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# Art In Clay

## *Masterworks Of North Carolina Earthenware*

BY LAURA BEACH

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. — Mary Farrell has been interested in North Carolina earthenware for as long as she can remember. The Tar Heel native and her husband, David, both potters, founded Westmoore Pottery in Seagrove, N.C., in 1977, where they make wares inspired by historic American and English examples.

As Farrell recounts in “Making North Carolina Earthenware,” published in *Ceramics in America 2010*, her interest prompted her to study collections around her state, especially those at Old Salem Museums & Gardens. The Winston-Salem institution is the foremost repository of pottery made by Moravians who settled in North Carolina’s piedmont region in the Eighteenth Century. Members of the protestant religious sect migrated south from Pennsylvania, bringing with them a familiarity with Germanic design traditions.

“Thirty years ago, almost every elaborately decorated example of North Carolina earthenware was attributed to the Moravian potters at Bethabara and Salem,” writes Farrell, who, like many collectors, was drawn to the dishes, mugs, sugar pots and pitchers that were sometimes dipped in white or orange slip, then colorfully patterned with contrasting splashes, squiggles, dots and dashes in abstract and representational designs.

Over time, Farrell and many others began wondering about differences among the pieces. There were too many differences in the shape of basic forms, such as dishes, and too many styles of trailed slip decoration for the works to be by one hand, or even by many hands working within the strictly supervised Moravian missionary settlements.

“Art In Clay: Masterworks of North Carolina Earthenware,” the traveling exhibition on view at Old Salem’s Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) through August 14, addresses these and other questions. In tandem with the themed 2009 and 2010 editions of *Ceramics in America*, edited by Robert Hunter and Luke Beckerdite and published by Chipstone Foundation, “Art In Clay” is a landmark study offering a new and definitive view of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century North Carolina earthenware, Moravian and otherwise.

It is also a model of cross-disciplinary research that joins new scholarship in art, history, archaeology and religion. What Hunter and Beckerdite originally envisioned as an article or two on North Carolina earthenware grew to a five-year project involving a team of scholars and multiple institutions, led by Old Salem Museums & Gardens and Chipstone Foundation, with additional support from Caxambas Foundation. The project includes an online virtual exhibit, visual index and database of more than 600 objects.

“For the past three or four decades, major auction houses, museum curators and prominent dealers have erroneously attributed this Southern genre of ceramics, as can be seen in a review of any collector’s guide or Americana auction catalog written during



**A pair of squirrel bottles, Salem, N.C., circa 1804–1829, 8¼ inches tall.**

*At Museum Of Early  
Southern Decorative Arts*



**The trailing on this dish made between 1775 and 1795 in Alamance County, N.C., has parallels in painted decoration on chests attributed to Berks County, Penn., where members of several Alamance County families originally settled. Motifs occurring in both groups of objects include stems with jeweled edges, awkwardly perched birds and both abstract and naturalistic plant forms. Lead-glazed earthenware, diameter 15½ inches. Old Salem Museums & Gardens.**

this period,” writes Hunter, redrawing the landscape. *Ceramics in America*’s 2009 edition discusses Moravian pottery made in the Bethabara and Salem communities. The 2010 volume focuses on misconceptions about North Carolina slipware by identifying other groups, including Quakers, who worked in the piedmont concurrently with Moravians.

Beckerdite and Hunter recount the pioneering efforts of early collectors and scholars. They begin with the antiquarian Edwin Atlee Barber, who scoured Pennsylvania for slip decorated earthenware in the 1890s. York, Penn., antiques dealer Joe Kindig Jr was the first serious scholar of North Carolina earthenware. Of the dealer’s 1935 article on the subject for *The Magazine Antiques*, the authors note, “Kindig had learned enough about the subject to form conclusions that remain accurate today.”

