Contemporary First Nations Clay

May 27 to September 4, 2005

Moon Figure; Marriage/Anniversary vase; Loons, Bear, Deer
Steve Smith
FROM THE EARTH: Contemporary First Nations Clay

Curated by Virginia M. Eichhorn

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For over 3000 years the people of the Kahniakehaka (Mohawk) nation made pottery. Pottery that was used primarily for functional reasons – cooking vessels, containers – and also for cermonial purposes such as pipes. However with the advent of the European settlers in the 18th century the traditional creation and use of pottery by the Mohawk people changed. The Europeans brought with them pots, pans, cups and dishes made of tin, copper and iron. These implements became increasingly used by the Mohawks and their traditional pottery skills and practices began to die out, eventually becoming forgotten.

Two hundred years later, in the middle of the 20th century, the Mohawk pottery making practice was revived. The late Elda “Bun” Smith, a Mohawk woman living on Six Nations Reserve began collecting pieces of broken pottery that she found dispersed throughout the lands of the Reserve. As her son Steve Smith has said, you couldn’t dig in the earth or walk through the woods without coming upon the broken shards.

Elda was curious about this lost art and began actively to investigate the history of Mohawk pottery. Serendipitously, at that time the Ontario Arts Council sent a potter named Tessa Kidick from Vineland Station to teach pottery at Six Nations. In this pursuit, in this reclamation of a lost art, Elda was joined by Oliver Smith, Darlene Smith, Sylvia Smith, Dee Martin, and Karen Williams who began to create a form of pottery which became known as Mohawk Pottery. They dug their own clay out of the ground and they didn’t use electric kilns. In a very true sense they had gone back to the roots of this traditional practice.
The work which was created by those involved in Mohawk Pottery was beautiful and powerful, drawing upon their rich heritage but infusing it also with elements of their contemporary sensibility. In 1967 Elda Smith had created a stunning tea-set using the Wampum bead design as her inspiration. However, in recognition of the significance of this design she refused to sell it. Instead, it was presented to Queen Elizabeth II on her visit to Canada during Expo 1967.

In the 1970s Mohawk Pottery stopped working as a workshop with the potters developing their individual practices. Elda’s son Steve began work in ceramics as a 12 year old. His distinctive style and eye for detail lead to such success that he eventually was able to quit his job as a steel-worker and devote himself to pottery making full-time. Steve’s wife Leigh and his daughter Santee are also successful potters. And Steve’s 7 year old granddaughter now joins him in the studio as well.

Cindy Henhawk is also a second generation potter. Her mother Darlene was Elda’s sister and she taught Cindy the art of pottery. Cindy and her family are now actively producing striking and functional works.

The Monture brothers, Don and Ron, work in the most traditional of methods. These clay vessels have been fashioned after ancient North Eastern Woodland cultures, circa 1300-1600 AD as documented by archaeologists. All designs and decorations can be attributed to the Iroquois, Huron and Susquehannock cultures of that time. Their clay smoking pipes are exact replicas of early Iroquois pipes that were in use when the first Europeans arrived in the new world in the early 1600s. Although other Woodland peoples at that time made pipes, the Iroquois pipes of New York were very neatly finished – the work on them being much better than that of the earthen vessels.

The works on view as part of From the Earth: Contemporary First Nations Clay are part of a wonderful story. Knowledge was lost and then reclaimed. Traditions were forgotten and restored. Art became a means for the Mohawk people to reclaim part of their history, thus honouring the past and ensuring it will be a part of the future.