

SHARDS

A Newsletter of the

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China Students' Club of Boston

January 2006

A Message from Our President

Dear Members,

What a fall it was! China Students' Club members were treated to several excellent programs, beginning with Katherine Houston's fascinating discussion of the stunning fruit, vegetable, and floral pieces that she creates in exquisitely colored porcelain, to Pamela Jaye Russell's talk on the noted collection of ancient Greek pottery at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In November, we were fortunate to have the opportunity to attend the American Ceramic Circle Symposium at the Peabody Essex Museum. Special thanks must go to the ACC for offering China Students' members the chance to attend the lectures on Friday and Saturday at a greatly reduced price. We will report on the Symposium in the next issue.

The ACC's trip to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, was thought by many of the attendees to have been "the best pre-symposium trip ever." China Students' Club members Bob Barth, Martha Pinello, Louise Richardson, Carolyn Roy, and Tara Webber were involved in the planning and execution of the program which included visits to the Warner House for a session with the archaeological collection; Strawberry Banke for a workshop with the Lloyd and Vivian Hawes Collection; the Walsh House with Carl Crossman to view objects from his collection as installed in the ca. 1795 house; and two private collections, before heading back to Salem.

I mention this trip to underscore the expertise that

is available within the Club as well as the rich and stimulating material that we have around us on a daily basis. On Thursday, January 26th, we will have the opportunity to learn from another CSC member, Greg Lovell, who will be speaking about his interest in English porcelain factories. Judging from the objects that Greg brought to last year's Bits and Pieces, we can expect a most interesting presentation from a very knowledgeable and dedicated collector.

Lastly, a number of members have attended the study sessions led by CSC member Harriet Carleton Goldweitz at her home a couple of years ago. At that time, Harriet generously shared her substantial knowledge of each piece in her collection. Many of you have heard by now that Harriet's collection will be auctioned by Sotheby's in New York on January 20th. A beautiful catalogue has been produced for the sale which is not only a record of an important collection and the hard work that went into assembling it over a period of many years, but a tribute to the dedication and purpose of a fellow Club member (some of the pieces to be auctioned are depicted on the back page).

I trust that all of you had a happy and healthy holiday season. My very best wishes to you for the New Year.

Sincerely,
Carolyn Parsons Roy
President



Porcelain creations by Katherine Houston:
Left: *Spring Asparagus*
Right: *Silk-Road Mantelpiece* (see page 2)





Katherine Houston on “The Clay Gardener: Porcelain and Mystique” Report by Jeff Brown

On September 22nd The China Students’ Club opened its 2005-2006 season at the Women’s College Club of Boston with a great talk by renowned local ceramic artist Katherine Houston. The very informal and conversational talk was at first autobiographical—about how Katherine arrived at this point in her life—and then technical, illustrating the way in which her masterpieces in porcelain are created.

Katherine grew up in Ohio, always loving to paint and draw. She studied art in college, but unfortunately, arrived at the wrong time. It was the heyday of Abstract Expressionism and all Katherine wanted to do was paint beautiful and “pretty” things. Her work did not fit in with what was considered “art” at the time. She married, taught art, raised a family, but never stopped painting, having taken up watercolors. While visiting London, she was stopped dead in her tracks by a display of exquisite porcelain fruits and vegetables in a shop window. When she inquired how the shop owner acquired so many pieces of fine 18th century porcelain she was told the pieces were all contemporary. It was then and there that she realized that this was what she wanted to do. She simply stated “I’m going to learn how to do this!” She was told the artist did not accept students, but Katherine persisted and a reluctant shopkeeper finally put her in touch with the creator of these fine porcelain legumes—who turned out to be none other than Lady Anne Gordon, Marchioness of Aberdeen! Lady Anne could not have been more encouraging and simply told Katherine to go home, buy some clay and colors and get her hands dirty.

By trial and error Katherine learned the techniques of modeling in clay. Thinking fruits and vegetables boring, she tried to make heroic figures from Greek mythology. They were not very successful, and once again Lady Anne Gordon stepped in and said “stop fooling around and make a lemon or an apple for God’s sake!” And so Katherine made her first renditions of fruit, which were a great success. She attributes her knack to her love for cooking, working with her hands and making great piecrusts! The porcelain clay is very elastic and can be stretched and twisted and modeled and then it retains its shape. Each piece is hand modeled, some-

