A large, light-colored ceramic jar with a blue floral pattern. The jar has a wide mouth and a rounded body. The pattern consists of stylized, overlapping floral or leaf-like shapes in a deep blue color. The jar is set against a plain, light-colored background.

THE MUSEUM OF EARLY SOUTHERN DECORATIVE ARTS

COLLECTION ASSESSMENT REPORT

MICHAEL J. BRAMWELL
VISITING GUEST CURATOR
2021

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

James Baldwin

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents an assessment of The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) online decorative arts collection in four domains: presentation, strengths, weaknesses, and systematic biases, together with recommendations and a framework for system change.

The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts was founded in Winston-Salem, North Carolina in 1965 by Frank L. Horton, with a mission of exhibiting and researching the decorative arts of the South before 1821. Building on artifacts belonging to Horton, MESDA's collection includes furniture, ceramics, paintings, textiles, and metals that were made and used in Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia. MESDA is composed of room-settings and specialized galleries. Its interpretation and education programs reflect divisions and sharp cultural contrasts found in the South, between the Chesapeake region, the lowcountry, and the backcountry (Piedmont). MESDA operates a research center that is available to scholars, the general public and includes approximately 15,000 objects and documentary information on 60,000 artisans working in the South in 125 different trades. MESDA is accredited by the American Association of Museums and welcomes approximately 400,000 visitors annually.

MESDA sent out an open call in the Fall of 2020 for Visiting Guest curators with advanced degrees and expertise in American History and African American diaspora history, knowledge of 17th-19th century decorative arts and material culture. These curators would collaborate with the Southern Pathways project to evaluate and implement new strategies of presentation and interpretation of Old Salem and MESDA's permanent collections. They were tasked to identify systemic biases, strengths, weaknesses, and provide recommendations for systemic change. These curators would develop Southern Pathways scripts, present lectures, and participate in the scholarly community of MESDA/Old Salem. This report is an outcome of that collaboration to promote a diverse and inclusive collection of American decorative arts.

COLLECTION ASSESSMENT



MESDA's collection covers art across sixteen media: Architecture, Arms and Weapons, Bedcoverings, Books and Manuscripts, Brass, Copper, and Pewter, Ceramics, Clocks and Compasses, Fraktur, Furniture and Woodwork, Iron, Maps, Musical Instruments, Needlework, Paintings and Drawings, Prints, Silver and Gold.

PRESENTATION

- The collection of The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts at Old Salem presents one of the most comprehensive collection of objects made and used in the early American South. It spans seven states and is available through in person and online databases. Its focus is on the Moravian town of Salem and surrounding areas of North Carolina. The collection is professionally presented and accompanied by well-researched object records.

ACQUISITIONS:

- Description: Old Salems and MESDA's endowment structure consist of 74 individual funds with 63% being donor-restricted to targeted acquisitions and there are 13 other endowments controlled by the board of trustees.

An analysis of MESDA/Old Salem's pattern and practice of acquisition was conducted for artifacts acquired over a five year period (2015-2020). The geographic regions span: Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia, Massachusetts, Gerogia, Maryland, Great Britain, Belgium, and Pennsylvania. There are 267 objects that include: side chairs, silver spoons, case clocks,

books, needlework, quilts, photographs, documents, tables, desks, sugar bowls, chests and ladles.

Each object was coded to designate 1. Craftsperson was BIPOC (black, indigenous person of color). 2. Craftsperson or workshop where BIPOC are known. 3. Craft person was known to have enslaved people. 4. Other connections (subject matter etc.) to BIPOCs. 5. No discernable connection between craftsperson and/or workshop and those who are BIPOC.

Analysis: Acquisitions consist of 267 objects of which 189 or 76% are partial or complete gifts; 78 objects or 29 % were purchased; 4 objects or 1.5% are coded No.1 and are gifts that can be identified as being made by a BIPOC. Objects include: Life and Adventure of Uncle Tom, 1854; Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, 1861; Jug, 1850-1860 by Lucius Jordan and Young Clem Brown, 1846.

The lowest BIPOC Rating is 5 (No discernable connection between craftsperson and/or workshop and those who are BIPOC).