The founding in 1950 of Old Salem Museums & Gardens, with its extensive records compiled by the Moravians themselves and outstanding collections, was another milestone. Archaeology conducted in the 1960s by Stanley South at Bethabara and Salem uncovered artifacts that helped develop criteria for attributing earthenware to different kilns and their workers. Published in 1972, *The Moravian Potters in North Carolina* by John Bivins Jr was the first monograph on the subject. Beckerdite, Johanna Brown and Linda F. Carnes-McNaughton challenge some of Bivins’s key assumptions in “Slipware from the St Asaph’s Tradition,” published in *Ceramics in America 2010*. The authors’ findings form the basis for the reattribution of works once thought to be Moravian to non-Moravian potters working in and around the St Asaph’s district of Orange County, now southern Alamance County.

Alamance County earthenware is distinctive in both shape and decoration. The ornamental and compositional vocabulary introduced by the first generation of St Asaph’s potters remained intact for more than 70 years. Carnes-McNaughton singles out Solomon Loy as the master potter of the St Asaph’s tradition. A 1986 archaeological survey of Alamance County identified two pottery sites with kiln remains, both subsequently linked to Loy, whose family settled there in the mid-Eighteenth Century and over six generations produced at least a dozen potters.

In keeping with tradition, Solomon Loy applied his decoration directly on the clay body or on white, orange or black slip grounds. A few of his plates have dripped decoration that is boldly abstract. Using trailed slip, Loy also decorated his pottery with lunettes, stylized leaves, linked and nested triangles, jeweled circles, interlinked cymas and stylized crosses and lobes accented with dots.

With much North Carolina earthenware recategorized, what is left comes into sharper focus. In *Ceramics in America 2009*, Beckerdite and Brown reconsider Moravian earthenware, which reached its apex in the work of Gottfried Aust (1722–1788) and his former apprentice, Rudolph Christ (1750–1833). A shop sign made in 1773 dur-

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This dish was formerly attributed to Rudolph Christ (1750–1833), who established a pottery in Bethabara in 1786 before taking over the pottery in Salem in 1789. Dating to 1770–1790, the dish is now thought to be from the St Asaph's tradition in Almanace County. It differs from contemporary Moravian examples in having a rim that is rectangular in cross section rather than rounded and undercut. Fylfots, like that used to represent the flower, do not appear on any objects made by Moravian craftsmen in North Carolina. Lead-glazed earthenware, diameter 5<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches. Old Salem Museums & Gardens.



Many of the dishes associated with the tenure of Gottfried Aust (1722–1788) as master of the Salem pottery have centers with naturalistic flowers trailed in two, three or four colors of slip. As the leaves and flowers on this dish of 1775 to 1785 reveal, Aust and his workmen were highly skilled in their application of slip. The floral motif may have been inspired by a botanical illustration of the time. Lead-glazed earthenware, diameter 13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches. Old Salem Museums & Gardens.



Organizers call this shop sign, made in Salem in 1773 during the tenure of master potter Gottfried Aust (1722–1788), “the most elaborate and technically complex piece of Germanic earthenware from colonial America.” The incised decoration and inscribed name and date are unusual, but the central motif, a stalk of flowers, epitomizes Moravian design and is thought to have religious meaning. Lead-glazed earthenware, diameter 21<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches. Wachovia Historical Society.

# Art In Clay

## Masterworks Of North Carolina Earthenware

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ing Aust's tenure as master of the pottery at Salem is, in the authors' words, “the most elaborate and technically complex piece of Germanic earthenware from colonial America.”

The shop sign's central motif, a leafy stalk of flowers reminiscent of botanical illustrations of the time, occurs, with variation, on many Moravian dishes, prompting the authors to posit that the image had spiritual meaning to the deeply religious settlers. Beckerdite and Brown find a parallel in a German illuminated manuscript of 1775 that conflates a tree of life with the image of the crucified Christ, whose spilt blood encourages the tree's lush growth.