times using a simple wooden tool or a peach pit for texture. She derives great inspiration from the 17th century English woodcarver Grinling Gibbons. The larger pieces have to be hollow inside and the walls of the piece carefully shaped to the same thickness all the way around or else they will crack. The modeled forms have to be very carefully dried before a first biscuit firing. A second firing is done after a lead glaze is applied. The porcelain is always high-fired hard paste. Her years of water coloring come in very handy as she treats each form as if she were rendering it in watercolors, creating shadows and highlights, and painting in glaze washes—each wash requiring a separate firing. Her colors are all historically correct and inspired by Chinese export porcelains. Some pieces need as much as 5-6 separate firings. The larger pieces such as mantel garnitures and table centerpieces require some sort of form to be constructed underneath for support during the firing. Gilding is only done on monochromatic pieces, the gold being 24k, and has to be painted on with the consistency of Hershey’s syrup, and then hand burnished when it comes out of the kiln. Katherine always needs a challenge and never does the same piece twice. If an item is popular and duplicates are needed she has them produced by a small studio of interns she employs, mostly from Mass College of Art.

In summing up, all Katherine could say about herself was that she was a “conduit for porcelain.” Well, keep channeling that kaolin, Katherine, as you’re doing a magnificent job!



“Nana Composition”
(more of Katherine’s creations on page 1)



**The Vivian Hawes Memorial Lecture: Pamela Jaye Russell on
“Myth and Reality in Ancient Greek Pottery:
Highlights from the Collection of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston”
Report by Jeff Brown**

Our October talk was the China Students’ annual tribute to past Treasurer, President, scholar and friend Vivian Hawes. Pamela Jaye Russell, independent scholar and faculty member of the New Hampshire Community Technical College, spoke to us on “Myth and Reality in Ancient Greek Pottery, Highlights from the Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.” As Vivian was so closely involved with the museum, it was a fitting tribute that we heard a presentation on one of the MFA’s greatest ceramic collections—its ancient Greek pottery.

A vast portion of this amazing collection was formed in a very short time under the direction of Boston aristocrat E.P. Warren who lived in England during the late 19th century and guided the MFA and alerted it to great finds coming onto the market. The serious collecting of Greek pottery was a relatively recent pursuit. The famous Sir William Hamilton sold part of his great collection to the British Museum in 1772, but had to negotiate hard to get what he considered a fair price. It wasn’t until 1828 when an Etruscan cemetery was unearthed at Vulci and a hoard of undisturbed pots was discovered, that the auction and collecting markets were infused with any kind of intense interest. (Keep in mind that pottery was exported to many Greek colonies around the Mediterranean, hence the discoveries in Italy.) Early scholarship centered on treating the decorations as works of art and studying the imagery just as one would a small painting. The biggest proponent of this course of study was the British scholar Sir John Beazley, 1885-1970, who initiated stylistic studies and spent a lifetime trying to identify individual artists by some characteristic or trait in their work. The vast majority of these vessels are anonymous; very few are signed, either by artist or potter. Recently, though, scholars began looking at iconography and iconology, economic, archaeological, and historical aspects.

The golden age that our talk centered on was Athens from about 550-400 BC. As most of us know, there were two major types of decoration—black figure and red figure, the black figure being developed ear-

lier in the city of Corinth. In black figure, the images are represented as silhouettes against the red ground of the vase. The detail is precise and incised. White and maroon were sometimes added, but over the glaze after the firing (it easily flakes off). In red figure, the scheme is reversed and the figures are the natural reddish color of the clay against a black background. More detail and action can be painted in. The lustrous black surface of a Greek vase is not the result of the application of a true, vitreous glaze, but of a highly refined clay slip without added pigment. It is interesting to note that this refined slip, the decorator’s “paint,” was very close to the color of the clay of the vessel itself. The artist kept track of his work through subtle variations in surface texture. Some vases show impressed traces of preliminary sketch lines that would have guided the artist’s hand. The contrast between the black and red areas of Greek pottery is the result of a carefully controlled firing process that was executed in three stages. The first stage took place in an oxidizing environment. At this stage, both slipped and unslipped areas were red. In the second stage, oxygen was cut off from the kiln, and a reducing atmosphere was achieved. The vessel turned entirely black and the applied slip “sintered” or fused. In the third stage, the chimney was opened, oxygen re-entered the kiln, turning the unslipped areas red. The oxygen being unable to penetrate the slipped areas, those remained black.

As the title of the talk suggests, themes for decoration ranged from early black figure heroic scenes from mythology to later red figure scenes of athletes and the world of male bonding to even later scenes of everyday life and domesticity. Some of the leading black figure painters of the time were Kleitas, circa 570 B.C., the Amasis Painter, 560-525 B.C, and Exekias, circa 545-530 BC. In the area of red figure work a few important names are the so called Pioneers: Euphronios, Euthymides, and Phintias (520-510 BC) who helped develop this new style, as well as the “Berlin Painter” (500-465 BC) and the Achilles Painter (450-440 BC).