- ACQUISITIONS

Acquisition Advisory Committee of art professionals was put together who agreed to recommend decorative art works by BIPOC artist for MESDA's acquisition. The committee consists of: Michael J. Bramwell, M.F.A., Dr. John Bowles, Professor of African American Art History, UNC Chapel Hill, Dr. John Sensbach, Professor of Afro-Moravian history and culture, and Dr. Benjamin Frye, Professor American Studies, with expertise in Cherokee history and culture.

- INTERPRETATION:

- Words used in many of MESDA's object records can be considered politically-incorrect within a contemporary setting and should be identified and removed. The collection can be scanned using a search algorithm to identify words like: slave, slaveowner, Negro, primitive, savage. The Chief Curator, Dr. Daniel Ackermann was instrumental in creating a Google document to be

used by staff whenever encountering antiquated words in the course of their work.

- Records in MESDA's collection are object-centered descriptions of artifacts and in many cases do not provide full descriptions of the context in which objects are produced and enslaved artisans are included as subtexual additions within the object record.
- **ACKNOWLEDGMENT** It is important for MESDA to acknowledge the enslavement and displacement of BIPOCs and indigenous people. It should be prominently displayed in galleries and other prominent locations at Old Salem and MESDA. An example is presented below.

MESDA stands on lands stolen from First Peoples of North Carolina and many of the objects in our collection were produced by enslaved laborers. We believe it is important to remember and honor this presence and the deep histories of disenfranchisement, forced labor, denial of access to basic civil liberties and essential freedoms. We hope this acknowledgment begins to heal the wounds of the past and make the future more equitable.

Example of Record Correction

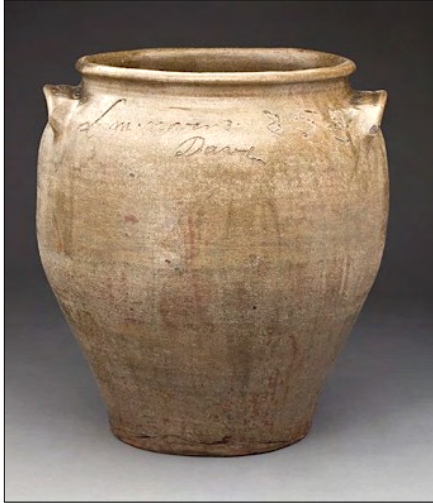


Fig. 1 Storage Jar, 1858, David Drake (c. ~~1781~~1800-1870)
Edgefield County, South Carolina
Alkaline-glazed stoneware
HOA: 24 ¾" , WOA 22", DIA 17 9/16"
MESDA Purchase Fund (4317)

Storage Jar

This massive storage jar was made by ~~Dave~~-David Drake one of the many ~~slaves~~ enslaved artisans who worked ~~on~~ in the ~~pottery plantations~~ industrial enslavement camp called Pottersville, ~~of~~ in Edgefield County, South Carolina. ~~Dave~~ David was first ~~owned~~-enslaved by Abner Landrum (1780-1859) who ~~has been~~ is credited with establishing the first pottery in ~~the~~ Edgefield District during the 1810s. Later, ~~he~~ David was ~~owned~~ enslaved by Lewis Miles (c. 1809-1868) ~~the~~ a pottery proprietor. ~~Lewis Miles (c. 1809-1868)~~. One side of the jar is inscribed "Lm. Nover 3, 1858/Dave." The other is marked "I saw a leopard & a lions face/then felt the need-of grace," ~~an a~~ ~~adaption~~ reference to ~~from~~ the Book of Revelations. Of the nearly 3000 enslaved ~~craftsmen~~ craftspeople who have been identified by MESDA, ~~Dave~~ David is the only one whose work ~~we~~ can positively identify. Despite laws prohibiting literacy among ~~slaves~~-enslaved people, ~~Dave~~-David ~~was taught~~ learned to read and write. His pots-more than 150 signed examples, ~~are know~~-testify to ~~both~~-his literacy and ~~his~~ skill as an artist. As a freed man, he ~~ironically~~ adopted the ~~more~~-formal appellation "David"and the last name "Drake" after one of his earliest ~~owners~~-enslavers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Build a restricted acquisitions endowment for work by BIPOC decorative arts. It is about getting diverse work into MESDA but also, restructuring institutional thinking about diversity and how inclusion becomes a positive outcome of that type of thinking. This is an acknowledgement that increase acquisitions alone will not accomplish equity.
- New curatorial and Interpretive Methodologies.

