

THE CENTRALITY OF CERAMICS IN

AFRICAN CULTURES

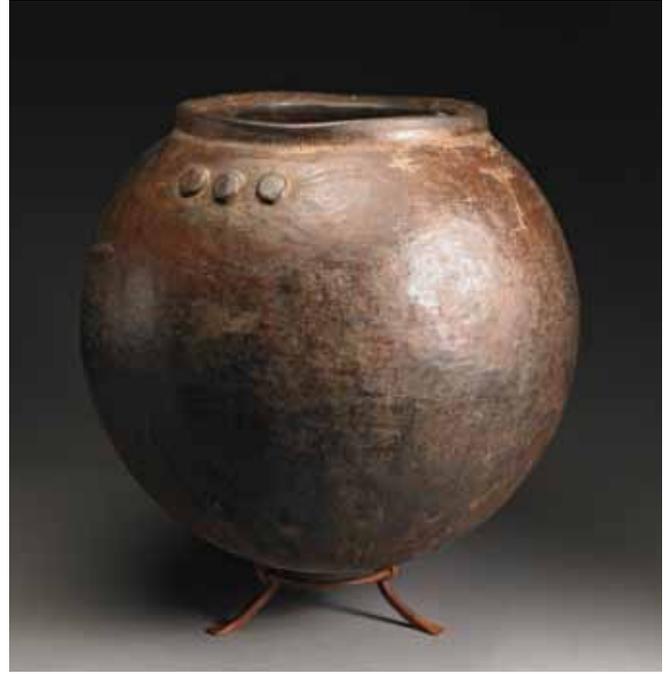
BY DIANA LYN ROBERTS



Covered Vessel, Lobi people, Burkina Faso, 22 in. (56 cm) in height, fired clay, patina, early to mid-20th century. All works are collection of the Art Fund, Inc. at the Birmingham Museum of Art; Dick Jemison Collection of African Pottery. All images courtesy of Birmingham Museum of Art.



Beer Pot, Zulu people, South Africa, 17½ in. (45 cm) in diameter, fired clay and slip, 20th century.



Vessel, Bamana people, Mali, 22½ in. (57 cm) in height, fired clay, 20th century.

In today's tightly controlled museum environments, one doesn't expect to come across a gallery with industrial shelves filled floor-to-ceiling and wall-to-wall with closely packed African pots. Yet in May of 2011, just past the final display case of the exhibition at the Birmingham Museum of Art (BMA) (www.artsbma.org) entitled, "African Artistry in Clay and Iron," a small gallery was in process of becoming temporary storage—for the moment blocked only by a stanchion and a friendly guard—where small, fragile, burnished vessels sat next to rough oversized jars with elaborate carved or embossed surfaces, next to crates that hadn't even been opened yet. The pots were just arriving from local collector and artist Dick Jemison and, the guard had heard, it was one of the finest collections of African ceramics in the country. Indeed, the 406-piece Jemison Collection of African Ceramics—now officially entered into the BMA's permanent collection—has prompted a full redesign of the African galleries, emphasizing the BMA's museum-wide commitment to ceramic display, history, and scholarship. A gallery dedicated to African ceramics opens this month, reinforced by the museum's inaugural Bunting Biennial Ceramics Symposium, a scholarly conference held in conjunction with the 28th Annual Alabama Clay Conference.

Until recently, African ceramics has held a somewhat peripheral position in the Western artistic consciousness and in museum holdings. The influence of African art on the early Modernists is a common axiom in the Western canon (with further appropriation of African imagery by later artists), but the weight of art history—and the colonial collections that inform it—rests almost entirely on the shoulders of carved masks and figurative sculpture, with an occasional nod to iron or bronze work, textiles, and luxury items in gold or ivory. Yet the prominence of ceramics in traditional daily

life and ritual, not to mention indigenous systems of value and connoisseurship, tells a different story of the African engagement with clay and aesthetic continuities between materials. This is the more complex view of African aesthetics that will be explored in the newly re-designed African galleries at the BMA, guided by Curator of the Arts of Africa and the Americas, Emily Hanna.

"It's unusual for art museums (as opposed to natural history museums) to have extensive collections of African ceramics," says Hanna, who became enamored of local traditions on her first research trip to Burkina Faso in 1989. Noting that the scale of most pots require storage and display space that many museums just don't have, Hanna acknowledges that accepting a gift of over 400 of them was a huge commitment for the museum, which involved rethinking—and funding—both storage and display.

