

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Bonnie Seeman

The following text is an interview summary from a conversation conducted by Tom Spleth on behalf of the curator in February, 2007.

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

Like most people, she just fell into it. She never imagined that this was what she might be doing. She didn't go to school to do ceramics but transferred into the program because it captured her interest.

She is compelled to make what she makes. The impetus originates from her grandfather whose death inspired her work. He was a painter whose work included water lilies, and she adopted similar imagery in her commemoration. She was in graduate school in the Northeast and the gray weather, her desire to be back in South Florida where she was raised, the illness of her mentor Christine M. Frederighi, and the death of her grandfather combined to generate the beginning of the work she is now doing. The plant and sea imagery is about the life and death struggle. She really had to make it.



*Bonnie Seeman- Teapot with Lid
Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007*

Now, after many years, she is not at all bored with it but the feeling of “wow, I can make it better and the next will be better” drives the work.

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?

The South Florida environment is the big influence. South Florida plants, especially. If one drives an hour or two north, the flora changes. The orchids and weird plant forms in her neighborhood are unique and very important.

She looks at work in many craft media, in many different materials. Art Nouveau¹, Yixing² tea pots—seeks objects that combine nature and functional forms. She was trained in the Pete Voulkos/Robert Turner idea of letting the material and the fire speak for itself, but she is now interested in highly crafted objects such as European ceramics. Her first works were in commemoration of her grandfather's water lilies and were cups and saucers.

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

Her current work is very sculptural and she is always asked “why make pots?” Her content is plant and sea forms and also human anatomy—bone and muscle—without function you would not want to touch it. There is a push/pull—about not wanting to touch the subject matter and wanting to touch its usefulness. She loves pots.

Bonnie: If I can get it to act as art and to also function, it is twice as good.

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

Her studio is at school where she teaches, and is only working at home recently. Even though she is surrounded by students, she is isolated from peers. She works in the studio alone. Lately, however, she is using glass in her work that is made by a torch worker. So she is working with someone in an important way.

What does “mastery” mean to you?

Bonnie: Something I am not. Masters are much older, Hamada/Sam Maloof. A master is someone who is accomplished in the field. I am too young.

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

She moved to South Florida when she was four. Her only time not living there was three years in the Northeast when she was in graduate school. Miami is practically New York, not really in the South. South Florida is all New Yorkers and she did not feel out of place in the Northeast. She found that the Northeast, as

¹ Art Nouveau was an art movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries characterized by stylistic, curvilinear depiction of the natural world.

² Yixing refers to a historic, pottery-producing district of China where small, finely crafted, unglazed and highly polished teapots are still produced.

a region, loved the handmade. Miami is not a lover of the handmade and Miami is not the South.

If born in the South, how do you think you've been influenced by it? 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?

Bonnie's main influences are the tropical weird plants and orchids—a short drive north and it all disappears. Her environment is lush and bizarre. Her ocean coral work comes out of the fact that she lived in a coral-rock house growing up.

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?

Her work could be from California but probably not from Minnesota.

Bonnie: There is a feeling shift, I guess.

If she lived elsewhere, the work would definitely be different.

Early on she did soda fire and Mingei³ work and was working in contrast to her Florida environment. She expected to find sympathetic and like-minded potters up North when she went to graduate school in Massachusetts. But soon after arrival there she began to make colorful South Florida imagery in response to events in the lives of loved ones she left behind and in response to the gray weather.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

She considers it egotistical to say so, but in some ways yes, i.e. incorporating glass in her clay work. She definitely feels, however, that she is working in relationship to what has been done before—her teapots are teapots—she is not reinventing the wheel.

How is your work evolving?

She does not take giant steps. She wishes she could but simply doesn't. So many demands—teaching and shows—expect less change and she is very aware of her responsibility for the expectations of her professional world, and apparently feels very good about it. The work does change but it goes back to the “well, I can make this even better” attitude. Her repetition is an issue with her and she quotes Guston, her teacher, “If you get to where you make it too fast, it is time to change.”

³ The Japanese Mingei movement focused on the beauty of utilitarian objects. It is also known as the Japanese Folk Art movement and its central pillar is the “hand-crafted art of ordinary people.”

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

She loves the ceramic community and the ceramic world. Potters love to cook and know how to have a good time. They are extremely generous - they share information readily - what other art form would be of a mind to get together and fire a kiln? Her friends tend to be scattered around the country in the people she shows with or the people she meets at NCECA (the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts.)

As she realizes success she feels pressure to sever ties with the craft world—her prices are too high now for craft galleries. She is hearing that she needs to drop out of the craft world because crafts is not really art—a position that runs counter to her beliefs. Ceramics people are down to earth. She does not want to lose that.

Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you? What would you like your legacy to be?

She would like to think that she is. Part of her outlook comes from a book called *Care of the Soul* by Thomas Moore. He talks about what is wrong with things today, why people are diseased, etc., through life style and Styrofoam containers. Her mom is the Queen of Paper Plates and never used the fine china. Becoming a craftsman and learning to appreciate pots makes her home so warm. She values the feeling you get inside when you see a beautiful handmade chair by Sam Maloof. “It can be so cold without that.”

Legacy: for her it’s an arrogant question. She is too young. But she wants to see her students be really successful.

How did you learn your craft?

A class with Christine Frederighi and Ron Fondow started it all off. Christine is her mentor and has had a real impact on her life.

Do you share your knowledge with others--the next generation of artists?

She is very open and shares a lot. Gives anybody anything. All technical information goes out. When teaching, you want to share all your knowledge without imposing it in order to allow students to make their own work.

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

Bonnie: I want to say that a lot of universities have killed craft. The Penlands, the Haystacks, the Anderson Ranches have kept it alive.

The universities have really killed it off—closing programs—eliminating positions in the crafts. Studies in post-modernism kill a student's enthusiasm and love of making. She has seen it happen. For the most part the universities kill crafts. Only a very few sustain it.