Museum sheds light on Catawba pottery

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Tribe's craft tradition oldest in New World

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Several centuries before Europeans first stepped foot in South Carolina, the Catawba people flourished on the upper reaches of the Catawba River in present-day York County.

One of the Catawba's great cultural traditions, dating back 4,500 years, was the art of pottery making.

Disease, war and white encroachment decimated the Catawba after the tribe's first encounters with Spanish explorers in 1540.

But a few thousand Catawba survive today — as does their pottery making.

Upstate residents can see some fine examples of this pottery tradition at the Upcountry History Museum's exhibition "The Language of Clay: Catawba Indian Pottery and Oral Traditions," which runs through June 24.

"The Catawba's pottery tradition is the oldest in North America," said Brittany Taylor, curator of the exhibition.

Much of the earliest Catawba pottery, however, hasn't survived the centuries. The oldest pottery in the Upcountry History Museum exhibition dates from the late 1880s.

All of the 100 pieces on display, however, are authentic.

"It's only considered Catawba pottery if it's made by a member of the Catawba tribe with clay dug from around the Catawba River," said Taylor, an art instructor and curator of collections at the University of South Carolina Lancaster.

Most of the Catawba pottery in the Greenville exhibition comes from USC Lancaster's huge collection of Native American artifacts.

Though the Catawba pottery tradition reaches back thousands of years, the style of designs changed in the 20th century, becoming far more decorative, Taylor said.

The 19th-century Catawba pottery in the exhibition appears merely functional while the 20th-century pottery on display is more elaborate, featuring symbols such as owls, snakes, seeds, the sun and Indian heads.

Each of those symbols relate to Catawba story-telling tradition, Taylor said. Seeds and the sun reflect the tribe's close connection to nature. Snakes represent warriors, and owls symbolize death.

"Each piece will speak to different people in different ways," Taylor said.

"I'm more partial to the turtle effigies and or other animal effigies. I find the connection between the effigies and the storytelling very appealing."

The exhibition includes some audio displays featuring interviews and storytelling in the Catawba language. Several panels provide historical context for the exhibition.

Although the style of Catawba pottery has changed through the centuries, the potter's creative process harks back to ancient ways. Even today, Catawba pottery is hand-built, burnished and fired using primitive techniques.

Today Catawba pottery is created on the Catawba reservation about eight miles from Rock Hill. The Catawba Indian Nation is the only federally recognized Indian tribe in South Carolina.

The Catawba tribal roll includes about 2,600 names.

"The Language of Clay" exhibition is the first of several projected off-campus displays of USC Lancaster's Native American artifacts, which includes more than 1,000 pieces of Catawba pottery.

All of the planned exhibitions will be designed to bring greater attention to the history and culture of South Carolina's indigenous peoples.

The Upcountry History Museum will feature several programs in connection with the exhibition, including a Jan. 12 "Lunch & Learn" discussion, from noon to 1 p.m., featuring Dr. Stephen Criswell, who will explore the history of the Catawba people and their pottery.

On Jan. 22, the museum will hold a "Catawba Cultural Celebration Family Day," from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., featuring Monty Branham, a Catawba potter, musician and storyteller. Other Catawba programs will be held the second Saturday of each month from noon to 2 p.m.

"I hope people walk away from the Upcountry History Museum exhibition with a greater knowledge of the Catawba people and their traditions and a greater respect for those traditions," Taylor said.



Contributed

"Snake Pitcher," a 1978 work by Georgia Harris, will be on display through June 24.



Contributed

Horse Pot," a 2003 work by Earl Robbins, is part of "The Language of Clay: atawba Indian Pottery and Oral Traditions" at Greenville's Upcountry listory Museum.

YOU CAN GO

- **What:** "The Language of Clay: Catawba Indian Pottery and Oral Traditions"
- **When:** 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday-Saturday; 1 p.m. to 5 p.m., Sunday. (Closed Dec. 31 and Jan. 1.) Exhibition continues through June 24.
- **Where:** Upcountry History Museum, 540 Buncombe St.
- **Tickets:** $5 for adults; $4 for seniors and college students; $3 for children and students ages 4 to 18; free for children 3 and under.
- **Information:** 864-467-3100 or www.upcountryhistory.org