"The Museum's African collections now consist of about 2000 objects, including masks, figure sculpture, ritual objects, musical instruments, furniture, jewelry, textiles, costume, basketry, ceramics, and metal arts," says Hanna, noting that the main gallery accommodates about 150 objects. So how many pots can be shown? "Maybe ten," she says, a fact that prompted the idea of creating a new, dedicated ceramics gallery. Located directly across from the main African display, the new space accommodates up to 50 ceramic objects at a time, which will be rotated on a regular basis to "explore regional style, symbolism, function, and other themes." A flat screen in the gallery features video of "African ceramics in context—being formed, fired, and used," and the education department is developing a range of other interpretive tools. Exhibit designer Terry Beckham has developed a floor plan that both accommodates and references the shape of the pots, incorporating design elements and a common conceptual framework that ties it to the main African gallery.

For Hanna, documenting and researching the collection is a return to her scholarly roots. While her primary fieldwork in Africa focused on masquerade traditions, an engagement with ceramics was inevitable, “In African villages, ceramics and ceramic production are everywhere, a recognized aspect of the living culture.” Ultimately, her research in Burkina Faso showed that in celebrating the primary creation myth, the ritual masquerade underscores a sacred trust between the farmers, the blacksmiths and potters, and the griots—poet-musicians who maintain the culture’s oral history. “In this central covenant,” she says, “there’s an important interaction between the three factions that keep the culture going, with blacksmiths (men) and potters (women) transforming the elements of the earth, through fire, into the essential tools of physical and cultural survival.”

“African ceramics are central to daily life,” Hanna states, “and their production and function tie contemporary African life to the ancient past. Pots are still used to store and serve beverages and food; for cooking and brewing beer; storing grain and valuables; and are

used in ritual healing, initiatory, and funerary rites. They are often included in burials or as grave markers. Some pots are handed down as heirlooms, and others are smashed after their owner’s death. Each culture group has a distinctive style of pottery, and some groups produce ceramics that are renowned and acquired by other groups. Patterns and designs are coded, and symbolize many things, from fertility to the medicinal contents of the vessel. The women and men who make pots are guardians of specialized knowledge that is not shared.” Formal aspects give clues to spiritual or ritual function: a spiked surface is “something you should take note of,” says Hanna, a visual warning on jars that may contain powerful medicine or ritual substances that should be approached with caution and respect. Metaphorical attributes and symbolism are also common, especially in reference to the human body and its adornment. In

Cameroon, pots are gendered: big, rounded vessels are female, ceramic dippers and lids tend to be male. Other design elements reference textile patterns, musical instruments, or folklore.

Vessel, Mangbetu people, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 16 in. (41 cm) in length, fired clay, 20th century.



These are a few of the insights Hanna hopes to highlight in the ceramics gallery, focusing on the range of form, function, process, and aesthetics. The main African gallery will also be fully redesigned, closing in late spring with a grand re-opening slated for November 2013. Hanna's goal is to display more of the collection, developing a nuanced conceptual and symbolic framework for interpreting the material and presenting a broader idea of what *African* really means. Emphasizing the range of artifacts in the collection, Hanna aims to bring modern Egypt and Ethiopia into the room, and to incorporate North African Islamic artifacts like Q'uran boards, Coptic Christian artifacts, and even African Judaic objects—aspects of Africa's vast range of geography, culture, and history that are often left out of regionally focused museum collections and Western conceptions of the continent.

The bias toward sub-Saharan masks and figure sculpture tends to dominate Western collections, but Hanna says, “there is a

Oceanic artifacts, Jemison has collected broadly, and his range of interests has profoundly influenced both his own artwork and his broader aesthetic vision.

“Dick has such an interesting collection of ethnographic art from all over the world,” says Hanna, who has found in Jemison a kindred spirit and willing collaborator. “We showed his beautiful collection of Katsina dolls. We've borrowed Pueblo ceramics, and talked about a number of exhibition ideas I'd like to develop—he has a marvelous group of Central American portable altars called *nichos*, and a fantastic group of Dogon masks from Mali. He is drawn to particular forms and materials, and his eye is unerring—he chooses great objects every time.”

Jemison's obsession with African ceramics began when he and a friend traveled to South Africa to study wildflowers and architecture in the wine country. What he discovered were Zulu beer pots, plus a range of other ceramic vessels, which he knew were underval-



Pot, Matakam people, Cameroon and Chad, 26¼ in. (67 cm) in height, early to mid-20th century.



