

SHARDS

A Newsletter of the China Students' Club of Boston

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A Message from Our President

Greetings!

As a new year of exciting programs gets underway, I look forward to serving as your new President. I want to thank Amanda Lange for her fine leadership as President. I am sure we all look forward to her new role as Chair of the Board of Directors. She has already been a great help in guiding me through the transition. For those of you who may not yet know me, I'll offer a few words of introduction. I have been a member of the China Students' Club for many years and presented two talks for the club when I was Curator of Decorative Arts at Old Sturbridge Village. I left that post several years ago so that I could have a more flexible schedule while raising three youngsters. My family and I live in Hardwick, MA, where I work as a museum consultant and teach material culture courses as an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Smith and Amherst Colleges.

I developed a love for ceramics at an early age. My mother was a potter in her younger years and as a child I loved playing with her glaze samples. Over the years I have experimented with making redware, stoneware and porcelain as part of my training in material culture studies. I find it helpful to learn first-hand how things are made in order to fully understand the process. It can be very humbling to learn just how much effort goes into producing a respectable piece of pottery! In more recent years as a museum curator and consultant I have enjoyed working with a number of collections and

learning and teaching about ceramics through the study of pieces and related historical documents. I know some of you have enjoyed some of the same ceramic study programs as I have over the years, such as those offered at Keele University and at Historic Eastfield Village.

I look forward to seeing each of you at future meetings and talking with you about your interests in ceramics. We all share a passion for ceramics and we are fortunate to have a venue to discuss and learn from one another. I welcome your comments and suggestions on how we can make the China Students' Club serve your needs as members. I also look forward to hearing your suggestions on how to attract new members. We hope to improve our image on the website this year by adding photos—thanks to our webmaster Jim Mattozzi.

Our annual field trip promises to be a very rewarding visit to Portsmouth on October 3rd. More details on this have already been distributed; hope to see you there! This year's programs at The College Club look terrific too. Anne Lanning has once again lined up a great list of speakers for us. We will kick off our first meeting in Boston on October 22nd with Arthur Goldberg speaking on *Dave the Potter*. Look for the dates and speakers for the rest of the year on page 5. I'm sure you will agree that we can expect a great year!

All the best,
Nan Wolverton

Jim Kaufman on "The Ceramics of Hugh C. Robertson: Before and Beyond Dedham Crackle-Ware" Reviewed by Jeff Brown

It is always a pleasure to hear from "one of our own" and so the CSC welcomed our past president, Dedham Pottery dealer and aficionado James Kaufman who spoke to the group on "The Ceramics of Hugh C. Robertson: Before and Beyond Dedham Crackle-Ware."

The history of the Dedham Pottery begins with the story of the Robertson family in America. James Robertson was a fourth generation potter who immigrated from Edinburgh, Scotland in 1853. His son, Hugh, was 8 when they arrived in Sayreville, NJ. They then

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Jim Kaufman on Hugh Robertson

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moved to East Boston, joining one Nathaniel Plympton to create the Plympton and Robertson Pottery. They produced yellow and white crocks still using New Jersey clay.

In 1866 James's son Alexander started a rather humble pottery in Chelsea, MA, creating basic flour and bean pots from locally dug red clay. In 1868 his brother Hugh joined him to form the concern of A.W. & H.C. Robertson, and the product line became more decorative to include glazed and painted surfaces. The work eventually became more artistic, copying many classical forms with designs after Greek, Roman, and Egyptian styles all befitting the Victorian taste of the period.

In 1872 father James left East Boston to join his sons in forming the "Chelsea Ceramic Works, Robertson and Sons," producing both artistic and utilitarian pottery. During the 1870s the Robertsons produced about forty standard shapes in either decorated or bisque form. In 1877 the term "Chelsea faience" was used to refer to a wide range of the potter's art. Hugh and other potters at the Ceramic Works produced extraordinary examples of sculpted decoration. Pieces could be impressed, incised, or painted with applied decoration; some pieces were sold undecorated to be painted later by artists or amateurs. They also produced wares that were slip decorated under the glaze similar to Limoges porcelain of the time. These efforts were successful contemporaneously with the more widely acclaimed wares of the Rookwood Pottery in Cincinnati. Robertson's broad knowledge of glaze chemistry led to a matte yellow glaze by 1880, nearly twenty years before that surface treatment became popular with such firms as the Pewabic Pottery in Detroit. Yet another facet of their work was a hammered-looking surface that resembled ancient Asian metalware.

