

Unveiling American Genius
Kalamazoo Institute of Arts Docent Reports
Section 1: Design and Purpose

Report by: Sandy Ford



Object 1: *Tanoura*

Tanoura is a sculptural representation of a common Egyptian folk dance performed primarily by Sufi men. This sculpture is all about movement. A circular movement and rhythm are created by the repetition of a pattern of geometric shapes. Not only are the shapes repeated but the color of the shapes is also repetitive. These repeating patterns create an energetic movement. The curved undulating black lines create a sensuous mood and also serve to move the viewers eye around the sculpture. The surface area of the sculpture is completely covered by the pattern adding to the energetic movement. Even though the piece is not symmetrical, it creates a sense of balance and harmony because of the repetitive pattern and the curving organic lines. The asymmetry of the piece also adds to its sense of movement. This sculpture creates an artistic bridge between the beauty of Egypt's past and a more modern, innovative view of present-day Egypt.

Object 2: The Dance Wand is a sculptural piece that is carried by young men in Papua, New Guinea during dances and performances that have symbolic power relating to the agricultural cycle or some part of village life. The dances in which the paddles were used accompanied ceremonies for harvests, the launching of a canoe, and preparation for warfare. *The Dance Wand* consists of two semi-circular symmetrical elements connected by a short bar, by which the dancer would have grasped and twirled the paddle. The wands were kept in sacred houses when they were not being used.



The *Dance Wand* is used in a spiritual ritual dance unlike *Tanoura* which is an artistic representation of a spiritual ritual dance. The designs on the *Dance Wand* were scroll designs, curving and organic lines much like the *Tanoura*, but without the repetition of the geometric designs that gave it movement. The comma-shaped motifs on the paddle suggest the head of a bird with a long down curving beak. Unlike the *Tanoura*, the pattern was a low relief carving on wood rather than pottery. The two paddles are symmetrical, mirror images of each other. Similar to the *Tanoura*, the paddles both have a small base and a large curving structure connected. The wooden paddles are unpainted unlike the *Tanoura*. The geometric pattern moved throughout the *Tanoura* whereas the pattern in the wand was repeated only in each separate piece. Compared to the *Tanoura*, the *Dance Wand* really didn't appear to move, but only to suggest movement down the curving neck of the bird.

Questions:

Spend a few minutes looking at this piece. Write down 5 things you notice about the piece.
Now let's discuss what you observed.

How did the artist use line, shape and color to contribute to the mood or meaning?

What adjectives would you use to describe the work?

What verbs would you use to describe the work?

Report by: Paula J. Shelhamer

Object 1: *The Necklace of Seven Frogs*

Over thousands and thousands of years, we know that waterways will slowly change their course. In Central America, when precious items of gold jewelry started appearing onshore down river, it was discovered that the early cultures of these areas had underground tombs for their important leaders. Nearby waterways had eroded into these tombs and started washing treasured items downstream.

In the Pre-Colombian world (13,000 BCE-750 AD) there was often no written language, so art in many forms became the mode of correspondence and of visual importance. Art would represent the philosophy/religion of the culture along with serving as a mnemonic device. Of all the ways they would use art, using gold was the most significant. Gold, in its ore form, was not valuable to these early peoples. But use it to make decorative items and it became prized and treasured.



The Necklace of Seven Frogs was discovered in a burial site in Venado Beach in Panama. It was probably created in 800-1500 AD. The frog has several important characteristics to the early cultures. It was thought that the frog was present when the sea was created and may have had a critical role in creating it. The frog also performs the position of assistant to the funeral burial specialist and is left on top of the grave so that the dead cannot arise and bother the living. It has the duality of representing both fertility and death. The frog is usually found in its seated pose and most often has large, rectangular feet. Some cultures also highlight the poison glands where hallucinogenic poisons were extracted. This is represented by spirals found on some cast frogs.



Object 2: *The Tiffany Legacy Butterfly Broach*

The Butterfly Legacy Broach by Tiffany, even though made in 2006, follows the philosophy of Louis Comfort Tiffany who passed away 97 years earlier. The two most important requirements to Tiffany, were beauty and nature (and its colors). Cost was rarely, if ever, considered. In this handcrafted (another Tiffany condition) pin, we find eight significant blue sapphires with numerous diamonds (Tiffany was not enamored of diamonds!). Louis (pronounced "Loo-ee") was a fan of using plique-a-jour (enameling) to color and cover the gold parts of a piece of jewelry . . . also shown on this piece.

Butterfly symbolism: In psychoanalysis, a butterfly represents rebirth. In dreams it can mean a metamorphosis (positive if it's white). In Chinese art, a single butterfly represents longevity, grace and beauty while two butterflies mean young, harmonious love. To Native Americans, the butterfly is a symbol of change. To most cultures, the butterfly represents a positive symbol.