Pot, Igbo people, Nigeria, 14½ in. (37 cm) in height, fired clay and slip, early to mid-20th century.

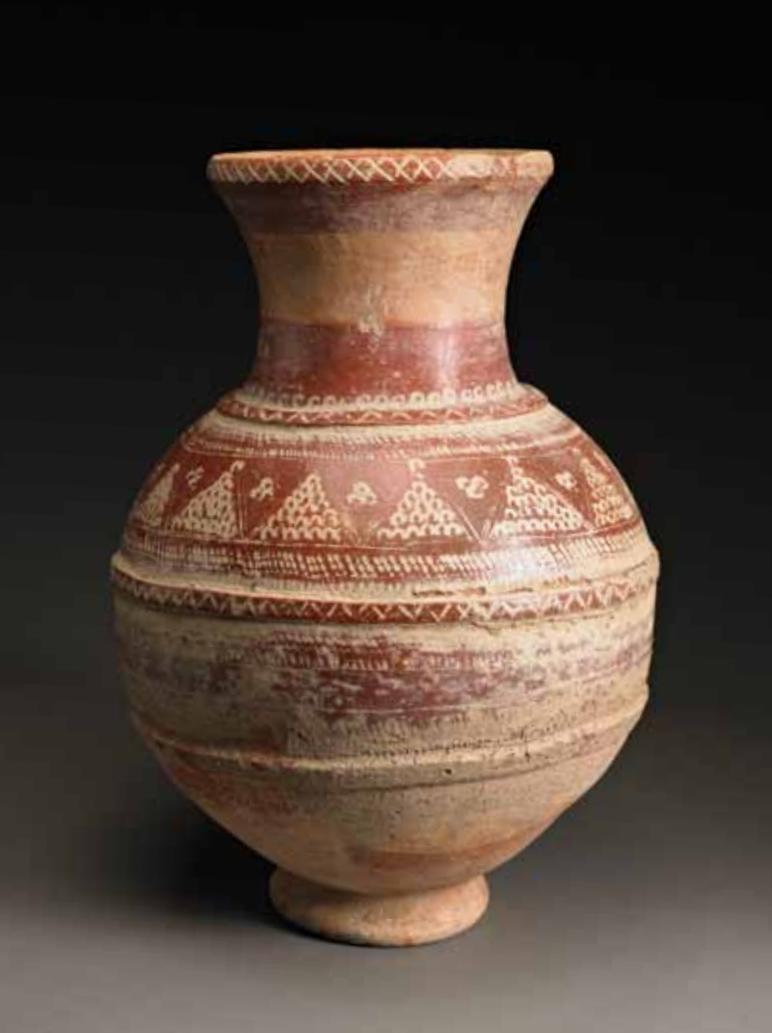


Pot, Yungur people, Nigeria, 19½ in. (50 cm) in height, fired clay and slip, early to mid-20th century.

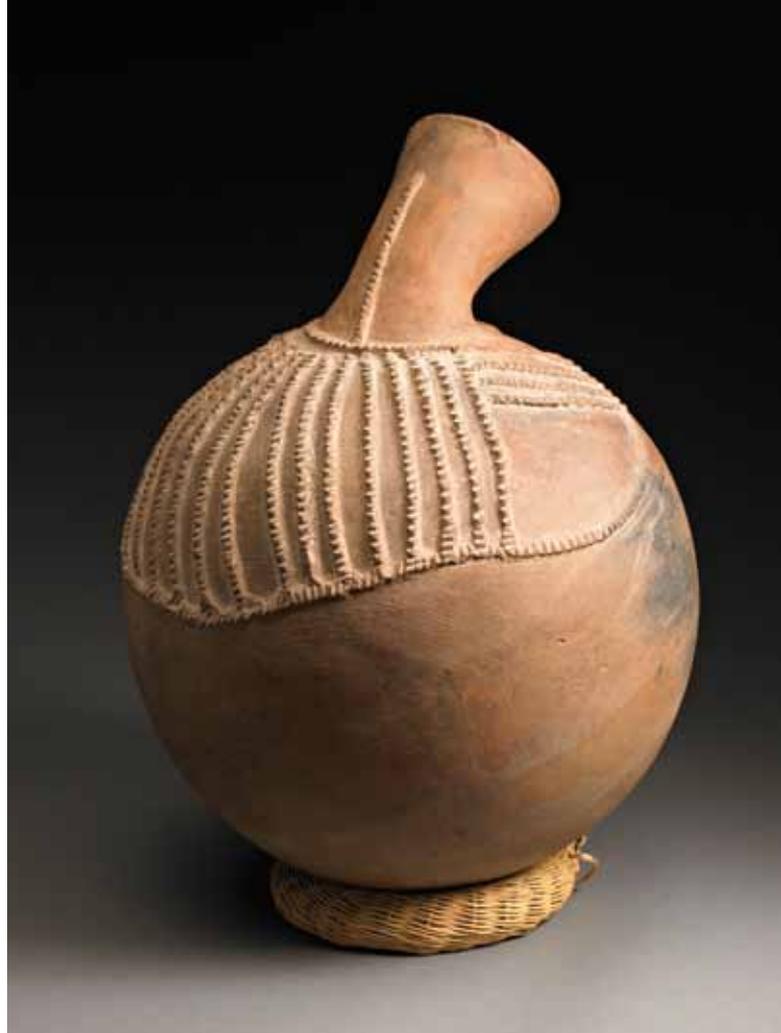
growing interest on the part of museums and private collectors in works that would traditionally be considered craft, such as textiles, ceramics, and metal art.” Artist and Birmingham native-son, Dick Jemison, is just such a collector. Jemison started collecting in the late 1970s when he moved to Santa Fe. Like many artists, Jemison started studying and acquiring objects that interested him visually, though he soon began to collect in series, and in depth. From Native North American and Spanish colonial objects to African and