It wasn't until the 1890s that the first Arts and Crafts Society in America was established in Boston, but the Robertsons' small shop, where everything was done by hand, epitomized the Arts and Crafts philosophy a decade before other luminaries of the movement began their work. Other ceramic artists of the period that came to rival Robertson's genius include William Grueby, Adelaide Robineau and George Ohr.

Hugh also produced the first pressed tiles in this country but never reached commercial production levels. A third brother, George, who worked for the firm, left to work for John Low's Art Tile Factory in 1878. Low went on to found the first commercial pressed tile factory in America; George Robertson's glaze expertise is clearly evident in Low's creations.

In 1880 patriarch James Robertson died. Brother Alexander left for California in 1884, forming the Roblin Pottery in San Francisco that was subsequently destroyed in the earthquake of 1906.

Hugh Robertson was now left alone to run the Chelsea pottery. He became a great innovator and experimenter. A major source of inspiration was the Japanese Exhibition at the American Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876. What he saw there was to influence his work for the next 32 years.

Hugh set out to re-discover the lost art of the Chinese Ming period Dragon's Blood Glaze. It required numerous kiln firings and glaze experiments over half a decade, but he finally perfected a spectacular red glaze — but at a great cost. Hugh also created a peachglow glaze and a monochromatic "orange peel" surface on his vases, as well as perfecting the lost art of the crackle glaze effect from the late Tang Dynasty. He garnered much critical praise, but his efforts were laborious and expensive and the product too costly to produce. And so, the Chelsea Ceramic Works closed in bankruptcy in 1889.

But Hugh had many wealthy patrons and friends who helped him with financial backing and he set up the "Chelsea Pottery U.S." in 1891. An impressed cloverleaf with the letters "CPUS" within the leaves marked pieces made by this company. Hugh was encouraged to find a more saleable product. A contest was held at the MFA Museum School for border designs, and an instructor, Joseph Lindon Smith, submitted the now famous rabbit border as the winning design. The border combined with the crackle-glaze Hugh developed in the 1880s became the signature Chelsea look. The pottery was made from stoneware clay imported from New Jersey and Kentucky.

In 1895 the company moved to Dedham, MA and

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Jim Kaufman on Hugh Robertson

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changed its name accordingly to the “DedhamPottery.” All pottery was marked with new stamps displaying a blue rabbit and the name of the company. This was

accompanied by an impressed rabbit face stamp and, after 1929, the word “Registered” was added. Some experimental vases were incised with the company name.



Vases by Hugh Robertson

Karina Corrigan on “Learning to Mix a Jingdezhen Sling: Highlights of the American Ceramic Circle’s 2008 Tour to China” Reviewed by Jeff Brown

The CSC program year concluded with a fun talk by Karina Corrigan, fellow member and newly appointed Curator of Asian Export Art at the Peabody Essex Museum. She shared “holiday snaps” of highlights of the American Ceramics Circle’s 2008 tour to China.

The trip took place the previous summer and Karina was determined to attend: having never been to China she thought it might be a bit embarrassing for a future curator of Asian export art not to have visited the point of origin of so many of the pieces under her care!

The journey began on a high note in Hong Kong with the group visiting a private collection of ceramics of breathtaking proportions housed in a separate apartment just intended for the collection. The group then proceeded north to the bustling port of Xiamen on the coast overlooking Taiwan, a city now devoted mainly to the textile trade. Xiamen was a popular foreign settlement in the late 19th century and Gulang Yu, an island in the harbor, is particularly noted for its beautiful surviving art deco buildings.