I have been thinking and doing research about how to tell a more inclusive and balanced story about the intersection between early African diaspora and Moravian histories. I am pursuing two projects toward this end: 1. Southern Pathways script that explores the decorative arts of enslaved artisans and how it relates to practices of freedom; an untold story of Afro-Moravian resistance and self-determination, and 2. An online exhibition (Means End: Crafting a Road to Freedom in the Diaspora of the Early American South), that picks-up on the same them. Additionally, I am offering two paintings by John Valentine Haidt (1700-1780) that depict early Afro-Moravians that may be incorporated into the Moravian Gallery (on loan) as a way to diversify the collection and stimulate interest among non-traditional audiences.





Fig. 1 Wachovia Whip

Object Description: The Wachovia Whip is a brown, stitched leather instrument of torture that is 26 X 2 ½ inches wide (widest point) with a stiff, leather covered handle. There are four designated holes per row with fifteen rows on it flap in total, with an extra layer of leather that contains thirteen rows of four holes

Notes on interpretative record: The Wachovia Whip under consideration is a “whip” in the shape of a paddle (different from braided bull whips) that was used by colonial Moravians to torture and instill fear and terror in the people they enslaved. A distinction between the two terms is necessary and not simply a matter of semantics, because the word “paddle” softens and thereby obscures a cruel and abusive reality, and re-signifies torture, as a natural and acceptable form of corporal punishment.

The word punishment further implies that enslaved Afro-Moravians had done something wrong by trying to escape or otherwise resist oppression and Moravians were simply administering what they deserved. Jon Sensbach and I will be in conversation on February 3, 2021 THINGS: A Global Conversation about African Diaspora Decorative Arts and Anti-Slavery Resistance in Colonial America. We will discuss not only how enslaved artisan used decorative art in crafting a road to freedom, but how objects of torture and restraint occupy a new category within American decorative art.

Categorization: The Wachovia Whip is a highly designed and utilitarian piece of decorative art, with its circular holes used to prevent the type of lacerations and

keloids produced by bull whips. Its design is strategic, i.e., if enslaved bodies were marked, then it indicated resistance to enslavement and thereby less valuable. Yes, the whip can be categorized as a textile, technically, given its stitched, dyed, and perforated leather; but it is not typically what we think of when imagining textiles, at least as they are displayed and interpreted in the Moravian Gallery. It defies a neat interpretation. It seems like a new category may be useful: Decorative Arts of Torture and Restraint. It can be populated with objects like the Wachovia Whip and “self-emancipated notices,” a form of paper restraint used to surveil and re-enslave escaped bodies. This is a subjugated history that needs to surface now at this inflection moment.

Notes on Language Terms:

- Enslaved (Africans, people, mothers, workers, artisans, children, etc.). Using enslaved (as an adjective) rather than “slave” (as a noun) disaggregates the condition of being enslaved from the status of “being” a slave. People were not “slaves” as an essential status but were enslaved by someone.
- Enslaver (rather than many of the terms below).
- The term “master” transmits the aspirations and values of the enslaving class without naming the practices they engaged in.

Language to Avoid:

- Slave master
- Slave mistress and enslaved mistress
- Slaveholder
- Slave owner
- Planter (when referring to enslavers)
- Primitive
- Negro

Alternatives: those who claimed people as property, those who held people in slavery, etc.

- Avoid using “runaway slave.” Alternatives: “fugitives from slavery” or “self-liberated” or “self-emancipated” individuals.

PECULIAR AESTHETICS



Objects above represent a new area of decorative arts collection for MESDA.

VOCABULARY

Diversity: Diversity refers to the ways that people are different and the same at the individual and group levels. Even when people appear the same, they are different. Organizational diversity requires examining and questioning the makeup of a group to ensure that multiple perspectives are represented.

Equity: is the fair and just treatment of all members of a community. Equity requires commitment to strategic priorities, resources, respect, and civility, as well as ongoing action and assessment of progress towards achieving specified goals.

Accessibility: is giving equitable access to everyone along the continuum of human ability and experience. Accessibility encompasses the broader meaning of compliance and refers to how organizations make space for the characteristics that each person brings.

Cultural Competence: An ongoing, active process of acknowledging and a willingness to learn about other people and how to respect their cultures.

