

# Pottery Perspectives of Daisy Wade Bridges

By Ross Loeser

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*Above: Daisy Wade Bridges holding an early Burlon Craig face jug*

Daisy Wade Bridges is a North Carolina treasure, having contributed significantly to the Mint Museum of Art's ceramics collections, as well as our general knowledge about the history and significance of this media. Her energy and enthusiasm have helped increase interest in pottery and ceramics throughout our region. I was privileged to interview her, capturing her experiences and insights.

The interviews were recorded on digital (MP3) files, which are available from the Mint's Curator of Decorative Arts.

## **Daisy Wade Bridges – her contribution to the Mint Museum of Art**

Daisy has contributed to the museum in many ways:

- She personally acquired and donated ceramics from many regions of the United States, including Ohio, the American Southwest, New England and North Carolina.
- She engineered the acquisition of several broad collections, including the Delhom Collection of European and Asian ceramics, the Dorothy and Walter Auman Collection of North Carolina Pottery and the Pat H. Johnson collection of Oscar Louis Bachelder pottery.
- She curated exhibitions and wrote books, many based on her personal research (e.g. "Ash Glaze, Traditions in Ancient China and the American South").
- She taught classes on Wedgwood based on her employment with the Josiah Wedgwood Company and friendship with members of the Wedgwood family.

When you walk through the galleries at the Mint Museum of Art and stop to view a piece of ceramic art, there's a good chance Daisy Bridges had a hand in obtaining that piece for the museum.

*The following pages contain a brief outline of Daisy's life in ceramics, her overview of the history of NC pottery up to the current day, and a look at two very influential potters who were Daisy's good friends – Dot Auman and Burlon Craig. An addendum to this paper contains specific comments on pieces of pottery, and her written responses to several questions.*

## **Daisy Wade Bridges – A Brief Outline of a Life in Ceramics**

Daisy was born in 1932 in Bluefield, West Virginia, but has strong roots in North Carolina through her mother. She attended UNC Chapel Hill, majoring in art history, and obtained a masters degree in business merchandising from New York University. After obtaining that degree, she worked in NYC for Josiah Wedgwood and Sons. “They wanted a Southern girl to show the buyers around,” she says. She got to know Hensleigh Wedgwood, who was the head of the American Division of the company. Daisy learned a lot about ceramics from him and two of his wives, and frequently traveled to the Wedgwood factory in Stoke on Trent in England.

Daisy married Henry Bridges in 1955, spent a year in Paris, and moved to Charlotte in 1960. She started teaching classes on Wedgwood in Charlotte, which proved to be very popular. She started the Ceramic Circle of Charlotte.<sup>1</sup>

One of Daisy’s major contributions to the Mint Museum came as a result of a friendship she developed with Mellanay Delhom, whom she met as a result of the Wedgwood International Seminar in Chicago in 1962. Ms. Delhom had amassed a very large collection of European and Asian ceramics and wanted to sell her collection to a museum. Daisy helped the Mint Museum acquire the Delhom Collection.



Her initial interest with NC pottery came via a connection with Wedgwood – she learned of a NC potter whose wares resembled this classic design. Walter Benjamin Stephen created pieces that looked like Wedgwood, but were made with a different process (a “paste on paste” technique involving painting layers of porcelain liquid clay as a decoration). Her first piece of NC pottery was made by Stephen (shown at left).<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, Daisy spent much of her life in areas of the US and world where pottery was made... getting to know the people involved (often the potters themselves), and understanding the process they used. She traveled to Europe and Asia. In North Carolina, she took innumerable trips to potter’s kiln openings, antique markets, flea markets, and other locations where pottery could be located. She had an extensive network of pottery lovers who would lead her to a particular piece in which she was interested.

Daisy has long had a vision that the Mint Museum would be a center of ceramics. She’s personally helped reach that vision by donating hundreds of wonderful pieces of pottery from North Carolina, and from Ohio, the American Southwest, and New England. Her legacy continues to grow as the collections grow and form an important resource for our region and our country. Her vision today is for the Mint Museum to be a resource center for all who are interested in learning more about North Carolina pottery.