Anemones, which often appear with lilies of the valley, are the most frequently depicted flowers on Moravian dishes. “Christians have long associated anemones with Jesus's sacrifice, believing them to be the flowers that sprang from the ground as the blood flowed from his wounds,” note the experts. While the argument is intriguing, Beckerdite and Brown ultimately conclude that “scholars will never fully interpret the designs on Moravian slipware because the



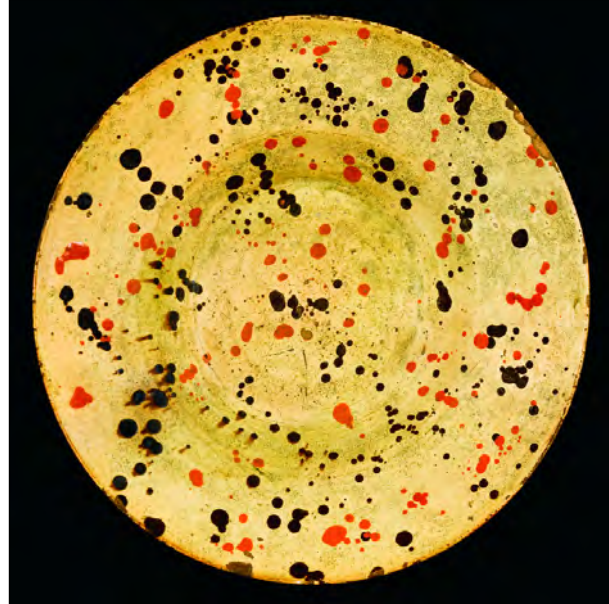
A sugar pot made in Almanace County, circa 1790–1810, in the St Asaph's tradition. Measuring 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches tall, the pot appeared in an advertisement by Americana dealer and North Carolina pottery researcher Joe Kindig in April 1935.

meaning of motifs varied from person to person.”

They add, “It perhaps is no coincidence that the decorative tradition introduced by Aust and perpetuated by his apprentices began to disappear in Moravian pottery during the period when Salem ceased to be a closed community and the church's control over the lives of its members started to wane.”

“Art In Clay” features up to 160 examples of decorated slipware, figural bottles, creamware, faience and molds made by North Carolina's first potters, as well as shards recovered from the excavation of local sites. It is the first major survey of its kind. The exhibition organizes pottery into groups made by Moravians, other potters of German descent and Quakers. The MESDA display additionally includes examples of the utilitarian pottery that was a much bigger part of Salem's production.

Concurrently on view at MESDA is “The Neatest Pieces of Any Description”: Furniture of Piedmont North Carolina, 1780–1860.” Drawn from MESDA's collections, it showcases the work of craftsmen of Scotch Irish, English and German descent who used the region's abundant walnut, cherry, pine and poplar



This monumental dish, thought to have been made between 1825 and 1840, is the largest example attributed to Solomon Loy. The master potter of Almanace County trailed most of his decoration, but several objects attributed to him have dripped decoration. Both types of ware were bisque-fired to harden the body and slip, then fired a second time to mature and bond the lead glaze. Lead-glazed earthenware, diameter 15 inches. Private collection.



This dish made in Salem between 1775 and 1795 displays some of the traditional iconography long associated with Moravian potters in North Carolina. Lead-glazed earthenware, diameter 13 inches. Old Salem Museums & Gardens.



Lozenge-shaped panels with marbled centers and jeweled perimeters separated by interconnected cymas and straight and wavy lines decorate this dish made in Almanace County between 1790 and 1820. The design that radiates from the dish's center is a precursor to Solomon Loy's simple cruciform motif. Lead-glazed earthenware, diameter 11 inches. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.





An unusual bottle in the form of a lady with overall white slip highlighted by copper and manganese drippings. Salem, N.C., circa 1806–1830, height 7¼ inches.

to produce well-made, stylish furniture for their homes.

In conjunction with “Art In Clay,” Old Salem Museums & Gardens is planning a symposium, “Revolution and Revelation in North Carolina Earthenware Studies,” for April 15–16. To date, presenters include Farrell, Carnes-McNaughton, Dr Michael O. Hartley, Philip Zea, Craig D. Atwood and Hal Pugh, as well as Brown, Beckerdite and Hunter.

