



Greenville County **Museum of Art**

420 College Street Greenville, SC 29601
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gcma.org

News Release

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Greenville, SC— *Expressions of Power: Face Vessels of Edgefield District*, recently opened at the Greenville County Museum of Art, presents sixty face vessels, the least understood and most mysterious examples of early nineteenth-century Edgefield pottery. Highlighting work from the Museum’s own collection as well as that from more than a dozen private collectors, the exhibition is on view through January 22, 2023.

Set atop a broad and deep vein of rich clay soil that well supported agricultural commerce, South Carolina’s Old Edgefield District encompassed a region that today includes parts or all of Aiken, Edgefield, Greenwood, McCormick, and Saluda counties. It was there that Dr. Abner Landrum (1785-1859), a resident physician, newspaper publisher, and businessman, pioneered the manufacture of alkaline-glazed utilitarian stoneware during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Many of Landrum’s immediate and extended family participated in the enterprise; eventually, twelve different pottery sites were linked to Landrum by blood or marriage.

The pottery-making industry was built on enslaved labor, which was needed for digging and transporting clay; preparing it; building and turning vessels; cutting firewood; filling, stoking and emptying kilns; and moving the product to regional markets. The industry was extremely profitable, producing countless vessels made for food containment and storage, including pitchers, cups, bowls, jars, jugs, and crocks. Sold to plantation owners in South Carolina and neighboring states, some of the objects were enormous, holding as much as forty gallons and weighing as much as 80 to 100 pounds when empty.

Many of the potteries closed during the Civil War, and few re-opened afterward. Most Edgefield pottery was destroyed over time, and clay-based storage containers were replaced by mass produced glass products. The mid-nineteenth century pottery that survived is extremely rare, and is now widely collected and represented in private, institutional, and museum collections throughout the country.

Among the most unusual products of the Edgefield potteries are the face vessels that are the subject of this exhibition. Largely attributed to Black makers, face vessels are among the least understood and most mysterious of Edgefield pottery. They were not made for commercial purposes and were primarily created as “ritualistic” or “conjuring” objects that embodied spiritual traditions derived from the many cultures of the African Diaspora as adapted to life in South Carolina. A notable



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feature of Edgefield face vessels is the use of kaolin, a chalky white clay abundant in the region, for the details of teeth and eyes.

Over the past three decades, Dr. John Hoar (1937-2022) of Huntsville, Alabama, researched and collected Edgefield face vessels, often in collaboration with Philip Wingard, the curator of this exhibition. Reflecting his work with Dr. Hoar, Wingard's selection presents the first effort to articulate a typological organization of these objects, which currently number approximately 180. Most of the makers, when enslaved, had no rights, and did not sign their work. Without benefit of identifiable artisans, the objects are arranged in this exhibition in groups that share facial attributes, sculptural techniques, clay bodies and glazes, and, through archaeological findings and/or provenance, are linked to specific Edgefield pottery sites.

This exhibition is dedicated to Dr. John Hoar. A documenting publication is planned for production in 2023.

The Greenville County Museum of Art is located in the center of downtown Greenville's cultural campus, Heritage Green, at 420 College Street. The GCMA is open Wednesday through Saturday from 10 am until 5 pm and on Sundays from 1 pm until 5 pm. Admission is free.

To learn more, visit gcma.org/see

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