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<sup>1</sup> MP3 Files – Interviews of Daisy Wade Bridges by Ross Loeser, October, 2010 (file #2, DWB background)

<sup>2</sup> Interview file #4, DWB developing interest in NC pottery

## Development of the North Carolina Pottery Tradition

Indians were the first settlers in NC, and made pottery via coiling clay, and forming it into vessels. They showed the white settlers where the best clay was located.

The Moravians settled in Bethabara in the 1750s, near what was soon to be Salem. They brought well-trained craftsmen with them. The first known potter was Gottfried Aust (1722-88). He made beautiful wares with patterns, birds and flowers traced onto the pieces. The basic material used was earthenware – a relatively low temperature fired clay – with a lead glaze. In time, several of the Moravian potters left and settled in other areas of NC.

Three areas of North Carolina are identified with the development of pottery: the Piedmont, the Catawba Valley, and the Mountains.

Potters came from England in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with knowledge of salt glazing and high-fired work using stoneware. These people and other potters settled in the Piedmont area, which is today located around Seagrove. Early potter families were the Coles and Cravens. They were followed by many more families such as the Owens and Aumans.

The next area to develop, as the migration went westward, was the Catawba Valley. They used stoneware, but ash glaze (ashes left over from fire places used in heating, mixed with a clay slip to result in an impervious glaze). The most famous early potter in this area was Daniel Seagle, who turned out excellent utilitarian pots in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Seagle, like many in Catawba Valley, was of German ancestry, and the Germans were known for salt glaze, not ash glaze... an intriguing contradiction. He also put glass on the handles, which melted and ran down the side of the pots. This possibly gave the handles added strength. Another well known pioneer family in Catawba Valley is the Hartsoe family.

In the Mountains, there were utilitarian potters who supplied the needed jugs, pitchers, churns and dishes. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two potters stood out from a quality and artistic standpoint – Walter Stephen and Oscar Bachelder.

Bachelder had traveled all over the country, making utilitarian wares, but he was an artist at heart. He said his masters (bosses) just wore him down. He finally wound up in the NC Mountains, and made wonderful artistic pottery.

Walter Stephen came from Iowa, and migrated to Tennessee with his mother, who was an art teacher. There they began to experiment with white clay, mixing it with water, and painting designs on his pieces. They later moved near Asheville, NC, and started his famous “paste on paste” pieces, with these designs. They were very popular with tourists coming through the mountains on vacations.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Interview file #5, Pottery development in NC

## Development of Art Pottery in the Twentieth Century

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, NC potters were making utilitarian wares. But with the advent of Sears Roebuck and other companies, people found cheaper and better products for these uses... and they could buy butter instead of making their own in pottery churns. Many potters quit and went into other professions.

Among the first people to recognize the wonderful work done in Seagrove, and the need to preserve this work, were Jacques and Juliana Busbee. They moved to Seagrove from Greensboro, and hired Ben Owen in 1923 to make artistic pottery that might be bought by people outside the area. Juliana opened a shop in Greenwich Village in New York City and sold his wares there. Jacques took Ben to New York and educated him in global pottery traditions, like the ancient Chinese. The market loved the results, and Ben Owen's pottery is now in museums around the country.

Other families in the Piedmont followed this lead, and developed innovative approaches to selling their unique products. In the mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dorothy Cole Auman was very creative in marketing, and provided another boost for the industry (see more on Auman in the next section).

Updated production of pottery in the Catawba Valley developed later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than Seagrove. The Catawba Valley had none of the tourism advantages of the Piedmont, or people with the vision and drive of the Busbees or Dorothy Auman. Some potters such as Reinhardt and Propst did try to keep going, selling in mountain shops, and even shipping some pieces made with two colors of clay to the West Coast ("swirlware").

