



37th Annual Conference
Indianapolis, Indiana, April 16-21, 2009

**Session/Meeting Name: Indiana Innovations: Traditional and Modern
Decorative Arts**

Date, Time: April 20, 2009, 10:15-11:45am

Moderators: Kathy Woodrell
Recorder: Julia Wisniewski

Speakers:

Mary Jane Teeters-Eichacker, Curator of Social History, Indiana State Museum
Peter Blume, Director of the Ball State University Museum of Art, Muncie, Indiana
David Buchanan, Curator of Decorative Objects and Furniture, Indiana State Museum
Lisa Pelo-McNiece, Department Head, Glass Studio, Indianapolis Art Center

Summary:

Moderator Kathy Woodrell invited four representatives from Indiana cultural institutions to present Indiana's contributions in the decorative arts. Their discussions of quilts, pottery, furniture and glass covered not only aspects of style and design, but also the flavor of the times. Kathy innovatively introduced the speakers by highlighting their personal collecting habits, starting with Mary Jane Teeters-Eichacker, who collects a variety of crafts and makes art doll figurines, usually with found objects.

"Indiana's Quilting Heritage: Amish and English Quilts in the Indiana State Museum." Mary Jane Teeters-Eichacker

Mary Jane opened our tour of Indiana quilts with the Indiana State Museum's newest acquisition: a "fancy" quilt, unusually signed, named, and dated in the eye-catching border. This historic context distinguishes a true museum piece from a collectible. Further examples, from the Pottinger Collection of Indiana Amish quilts, mostly from northern Indiana counties, were contrasted with those from the "English" (as the German-speaking Amish call everyone else) tradition. Mary Jane quizzed the audience about the differences, which were not always easy to tell!

She dispelled many myths regarding quilts: 1) they were devised by thrifty American homemakers—quilts probably originated in China, and often showcased luxury fabrics and refined skills; 2) Amish quilters don't use white—colors vary as determined by local bishops; 3) Amish don't use prints—David Pottinger collected an example made with pieces given by a Mennonite friend; 4) Amish always include mistakes—again, Mr. Pottinger pointed one out to a maker who hadn't noticed; and 5) there is no solid evidence for an Underground Railroad quilt code—this only reveals our desire for such stories.

Techniques for making the decorative quilt top—piecing and appliqué—were illustrated, as well as different piecing patterns and sets: Log Cabin being a pattern, and Barn Raising a typically Indiana set, or variant arrangement, of the pattern. Friendship quilts, not a pattern but a usage, were made by groups as fundraisers or gifts for special honorees. (To a hand-quilter's comment on the predominance of machine-quilted art quilts, Mary Jane replied that she considers it another technique. Of greater concern are non-traditional

materials that challenge conservators.) Finally, the tour surveyed the evolution of the practical bedcover to the “best” quilt: red and green appliqué quilts of the 1850s, Victorian crazy quilts with pieces joined by the most elaborate stitching conceivable, art quilts (non-utilitarian quilts created as an art form) sparked by the 1971 exhibition “Abstract Design in American Quilts” at the Whitney Museum, and last, the painterly effects of the “Letters to Sylvia” art quilt, made by Phil Beaver of French Lick in 2004.

“American Studio Ceramics (Indiana Born or Made)” Peter Blume

Potters in Ohio began to use the local clay in the late 19th century; the Hoosiers in Indiana followed somewhat later. Elizabeth Overbeck (1875-1936) studied ceramics at Alfred University (Alfred, New York remains an important center for ceramics to this day), and founded her studio in Cambridge City, Indiana, about 1911. The four Overbeck sisters held themselves to high standards: 1) borrowed art is bad art, and 2) quality over quantity. Anything imperfect they smashed, making their surviving work extremely expensive. Humorous designs by Mary Frances show leaping gazelles whose eyes are repeated as motifs in foliage and hunters’ shields.

In 1880, the discovery of natural gas attracted the Ball Brothers Company and other glassmakers to eastern Indiana. Muncie Pottery manufactured large industrial ceramic vessels to hold molten glass, and began to make art pottery as a secondary line for the wholesale market in 1919. Styles in the 1930s reflected changing tastes, as shown by a tangerine-glazed pitcher. The Secret brothers of Muncie studied at Alfred, then remained in New York State, making utilitarian yet modernist, Scandinavian-influenced pottery.

Later, universities gave a vital boost to Indiana ceramics. Karl Martz (1912-1997), Alfred-trained like Elizabeth Overbeck, started the ceramics department at Indiana University. An accomplished potter, he is principally remembered for his experiments as a glaze chemist. A “bullet-proof” compote that survived decades of use in a student lounge is an example of the work of his counterpart at Ball State University, Marvin Reichle (b. 1924). Reichle was best known as a teacher of generations of potters, including his successors at Ball State, Linda Arndt and Ted Neal. Neal constructed a wood-fired kiln of bricks from a Mexican steel mill. His provocative “Geneva Teapot with Cozy” features an industrial light fixture holding the pot in bondage to a cast concrete base. Kenneth Ferguson (1928-2004) of Elwood, Indiana was an important teacher and ceramic artist, educated at the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh. The eccentric animals on his “Hare Basket” assume unexpected phallic shapes. Byron Temple (1932-2002) studied with various teachers, including Bernard Leach in England, then returned to the U.S. where he successfully marketed high-end dinnerware.

Peter concluded by emphasizing the shift in the second half of the 20th century from industrial to academic support of Indiana studio pottery. Peter himself collects practical pieces in support of local potters (and encourages others to do so), and contemporary turned wood objects, which (he says) are completely useless.