From Xiamen, the group proceeded up into the

mountains to the kiln sites at Dehua. This mountainous region has been a center for ceramics production for over a thousand years, but is best known in the West for the sugary white porcelain cups, whistles, and moulded figures imported to Europe in large quantities in the 17th and 18th centuries. At Dehua, they saw their first dragon kiln. This kiln dates to the Song Dynasty, and, until this point, Karina had only seen these strange beasts, built up the side of a hill, in period gouache illustrations at the Peabody Essex. A dragon kiln was typically fired once a month; it took three days to fire it and another seven to let it cool down. Each firing contained about 10-15,000 pieces of porcelain. The scale of production is mind-boggling—over 230 similar kiln sites have been identified, including 30 from the Ming and 177 from the Qing dynasty. A wonderful museum exists at this site, and many artists are creating contemporary works.

From Dehua they flew to Xi’an, the ancient capital of China and once the largest city in the world. Xi’an boasts multiple museums and historic sites of great in-

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Karina Corrigan on China Tour

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terest, but this World Heritage site is best known for the terracotta army that guards Emperor Qin's tomb. Qin is regarded as the first Emperor of China, celebrated for unifying warring feudal states and subsequently introducing standardized currency, weights, and measures to China. Work began on his massive mausoleum shortly after he ascended the throne in 220 BC. A local farmer first uncovered his tomb in 1974; archaeologists have thus far discovered over 8,000 terra cotta soldiers, as well as horses and chariots, officials, acrobats, strongmen, and musicians buried with the Emperor. The head, arms, legs and torso of each terracotta figure were created with a series of mix-and-match clay molds and then potters further individualized each figure. Another amazing point of interest is the Famen Temple, a huge Buddhist center of the Tang period, built to house several of the Buddha's fingers. Long thought lost, the crypt containing precious reliquaries of Buddha's fingers as well as a treasure trove of Roman glass and Tang silver, was uncovered when an earthquake in 1987 toppled a Ming-period pagoda. The treasury also contained some extremely rare celadons of which no one thought any had survived—until this amazing revelation.

The group left Xi'an for a brief visit to Shanghai, to stroll along the picturesque Bund with its 19th century architecture, and visit the enormously popular museum—a structure shaped like a ding—an archaic three-legged bronze vessel. This is indeed an appropriate shape for the museum as it houses the world's finest collection of these early Chinese bronzes.

The culmination of the journey was a visit to Jingdezhen, a highlight for Karina as she has appreciated and studied so many objects at the Peabody Essex that had originated in this famous ceramics center. It is not yet a tourist destination, but the Chinese are working hard to promote it and its famous porcelains—the street-lamp posts and trash receptacles are all made of porcelain! The group sought out the basic ingredients of porcelain—kaolin and petuntse—and actually climbed Mount Gaolin. They watched the pounders that crushed the petuntse, and visited a reconstruction of a Qing-period porcelain factory where artisans were at work creating their wares, much as they had in the 18th and 19th

centuries. They witnessed the loading of a kiln, the stacking of the pieces, and use of kiln furniture and saggars to prevent the porcelain from fusing together. They even saw the straw shoes worn by attendants who need to walk on the roof of the kiln to monitor the firing, and the use of the straw in packing the finished product—just as it had been done in centuries past.

They then visited a Ming era wood-fired kiln that continues operating to this day, producing earthenwares, mostly roof tiles. The group also visited a number of kilns producing contemporary wares for sale, as well as the Jingdezhen Ceramics Institute where 4000 students are learning traditional ceramics-making techniques. Amazingly, there are an additional 16,000 students involved in the technological side of porcelain production—very cutting edge modern applications to everything from space programs to the automobile industry. A quick side trip was made to a small studio that the tour guide explained “was very close to the train,” implying all manner of fine traditional wares were made there (i.e. copies or fakes, it depends on how you look at it). These could end up in sales rooms in the West passing for period pieces—a very enlightening but disheartening revelation. A final stop was the Jingdezhen Imperial Kilns Museum, where the kilns had produced for centuries the finest wares for the Emperor and his court. Any piece that was not perfect was immediately smashed and the shards buried so no one could ever use it—an archaeologist's dream come true!

And so, our lecture-hall tour of China's great ceramics sites concluded and Club members adjourned to enjoy our famously delicious Annual Tea and say goodbye for the summer.