Inclusion: refers to the intentional, ongoing effort to ensure that diverse individuals fully participate in all aspects of organizational work, including decision-making processes. It also refers to the ways that diverse participants are valued as respected members of an organization and/or community.

Structural Racism: a system of public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms that work to reinforce and perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that allow privileges associated with race and disadvantages associated with color to endure and adapt over time. Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice, rather is as bee a feature of the social, economic, and political systems.

FRAMEWORK FOR SYSTEM CHANGE

MESDA is in a unique position to advance equity and inclusion in communities and has the power to drive systems change. It has demonstrated a willingness with this visiting curator initiative to address patterns of structural inequity by dedicating financial resources to assessing its permanent collection. Its ability to move systems does not begin with material assets but with the following considerations:

Check your norms. This requires a considerable amount of self and cultural awareness. Take time to practice this so you can be ready for situations that are different than your own norms.

Ask questions, to others and yourself. You cannot expect someone who is different from you to just tell you everything you need to know about their values, behaviors, and cultural patterns. Put in the effort to be curious but do not to make assumptions.

Find connections. What are ways is your culture like the culture of others? How can those similarities be helpful in developing understanding of that culture?

Be uncomfortable. It probably means you are learning something when you are uncomfortable. Challenge yourself to embrace experiences or differences that are new and reflect on why something makes you uncomfortable and use that to understand the difference that you are encountering and how it relates to your norms.

Celebrate victories. It is challenging to stick with learning if you never get positive reinforcement. Learn to celebrate small achievements and use them to motivate continued curiosity. Do this while also checking your ego. (Remember, an expert can always work on the basics.)

Be patient with yourself and others. Cultural competency is an extended process. It is consistent work, and we may find ourselves not having the impact that we intend. Try some things out and forgive yourself when you make mistakes. Remember, others are also trying to be better at being a humble learner and understanding you. Give patience back.

AFTERWORD

MESDA should continue to solicit feedback from segments of the community like Happy Hill on museum programming and its services. These segments should include all perceived local audiences and stakeholders, including ones that may not be well-represented among current visitor profiles (such as Indigenous populations, African-American, Asian or Hispanic residents, teens, and senior citizens; together with school staff, government, and the business community.

Following this information,, the board and curatorial staff at MESDA can benefit from a one-day “retreat” to discuss the mission of Old Salem and MESDA, and arrive at some consensus about the audiences they serve and how best the organization can fulfill its mission and identity.

With a renewed sense of direction, the leadership at MESDA can contemplate where existing resources should be allocated during their next budget planning cycle and determine what new sources of revenue should be pursued.

APPENDIX A RESOURCES

- Print Museum Strategy and Marketing, Neil Kotler and Philip Kotler, Jossey-Bass, 1998.
- Local History, National Heritage, Rath, et al, AASLH.
- Help for the Small Museum --- Handbook of Exhibit Ideas and Methods, Arminta Neal, Pruett. 1987.
- Conservation in Context: Finding a Balance for the Historic House Museum, Wendy Claire Jessup, ed., The National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1995.
- Museum Store Management, Mary Miley Theobald, AASLH, 2000.
- Mastering Civic Engagement --- A Challenge to Museums, AAM, 2002. Online Mission AAM website --- <http://www.aam-us.org/> • AAM and AASLH publications ---
- <http://www.aam-us.org/>; <http://www.aaslh.org/> Collections Policy & Care, Texas Historic Commission ---
- <http://www.thc.state.tx.us/museums/musWord/BasicGuideforPreservHistArtifacts.doc> • Prince William County, Historic Preservation Division ---
- Institutional Planning Review the requirements for a strategic plan as defined by the AAM Accreditation Program as a guide. The plan must address all relevant areas of museum operations, list goals, list action steps, assign responsibility for accomplishing action steps, assign both the human and financial resources needed to implement the plan, list steps to obtain resources, and include a timeline.

- John M. Bryson and Farnum K. Ashton, *Creating and Implementing Your Strategic Plan: A Workbook for Public and Nonprofit Organizations*, 2nd edition (Jossey-Bass, 2004).
- Gary Edson and David Dean, *The Handbook for Museums* (Routledge, 1996).
- Marie C. Malaro's, *A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections*.
- Museum News presents an article that offers advice on crafting a collections management policy. http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/MN_JF04_ManagingThings.cfm
- The Smithsonian Institution offers an online manual for Developing a Collections Management Policy (<http://siarchives.si.edu/collections/cmp.html>).

