

Pottery, Poetry, and Protest: “Hear Me Now” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

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In 1919, South Carolina’s Charleston Museum acquired an unusually massive jar bearing the inscription “made at Stoney bluff; / for making dis old gin enuff / May 13 - 1859 - / Dave & / Baddler”. The following year another large, alkaline-glazed vessel came into the museum’s possession bearing the same date and names within its inscription. At the time little was known about South Carolina’s pre-war stoneware industry or the highly skilled enslaved labor that it relied on at every level of manufacturing. It would not be until 1930 that “Dave” was identified as the “might good” potter, David Drake. The unadorned elegance of Drake’s stoneware is at the heart of Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield, South Carolina, currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This is an extraordinary exhibition, the significance of which can hardly be overstated. One can perceive these ceramics fashioned by the hands of slaves, as the material incarnation of human freedom: on one hand, they are the work of men in bondage and yet they stand witness to an inwardness, a human core that cannot be enslaved. The exhibition includes, for example, a storage vessel that Drake produced in 1858 and inscribed with a couplet: “A very Large Jar which has 4 handles = / pack it full of fresh meats - then light candles -” Another states: “I made this Jar = for cash - / though its called = lucre Trash / Dave / Lm Aug. 22, 1857 / Dave”. Notice that Drake has signed his name not once but twice, and boldly affirms his role as both potter and poet.



Image: Face jugs were made by African American slaves and freedmen working in potteries in the Edgefield District of South Carolina, an area of significant stoneware production in the nineteenth century. Unrecorded Edgefield District potter (American) Miles Mill Pottery (American, 1867-85) (Source: [The MET](#))

Slaves were forbidden from learning to read and write, as part of the general priority to keep them mentally degraded, spiritually isolated, and unable to communicate with each other through the written word. Those caught violating the prohibition on literacy could be brutally whipped or worse; as one enslaved Georgian recalled: “if they caught you trying to write they would cut your finger off and if they caught you again they would cut your head off.” Given that Drake was known to be missing a leg, it is very possible that he too suffered grievously for some such transgression.

Each of Dave’s poetic inscriptions was in its way an act of resistance, a rebellious declaration of his humanity, and the independence of his mind. As G.W.F. Hegel observes, “through the rediscovery of himself by himself, the slave realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own.” Hegel’s celebrated analysis of the relationship between dominion and servitude in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) can shed light on the admittedly uncomfortable intersection between creativity and coercion that this exhibition forces us to confront. The master is defined by his power to command the labor of another and affirms himself through the appropriation and consumption of objects which he himself does not produce. Inevitably, he finds that he is in fact utterly dependent on the slave who labors for him. The same holds true for antebellum America where, as the historian Walter Johnson points out, enslaved artisans possessed expertise and know-how that slaveholders “might command or even claim as their own, but they could never fully understand.”

With no need to engage the natural world, his needs being satisfied immediately, the master proves his position to be non-dynamic, non-developmental and ultimately a dead end. Even his satisfaction must ultimately be fleeting because he has reserved for himself the complete negation of the object, and as the object disappears so must the gratification. In work, however, we see something quite different: desire is “... held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work forms and shapes the thing.” What Hegel wants to say is that in working, the slave achieves something the master was unable to do: that is, in

shaping and fashioning the object, the laborer imprints his consciousness upon it, such that it is no longer a dead thing confronting him, but an expression of his independence given objective form. Instead of the transient enjoyment that is the master's portion, the laborer enjoys seeing his essential action preserved in the object, "which in this externality is seen by him to be the truth."

Image: Inscription: "this jar is to Mr Segler who keeps the bar in orangeburg / for Mr Edwards a Gentle man — who formly kept / Mr thos bacons horses / April 21 1858" "when you fill this Jar with pork or beef / Scot will be there; to get a peace, - / Dave".

This monumental storage jar—a masterwork by the enslaved African American potter and poet David Drake—reveals his unmatched technical facility and command of language. (By Dave (later recorded as David Drake) (American, ca. 1801-1870s) ; made at Stony Bluff Manufactory, Old Edgefield District, Sout, Stony Bluff Manufactory) (Source: [The MET](#))



Perhaps the most important aspect of Drake's pottery is, precisely, its truth. As elaborated by Alain Badiou, truth is the "general name that philosophy gives to... the productions in time and space of something that may, for solid reasons, assume to have a universal value." In this sense, truth can be "a painting by Picasso, the Bolshevik Revolution, Romeo and Juliet, or the Pythagorean theorem." The crucial point is that truths arise within the world, but always have an exceptional quality which makes them both unforeseeable, and irreducible to the given state of affairs or status quo. Hence, a truth is an "immanent exception," and in precisely this sense we can understand the universal value of the truth that is embodied in the pottery of David Drake. When, in 1857, he inscribes the words: "I wonder where is all my relation / Friendship to all - and every nation," he is bearing witness to his own experience, the enduring trauma of forced family separation, but also, in some sense, transcending it. Drake's couplet pronounces the truth of the situation from which it emerged, the reality of slavery, while in and through that same operation it intervenes itself and breaches the established order.

Hear Me Now also includes several dozen nineteenth century ceramic objects from the Old Edgefield district, the most remarkable of which are face vessels, also referred to as "grotesques," and "voodoo jugs." These bizarre looking faces, with their exaggerated features, their bulging eyes, and bared teeth, have an unmistakable power, an intensity that cannot be grasped solely in terms of the so-called primitive, "aboriginal" or West African art from which they are thought to be derived. Many of them unquestionably convey a certain

horror, a sense of man in extremis, literally stretched to the brink, but somehow maintain an element of whimsicality, and even levity – a kind gallows humor.

The exhibition concludes with contemporary works by artists such as Simone Leigh, Theaster Gates, Woody De Othello, and Adebunmi Gbadebo – contributions that attest in various ways to the continued relevance of the older stoneware. Which is just to say that the truth of what David Drake and the enslaved artisans of Old Edgefield produced has not been exhausted: it continues to exert a claim upon us, such that we remain beholden to the universal value of their achievement, and the truth of their exceptionality.

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