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Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield, South Carolina

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston | Boston, Massachusetts

March 4–July 9, 2023

Hear Me Now: *The Black Potters of Old Edgefield, South Carolina* was a powerful exhibition honoring the lives of enslaved potters whose work resulted in a wide array of beautifully crafted stoneware storage vessels, ranging from small jugs to large, wide-rimmed jars.¹ These handmade works stand as evidence of the forced labor of African Americans, labor that extended outside of plantation fields and industrial production with which we generally associate slavery. While the storage jars were functional, they were made with great skill, demonstrating consummate craftsmanship. They are adorned, in some cases, with decorative elements, adding to the creative expression evident in an overall design. Co-curated by Adrienne Spinozzi of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Ethan Lasser of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Jason Young of the University of Michigan, the exhibition made every effort to document names of the individuals who crafted them, information often recovered from manufacturer ledger books. When known, dates of birth and individuals' work locations also appeared. This



dedication to naming individual potters reflects the exhibition's primary goal in telling the unique stories of enslaved people who, despite their circumstances, created works of great creativity and skill.²

Figure 1. Dave (later recorded as David Drake), storage jar, 1857, object place Edgefield County, South Carolina; made for Lewis J. Miles Pottery, stoneware with alkaline glaze, overall height 48.3 cm (19 in.), overall width 45.1 cm (17 ¾ in.), weight 35 lb (15.88 kg), Harriet Otis Cruft Fund and Otis Norcross Fund, 1997.10.

In the case of one named potter—Dave, later named David Drake, ca. 1801-1870s—his storage ware can be found in museum collections and has been included in other exhibitions. One of his vessels was recently part of a traveling exhibition, titled *American Perspectives: Stories from the American Folk Art Museum Collection*, organized by New York’s

American Folk Art Museum in 2020. Dave stands out among other potters in that he embellished his work by signing his name, an action that risked extreme punishment for enslaved people due to laws against reading and writing. Even more daring, in the case of several identified pots, including one on view from the Museum of Fine Arts permanent collection (fig. 1),

he inscribed lines of poetic text that provide insight into his lived experience. On another jar, on view and from the collection of the Greenville Museum of Art, South Carolina, Dave wrote:

I wonder where is all my
relation
Friendship to all—and every
nation.

As the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFAB) wall text explained, it was around this time that Dave was separated from wife and children when they were sold to an enslaver in Louisiana. The poignancy of this line is hard to bear when considering his circumstances. Yet, astoundingly, Dave offered “friendship to all,” even while marking the loss of family he was forced to endure.

The exhibition also included a collection of face jugs and cups (fig. 2) made by the Edgefield potters. In contrast to the functional storage jars that might be found in homes throughout South Carolina, and parts of Georgia, the face vessels are thought to have been made by Edgefield potters for themselves, and specifically for their own spiritual practices. Wall text offered connections between these face vessels and the *nkisi nkondi*, a power figure used by healers and diviners among the Kongo peoples of West-Central Africa. Museum



Figure 2. Unknown African American, face jug, made at Thomas Davies Pottery, ca. 1860, stoneware, alkaline (ash) glaze; kaolin clay inserts, 21.6 x 17.8 x 18.4 cm (8 1/2 x 7 x 7 1/4 in.), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, The John Aelrod Collection—Frank B. Bemis Fund, Charles H. Bayley Fund, and The Heritage Fund for a Diverse Collection, 2011.1807. Photo: Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



labels also informed viewers that, in 1858, a slave ship illegally transported hundreds of Africans to the United States, including one hundred individuals who were sent to Edgefield and forced to work in the potteries. This may account for such objects as these face jugs and cups, which would have been part of a broader resurgence of African-influenced religious and cultural practices in African American communities.

Recognizing the vessels on view as important markers of the lives of their enslaved makers, the MFAB did an excellent job of creating an atmosphere of solemnity throughout its exhibition design

(fig. 3). Each object was placed on an individual pedestal. The gallery was dark with lighting limited exclusively to spotlights directed at individual works. By way of this arrangement, each ceramic held a pride of place. Except for the face jars and cups, located together in a case at the back of the gallery, the exhibition invited visitors to contemplate the unique life of each maker, while spotlights served to highlight their craftsmanship and labor. Meanwhile, the quiet solemnity of the installation was disrupted, periodically, by the presence of a few containers made by enslavers who owned the potteries, as well as by containers signed by enslavers who had not

Figure 3. Installation view of *Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield*, South Carolina, exhibition photograph, courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

actually made them, a practice essentially negating the labor and lived experiences of enslaved makers. This juxtaposition of works associated with both oppressed individuals and their oppressors kept visitors grounded in the history of American slavery, even while showcasing the beauty and craftsmanship of these objects.

Two other components warrant recognition. Reminding viewers that the North also profited from slavery, the MFAB's version

of the exhibition featured the stoneware and pottery business of Isaac and Grace Parker, located in Charlestown, Massachusetts, and operating from 1715 to 1774. Forced to work for the Parkers, two enslaved men—Jack and Acton, known only by their first names—were recognized in the exhibit, though only represented by one photograph of a work produced there. In addition, the exhibition featured related works by contemporary artists, including examples by Simone Leigh (b. 1967), Theaster Gates (b. 1973), and Woody De Othello (b. 1991). In the case of two especially poignant ceramic pieces, Adebunmi Ghadebo (b. 1992) made them using clay from the same plantation in South Carolina where her enslaved ancestors had worked the land. There were also works on paper by Robert Pruitt (b. 1975). From the museum's permanent collection, one depicted Sofia Meadows-Muriel, a museum intern at the time, pouring water from a face jug owned by the MFAB and included

in the show (see fig. 2). While these contemporary works were meant to bring the legacy of Dave and other African American potters into the present, it is worth wondering how the older vessels made by African American potters might have been experienced, had they had been celebrated solely and independently within the context of the time period in which they were made.

Hear Me Now was a powerful and compelling tribute to enslaved African American potters. It served as profound recognition of their persistent humanity, even under the most cruel and inhumane conditions in which they lived. One exhibition label indicated that, in 2021, a jar by Dave sold at auction for \$1 million. Dave himself may have been referring to the exploitative economic market that existed during his lifetime when he wrote on one jar: "I made this Jar = for cash—though it's called = lucre Trash." The museum didactic posited that his words may have served as ironic reference to the owner of the Stony Bluff

Manufactory where the jar was made. It is likely that owner Lewis Miles profited from Dave's labor without compensating him. Yet the craftsman's words offer caution beyond his own time. They warn us of how the current art market might end up exploiting Dave's labor, and that of other Edgefield potters, yet again.

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Endnote

1. The exhibition tour also included the University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, Michigan, August 26, 2023–January 7, 2024; and High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia, February 16–May 12, 2024.
2. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalog that includes thoughtful reflections on the Edgefield potters by scholars and curators, an interview with Simone Leigh, and color reproductions of the objects on display; Adrienne Spinozzi, ed., *Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield, South Carolina* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022).