The symposium will touch on recent discoveries and point at directions for future research. Said Brown, “We have looked at the most obvious schools of North Carolina earthenware production in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century, but there are certainly pieces that don’t fit neatly into these three groups. We would love to find the keys to unlock these other mysteries.”

After closing at Old Salem Museums & Gardens, the exhibition travels to Colonial Williamsburg Foundation September 26, to June 24, 2012; and to the Huntsville (Ala.) Museum of Art from October 7, 2012, to January 6, 2013.

Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts is at 924 South Main Street. For information, [www.oldsalem.org](http://www.oldsalem.org), [www.artinclay.org](http://www.artinclay.org) or 336-721-7300.



Trailed slip decorations, including stylized grass and fitted triangles, decorate the black slip ground on this dish reattributed by the research team to artisans of German descent working in Almalnce County, N.C., between 1790 and 1820. Few American earthenware potters outside the St Asaph’s tradition used black grounds. Lead-glazed earthenware, diameter 10 inches. Old Salem Museums & Gardens.



The earliest Almalnce County dishes with white slip grounds appear to date from the first quarter of the Nineteenth Century. With their coved profile and delicate squared rims, these dishes are closer in shape to those made by Solomon Loy than the examples with black slip grounds. This example was made between 1800 and 1835. Lead-glazed earthenware, diameter 11½ inches. Old Salem Museums & Gardens.

## At Museum Of Early Southern Decorative Arts



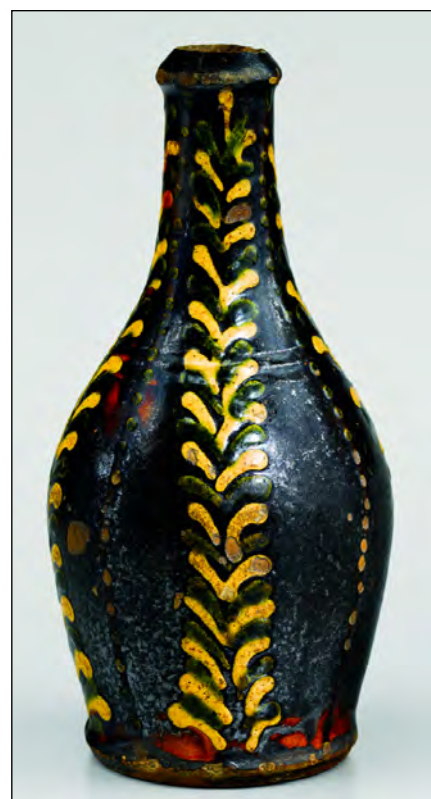
A fish bottle produced in Salem, N.C., circa 1801–1829, with the mold from which it was made, length 9¾ inches.



Solomon Loy, whose family settled in Almalnce County in the mid-Eighteenth Century and over six generations produced at least a dozen potters, is regarded as the master potter of the St Asaph’s tradition. This cream jug of 1825–1840 is attributed to Loy, based on dish and hollowware fragments recovered at Loy’s site. Lead-glazed earthenware, height 4 inches. Private collection.



This sugar pot made in Almalnce County between 1790 and 1810 is among the most refined example of hollowware from the St Asaph’s tradition. In a 1935 article for *The Magazine Antiques*, Joe Kindig Jr claimed to have found several pots in the early 1930s that still contained sugar. The York, Penn., antiques dealer noted the distinctive shape of the North Carolina examples, which he said had rounder sides, smaller mouths and less vertical handles than Pennsylvania vessels. Lead-glazed earthenware, diameter 10 inches. Old Salem Museums & Gardens.



Recent research indicates that non-Moravian potters working in and around the St Asaph’s district of what is now southern Almalnce County, N.C., made pieces such as this bottle, which dates to between 1790 and 1820. Lead-glazed earthenware, height 6 inches. Private collection.