Questions:

What do these two pieces of jewelry have in common?

What do either of these creatures mean to you?

If you were going to make a piece of jewelry, what creature would you use and why?

Object 3: Dwayne Lowder, *Saddle Theme*, 1968

This work, exquisite in its simplicity, is literally a standout. *Saddle Theme* is 24 inches high, 14.25 inches wide and sticks out 6.25 inches. Anyone who has had a knowledge of horses, would immediately recognize this as a saddle in its most organic form. Cast in bronze and gold with a patina, it exemplifies Mr. Lowder's artistic focus towards things that are natural. It could also remind one of a sea creature that is smooth and graceful. Does it remind you of a manatee?



There is a wisp of a wire-like feature across the front of the saddle. Is it a lariat? Is it in the shape of a "w"? The eyes easily follow the flow from the bottom, up around the curves to the knot on the end. Is it a whip? The saddle is placed on a black arch that makes it even more impressive. In artwork, arches can signify being invited in. Is the artist inviting you in to relate to this work? The arch is placed on a lighter colored board that further accentuates the depth and layers of *Saddle Theme*. In the middle of the saddle there is a deep round depression, whereas on a saddle there would be a build up to fit a person's body. Do you think he did this to accommodate the wire?



The Artist

Originally from North Carolina, Dwayne Lowder moved to Kalamazoo to teach at the KIA, as well as, to be the KIA's preparer from 1963-65. From the KIA, he moved to Western Michigan University to be an associate professor in the WMU art department and stayed there from 1966-80. Lowder was quite an important figure in the Kalamazoo art scene during all that time.

Lowder, a complex man, was multi-talented, working in paint, sculpture, wood print and "circle" painting. Even the reverse sides of his canvases are thought to be works of art because of the way he placed the wood stretcher bars. At one point in his career, he destroyed half of his works because he considered them "too immature". One of his philosophies was that artists should be humble.

After his time at Western was done, he moved back to the South to Virginia where, continuing with his artwork, he also maintained a large sheep farm and orchid farm among many other gardens.

Dwayne Lowder passed away on August 16, 2018. A comment written by a former student said: "I was one of Dwayne's pupils at Western Michigan University in the 1970s. He was one of the most thoughtful, modest, wise and kind people I have ever met. He is sure to be remembered fondly by many." Even in death, he left an intriguing story. When the estate had been finalized and settled, the caretaker discovered, in a shed, many dusty and dirty paintings. Rather than throwing them away, he realized that the paintings could be something of value and wisely contacted someone he knew who had a link with WMU. These paintings became the property of Western and were shown along with other works of his in an exhibition at the Richmond Center last year. The catalog of this exhibit is available in the KIA library Lowder file and is a wonderful guide to his artwork and bio.

Other Dwayne Lowder works in the KIA Collection

In the Southern Tradition, 1981, stained glass

Landscape, 1965, lithograph

Shooting Gallery, 1979, Acrylic on paper

December Dominance, 1974, Acrylic on paper

Untitled, 1973, Acrylic on canvas and wood panel

Report by: Lyda Stillwell

Ideas about Mayan Objects to Consider Sharing on Tours

**The objects were not considered “art” but were important objects in the spiritual/religious/life practices of the people who created them.

**The study of ancient cultures is on-going. Archeologists, scholars, scientists learn something new about these cultures all the time. New knowledge often enhances what is known, as well as proving the old inaccurate.

**Some practices may now seem strange to us, but they were vital to the people at that time and they were a crucial part of their everyday life.

**Some of the information shared has come from a transcript of the lecture delivered by the late Dr. Douglas Bradley, a Curator at the Snite Museum of Art at Notre Dame. Dr. Bradley was an expert on pre-Columbian art who came to the KIA on January 10, 2005, to present a lecture and discuss our collection.

Big Idea: To the Maya, blood contained the soul of a person. When blood was purposefully spilled it was a reciprocal gift to the gods for creating the universe.

Public sacrifices, after wars or ball games, were important events and these public displays were attended by many people.

Individuals also offered blood to the gods. People would pierce their bodies and collect the blood on paper. These papers would be placed on a plate on top of a brazier where the papers would burn – sending communicative smoke to the gods.

The first two figures, the *Ball Player* and the *Smiling Girl* are associated with blood and human sacrifice.

Object 1: *Figure of a Ball Player*, 550 -950 CE, earthenware.

This small figure has been described as a funeral figure from the Isle of Jaina. This isle sits in the present-day Mexican state of Campeche on the Yucatan Peninsula. It is a Maya archeological site where dignitaries were taken to be buried. When excavated, these sites have revealed a high number of ceramic figures.



