

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Jerry Brown

The following text is an interview summary of a conversation with interviewer Joey Brackner at the artist's home in Hamilton, Alabama, conducted on behalf of the curator on March 24, 2007.

Jerry Brown is a ninth-generation potter. He carries on a tradition that goes back to the 1700's in his family. The feeling of history was his call to the potter's life, but he enjoys making pottery. His commitment to his craft and to traditional pottery stems in part from a desire to carry on the tradition and in part to provide joy to his customers through his pieces.



Jerry Brown- Collection

Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007

His craft has evolved from the traditional. The forms he makes now had their heritage in utilitarian usage. Jugs were used for storing and carrying water. Their customers were farmers and whiskey makers. The solid stone-ware that Jerry makes is still usable. He makes dinner ware that his customers use regularly. Stone-ware pitchers keep sweet tea fresher. However, his whimsical face jugs (the most popular item) is probably used for display.

To make his pottery he begins by digging his own clay from a clay bed that his family has used for over 100 years. The clay then goes into a traditional mill. They take the clay out by hand, screen it for rocks and trash, and let it age. Once it is ready to use it is wedged to get rid of air bubbles before it goes on the wheel. The wares are thrown, handles and decoration are added. Once the piece is finished it is dried for a few days. Glazes are added, and it is fired in the kiln. The kiln is fueled by natural gas (it used to be wood but that material has gotten expensive) and is partially buried.

Jerry, while trying to keep the traditional forms, has created quite a few culinary inventions. He has made a bacon cooker (on request), a chicken cooker, an egg separator, chip and dip sets, and pie plates. He jokes about his egg separator, "My daddy wouldn't know what it is." Most people don't, unless they see it in action. While looking like a cream pitcher with a face, crack an egg and the whites will run out of the nose.

Jerry's father had a limited glaze repertoire of ash, white and Albany slip glazes. Jerry makes his own ash glaze, using Epsom salt instead of Albany slip to thicken the glazes (Albany slip is no longer available). His color palette runs from burgundy glazes, made with a mason stain, yellow colors which come from the ash glazes and a cobalt blue for spraying and feathering decorative techniques.

The Brown family has its own style of pottery. Jerry says, "All the Brown pottery I ever seen was a lot different from what I call Studio Pottery." They were largely self-taught or taught by the previous generation. His stepson Jeff started training in his shop when he was 11 or 12, learning the trade. Among his twelve grandchildren one has also taken a great interest in pottery. Jerry is hopeful that there will be Brown potters for many years to come.

Family is important; his shop is largely run by himself and his wife, Sandra. She weighs, wedges, helps with handles, glazing and stacking. At a state heritage award speech Jerry made sure to acknowledge his wife's role in his pottery's current success.

Jerry on the idea of mastery says, "Well, that means you put a ball of clay on the wheel and...you make pretty well anything you want to, big or little. You can learn to master the clay and not let it master you."

Jerry was born and raised in Sulligent, Alabama and moved to Hamilton in 1963 or 1964. Being a Southerner and surrounded by the South is such a part of him that he has a hard time pinning down its influence (though he does mention that people do seem to love his Southern accent). In addition to his pottery studio, Jerry enjoys the environment of the South. He hunts for food and takes pleasure in the passing of the Purple Martins every year. He likes to stay busy, and works with his garden, livestock and catfish farms. In the community he helps his elderly neighbors with their farming.

In response to the question, "Do you see yourself as a keeper of culture?" Jerry speaks of his training. He considers himself fortunate that his father taught him to make pottery, and thinks that if other families had continued the tradition they would be well known now too. But the pottery he produces is part of a dying art. He would like his pottery to accrue value, and would like his works to be kept as heirlooms.

Jerry Brown is an accomplished and acknowledge potter. To celebrate his commitment (and in thanks for putting the town of Hamilton on the map) his hometown hosts the Jerry Brown Arts Festival. The first festival was in 2002, and has grown since then to include music and contests celebrating the tradition of the arts in Alabama.