used by Western scholars, museums, and collectors. In the five-year period of 2002–2007, Jemison had essentially tipped the balance by acquiring a vast collection of mostly 19th- and 20th-century works, but a few that Hanna suspects may be much, much older.

It wasn't Jemison's intention to build an encyclopedic collection, but his tendency to acquire as many examples as he can of forms and surfaces that appeal to him has resulted in a particularly rich body of works that allows for both aesthetic breadth and in-depth



Pot, Bozo people, or Somono people, Mali, 23 in. (58 cm) in height, fired clay and slip, 19th or early 20th century.



Pot, Matakam people, Cameroon and Chad, 22¼ in. (57 cm) in height, fired clay and slip, early to mid-20th century.

study of particular forms and processes. The collection includes Zulu beer pots, water jars from Mali, functional and ritual ware from Cameroon, Nigeria, and the Congo. Smooth, burnished slips contrast with heavily patinated surfaces that bear traces of ritual substances accumulated over time, and with pots that have been plunged hot from the kiln into vegetable baths to seal the surface, or vessels with pigment applied after firing. Shapes and surface treatments invoke mythology, function, and the human form, often mimicking ritual scarification. Yet for all its technical and geographic range, one thing remains constant: the unerring eye of the collector, an artist who made choices primarily on visual and formal appeal. As Emily Hanna puts it, “Dick’s imprint on this collection is very present. There’s no other collection quite like it.”

When Jemison found himself with more than he could comfortably live with (the pots were previously on display in his home) he and Hanna began negotiating to bring this treasure trove to the BMA, where Jemison hopes his pots will form the nucleus of a growing collection and appreciation for African ceramics that will benefit both the museum and the people of Birmingham, a position that fits right in with the BMA’s vision of becoming a major center for ceramic scholarship.

The foundation for this vision, of course, rests with the collections. Long known for its extensive holdings of contemporary and historical American, English, and continental European ceramics

(including one of the largest Wedgwood collections in the world), the BMA also has a strong group of pre-Columbian and Native North American works, and Asian and Southeast Asian ceramics from Neolithic to modern. Now, the Jemison pots add considerable depth and breadth to the Museum’s African collection. Taken together, these collections are a testament to the BMA’s commitment to ceramic arts, and their growing significance as a major center for the study and appreciation of the world’s ceramic traditions.

The Jemison African Ceramics Gallery opens to the public February 22–23 with the BMA’s first Bunting Biennial Ceramics Symposium, Clay Embodied: Ceramics and the Human Form (www.artsbma.org/events/the-bunting-biennial-ceramics-symposium). Ceramic artist Magdalene Odundo is the keynote speaker, with presentations by historian, critic and collector Garth Clark, ceramic artist and Ceramic Review editor Bonnie Kemske, and other scholars—including Emily Hanna on the Jemison Collection—addressing topics from English porcelain to Michelangelo’s sculptural models and Nasca effigy vessels. The Symposium is free and open to the public, and is organized in conjunction with the 28th Annual Alabama Clay Conference, February 21–24 (www.alclayconference.org).

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