The ***Ball Player*** is dressed in typical Maya ball player gear but also includes a necklace of skulls, perhaps suggesting the importance of **the ritual ball game which was one of the most important single religious activities in the Maya culture.**

Some archeologists assert that to the Maya, the game was a battle between the underworld and the living. Later, the Aztec compared the bouncing ball to the cosmic journey of the sun and they held festivals to help insure the continuous cycle of nature and the cosmos.

The Ball Game-The ball game was a game of Life and Death; death often came to the losers.
Losing ball players were beheaded as a sacrifice; the head may be a metaphor for the ball.

Ball courts were focal spots placed in the city's sacred area. The court was a masonry rectangular space with the possibility of the audience sitting on either side. The idea of the game was to get the ball through stone hoops attached to the sides of the opponent's court.

The players could not use their hands – only their hips, elbows, knees, thighs and shoulders. By skillful maneuvers, a player could project the hard rubber ball, usually weighing 6 to 10 pounds. Players wore

protective gear to prevent bodily damage as a direct hit by the ball could mean death to the player. The yoke was an important device. It somewhat resembled a horseshoe made of stone or heavy wood and was worn around the midsection, allowing the player to twist the body to hit and return the ball. The **Ball Player** is wearing a yoke. The equipment at such games was completely covered with iconography of power and fertility

Object 2: Smiling Girl – Possibly of the Remojadas Culture located on Mexico's Veracruz Gulf Coast from 100 BCE to 800CE

Various roles have been assigned to figures such as **Smiling Girl**. She might represent a performer or someone who is a part of the cult of the dead. To Dr. Bradley, she more than likely she represented a drugged human before sacrifice. Sacrificial people are often females, an offering symbolizing fertility – the best gift. She is unusual in that she has a head and body as well as articulated arms. Mounds of bodies and separate mounds of heads were found at funeral sites.



Object 3: Maya Polychrome Plate, 550 – 900 CE

This colorful plate has the image of a ritual ball player – wearing a yoke - with one leg up. This funeral dish has a hole drilled in the center. It is a “kill” hole, killing the plate to allow it to accompany the deceased into afterlife.

Question: Three thousand years from now when people, attempting to learn about us, examine our culture, what custom or customs will appear very strange



Gold Objects from Panama/Costa Rica A. D. 800 – 1500

Big Ideas:

Objects were not considered “art” but were important in the spiritual/religious/life practices of the people who created them, focusing on the invisible realm.

According to KIA information, “...It is important to keep in mind that these works were created according to strict cultural traditions rather than as an individual artist’s desire for self-expression.” Objects such as the Anthropomorphic Pendant and the Warrior Figures may not have been seen until ritual occasions, such as coming of age, connecting with ancestors, planting and harvesting.

Gold was viewed as divine. Some cultures believed that it had fallen out of the sky and it represented the amount of spirituality the person possessed. Various gold figures were melted down by invading people and then reshaped into ingots and transported to Europe. The search for gold would lead to the destruction of some communities.

Transformation: A universal concept found throughout the Americas - the physical change of a special person, such as a ruler or shaman into another form enabling him to go into the Spirit World to talk to ancestors. His purpose might be to build relationships and resolve issues and problems.

Duality: This is an extremely important concept in pre-Columbian art. *Duos* often carry opposites. It is the metaphor for existence in the world; it is the foundation for a world view that bundles every aspect of the world and existence together in one image: male/female; age/youth; life/death; human/monster, etc,

Animal images as symbols – suggesting supernatural traits or qualities the human possessed or wished to have. Images of animals used for decoration conveyed meanings for the various cultures; some of them are:

Jaguar: - power. The god of Night and the formidable Lord of the Underworld; an image used by rulers and warriors.

Crocodile/Caiman: The world was a huge crocodile/caiman whose scales formed the mountains and valleys of their world. When the crocodile moved, there was an earthquake. The caiman was considered a God.

Frogs – The Great Goddess and the opposite of the Caiman God. Frogs could be considered spirits of rain, creator of the ocean, burial helpers.

Bats – Duality. Bats fly in the sky and also live in caves: Upper earth/ Underworld.

Spider Monkeys: warriors

Monkeys - men

Harpy Eagle – a metaphor for the sun god.

Pendants could indicate social status for some cultures

Object 4: Gold Anthropomorphic Pendant, Panama/Costa Rica, 800 AD – 1500

*This pendant has many symbolic messages.

*It is a half human/half animal being.

*The bars on top and bottom are symbols of the Upper Earth and the Underworld

*The wide-legged stance suggests transformation of the shaman to the Spirit

World to serve an intermediary between the two worlds.

*KIA's information notes that this object "...shows a figure wearing a hummingbird mask. On the wings are small details meant to be feathers on the outside edge. Four alligators in profile surround the figure." A monkey or a spider monkey is in his mouth.



The creative process:

*Lost wax casting was used. The pendants were molded in wax and then cast in gold.

