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or centuries, the ceramic medium has been used to document catastrophic human events. In western society, wars, fires, plagues, and other devastating conditions have been memorialized on mass-produced ceramics and sold as remembrances to a diverse populace. The British in particular have long recorded elements of their history on pottery, including tragic circumstances from the Great Fire of London in 1666 to the horrors of trench warfare during World War I. This phenomenon of ceramic commemoration has

The great English potter Josiah Wedgwood used this particular form of ceramic art for a number of mass-produced works featuring images

flourished in the industrialized

age, in most cases the objects

outlasting conscious memory

of the events that have been

memorialized.

of the physical remains of the magnificent Greek and Roman cultures. One of his simpler but more profound memorials is a flower vase composed of broken fluted columns resting on a cracked and crumbling plinth (fig. 1). Although these vases were functional, they better served as ornamental devices alluding to the ultimate decay and ruin of a great classical civilization. Wedgwood used his famous jasperware body to create this architectural reminder of a culture's inherent transience.

Throughout the 19th century various commemorative pieces were produced depicting the full range of western historic events. With the advent of transfer printing, commemorative ceramics could be made for the public market in a very short period of time following their commission. These printed images were able to convey the horrors and pathos associated with warfare, natural catastrophes and general social ills, and were placed on all sorts of ceramic forms from chamber pots to meat platters (fig. 2). But with the use of printed images these works become less of a potter's art and more within the realm of the artist and engraver.

One late 19th-century exception was the commissioning of another blue and white British stoneware piece, created by Spode Copeland for the Burley Company in Chicago to coincide with the 1893 Chicago World's Fair (fig 3).

Cataclysmic Ceramics

by Robert Hunter



FIGURE 1: Jasperware Vase, Josiah Wedgwood, c. 1785-1795. H. 7" (Courtesy, The Saint Lewis Museum of Art)

This piece was a molded jug decorated with applied sprigging detailing the events associated with the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. The fire, which started around 9 o'clock on Sunday evening, October 8 of that year, was one of the worst disasters that this country had faced; over 300 people died and another 100,000 were left without homes or shelter. The fire destroyed a major part of the city, covering an area four miles long and nearly twothirds of a mile wide. Over \$200 million in property was lost - a considerable sum for that time.

The fierce conflagration is depicted on the sprigging around the neck of the Spode Copeland jug, along with several related details on the body (fig. 4). Of particular significance are the vignettes of firemen fighting the blaze, and another immortalizing

the somewhat mythologized Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicking over the lantern that started the fire (figs. 5 and 6). In keeping with the mass-produced nature of commemorative wares, 500 copies of this jug were made (fig. 7).

The documentation of cataclysmic events continues to this day, although with the growth of studio pottery in the 20th century many clay artists produce only singular works rather than mass-produced items. Potter Michelle Erickson recently extended this age-old custom, capturing in clay her perspective on the destruction of the World Trade Center during the horrific events of September 11, 2001.

Precipitated by an invitation to participate in Garth Clark's "Blue + White = Radical" group show in July of 2002, she created three works reflecting her thoughts and feelings on this historic and life-changing event. Best known for her extensive repertoire of 17th and 18th century ceramic techniques, Erickson had a substantial historical toolkit with which to build her artistic vision, utilizing porcelain, tin-glazed earthenware and jasperware in her efforts. The selection of the material and specific historical technology reference play an integral role in conceptualization and execution of all of her work.

The most literal of these is the blue and white jasperware depiction of the ruined façade of one of the World Trade towers, an image burned into our consciousness



FIGURE 2: Detail of Transfer Print on Porcelain Jug, Staffordshire, c. 1855, showing a grieving widow during the Crimean War (Private collection).

through both television coverage and subsequent photography of the aftermath (fig. 8). Although this fragment of the great wreckage was indeed a powerful physical artifact of the destruction, Erickson drew a parallel with a technique used 200 years earlier by Josiah Wedgwood. Erickson's choice of jasper as the medium for this work has significance beyond the symbolic comparison with Wedgwood's ruined column.

One of the greatest ceramic stories of all time is Wedgwood's perfection of the jasperware body while attempting to copy the famous Portland vase in the late 18th century. Jasperware was developed to simulate the look of this ancient Roman cameo-glass masterpiece. Thus, in developing jasperware, the emphasis was on its decorative properties, which included a degree of translucency and the ability to be polished. It was this purposeful intent by Wedgwood to memorialize the past through his choice of material that Erickson found fascinating.

Using an original 18th-century formula, Erickson herself experimented endlessly to achieve a workable clay body. The jasperware body, largely composed of barium carbonate, is extremely volatile and very difficult to manipulate. It is prone to slumping and cracking and, as Erickson observes, "it is the last material you would want to use for a tall and skinny sculpture." Nonetheless, these very properties help convey the enormous force in the cracking and twisting of the Trade Center tower's metal structure.

While the Trade Tower ruin will forever symbolize the specific events of September 11, another more cryptic piece explores the greater context of the tragedy. Working in the style of traditional Chinese export porcelain, her thrown and cast bowling pins depict the Manhattan skyline painted in blue, suggestive of the famous Blue Willow pattern (fig. 9). While her choice of a porcelain body suggests strength and stability, the splayed stance of the pins imply that the skyscrapers are frail targets waiting to be knocked down. Beyond this allusion, Erickson also includes images of Afghan women dressed in the traditional birkas, shapes reminiscent of the bowling pin.

