
Clear as Mud proves the adage that collectors are truly the best source of knowledge about under-studied art forms. Take the art pottery made in Kentucky in the early twentieth century; wonderful pieces have long been available on the art market, but the histories of their makers have been murkily understood, and questions about how the potteries relate to one other or to the larger art pottery world have gone unconsidered. Thus when gallerist Warren Payne set out to provide a thorough history of the region’s art pottery, he turned not to museum curators or academic art historians, but to serious Kentucky ceramics collectors who have spent decades compiling information on the objects they collect.

His result is a volume of new writing by collectors. Clear as Mud presents a series of thoughtful introductory essays plus chapter-length profiles of seven Kentucky potteries, designed and illustrated by Julie Payne in full, four-color pages. The writing varies by author, and the information provided is always excellent. Particularly valuable is a “Bottom Line” section that accompanies each chapter, showing images of the marks and other tells associated with each pottery.

The illustrations aid researchers throughout, whether historic images of the potteries unearthed in archives and library collections or Julie Payne’s new photographs of the works themselves. Her photos, taken in a gallery setting under studio lights, show numerous examples from each manufacturer, demonstrating their range of glazes and forms, and are so attractive they might make readers long for more captions. Further detail is found in the bibliography, which is especially strong on local historical works. A short index helps trace names, places, and styles across various essays.

The book is the second published by Cane Ridge. The beautifully-bound format, a nicely-sized paperback with flaps, allows space to appreciate the illustrations without being unwieldy. Only the typesetting, hampered by some very loose and very tight lines, may betray the youth of the publisher.

Regional histories of American pottery—such as Hazel Bray’s The Potter’s Art in California, Jessie Poesch’s Newcomb Pottery, and others—flourished in the 1980s, and it is exciting to see attention returned to art pottery, now in a newly-researched region. For its lovely photographs, laudable collectors’ perspective, and quality of information, Clear as Mud is a publication to be celebrated. Strongly recommended for all art and decorative art research libraries, academic libraries that support ceramics, and for museum libraries that collect American pottery, the book well serves curators, collectors, and researchers of the period.

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