



SCORPION FLOAT, Earthenware, 1993, Peter Shire

Care for a spot of art?



TEAPOT STUDY, Porcelain, 1992, Edward Eberle

Crafts museum brews show featuring 250 artful pots

BY RICHARD MASCHAL
Staff Writer

In the fifth century B.C., so the legend goes, a monk bringing Buddhism from India to China vowed to sit facing a wall for nine years of sleepless meditation.

Falling asleep after five years, he sliced off his eyelids and tossed them to the ground. From that spot a tea bush grew. A drink made from the leaves kept the monk awake, enabling him to finish his spiritual discipline.

In the centuries since, many have followed the monk's supposed discovery. After water, tea is the most commonly consumed beverage in the world. And where there's tea, there are teapots, a familiar and friendly object both celebrated and collected.

Sonny and Gloria Kamm have been doing both for 20 years, amassing what is probably the largest teapot collection in the world. A slice of it comes to the Mint Museum of Craft + Design on Saturday when "The Artful Teapot" opens.

Featuring wildly inventive styles and materials that riff on an object many people own, the 250 pieces by 100 artists include portraits of Marilyn Monroe and Ronald Reagan, one made of folded \$5 bills and another almost 6 feet high.

"People who are intimidated by going to museums need not be by this," Sonny Kamm, a lawyer in Los Angeles, said in a telephone interview. "They can just come and smile. It's kind of something for everybody and that's why the show (on a national tour) is drawing such

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RETRO STUFF: Stars and Stripes, glass, 1997, Richard Marquis



G's AFFORDABLE A, Earthenware, metal, glaze, 1995, Mark Burns

Mint throws a tea party featuring 250 artful pots



ARMADILLO TEAPOT, Recycled tin, 1997, Peter Grieve



TEAPOT, French silver, rock crystal, vermeil, 1937, Jean-Emile Puiforcat



TEAPOT, Glazed earthenware, 1992, Richard Milette

attention.”

The Kamms, who will discuss their teapot obsession at 3 p.m. next Sunday at the crafts museum, want to give their entire 6,000-piece collection to North Carolina if a museum can be built in Sparta, near the Virginia line.

Steeped in history

The teapot was invented in China about 500 years ago. Before then, Garth Clark relates in the exhibition catalog, tea was brewed by boiling tea leaves with salt or spices. Later, in powdered form, it was whisked in a bowl.

The teapot emerged in Yixing, an area west of Shanghai known for its richly colored clay. The first teapots supposedly were made from a single lump of clay by a monk in his spare time.

“These modestly scaled objects were to have a greater impact on ceramic design than any other single ceramic style,” writes Clark. “Alongside Japanese tea bowls, Yixing was the first pottery in the world to be made by individual artist-potters.”

When tea arrived in Europe in the 17th century,

the first teapots were imported from China - packed in tea leaves for their protection.

Iced tea, that Southern favorite, and the teabag arrived in the 20th century.

In 1904, Englishman Richard Blechynden introduced iced tea at the World’s Fair in St. Louis. Serving hot tea at a stand, he realized he’d have few customers on a sweltering day, so he offered the drink with ice cubes.

In 1909, N.Y. merchant Thomas Sullivan sewed tea samples in bags (some say muslin, some silk) for potential customers. The discovery: Tea could be brewed by pouring hot water over the bag.

What to look for

The basics of teapot design have remained unchanged for centuries: a bowl, spout, lid and handle. “The Artful Teapot” offers variations on this theme.

When viewing the show, keep the teapot’s basic elements in mind, and also its familiar associations of warmth and domesticity. Then look at how artists play with these attributes.

Some pots touch on topical subjects, such as

“Hostage,” a ceramic heart in chains. Teapots in the shape of a V8 engine, or portraits of Elvis and Col. Sanders touch on the lighter side.

Some of the works could be used to brew tea. With others, the maker tossed out functionality for a more artistic expression. Look for colors, form and surface treatment. And some of the more bizarre materials: bottle caps, olive oil cans, coconut shells and ostrich eggs.