Erickson has written about this work: "The environment in which terrorism thrives is oppression, and the breeding grounds for extremism are poverty, desperation and hopelessness. The images of women anonymously

shrouded, transposed onto the bowling pin forms, simultaneously suggest extreme vulnerability and strength. The precarious stance of the pins, frozen by fire in time, provide a window into a poignant, horrific moment in history and evoke in the viewer a consideration of universal humanity."

Erickson's final work related to the events of September 11 is a tin-glazed earthenware or delftware sculpture of Liberty (fig. 10). Although this figure is a nearly universal icon used in countless patriotic and artistic endeavors, Erickson's version also alludes, through the subtle but powerful suggestion of crucifixion, to the sacrifice of Liberty. The bust-length, armless composition also pays homage to the remnants of classical figures that have survived from the Greek and Roman cultures. Her choice of delftware also has implied historical content. This earthenware body, typically used for a variety of utilitarian purposes and rarely







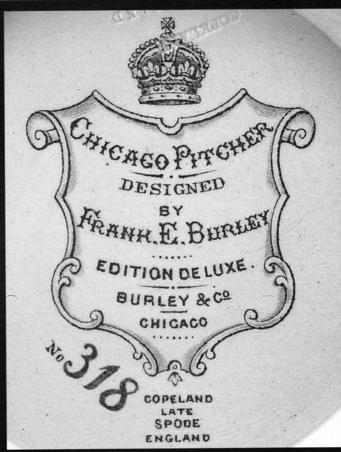


FIGURE 3, CENTER LEFT: Stoneware Jug, Spode Copeland, 1893. H.8" (Private collection; photo: Gavin Ashworth). FIGURE 4, TOP: Detail of sprigging on the neck. FIGURE 5, INSET: Detail of sprigging on the opposite side of the neck. FIGURE 6, LOWER LEFT: Detail of sprigging on the body, showing Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicking over the lantern. FIGURE 7, BOTTOM RIGHT: Detail of mark on the bottom of jug, identifying it as No. 318 of 500 copies.



for sculpture, was found in the homes of peasants and nobility alike for several centuries. Thus, her crucified Liberty is sculpted from the most democratic of all ceramic bodies. Erickson's works can be justifiably included in the long continuum of ceramic commemoration of historical events. Beyond mere personal expression, she has created timeless reminders of the tragedy while supplying some cathartic relief for our social conscience. Although the events of September 11, 2001 are painfully close to us today, studying historical ceramics provides evidence of other equally sorrowful events that have disappeared from public consciousness. For example, a 19th-century Staffordshire dinner plate depicts the Great New York City Fire of 1835, an event that is unfamiliar to most of us. Yet the conflagration destroyed 674 buildings over 17 city

blocks in the middle of Manhattan, leveling the Stock Exchange and the Post Office – a disaster of international proportions. Ceramic artifacts such as this plate are among the many ways in which we try to not forget our past. The very act of memorializing our cataclysmic events in clay – whether it is the sacking of Troy or the Hiroshima blast – is an important testament to the artistic spirit and the enduring relevance of the craft.

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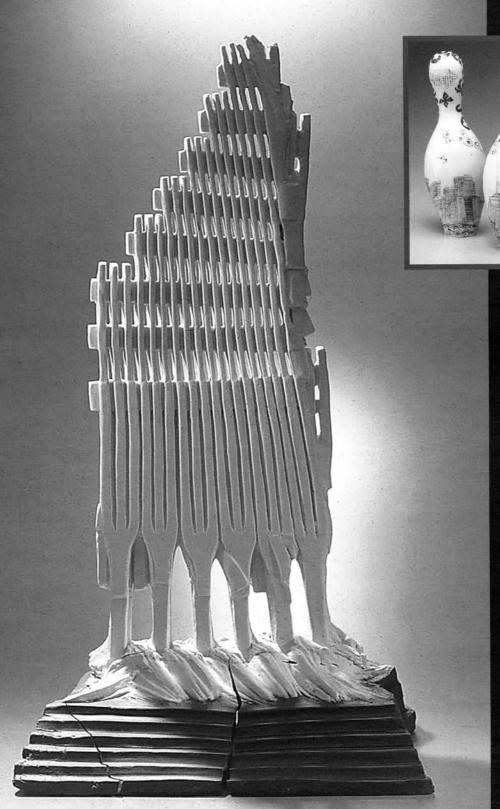




FIGURE 8, LEFT: Ruin by
Michelle Erickson, 2002.
Jasperware, H.17"
FIGURE 9, ABOVE: Garniture
by Michelle Erickson, 2002.
Porcelain with underglaze
cobalt decoration. H.14"
(Courtesy, The New-York
Historical Society).
FIGURE 10, OPPOSITE PAGE:
Liberty by Michelle
Erickson, 2002. Tin-glazed
earthenware. H.16"
Photographs by Gavin
Ashworth.