Electric), and especially the Seagrove and Westmoore communities, grew some of North Carolina's most famous potteries. Jugtown Pottery and Owens family potteries of this region earned early recognition in the 1940s and 1950s, and today nearly 100 studios and shops are located here. Potters also have revived the traditions in the Catawba Valley (Rutherford Electric), Alamance County and Chatham County (Central Electric). The work of contemporary potters clearly shows influence of those who came before. The North Carolina Pottery Center in Seagrove is a central source of information and display. The annual Seagrove Pottery Festival takes place the weekend before Thanksgiving.