Continued on page 4



Myth and Reality in Ancient Greek Pottery

Continued from page 3

As is so often the case, our speaker reminded us that we are blessed with the MFA having one of the three greatest collections of ancient Greek pottery in this country—the Metropolitan and the Getty being the other two. We possess in Boston some of the great masterpieces in this area of ceramics, and she urged us to visit soon and often!

All illustrated items are in the MFA Collection.



Amphora whose two sides depict Herakles driving the Cretan bull in black- and red-figure technique, respectively (525-500 bc)



Amphora depicting an Athenian lady being fitted for shoes



Amphora depicting two warriors; signed "Amasis made it" (520-515 bc)



Left: Plate depicting Herakles dragging Cerberus out of Hades (525-520 bc)



Upcoming Ceramics Events

CSC Meetings

Unless otherwise noted, all meetings are at The College Club, 44 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, at 1:00 PM on Thursdays.

1/26/06: English porcelain factories and their products that interest me and that I have collected; Greg Lovell, ceramic collector and CSC member

2/23/06: Bits and pieces; members are invited to bring objects for discussion

3/23/06: Kangxi porcelain: A culture revealed; Jeffery Stamen, ceramic collector

4/27/06: Fit for an American empress: Betsy Patterson Bonaparte's French china; Jennifer F. Goldsborough, adjunct professor at Parsons School of Design and at the Corcoran College of Art

5/25/06: Annual meeting and tea. Red teapots-Yixing to Bradwell Wood and beyond; Robert L. Barth, CSC member.

Connecticut Ceramic Study Circle Meetings

2/13, 1:15PM: The Latest dish: ceramics collecting in America; Letitia Roberts

3/13, 1:15PM: Salt-glazed stoneware and its decoration; Patricia Halfpenny

4/10, 1:15PM: Made in China: Export Porcelain from the Leo and Doris Hodroff collection at Winterthur; Ronald Fuchs II

5/3, 10:30 AM: Luncheon; Welsh porcelain; Jonathan Gray

For more information, contact Phyllis Simmons at 203-324-7742.

Providence Pottery and Porcelain Club Meetings

2/8, noon: Luncheon; The voice of clay: art (or pottery) of the Puebloan peoples of the American Southwest; Linda Foss Nichols

3/23, 2:00PM: Maiolica in the Hispanic world; Margaret E. Connors McQuade

4/26, 2:00 p.m. Iznik: Turkish ceramics and Ottoman artistic tradition; Walter Denny

5/4, 2:00 p.m. Welsh ceramics; Jonathan Gray.

For more information contact Mrs. William Viall (401-861-3216).

Auctions

Asian:

3/29, Christie's NY (Chinese)

3/28, Christie's NY (Japanese, Korean)

5/2, Christie's Amsterdam (Chinese, Japanese)

1/26/06, Christie's NY (Chinese Export)

British and/or continental:

1/20, Sotheby's NY, *Important English Pottery, the Harriet Carlton Goldweitz Collection*

3/7, 4/13, 5/11, 5/22, Christie's London

5/23, Christie's Amsterdam (incl. Dutch Delft)

4/11, Christie's Paris.

Exhibitions and Fairs

The Artful Teapot: 20th Century Expressions from the Kamm Collection; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, until 3/5. This exhibition explores the teapot as a universal domestic icon, and how it has become a mode of artistic expression in the 20th century. Showcasing 250 pieces from the collection of Sonny and Gloria Kamm, the exhibition addresses issues of beauty, abstraction, satire, and the rituals of tea. Contemporary teapots from artists including Roy Lichtenstein and David Hockney are displayed, as well as historic teapots from China and Europe.

New York Ceramics Fair, 1083 Fifth Avenue, New York, 1/18-22..

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Royal Portrait Gallery from the Harriet Goldweitz Collection Sale



All items are on English Delftware, except for Bonnie Prince Charlie who is on Staffordshire enamelled salt-glazed stoneware

Top row: Charles II, reigned 1660-1685. Lots 12, 13, 23

Middle row: William III, reigned 1689-1702. Lot 27

George I, reigned 1714-1747. Lot 44

Prince Charles Edward Stuart (“Bonnie Prince Charlie”), 1720-1788.
Lot 154

Bottom row: King Frederick II (“Frederick the Great”) of Prussia,
reigned 1740-1786. Lot 88