*Filigree was also used. Once the gold figure was completed, delicate threads of gold were carefully applied. Filigree can be seen in the spires on the caiman heads.

Objects 5 and 6: Warrior Figures, cast gold, Panama/Costa Rica, AD 800 – 1500

*These figures have symbolic messages.

* They represent the power of duality.

*They are human with bat heads - the creatures of the Upper World and the Under World.

*Successful warriors were highly honored and these two figures represented cultural heroes.

*They are holding rectangular ceremonial axes. The axes might be representing "macuahuiti" – a wooden club with sides embedded with obsidian blades – capable of great harm. The macuahuiti was common combat/warrior equipment.



Report by: Kristi Durbin

Object 1: Pitcher, Lucy M. Lewis, American, 1898-1991, Native American, Acoma Pueblo, ceramic

About the Artist

Lucy Lewis lived her entire life on the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico. First inhabited in 1150 AD, the Sky City mesa (as it is popularly known) is the oldest continuously inhabited community in North America. It is an area rich with culture and tradition, and the craft of making pottery has been handed down through generations of families. In the case of Lucy Lewis, she was taught by her great aunt; she began making pottery at the young age of 8 and continued her craft well into her 90's. Subsequently, Lucy taught pottery making to her own children, and seven of her sons and daughters have become skilled artists in their own right.



Lucy learned to make pottery the traditional way, by hand coiling and shaping each vessel. Once the pot is dried, a white slip is applied and designs are painted with a brush made of a strip of yucca - gently chewed at the end to form a point. Designs often illustrate the life cycle and the relationship between earth and sky; geometric patterns and hatched lines represent clouds, lightning, rain, rainbows, birds, flowers, and the Zuni deer motif. The finished pot is then fired in an outdoor pit fueled by dried cow or sheep dung.

Lucy's career began in earnest in the 1920's, and by the 1940's her work was well-known and sought after by collectors. Inspired by the pots created by her ancient ancestors, the Anasazi and the Mimbres, she pioneered the use of "fine line" design that is now synonymous with the potters of Acoma. In the 1950's, Lucy began signing her work and competing widely in native craft competitions, winning numerous first prize awards. She was honored by the Governor of New Mexico for "Outstanding Personal Contribution to the Art of the State" and in the last year of her life, she received Gold Medals from the American Craft Council and the College Art Association. Lucy Lewis became one of the most highly regarded potters in the Southwest, and her legacy continues in the work of her children and grandchildren.

The potters of Acoma have been making vessels associated with the carrying and storage of water since the 1600's, often decorated with geometric forms or rainbow/bird motifs. Lewis' use of stepped forms to decorate this pitcher suggest clouds and lightning, and she has also used the traditional orange and black pigments often seen in works from Acoma. Pottery from the Sky City mesa is known for its thin-walled construction, making the firing process quite tricky and delicate. Potters dig the distinctive white clay themselves from a secret source on pueblo lands, and mineral pigments are also gathered and mixed by hand.

This small pitcher is evocative of a traditional use but, due to its size and the decorative twisted handle, was likely intended for collection and display. At Acoma, as with many other pueblo communities in the American Southwest, the use of pottery as a daily "must-have" item declined in the 1800's once durable goods for cooking and household use became readily available.

Touring Questions/Suggestions for Elementary-aged Groups:

1. What can you tell me about this object?
2. How would you make an object like this? What materials would you need?
3. Describe the symbols painted on the side of the object. What do they look like to you?
4. What do you think this object is used for?
5. Do you have any objects like this in your home? How do you use them?

6. Activity suggestion – hand each child a piece of clay. Have them describe what it feels like. Ask them to make an object out of the clay inspired by the piece they are viewing.

References

Seven Families in Pueblo Pottery (1974). Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, NM.

<http://www.migrations.com/traditionalacoma.html>

<https://www.eyesofthepot.com>

<https://www.acomaskycity.org/main.html?pgid=40>



Object 2: Feather/Treasure Box, n.d., Unknown, Oceania, New Zealand, Maori, wood, paua shell inlay

Cultural Significance and Purpose

Considered a piece of functional art, a *wakahuia* (treasure box) such as the one in the KIA collection was used by the Māori people of Aotearoa (New Zealand) to store feathers and other personal ornaments. Typical items contained in such a box might include *hei tiki* (pendants) or *huia* feathers for decorating the hair. When not in use, the box was hung from the house rafters in order to keep the contents safe.

These containers were often given personal names and became highly valued *taonga* (cultural treasures) possessing both *mana* (prestige) and *tapu* (sacredness), qualities that they acquired by association with their owners. The *taonga* they held also acquired *tapu* through being worn on the body of their owners, and this is especially true of *taonga* worn on the head, the most *tapu* part of the body. This enhanced the overall prestige and value of these containers in Māori society. And as a result, they became highly treasured family and tribal heirlooms (Te Papa-Museum of New Zealand).

