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# EXTENDING THE TRADITION:

*Crafts from the Carolinas*

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# Extending the Tradition: Crafts from the Carolinas

**F**or more than two centuries, crafts have been an important and integral part of everyday life in the Carolinas. Handmade objects constructed with local materials intended for everyday use were, and continue to be, the most significant works that define the region's craft production. Born of geographic diversity (coastal plains, midlands, piedmont and mountains), ethnicity (Native American, European American and African American) and functional demands (the farm, the plantation and the city household), these objects have transcended their original utilitarian function and become powerful signifiers of regional identity and history.

Charleston, the wealthiest city and cultural center of the region, is also unique for the adaptation of West African traditions for the demands of the new world. Sweetgrass baskets are made from the tall sweet smelling grass collected from the marshes that surround Charleston and were critical to the daily operation of lowcountry plantations. Passed down from mother to daughter, this female identified tradition, a survival from the eighteenth century, today thrives across the river in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, the only locus for sweetgrass baskets in the country. *The Fanner* by Jeanette Lee is typical of the baskets used in agricultural production, while the celebrated work of Mary Jackson has pushed the tradition into a new vocabulary of forms and scale. The sweetgrass tradition stands in contrast with the more contemporary minimal work of Clay Burnette, whose work is rooted in a different geography and inspiration. The master blacksmith Philip Simmons has produced innovative decorative ironwork for Charleston buildings and public spaces for over seven decades. A recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship, Simmons' work is a striking example of the vitality of functional craft extending into the twenty-first century.

The Carolinas supported hundreds of local potteries and is still an important center of clay production. Edgefield, South Carolina, with its vast clay banks, was an early and critical center for local potteries. The work of Stephen Ferrell revives these classic forms of salt glaze pottery that demonstrates the intermingling of European and African forms and motifs that characterize the culture of the region. Similarly, the pit-fired pottery of the Catawba Nation finds its origins in pre-Columbian techniques and forms that have resisted concessions to European influences and modernizing trends. Earl Robbins' traditional forms and Sara Ayres' sensitive evolution of motif and scale have revitalized and insured the survival of this Native American art form for the next generation. The pottery of Winton and Rosa Eugene have come to be recognized by their unique collaborative process and creative use of African American and rural narrative bands of low relief carved into the vessels. Seagrove, North Carolina is

indisputably the capitol of traditional European American pottery today. The work of Ben Owen III continues family and regional traditions that date back to 1756, when the Owen family migrated from England to North Carolina to produce functional ware for European settlers. The powerful forms of Dan Finch, recent president of the Seagrove potters association, carries the domestic scale of functional pottery into the realm of sculpture while retaining the hand and surface of traditional functional work.

A key element to the development of the Studio Glass Movement was the establishment of a glass program at the Penland School of Crafts in Penland, North Carolina. Tracing its origins to the Appalachian School established in 1913, this important craft school grew out of the Penland Weavers organization of 1923, and by 1929 developed an independent program of instruction in traditional crafts. The Resident Artists Program established in 1963 brought leading craft people from across the country for workshops, many of them glass artists. The Penland area soon began developing a critical mass of glass production through participants in the artists in residence program. Representative of this trend, Mark Peiser, Robert Levin and Richard Ritter have exerted a strong influence on the development of studio glass. Along with Kate Vogel, these artists demonstrate the range of glass produced in the region and the continued development of the sculptural and pictorial possibilities of the media.

Tradition also thrives by innovation. The refined silver vessels of Alfred Ward are grounded in a nonsouthern, but no less vital crafts culture - the English Arts and Crafts movement. His influence as a professor at Winthrop University, coupled with the many public commissions he has received, brings a new and empathetic perspective to the longstanding craft traditions of the region. Christine Tadesco brings an innovative process to traditional medium. Quilts have a history operated in the arena of nonobjective patterning usually associated with abstract painting. Tadesco brings her training as an architect, and along with it her mastery of CAD (computer assisted design), to the design and production of her hand-sewn silk quilts, which share an affinity with the traditions of both painting and fiber.

*Extending the Tradition: Crafts from the Carolinas* demonstrates that tradition is not static repetition, but an open ended dynamic process of evolution. The works included in this exhibition represent some of the important directions that are redefining regional crafts traditions for the twenty-first century.

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