

# TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

## ***Douglas Harling***

*The artist answered these questions during an oral interview with Tom Spleth in May 2007 on behalf of the curator.*

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**In general, why do you do what you do? What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?**

I guess it's about satisfaction. I enjoy making what I make. It's a dialogue. I feel like it's a comment on history and contemporary life.

**What influences your work? Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how? Does your work draw references from or have any link to the past and if so how?**

I feel very much a part of the tradition. Looking at what's been done before helps me learn lessons about the material. How we live and how we have lived. It gets layered into the work. The traditions of metalsmithing are very important. I enjoy being part of that tradition.

**How is, or is, utility and function a part of your work?**

It is a part of my work. I reserve the right to not worry about it. When you deal with jewelry you're dealing with Body Theater. You can and maybe should push the envelope. Function is important but I reserve the right to ignore it in the end. I don't often worry about it. It's a starting point. Jewelry doesn't exist off the body. Just because you haven't seen it before doesn't mean that it's not possible, but you always start from the body.



*Douglas Harling- Full Measure Cup*

*Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007*

**Can you describe your studio practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?**

I'm kind of a needy hermit. I think most work is done in isolation or independently. I work alone but there is a conversation with the community through the work. I teach and when you teach you're never completely alone. I work alone and let the work talk for me.

**What does "mastery" mean to you?**

I think it means mostly an understanding. I think that can follow many lines. It can be an understanding of material, format, or of the way we live. I think I've tended to focus mostly on the way the material works.

My work is really about exploiting the material itself. I'm not wedded to a specific way of working but I feel like I'm not finished yet. After a while you don't think so much about the technique. It becomes second nature.

**Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there? How long have you lived in the South?**

I moved to Kentucky about two and a half years ago. I am not a native to this specific region. I grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina, but my family is from all over, England, Old South, and Old North.

The South has undoubtedly influenced me, especially the Appalachian crafts aspect of it. Both embracing it and working against it. It has been a big part of my crafts education.

**If born in the South, how do you think you've been influenced by it? If you moved to your current home from outside the South, what brought you to the South? Is your work influenced by the South in any way?**

My parents moved to Greensboro because they started a business when I was about five or six. I was born upstate New York near the Canadian border. I moved to Kentucky for a full time teaching job. Before, I had taught part time at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte and did a lot of workshops. I wasn't really interested in teaching originally, but started doing more of it and grew very committed to it. This school has a new crafts program. It's moving in stages. The first is metal and wood. It's a two and a half year program to get an associate of applied arts.

**Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place. Do you have a particular relationship to the land or a landscape? If you do, can you talk about it?**

There is a relationship to place in the sense that I am knee deep in Appalachia. The first time I went to Penland School of Crafts I was concerned that we'd be making honeysuckle baskets and playing a banjo. I was worried about stereotyping. It's not like that though; Penland has become a center of contemporary crafts. I recognize that I am a product of these Appalachian schools. Appalachian culture appreciates the handmade. I think that aspect does intrigue me. I'm interested in what makes work unique in terms of region and interested in regionalism versus nationalism. I am very interested in the difference between American crafts and European crafts. I like to compare and contrast. I have incorporated all of those aspects into my work. I have a large interest in Asian art. Bits and pieces of that have popped up in my work over the years. Gold has a lot of different meanings and consistent meanings though out cultures.

**In your opinion, are there features, factors, conditions that distinguish contemporary craft being made in the South from work made in other parts of the country?**

Yes, I think that the South has always been a little bit more accepting of tradition. Often Southern crafts people don't feel like they need to reinvent the wheel. I think that there has always been a tendency to accept traditional ways of working. They're as creative and as inspired as anywhere else. There is an acceptance of long traditions and a tendency to appreciate the art of necessity.

My interest in jewelry really stems from an interest in history. Gold is one of the few things that are immutable. Jewelry (gold) is an interesting way to look at social evolution.

**Do you see yourself as an innovator?**

I don't know. Sometimes that's more for other people to judge. I don't try to be and I don't try not to be [an innovator.]

**How is your work evolving?**

When I started out I was really more interested in the graphic aspects of drawing on a surface, dealing more with the picture plane. I think over the years it's probably become more dimensional. I think over time the pieces become more complicated. There is more of an effort to make the work more layered and more dimensional.

**Describe your relationship to community? Are there communities of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?**

I feel very connected to the community, both the metalsmithing community and the crafts community. I feel like I could go anywhere and have a friend that works

in crafts. I feel like there is a dialogue between my work and their work. It's amazing how when you're in a small field you do tend to know each other.

What we are doing here in Kentucky is really community development. It's a 20-year plan. Hopefully then we'll see a flourishing crafts community.

**Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you?**

I feel very much a part of tradition. I think crafts education is built on mentoring and apprenticeship. In crafts you don't eat your young, you nurture them. I think it's important for those who have the skills have an obligation to pass that on. It's a part of the community. In a sense keeping the culture means to mentor, teach and pass on what you know.

**What would you like your legacy to be?**

Legacies are multi faceted. You have your work and you have your influence. Whether through your work or through teaching. I don't know what I'd like my legacy to be but I would like to have an impact or influence.

**How did you learn your craft?**

I think, like most art majors, I took the scenic route. I took jewelry classes in high school through the local art center. When I started in college I was a biology major but wanted to switch to art. I can't say that went over well with my parents. I studied architecture for a couple of years as a compromise. Paula Garret taught jewelry classes at college that I took. Every class I took in art centers started at the same point and ended at the same point. I wanted more.

Then I went to Penland to take a concentration. The first instructor left after a week and they brought in a different instructor. Afterwards the school called and asked me if I would be interested in the core program and I said yes. I think that was the base for my jewelry education. The nice thing about Penland is that it lays out the whole spectrum of the crafts. What I ended up doing, after two years I went to Carbondale for graduate school. I can't say that I ever loved school, but I truly loved graduate school. It's funny that the hobby I had just sort of grew and grew but I didn't go at it full time until my late 20's. My sister paved the way for me because she was a textile artist. By the time I did the core program my parents were very supportive.

**Do you share your knowledge/technique/experience with others--the next generation of artists/craftspeople?**

The best part of the core program is that you can pick and choose. After a while I found that the people whose work I really enjoyed all taught at universities so I thought I'd give that another try.

**What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South? And, alternative places like Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, John C. Campbell Folk School?**

I think what universities give is the ability to focus over a longer period of time. Focus on not just skills but also on ideas. Unfortunately crafts education is expensive. I can't say that the university commitment to crafts education is particularly strong. Community colleges seem to be currently more focused on that. College gives the ability to focus over the long haul. Universities have helped turn the crafts into something more like fine art. There is less of a dividing line. I really don't think that you can talk about contemporary art without talking about contemporary crafts.

What's wonderful about alternative crafts school is that they are all linked to the settlement school movement – they all come out of that. It's sort of a wonderful direct line. I think each one of those schools has a different character. Penland, I think, has focused on contemporary crafts. Arrowmont has been successful at targeting younger students. They have good traditional and contemporary classes. John C. Campbell sees itself more as a preserver. Workshops really bring the community together, a chance to really dive in. While most universities only have one teacher in each area, you study with them for four years.

Penland was a great base because I met so many different instructors. Everyone is an equal at the alternative places.