Underglaze blue basin, 15th C, private collection, Hong Kong

More pictures on page 6



Upcoming Ceramics Events

CSC Meetings

Unless otherwise noted, all meetings at 1 PM at the College Club, 44 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston

10/3/2009: Tour of private collections of CSC members and ceramic collections at Portsmouth Museums, Portsmouth, NH

10/22: The Pottery of the Enslaved African-American Potter, Dave; Arthur F. Goldberg, Ceramics Scholar

11/30: When is Imitation no Longer the Sincerest Form of Flattery? — Fakes vs. Legitimate Production and Reproduction in the Ceramic Arts; Jody Wilkie, International Specialist Head, European Ceramics, Christie's

1/28/2010: English Art Pottery: Victorian Decoration and Beyond; Nicholas Johnson, CSC member

2/25: Bits and Pieces; *Members are invited to bring an object or two for discussion*

3/25: Archaeological Discoveries at the Colony of Avalon, Newfoundland; James Tuck, Chief Archaeologist, Colony of Avalon, Newfoundland

4/22: A Hidden Treasure: The Reeves Collection of Chinese Export Porcelain at Washington and Lee University; Ron Fuchs, Curator of the Reeves Collection, Washington and Lee University

5/27: The Vivian Hawes Memorial Lecture and Annual Meeting and Tea: Ivory, Cream Colour, or Queensware? English Creamware at Historic Deerfield; Amanda E. Lange, Curator of Historic Interiors, Historic Deerfield, CSC member.

Auctions

Asian:

10/4, Grogan's, Dedham (estate of Frederick R. Innes)

10/8, Sotheby's, Hong Kong (Chinese)

10/17-18, Skinner, Boston

11/3, Christie's, London (Chinese)

11/4, Sotheby's, London (Chinese)

11/4, Christie's, London (Japanese)

12/1, Christie's, Hong Kong (Chinese, incl. Lee family collection)

1/25/2010, Christie's, NY (Chinese Export)

European:

10/21, Sotheby's, NY (19th century)

10/24, Skinner, Boston (decorative arts and furniture from the Richard Wright Collection, featuring a wide variety of British and European pottery and porcelain, including Martin Brothers pottery featuring large Wally-birds; a collection of Doulton Lambeth stoneware featuring rare works by George Tinworth and the Barlow sisters; and unusual Zsolnay ceramic pieces).

Exhibitions

Alistair Sampson Collection of English Creamware, ongoing at the Flynt Center, Historic Deerfield

At the Sackler Gallery, Washington, DC:

Contemporary Japanese Ceramics

Taking Shape: Ceramics in Southeast Asia

At the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC:

Ancient Chinese Pottery and Bronze

Arts of the Islamic World (including ceramics)

Korean Ceramics

Black & White: Chinese Ceramics from the 10th-14th Centuries

Golden Seams: the Japanese Art of Mending Ceramics (until 11/8).

Exuberant Grotesques: Renaissance Maiolica from the Fontana Workshop, Frick Collection, NY, until 1/17/2010

Imperial Privilege: Vienna Porcelain of Du Paquier, 1718–44, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 9/22/2009-3/21/2010.

Conferences

France and the Exotic, a symposium held by the French Porcelain Society at the Wallace Collection, London, 10/9-10, followed on 10/11 by visits to The **Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace** and The Victoria & Albert Museum's new Ceramics Galleries. www.thefrenchporcelainsociety.com.

American Ceramic Circle Symposium, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, VA, 11/5-8. www.amercercir.org.



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Karina Corrigan on China Tour



Top, from left: Southern Song dragon kiln archaeological site, Dehua; An artist in a commercial studio in Dehua sculpting a clay model of a dragon for a slip-cast mould; Karina Corrigan and Jeffrey Munger at the 'Big Vase' factory, Jingdezhen.

Center: Ron Fuchs examines an enormous celadon charger at Zhe Jiang Provincial Museum, Hangzhou
Bottom: Porcelain trash can at Guyao Cichang (Ancient Pottery Factory)—a Ming-dynasty era living history museum for ceramic production; An artist at Guyao Cichang (Ancient Pottery Factory) shaves a porcelain bowl before glazing; An artist at the studio “near the train” copying underglaze-blue designs from an auction catalog image