“Adventurous Excess and Clear Design: William S. Wooten and Charles Hollis Jones.” David Buchanan

David first collected objects from the trash at age 8, including a brass drinking mug which he still has, and a bundle of hand-drawn female nudes, which he no longer owned by that very evening. He introduced two Indiana furniture makers: the first, William S. Wooten (1835-1907), was an inventor and wood furniture manufacturer whose later creations epitomized the Gilded Age. Commerce and Indiana’s position as a railway crossroads were the basis of his success. Wooten patented a functional school desk/meetinghouse seat design in 1869, but later excelled in office desks. His “rotary” model featured sliding compartments, and his 1874 “King of Desks” secretary was the ultimate for organizing,

storing, and safekeeping office paperwork. David presented grades ranging from the walnut 'Ordinary' (mostly made with power tools) up through 'Standard' and 'Extra Grade' to 'Superior.' Each step up offered increasingly finer veneers, more elaborate carving, inlays, and ornamentation beloved of that era. Owners of 'Superiors' included John D. Rockefeller, Sidney Lanier, Joseph Pulitzer, Ulysses S. Grant and Spencer Baird (2nd Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, which owns his desk). Ironically, growing quantities of paper required a new piece of office furniture—the utilitarian filing cabinet—and Wooton closed his business in 1893.

Bloomington-born Charles Hollis Jones (b. 1945), the second featured furniture maker, was a young design prodigy. At age 14 he built a plywood cabinet for his father. His talent was quickly recognized at Bullocks Department Store in Los Angeles. When his summer job as a floor sweeper ended, he returned home only to begin receiving commission checks—his sketches had been translated into successful products. At age 18, he headed west again to Hudson-Rissman, where he became chief designer within six months. By 1972, he had his own showroom of characteristically sturdy and distinctive Lucite furniture. His "Edison" lamp pays homage to that invention, and the Indiana State Museum exhibits it in use, with softly glowing bulbs. His "wisteria" chair, commissioned and named by Tennessee Williams, features subtle circular indentations (Jones observed "anybody can cut a hole"), and his sofas, lit from below, seem to float on Lucite platforms. His high-end clients include Lucille Ball, Loretta Young, Sylvester Stallone and Billy Wilder, and a Lucite staircase was recently commissioned for Cecil B. DeMille's house.

As plastic became more common, it also became cheap. Demand fell until a revival of interest by collectors at the turn of the 21st century. The Arthur Elrod house in Palm Springs, California, designed in 1968 by John Lautner, was the setting in 2003 for a modernism exhibition that displayed many examples of Charles Hollis Jones furniture. In his words, "Acrylic was patented in 1931 and I've been working with it for two-thirds of my life." Today he continues making commissioned works, and turned a suggestion of David's on baby-boomer furniture for eternity into an urn design: "I made it, I marketed it, and sold it instantly!"

"Temperature Rising: Hot Glass of Indiana and Contemporary Counterparts." Lisa Pelo-McNiece

The story began, as for art pottery, with the discovery of natural resources. Deposits of natural gas in east central Indiana attracted about 300 glass companies there, including Ball Brothers, Kokomo Opalescent Glass (in continuous operation since 1888 and "well worth a tour"), D.C. Jenkins, and Indiana Glass Company. They produced a phenomenal variety of flat, decorative, pressed, blown, and machine-made glass for everyday use. But their heyday was brief: the supply of natural gas, estimated to last 200-300 years, was exhausted in fewer than twenty. Only a handful of smaller, family-owned and operated businesses survived.

In the 1960s, a new enthusiasm for glass as an artistic medium, the American Studio Glass movement, grew from the Toledo region and swept the country. Its co-founders, Harvey K. Littleton (b. 1922) and Dominick Labino (1910-1987), scaled down industrial production furnaces for an artistic milieu where one to five people could learn to blow glass. Labino was a chemist with a 40-year background in factory glassmaking; his original formulations achieved colors astounding for the time. Littleton, originally a ceramicist, is also renowned as the father of American sculptural glass. Over years of experiment, not thinking to seek advice from the Venetian masters of Murano, he developed new tools, equipment and techniques for working glass, and founded the first Studio Glass curriculum at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. (In answer to a question about whether Murano artists were likely to reveal their secrets, Lisa replied: not early on. Now, artists like Lino Tagliapietra,

trained in the old tradition, appreciate the value of teaching and influencing others, and enjoy the creative freedom of an independent studio artist.) Lisa showed impressive examples of Labino's and Littleton's work from the Indianapolis Museum of Art, part of a collection donated by Marilyn and Eugene Glick. A "must-see" at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis is the largest permanent installation of blown glass, the 43-foot tall "Fireworks of Glass," by Littleton's student Dale Chihuly.

What's exciting about Indiana glass today? Two institutions, the Indianapolis Art Center and Ball State University, are growing. Ball State University, founded in Muncie from a donation of land and buildings by Frank C. Ball and his brothers, is developing post-graduate degree programs and a center for hot glass instruction, with support from the Glicks. The Indianapolis Art Center plans to triple the space for its popular glass program. There, children as young as 10 can begin working with molten glass. In Indiana, members of the public can learn various glassworking techniques—furnacework, torchwork, cast glass, "warm" techniques such as slumping and fusing, and "cold" grinding and polishing of hard glass—and go on to earn fine art degrees in glass without leaving the state. "Glass is the love of my life" says Lisa, a sentiment resonating in Indiana today.

After a brief question and answer period, a congenial mingling of panelists and audience closed the session.