Design and Materials

Māori *wakahuia* have ornate carvings on the underside, as they were intended to be seen from above. Common patterns are inspired from the natural environment, such as spider webs, fish scales, and the unfurling fronds of a fern (*koru*). In addition to the complex curvilinear designs typical of Māori wood carving, human figures (*tiki*) often adorn the bottom of these objects, as if the ancestors are looking down upon the owner. Native timbers, such as totara and kauri, are used for carvings such as these; this particular box also includes paua shell inlay, presumably as eyes for the heads carved in each end of the vessel.

Touring Questions/Suggestions for Elementary-aged Groups:

1. What can you tell me about this object?
2. How would you make an object like this? What materials would you need?
3. Describe the symbols carved on the side of the object. Why do you think this object is carved on the top and bottom?
4. What do you think this object is used for?
5. Do you have any objects like this in your home? How do you use them?
6. Activity suggestion – have the students compare and contrast this object with the Lucy Lewis pitcher. Discuss similarities and differences between the artists' craft – materials, use, cultural significance of the object, etc.

References

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/313623>

<https://www.newzealand.com/us/maori-carving/>

<https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/665918>

<https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/topic/2407>

Report by Christine McCarthy

Object 1: Janet Fish, June, 1999

Background Janet Fish

Janet Fish was born in 1938 in Boston, MA, to a family of artists. She was raised in Bermuda where she developed a passion for sculpture and printmaking. She later studied these interests at Smith College, going on to Yale to study painting and receive her MFA in 1963. She currently splits her time between New York City and Middletown Springs, VT. "The real structure of the painting comes from the movement of color and light across the entire surface," she has said of her work. "What matters is the complex relationship of color and form from one area of the painting to another. Eventually everything is intertwined."



The purpose of this painting is to showcase and highlight Janet Fish's belief that still lifes can be more than still. They do not need to be dead. Her work emphasizes light and color and how this flows and highlights radiant energy. Her belief in the interconnectedness of things is displayed as the light dances across the canvas leading your eye from one object to the next, swirling around a vase, reflecting a burst of color onto the tablecloth, highlighting each petal of fresh flowers, glistening on the skin of ripe fruit. A moment is captured, not so much in a photographic sense, but in a way that easily renders images of sunny days. The nearly overwhelming input of color and light tease our other senses as we can almost hear the sounds of summer, smell the scents of fresh cut flowers, feel the hard, slick glass and taste the sweet, ripe fruit.

Object 2: Dale Chihuly, *Buttercup Yellow Persian with Red Lip Wrap*, 1996

Background Dale Chihuly

Dale Chihuly was born in 1941 in Tacoma, WA. He studied interior design at the University of Washington in Seattle and received an MS in sculpture at the University of Wisconsin, where he studied glass blowing. He received his MFA in ceramics at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 1968 and received a Fulbright Scholarship and Louis Comfort Tiffany grant to travel to Italy and study at Venini Fabrica, a renowned glassblowing workshop on the island of Murano. He returned to the States in 1969 and established a glassblowing program at RISD, where he taught until 1980. He also founded the Pilchuck Glass School north of Seattle in 1971. After losing an eye in a car accident in 1976, he began to rely on assistants to help execute his designs. "Glass is the most magical of all materials," he has said. "It transmits light in a special way."



Unlike a vase or a bowl, this piece is less utilitarian and more decorative. Its purpose is to engage the viewer with its spontaneous form and burst of color. Is it modeled on sea life or perhaps a magnification of microorganisms? Perhaps it is a droplet of paint from a painter's brush as it ricochets off the floor. Whatever it is, it is alive with energy and movement. The red lips outline and highlight the form, creating a high voltage punch of color. This piece is loud, it will not be ignored or fade quietly into the background. It boldly calls attention to itself - in fact it is practically shouting! This piece may not be as big or grand as some other Chihuly works, but it demonstrates his style and inventiveness in exploring color, line and form to transform glass sculpture into an organic, vibrant creation.

Compare and Contrast

Both pieces deal with glass, in one piece as its subject, in the other as its medium. Both highlight the translucency of the glass and its reflective and refractive qualities, used to bounce the light and create

energy flowing through the artworks. Both pieces are richly saturated in vibrant colors to dazzle the eye and stimulate and excite the viewer. However, beyond this there are many contrasts. *Juno* feels “as Easy as Sunday Morning.” Observing this painting is an exercise in mediation, reflective and contemplative. The energy is peaceful and calming, our eye flows through the piece, appreciating the harmony and tranquility of the composition. On the other hand, *Buttercup Yellow Persian* brings a frenetic energy bursting out of itself. Its jagged lines outlined in red and its undulating shape with waves of ridges radiating out from the spherical core create an explosion, a freeze-frame as energy transforms powerfully from one form to another. While Janet Fish creates a painting, using her deft skills to produce a realistic depiction of glass with all its qualities and characteristics, Dale Chihuly takes glass and uses those qualities and characteristics to make it into something else entirely, something alive and on the move. These pieces exemplify the progression of each artist’s background and training to create highly skilled artworks that demand more than a passing glance.