APPENDIX B

SOUL BY SOUL CRAFTING A ROAD TO FREEDOM



Soul by Soul (SBS) is a new interpretive pathway and tool for experiencing MESDA'S collection that tells a dynamic story of how carpenters and cabinetmaker, potters and coopers, silversmiths and housewrights used the decorative arts as a form of resistance and road to freedom through the work of their hands. It's impossible to tell a meaningfully adequate story of early America without acknowledging the contributions and concerns of indigenous and enslaved people like: Peter Oliver, David Jabour, Muddy X, James X and David X, Cathy, Sam, Ben, Christian, Susy, and countless others that resisted bondage. These artisans perfected their craft but were also concerned with freedom from enslavement, which is the central theme of *Soul by Soul*.

Each year researchers discover new information about the histories of enslaved people and how they negotiated the great Maafa by struggling to achieve liberation that is so central to the American story. With freedom in mind, it is with gratitude and appreciation that we recognize and present the work of indigenous, African, and African American people in the history of American decorative arts. *Soul by Soul* celebrates the history of MESDA'S collection by presenting works by African American and Indigenous artists from the 18th and 19th centuries and across the Chesapeake, Low country, and Back country of the American South.

APPENDIX C

MUSEUM OF EARLY SOUTHERN DECORATIVE ARTS WINSTON-SALEM, NORTH CAROLINA

[WHO WE ARE](#) [PROGRAMS](#) [COLLECTION](#) [RESEARCH](#) [SUPPORT](#)



THINGS: A Global Conversation is an online program that features curators, makers, and other experts from around the world in conversation with people and objects from the Old Salem MESDA collection. You're invited to join the conversation via Zoom. Our things may be old, but the lessons we can learn from them are as contemporary and relevant as ever.

Tools of the Trade: Resistance and the Decorative Arts of Enslavement

February 3, 2021 7:30 PM EST Online via Zoom

Michel J. Bramwell

Visiting Guest Curator
Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts
Winston-Salem, North Carolina USA

Dr. Jon F. Sensbach

Professor of History
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida USA



Fig. 1 Wachovia Whip



Fig. 2 Speculum Oris

Whether it is the ancient Hebrews under African captivity in Egypt or Black Lives Matter activists protesting injustice on the streets of Minneapolis, resistance is an inexorable and transhistorical tendency among oppressed people. In this conversation, the social biography of a leather whip and a brass speculum oris help identify a new venue for resistance within American decorative arts and reveals a history of how enslaved joiners and coopers, potters and silversmiths built a road to freedom by the work of their hands. This conversation will help dispel a myth that enslaved artisans were content to perfect their craft for the benefit of others. These artifacts were designed to subdue a turbulent spirit and inform how that same spirit animates contemporary American politics.

Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts
Collection Assessment Report 2021

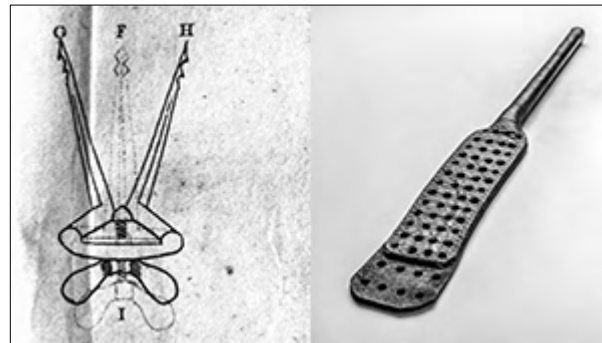
APPENDIX

D

MUSEUM OF EARLY SOUTHERN DECORATIVE ARTS
WINSTON-SALEM, NORTH CAROLINA

PODCAST

The Tools of the Trade: Resistance and the Decorative Arts of
Enslavement



Michel J. Bramwell. M.F.A.
Visiting Guest Curator
Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts
Winston-Salem, North Carolina USA

Dr. Jon F. Sensbach
Professor of History
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida USA

What can a whip made and used in Wachovia and a brass instrument used to force feed enslaved men and women during the Middle Passage teach us about resistance?

APPENDIX

Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts
Collection Assessment Report 2021

E VISITING GUESTS CURATORS



Michael J. Bramwell



Simiyha Garrison



Robert Hunter