

Four Potters of Floyd County, Virginia
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by Janet Niewald

“A Community in Clay” at the Art Museum of Western Virginia highlights the work of four studio potters from Floyd County, Virginia: Silvie Granatelli, Richard Hensley, Donna Polseno, and Ellen Shankin. The guest curator, potter and Virginia Tech professor David Crane, conceived of this exhibition for the museum in Roanoke, believing it to be a long-needed showcase of these particular potters to their home region. Through recognition of their achievements, the vitality of contemporary ceramics in this region is also celebrated.

Drawn by Floyd County, Virginia’s natural beauty and it’s combination of privacy and proximity to eastern metropolitan centers, these four ceramists settled there in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. All of them became successful professional studio potters, relying primarily on their work for income. While exhibiting nationally, each has contributed to the larger ceramics community by teaching and conducting workshops at various educational institutions. Collectively, they have received numerous grants and awards, and have had their work reproduced in significant crafts books and periodicals. All four attribute their national success, in part, to their years of interaction at home. Through friendship and cooperation with each other, and their outreaching generosity, they have formed the foundation for an exceptional, growing community of potters living in the mountains of Southwest Virginia.

To the layman, studio pottery may seem an anachronism. In fact, it has experienced a renaissance in American culture. Before the Industrial Revolution, potters made tableware and containers for every aspect of daily life. When ceramic production moved to the factories, the self-employed “folk potter”, working within a tradition often passed through generations, became a rarity. In some rural pockets, studio pottery continued, but as a source of novel ware for tourists and urban collectors rather than as a needed local industry. The potter’s focus had shifted from making utilitarian objects to creating more purely decorative objects for a newly emerging middle class. After World War II, more broadly educated artists were drawn to work in clay. They conceived of ceramics as an art form, and clay as a versatile means toward individual expression , whether used to invent sculptural or functional objects. As part of this movement studio pottery was revitalized.



These four ceramists represent this new breed of studio potter. College-trained during a high point in American art education, they are witness to an era of internationalism, when a ceramics magazine might advertise exhibitions of contemporary Japanese pottery and historic African ceramics, while calling for entries for a juried show in Italy. Though certainly not “folk potters,” they remain allied to ceramic tradition. The communal traditions to which they refer, however, may be global and eclectic, and they possess a wide range of historical knowledge and technical skills. Encouraged by past teachers, other colleagues, and collectors, each potter has developed a widely recognized individual style and aesthetic, with the support of a strong regional ceramics community.

The masterful work in “A Community in Clay” reminds us of “the primal interweaving of matter, human action, and symbol that each pot represents. Inert clay...is made into something related to active craft, to the process of human survival, and to social and spiritual factors in the life of man, all at once.”(Philip Rawson, from *Ceramics*, Oxford University Press, London, 1971.) With clay, artists have created the most intimate of our daily implements and some of the most revered tools for communal ritual. It has been the most widely available source of decorative, aesthetic pleasure for human society. When formed by individual hands, clay itself speaks of community.