Potential Tour Questions

How does each piece make you feel?

How are the pieces similar?

How are the pieces different?

Does the glass in each piece look fragile to you? Does it look strong?

Report by Vanita Aloisio

Object 1: Roesen, Severin, ca. 1815-1872. German, but active in the U.S. *Still Life with Fruit and Bird's Nest*. n.d.

Roesen was born in Germany on February 5, 1816. He is recognized as a major still life painter of the mid-19th century. He began as a porcelain painter which required a fine, detailed touch. His still lifes became the standard for Victorian dining room decoration.

He married in Prussia and then came to America in 1848. His wife died, but he remarried and had two children. He eventually left this family and settled in Pennsylvania where there was a large German population in the area of Harrisburg, Huntington, and Williamsport. Roesen found a ready market for his work among the merchants, hotels, and restaurants.

He modeled his work after the Dutch paintings of a century earlier. His subject matter did not vary, often just rearranged. Critics and historians say his work represents nature’s abundance and the sanctity of the New World. A large number of his paintings were discovered in Williamsport, PA. His last dated painting was 1872. He often used curling grape tendrils to form his signature.

His studio was often a place of male gathering and beer drinking. He would sometimes paint a stein of beer in his work, and if the client was dissatisfied with it, Roesen would paint it out. He often traded a painting for a supply of beer!

This particular work has a strong diagonal of grape stems; value contrast achieved by a “scoop” of white of the rinds and eggs that moves the eye; symbolism of the bird’s nest (home, comfort); absence of *memento mori*. Depending on what it’s surrounded by, I might mention the hierarchy of art instruction of the European academies; i.e. still life, animals, portraits, landscapes, etc. Roesen apparently found his niche and stayed there!



Object 2: Gammon, Reginald, American, 1921-2005. *Untitled (Still Life with Pewter Pitcher)*. ca. 1950

Born in Philadelphia, PA, Gammon became known as a “social painter,” inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and the Scottsboro trials, an infamous episode of legal injustice in the Jim Crow South. He joined the US Navy, rather than be drafted. He served in an all-black unit in Guam from 1944-46. He studied art in Philly and in New York City when he moved there in 1948. He began teaching art with the New York City Public Schools. He was invited to be a member of Spiral in 1963 and knew Romare Bearden, Richard Mayhew, Hale Woodruff, and Hughie Lee-Smith. He came to Western Michigan University in January, 1970 as a visiting scholar, began teaching painting at WMU, and retired in 1991 as a full professor of Fine Arts and Humanities.



Gammon, an exceptional painter, teacher, and printmaker, is known mainly for his portraits: Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, H.O. Tanner, Paul Robeson as Othello, and fellow professors at WMU; a series of family portraits done in sepia tones. Of this series, the KIA also owns *Home on Leave*.

At times, Gammon was interested in body art and African art. He retired to New Mexico and became immersed in the art community there. After his bypass surgery, he painted health images with subtle humor. In New Mexico, he also returned to printmaking, developing over 100 prints of historically important jazz musicians and gospel singers.

Gammon only occasionally did still lifes and landscapes. This still life was done early in his career when he was in New York City doing various jobs to support himself while devoting evenings and weekends to his painting. The colors are muted and dark. It has a look of abstraction, flatness. The inclusion of an open book and the mortar and pestle are atypical.

Gammon was an avid, life-long reader who researched his subjects well. He was on the selection committee for the sculpture of Martin Luther King in the city park near the transportation center.

Report by JoAnn Yochim

Object 1: Miriam Schapiro (1923-2015), *The Square Root of Paradise*, 1980

Looking at this 6 1/2 by 4 foot work of art, what catches your eye?

We see stitches, quilting, sequins, collage...What about these items is related?

Miriam Schapiro was a leader in promoting the concept that crafts, usually associated with women's work, could be considered fine art.

She was born in Canada and grew up in New York City. Her father was an artist and Miriam began developing an interest in drawing from an early age. At 14 she studied at MOMA and took evening adult classes with the Federal Art Program (WPA). She went to school at the University of Iowa, studying painting and printmaking, graduating with her MFA degree. She married fellow artist Paul Brach and by the 1950s they had settled in New York City. “Together they took their place in the blossoming avant-garde art scene.”



Schapiro was developing her own style of abstraction in her paintings, and exploring the fragmented roles women play in society. She was showing regularly in New York galleries. She and her husband Paul were working artists, as well as parents of a son, Peter. In 1964 they worked at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop and a turning point in her art career came when she created her first collages. For all that success she apparently felt an outsider in the male dominated art scene.

