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Shearwater Pottery

Shearwater, a family art pottery established at Ocean Springs, Mississippi, in 1928 and still active, is well-established in its region and has regularly been rediscovered by the larger art world. Since small potteries and studio potters proliferated in the '30s, there are probably many other similar instances of too-little-known interesting work.

Shearwater's southern location and multigeneration family history led Nancy Sweezy to include it in her chronicle of folk potteries, *Raised in Clay: The Southern Pottery Tradition* (1984), but it doesn't fit the mold. It was at first the work of three New Orleans-born siblings: Peter Anderson (1901-1984), whose idea it was and who did all the throwing, and his younger brothers Walter Inglis Anderson (called Bob, 1903-1965) and James McClellan Anderson (called Mac, 1907-1998), who decorated. Their father, a retired grain merchant, was their first business manager, and their mother, who had studied art at Newcomb College, was the critic and cheerleader. They all lived together in a variety of buildings on a 24-acre property fronting on the Mississippi Sound. The two older boys married sisters, and these two held their own in the creative, fractious, sometimes tragic interactions at the pottery that have been chronicled in a surprising number of books.¹

Shearwater seems to be a human-interest story because Bob, struck by mental illness at a young age (following bouts with undulant fever and malaria, which may have affected his condition¹), became a reclusive eccentric who left his wife and four children to live alone and to spend long periods in isolation, communing with the natural world on an uninhabited barrier island in the Gulf of Mexico. He produced thousands of watercolors of birds and other creatures

in the lush habitat, many now in the collection of the Walter Anderson Museum in Ocean Springs. Bob's ceramic decorating was astonishingly varied. He had studied at the New York School of Fine and Applied Art (which became Parsons) and the Pennsylvania Academy, where he won an award for animal drawing and another that allowed him to travel to France. There he was less interested in the conventional art sites than in cave drawings in the Dordogne (which showed up as a linear frieze of running horses with which he later decorated a pot) and in the Russian mystic Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. He was disappointed in the Institute but impressed with such practices as ecstatic dancing. Some of Gurdjieff's ideas played out in Bob's noncommercial conception of art as a spiritual calling,¹ his lifelong pursuit of oneness with the natural world, and perhaps even his daughter Leif's dancing career.

He also had read Jay Hambidge's book on dynamic symmetry when he was in art school, and studied the universal principles outlined by Adolfo Best-Mauguard. He decorated in registers (horizontal bands) in the Egyptian style, and tried applying figures in the manner of red- and black-figured Greek pottery. A compacted animal/human creature in an angular treatment recalls Mayan carvings. His own blend of all in pottery decoration was, as in his paintings, reflected in a joyous horror vacui, although he does not seem to have used as much color in his pottery as in his watercolors.

But it's a mistake to equate Shearwater with the genius of Walter Anderson. Peter was its heart with his strong, clean throwing of forms that graciously allowed his brothers' decorations. Like most serious creative potters of his time, he explored and developed glaze formulas. He believed that in the economic climate of the Depression, Shearwater's survival depended on its differentness from others. He adamantly refused to duplicate. One of his most popular glazes was

a turquoise that suggests the Gulf waters and sky. He wrote in the early days, “The glazes I’m anxious to do now are not just colors but textures and effects. Almost emotion. Glazes you can’t take your hands off.”¹ He dug local clays and struggled with a groundhog kiln before getting a Newcomb engineer to build an oil kiln (new technology then) that he used for the rest of his life.

Mac, who started out as an architecture student and who spent several periods outside the pottery business, also made a distinct contribution. In 1931 he and Bob started their own sideline business of cast figurines, most of them humorous. The purpose was to make much-needed money pandering to the new popularity of figurines, though neither of them liked the mechanistic procedures required. They made pirates, baseball players and a “picturesque” series of black characters of the sort popular in the first half of the 20th century. The work was well done—the configurations expressive and witty—and they sold in New Orleans and in department stores in the North and were juried into a ceramics exhibition in New York that included the major artists of the time. The Andersons’ figurines were shown in the Fifth Avenue windows of W. & J. Sloan department store and featured in photographs in the *New York Times* and other periodicals.¹ Production of the figurines was interrupted when Bob was institutionalized.

But it was a vessel with Mac’s decoration that was accepted in the 1936 Ceramic National (which toured Europe the next year). It was a tall, gently rounded vase on which Mac carved a spiraling line of fishes, glazed pale green. Other works he decorated show interest in regularity or radial organization, a tendency to interpret nature in architectonic order and flatter and more saturated color than Bob’s.

Peter continued to throw until shortly before his death, but by then his youngest son, Jimmy, had been working with him for some years, and the pottery went on. The staff of decorators has included others of the second generation—notably Jimmy’s sister Patricia

Feinarson, who paints with an expressionist edge recalling her uncle Bob—and now Jimmy's son, Peter Wade Anderson, makes a third generation as well.