Tea time

Tea is enjoyed by more than half of the world’s population. Tea consumption has been growing in India, China, Pakistan and throughout the Middle East. It’s grown in India, China, Kenya, Sri Lanka and other countries.

Tea-drinking traditionally was high in the United Kingdom and Ireland. In 1955, they accounted for one-third of the world’s tea consumption. Now, it’s down to about 5 percent.

The British tradition of afternoon tea began in 1840 when Anna, the Duchess of Bedford, began serving the drink and treats.

Contrary to what most people think, “low” tea is the most fashionable. “High,” served later in the day, is a full meal, including meat, actually a working-class supper.

In the United States, coffee wins over tea. But the plant had a role in the country’s formation. Protests over the tax on tea and other products, imposed on the American colonies by the British in 1767, led to the Boston Tea Party in 1773.

Colonials, dressed as Mohawk Indians, dumped 342 chests holding tons of tea into the harbor. Other cities such as Edenton had tea parties.

The “Teapot Song,” as Craft relates in the exhibition catalogue, was a product of the Depression.

Looking for a way to survive, composer George Sanders wrote the song with the help of Clarence Kelley, his partner in a N.Y. music business. The idea was to make money and give Kelley and his wife a tune young children at their dance school could perform. It worked, and “I’m A Little Teapot” became a hit.



COURTESY OF SONNY AND GLORIA KAMM

Beginning 20 years ago as collectors of studio glass, Sonny and Gloria Kamm have amassed what is now thought to be the largest teapot collection in the world - 6,000 pieces. They'd like to see it end up in North Carolina if a museum can be built to house it.

goodies related to the teapot exhibits. The crafts museum's shop will feature pocketbooks shaped like teapots. Both shops will offer teapots by Carolinas crafts people, tea towels, tea note cards and other items. In conjunction with "The Artful Teapot," the Hodges Taylor Gallery, 401 N. Tryon St., will present "Extravagant Imagination: Teapots." On view March 5-May 1 will be pieces by Southeastern artists.

PREVIEW
Short, Stout and More

"The Artful Teapot" puts a humble household artifact in the spotlight.

WHEN: Saturday-May 30.
10 a.m.-10 p.m. Tuesday,
10 a.m.- 5 p.m. Wednesday-
Saturday, noon-5 p.m.
Sunday.

WHERE: Mint Museum of
Craft + Design, 220 N.
Tryon St.

ADMISSION: \$6; \$5 seniors;
\$3 students ages 6 to 17;
free for ages 5 and under,
members, and all visitors
from 5 to 10 p.m. Tuesdays.
DETAILS: (704) 337-2000;
www.mintmuseum.org.

The collectors

Sonny and Gloria Kamm began collecting teapots in the mid-'80s. They haven't stopped. Their more than 6,000 pieces overflow their Los Angeles home into a condo purchased for storage and into the homes of their children.

"It's a little bit of a compulsion," said Kamm. "The collection is by no means finished. There's always something else."

The Kamms want their collection, which includes antique and historic pieces not in "The Artful Teapot," to stay together. They know no museum could take it all. So their plan is to donate it to a museum to be built in Sparta, about 70 miles north of Charlotte.

The connection came from Jean McLaughlin, director of the Penland School of Crafts. After visiting the Kamms last March, she put them in touch with businessman and arts supporter Phil Hanes of Winston-Salem.

He had the idea for a museum to attract tourists to Sparta, well-placed near the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Virginia state line.

Patrick Woodie, director of New River Community Partners in Sparta, said city officials have endorsed the idea and fund-raising has begun. With \$100,000 in hand, the group hopes to raise \$5 million to \$6 million over the next two years and house the collection in a new or renovated building. "It

would be the largest single investment ever made in downtown Sparta," said Woodie.

More tea stuff

"Timeless Teapots," a companion exhibition, will be at the Mint Museum of Art on Randolph Road through July 17. It covers 300 years of teapots from leading European makers such as Meissen, Staffordshire and Wedgwood, along with leading American and N.C. potters.

To mark its fifth anniversary, the crafts museum will be free to anyone bringing in a canned food item Saturday or Sunday. Donations will go to Loaves & Fishes.

The shops at the Mint's two locations will stock