

# Penland Line

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## Approaching Seventy-Five

Although it was not incorporated until 1938, the beginning of Penland School of Crafts is always dated at 1929. That was the year that seven out-of-state students came to the Appalachian School to join the summer weaving class taught by Edward F. Worst for the Penland Weavers. Every year since then, there have been craft workshops on Conley Ridge Road. In 2004, Penland School will celebrate its seventy-fifth birthday.

When Jean McLaughlin was hired as director in 1998, one of her charges from the board was to find a meaningful way to recognize and celebrate this auspicious anniversary. The following year, she began meeting with a group of staff members—Dana Moore, Robin Dreyer, Erika Sanger—and Nicholas Joerling who is a potter, a neighbor, and a board member.

interpreting craft, and their collection holds much Penland-related material,” explains Jean. “Penland does not maintain a permanent collection, but through its years of instruction has enabled the work of thousands of craft artists to evolve. The institutions complement each other in focus and scope, and they are linked in their role as educators.”

In addition to establishing this partnership, the school has hired Ellen Denker as lead curator (see page 3). She will work closely with Penland’s program director Dana Moore and MMCD curator Melissa Post to define the content of the exhibition. Ellen’s background is in the study of material culture. Her curatorial and scholarly experience reaches across the American Arts and Crafts Movement, folk art, urban and rural

ing and new ideas to bear on the subject of craft. Part of the way we will do this is by working with writers whose perspective is informed by other disciplines.”

To begin this process three writers were invited to Penland in 2001 as visiting scholars. With funding from the North Carolina Humanities Council, each of the writers spent a week at the school observing classes, talking to staff, instructors, students, and community members, and reviewing material in the archives. Each of them gave two public lectures about their own work. They were then invited to make proposals for topics they might research and write about for the publication.

The three visiting scholars last year were cultural anthropologist Norris Brock Johnson, who teaches at University of



Instructor Floss Perisho, 1950s.



Instructor Cynthia Bringle, 1970s.



Instructor Nick Cave, 1990s.

The group discussed many possibilities but kept returning to a central principle. Penland’s seventy-fifth birthday should be celebrated in a way that would explore the school’s history but would also bring new attention to the importance and meaning of craft and craft education. The strong feeling of Jean and the committee was that this celebration should make a contribution to the craft community; it should be a vehicle for taking Penland out into the world.

The plan that evolved from this principle is gradually becoming a reality. Penland will partner with a major exhibiting institution to produce an exhibition which will use the work of artists affiliated with the school to make a strong statement about the evolution and relevance of craft. The exhibition will also tell something about the history of the school and use the Penland story to emphasize the power of craft education to transform the lives of individuals.

Accompanying the exhibition will be a publication which will serve as a catalogue, but will also contain original essays on craft and the Penland experience, some of them written from disciplines outside of the visual arts: cultural anthropology, social history, material culture, science, poetry, etc. Just like the exhibition, the book will talk about Penland and will also attempt to expand current thinking about craft.

There is much to be done, but, with the strong initial support from the Windgate Foundation, the planning process is well underway. Penland’s partner will be the Mint Museum of Craft + Design (MMCD) in Charlotte, North Carolina. The exhibition will open there in August, 2004 and then travel to three or four additional sites over the following two years. “MMCD has achieved national recognition for exhibiting and

life, women’s contributions to the social fabric of American life, and the interrelationship of fine art, craft, and design. Bringing Ellen into the project was a starting point for defining its nature. “I come to this,” she says, “as an outsider, but a sympathetic outsider who really wants to understand what’s going on and tell that story. And it’s a story we want to tell not just to collectors or the academy; we want to tell it to the average person.”

Ellen has been visiting Penland regularly to gather background information, and is working with Jean, Dana, and the MMCD staff on a conceptual outline for the exhibition. Although the expectation is that the show will be visually stunning, the intent is for something more thoughtful than simply a display of beautiful objects.

Specifically, Ellen sees the project covering three broad topics, which she says are distilled from years of collective thinking about handmade objects. *Source* will explore primary sources of inspiration in craft: the body, landscape, spirituality, and serendipity. *Skill* will examine the role of oral tradition in craft teaching and will celebrate the choreography of proficiency. *Culture* will show craft as an expressive form of material culture shared across boundaries of race, ethnicity, age, gender, and nation. “What we are trying to do,” explains Ellen, “is get inside the nature of craft. This means that chronologically diverse objects will be gathered to illuminate the same theme.”

The companion publication will also take an innovative approach. “It’s clear to me,” says Jean, “that if we try to talk about craft and the Penland experience strictly from what you might call an ‘arts’ perspective, an important part of the story will be missed. Our goal with this book is to bring fresh think-

North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Ellen Dissanayake, an independent scholar who has been investigating the origins of artistic behavior from a Darwinian perspective; and Patricia Phillips, writer, critic and dean of the School of Fine and Performing Arts at the University of New York at New Paltz. More writers will be invited in 2002. (We will profile all of the scholars in an upcoming supplement to the Penland Line.)

As general background for the project, Dana Moore has assembled a timeline of the school’s history and a comprehensive list of past instructors and resident artists. She is also gathering slides representing the kind of work which might appear in the exhibition. Michelle Francis, a professional archivist, has been hired to organize and catalog the Penland archive. (see page 6) The school is gathering oral histories from a number of people, and a grant from the American Craft Council has funded the purchase of video equipment which will be used to document a number of the artists whose work will appear in the show. This will allow the exhibition to incorporate footage of artists working and talking about their work, their teaching, and Penland.

Important next steps include confirming other venues for the exhibition, finding additional sources of funding, securing a publisher for the book, and selecting artists and particular objects for inclusion. There are also plans for a web site and museum-based educational programs.

The project is ambitious, but the event of Penland’s seventy-fifth anniversary presents a special opportunity to explore and celebrate the importance of craft in our society. And, just in case you were wondering, we’ll probably have some kind of a party, too.

—Robin Dreyer