From 1967 to 1975 Miriam and her husband lived in Southern California. After a year teaching at UCSD they moved to Los Angeles where she established the Feminist Art Program at the Institute of the Arts with Judy Chicago. Together they organized an exhibition space called Womanhouse, which became a landmark in feminist art. A deteriorating Hollywood house was acquired and filled with "traditionally women-themed" art, such as needlepoint, weavings, collages as well as paintings. Opened to the public for three months, they staged performances to draw attention to the work. In 1972 Schapiro participated in the exhibition with her smaller piece within Womanhouse called "Doll House," featuring rooms signifying particular roles a woman plays in society and depicted the conflicts between them.

Schapiro became a founder of the Pattern and Decoration movement from the mid-1970s. She was working with collage materials of lace, sequins, and other ornamental elements associated with women, hearts, floral decorations, geometric patterns and the color pink. Elements we see represented in "The Square Root of Paradise." Moving further away from traditional painting, thinking differently and making craft a fine art. She introduced the term "femmage"...feminine and collage.

In 1975 Miriam and her husband returned to New York City when Paul became the chair of the Arts Division at Fordham University, Lincoln Center. Miriam became economically successful and had a studio of her own. She created shaped works including her iconic heart, fan and kimono shaped works. As she evolved further from traditional painting she produced installations and large visually dramatic works such as "Anatomy of a Kimono", and others, giving voice to issues central to women and the female experience.

The Square Root of Paradise is an outstanding example of work created by Miriam Schapiro.

It would be interesting to compare and contrast her piece with works by Helen Frankenthaler and Faith Ringgold. The title of this piece is intriguing and could be a conversation starter.

Report by Anne Lipsey

Objects 1 and 2: James C. Watkins and Maria Scott: Contemporary American Ceramic Artists

"We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want." Tao Te Ching

Ritual Display by James C. Watkins and *Salt Bowl* by Maria Scott are examples of contemporary American ceramic art. Both created in the 1990's, these works take a common household item - the bowl - and elevate it to artistry.



Bowls, especially handmade bowls, are both a part of our everyday life and an opportunity to bring art and artistry into our lives. They hold both beauty and opportunity. My favorite salad bowl for instance is a large wheel-thrown ceramic one. It serves as the container, and perhaps a canvas, for a wide variety of vegetables. I can spice it up with nuts, raisins and cheese and dress it with additional of flavors and smells. It can hold salad for 10 and serves as the vessel for both nourishment and fellowship. And while this bowl of mine is functional it is also a thing of beauty, it is an artistic expression. This bowl is more than simply the exterior curves and rim. The interior is the place that holds 'what we want.'

The pieces

Salt Bowl by Maria Scott is a large (15x15x8 $\frac{2}{3}$ inches) hand built pit fired stoneware vessel. It is a bowl within a bowl that uses everyday items - salt and sticks - to fill both the channel between the inner bowl and rim. The inner bowl is empty.



The large outer bowl is made by building layer after layer of coils joined and paddled to create a seamless but somewhat textured exterior. It is a slow and meticulous process that requires time over a number of days and consistent attention to ensure the integrity of the vessel. The inner bowl is elevated on an unseen pedestal and a channel has been created to link the inner and outer bowls. Following an initial firing the piece was buried in sawdust and pit fired. The resulting dark mottled surface allows the viewer to observe the subtle textures of the exterior. The additions of sticks and salt to the channel between the bowls adds interest and contrast to the piece.

Ritual Display by James C. Watkins is a large (18x17 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches) double walled stoneware vessel. A long serpent-like form curves out of the deep caldron-like bowl. The shape is repeated inside the form as if waiting to emerge.

The double walled wheel-thrown form developed by Watkins has become a signature of his work allowing large forms to be thrown in such a way as to prevent warping and cracking. The technique also adds to the feeling of substance found in these works while not adding to the weight. Watkins contrasts the highly textured exterior of the pot with its smoother often shiny interior. The resulting large organic form resembles a container or perhaps an urn that could be used in a religious ritual. The hidden chamber that lives between the walls of this vessel may hold secrets or memories and prompts our curiosity.

Both the *Salt Bowl* and *Ritual Display* utilize the traditional vessel form as the vehicle for their artistic expression. Scott uses her hands to create her vessel in moments stolen from a busy life; one where the time for art is often a luxury. Her pieces are often a contrast of outside and inside with the interior of the piece is in some ways mysterious. The salt and sticks are both a stark contrast to the clay body of the vessel and a serendipitous reference to essential elements: trees and rock and enhance the pot that is hardened by fire.