After World War II, there was no one left making pottery in the Catawba Valley. Burlon Craig was working in a furniture factory, and took over the Reinhardt kiln located next door to where he lived. He rejuvenated the ash glaze tradition in Catawba County (see more on Craig in the next section).<sup>4</sup>

Considering contemporary potters, in the Catawba Valley, (George) Kim Ellington and Charles Lisk are carrying on the ash glaze tradition of Burlon Craig. In the Mountains, Jane Peiser makes very special hand done pieces (sculptural, with many colors). Mat Jones, near Asheville, uses ash glasses with beautiful slip trailing (white clay into patterns). In the area of Seagrove, Ben Owen III may be the most famous... he does beautiful work, including influences of the Chinese and Japanese. Also in the Seagrove area, Donna Craven makes wonderful designs and forms. Daniel Johnston's pottery shows influences of his visits to Thailand. Mark Hewitt is originally from England; his father was involved in ceramics there. Mark has learned from his many travels, including Africa, and is now very much in demand.

The future for NC pottery is very bright... NC ceramics are getting broad national and international acclaim in important craft publications today.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Interview file #6, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Potters

<sup>5</sup> Interview file #8, Contemporary Potters

## **Burlon Craig and Dot Auman – Two Great Potters, Two Good Friends**

Daisy became close friends with two very important North Carolina Potters – Burlon Craig and Dot Cole Auman.

The first North Carolina potter who really piqued Daisy's interest was Burlon Craig (1914-2002)<sup>6</sup>, a major figure in carrying on the ash glaze tradition in the Catawba Valley. Daisy heard a talk by UNC folk art professor Charles (Terry) Zug at the Mint, which included pictures of Craig using ash glaze, and "I just went wild and had to meet him." "To my great surprise, I realized that this ware was the same thing that they made in China 2000 years ago." Daisy spent much effort researching this connection, including trips to China. (In a nutshell, the trail seems to go from China to Edgefield, SC – perhaps through writings of a missionary in China – then to the Catawba Valley.)

Daisy made friends with Burlon, started to buy his pots, and, with a contingent of others, attended all his kiln openings. Burlon called Daisy "girly" and the kiln gatherings were fun for all. They asked him to make a face jug (like those that were made in a similar setting in Georgia), and he became known for his face jugs.

Daisy made many visits to his facility, purchased many of his pieces, and donated several to the Mint.<sup>7</sup> She also introduced him to the international market in the late 1970s via Sotheby's and this led to a show by Burlon at the Smithsonian.<sup>8</sup>

Daisy also became good friends with Dorothy (Dot) Cole Auman (1925-1991), which in time benefited the Mint Museum tremendously. Dot was part of the Cole family, a family with a long tradition in NC pottery, and was an excellent potter herself. Daisy describes her as "very opinionated, yet very charming, open and friendly..." and willing to pass along her vast knowledge of NC pottery history and the pottery making process (she was taught by her father, CC Cole). Daisy spent many hours talking with Dot.

Dot had two major influences on NC pottery. One of her contributions was marketing NC pottery after business decreased following World War II. She worked with the newspapers, the governor, and helped supply stores where tourists might buy pottery (such as in Pinehurst). This approach helped keep the industry going in a tough time.

Dot's other contribution came from her love of NC pottery history. She developed a potter's museum at her home, with the help of an antique dealer friend who located old pottery (Dot used the old Seagrove railroad station building for the museum). Due to health concerns, Dot decided to sell her collection, and Daisy organized funding to buy it for the Mint Museum (personally contributing 1/3 of the price). Today, the Walter and Dorothy Auman collection forms a significant piece of the Mint's NC pottery holdings.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Interview file #4, DWB developing interest in NC pottery

<sup>7</sup> Interview file #6, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Potters

<sup>8</sup> Interview file #7, Buying and Donating NC Pottery

<sup>9</sup> Interview file #6, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Potters