Watkins is a teacher who utilizes clay and ceramics in both the architectural and design process. His work is substantial and references both the large cooking pots of his childhood and the dry often stark natural landscape of his Texas home. His pots have two distinct interiors. The first, the inner chamber between the bowl's walls is completely sealed off from the exterior of the piece. It is essential but hidden. The inner surface of the piece itself reflects the appendage in a subtle way and evokes questions that remain unanswered.

The artists

James C. Watkins was born in 1951 and grew up in the rural south. He was educated at the Kansas City Art Institute and Indiana University. Initially interested in drawing and painting, Watkins' chance encounter with a ceramics class changed the course of his art and his life. He is the Paul Whitfield Horn Professor Emeritus at the College of Architecture at Texas Tech University where he taught architectural drawing and architectural ceramics for 40 years. Watkins has showed his works widely.

Watkins grew up in an era where large cast iron pots were an essential tool for farm families. Used in soap making, laundry and food processing these pots were part of daily life. Watkins is known for his

large double walled ceramics that are reminiscent of the cast iron pots of his childhood. He also draws inspiration from the natural world and particularly the deserts and vistas of his Texas home.

Watkin's double walled throwing process was perfected following a dream and allowed him to address several structural challenges inherent in large pot making. Texture and the use of bird, snake and architectural appendages are also characteristic of his work. Watkins pots are fired to temperature and then removed from the kiln and buried in sawdust. The resulting finish, a dark lustrous black, adds dimension and mystery to his work. He is also able to emphasize the contrast between smooth from textured surfaces.

Maria Scott was born in 1963 in Chicago. She first worked in clay in high school, hand building because the school didn't have the equipment for throwing pots. She has lived in Kalamazoo since 1984 following her graduation, with a degree in fine arts, from Siena Heights College. She has worked in graphic design and currently is employed by the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts as a receptionist.

Scott's work is hand built and bisque fired, then buried in sawdust which is set on fire. The burning sawdust leaves the work with a smoky finish that allows the subtlety of the form and its texture to be revealed. Scott has often struggled to balance her work and artistic endeavors. She cites a 10-year period where the demands of earning a living left no time or place for her art. Today she works to fit her artistic endeavors into her life utilizing multiple short bursts of hand building and the slow deliberate drying process demanded by her work.

Both artists are African Americans.

Questions for discussion

These works are not appropriate for VTS (Visual Thinking Strategy).

General Questions:

1. What are the similarities between the two pieces?
2. What are the differences?
3. Do you have a favorite bowl? How do you fill it?
4. Scott uses rock salt and sticks in her piece. What might you use to accent this piece. How would that change its character?
5. Watkins has attached a serpent-like creature to his piece. What does that add to the story of the piece?

Reference: *Meditation of Fire, The Art of James C. Watkins*, by Kipra D. Hopper, 1999.

Object 3: William H. Bailey, Still Life With Egg Cup, Eggs and Bowl, 30 ½ X 33 ½ Oil on canvas

William H. Bailey is a contemporary painter who died in April, 2020. Best known for his still life, landscape and portraiture, Bailey created vividly real objects from memory rather than from the more traditional staged props.

Born in 1930 in Iowa, Bailey studied at the University of Kansas prior to enlisting in the army. He served in Korea and Japan and upon discharge enrolled at Yale. There he studied with the abstract painter Josef Albers and earned both a B.A. and M.F.A. He taught in the college setting from 1962 to 1995 mostly at Yale. There he influenced a generation of artists.



His work is quiet and refined. He paints simple objects, eggs, bowls, and solitary individuals. ‘When my work changed around 1960 I was thinking, ‘There is so much noise in contemporary art, so much gesture,’ he told Yale News in 2010. ‘I realized it wasn’t my natural bent to make a lot of noise, and I’m not very good at rhetorical gesture’.

He was heavily influenced by Italian still life painter Giorgio Morandi, whose work is known for its subtlety and quiet. Bailey used muted colors to create a timeless world. Objects are vividly real yet also dreamlike. His portraits work has been labeled ‘disconcertingly impassive, implacable and unreadable.’ His *Portrait of S* was featured on the cover of Time magazine (1979-89).

He rejected the label ‘realist,’ saying I admire painters who can work directly from nature, but for me that seems to lead to anecdotal painting. Realism is about interrupting daily life in the world around us. I’m trying to paint the world that is not around us.’

The painting *Still Life with Egg Cup, Eggs, and Bowl* is a simple arrangement of objects placed on a dark table. The objects are carefully rendered and somehow ethereal. He uses subtle colors that somehow filter out all feelings. While this painting is not one that fits the standard VTS format, one can imagine the viewer’s imagination to creating a story about how these everyday items came to be in this place at this time.

A survey of Bailey’s work was scheduled to open at the New York Studio School in March of 2020. It was put on hold by the pandemic.

Reference: “William Bailey Modernist Figurative Painter Dies at 89”, by William Grimes, New York Times, April 18, 2020