

## A Conversation With Ellen Denker, Exhibitionist

One of the first tasks in planning the major craft exhibition which will coincide with Penland's 75th anniversary (see page 1) was to find a lead curator. The job will be in the capable hands of material culture specialist, museum consultant, and writer Ellen Denker. It is an interesting choice because, although Ellen's background includes study of American decorative arts, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the history of ceramics, she is not primarily a craft curator. Her interests and experience are quite broad, with recent curatorial activities including the permanent display at the Chipstone Galleries of American Decorative Arts of the Milwaukee Art Museum, a show at the New York Transit Museum exploring the history and politics of public transportation, and an exhibition at the New-York Historical Society tracing the British in New York City from 1700 to the present (J.P. Morgan and the Beatles received equal attention in that show).

It was clear at our first meeting that Ellen would bring intelligence, sensitivity, and an unusual breadth of information to her work with Penland. I talked to her about how she approaches her work, and I thought an excerpt from our conversation would be of interest to readers of the Penland Line.

—Robin Dreyer

*You describe yourself as an exhibitionist, which I thought was funny, but I know you didn't mean this only in a joking way.*

It is a joke because the usual connotation of an exhibitionist is one who reveals himself, and, of course, I'm not usually revealing myself because I'm in the background. I'm the one who watches and takes notes and figures things out and then tells you stories. When I use that word, what I'm describing is my ability to tell a story in a space that you move through—to do it very quickly, and to do it so you understand it inside, not just intellectually, but emotionally. Most art museums don't work that way; in order to see that kind of exhibition, you usually have to go to history museums.

*Why don't art museums do that kind of work?*

Well, they tend to simply put things on pedestals and remove all of the context. One of the things that's exciting about working with craft and at Penland specifically is that it's totally contextualized. The meaning of the object is wrapped up in the process of its coming into being. Art museums do not explain process; what they see is product. In this exhibition we have the freedom to tell the process story.

*Your background is primarily in the field of material culture. Could you explain what that is.*

Material culture is the stuff of our lives. Animals nest and create material culture, but humans create a lot of material culture, and their material culture is the expression of their intellect and their emotions. The reason it's called material culture is that it's not the spoken word or the written word. Material culture is what archeologists dig up so they can make pronouncements about past cultures. Material culture people look at the stuff that's around them and, through that, attempt to

have insight into the culture we're living in. In order to be good as an exhibitionist you have to be able to see those connections.

Material culture is what crosses the boundaries, and this is what exhibitionizing is about, too: breaking down the boundaries so everybody understands where you are, what it is, what you're looking at, what's happening here. It's not race, it's not religion, it's not ethnicity, it's humanity. Craft definitely does that.

*So what's your method?*

Immersion. The first thing I try to do is learn as much as I can—not from books, although I read books eventually—but I really like to get it visually and aurally first, and by talking to people, because there isn't ever one story. When it's presented it may be one story, but there are always many points of view, and I'm looking for the common thread. I'm always looking for the way the visitor to the exhibition will come into it, because if you capture the visitor at their point of entry, then they'll learn everything you have to teach them.

*Can you give me an example of a point of entry?*

I did an exhibit several years ago about the visiting nurse service and the designer and I tried for a long time to figure out where we were going to find that nexus for visiting nursing. There's almost no material culture of visiting nurses: they carry a bag, they have a uniform. So where was that point where we were really going to engage the visitor and also be able to express to the nurses that we knew what they were up to?

We finally decided that it was the door: the blank door the nurses face when they go out. This is a visiting nurse who comes to your home. She comes to the door with the address, and she knows basically why she has been called there, but there's still that blank door. The door opens and all is revealed, and it's her part to step in and change the life of this patient.

So we got these anonymous blank doors for the exhibition and people opened them. When they opened them, there was a photo essay inside about the interaction between nurses and patients. At the opening of the show, all of the nurses were crying. That's what you're going for, capturing that moment when everyone who's inside the subject or outside of the subject gets it. It's a tricky business and you need a really good designer because you're

not just lining things up and telling the story, you're trying to get to the heart of something."

So our exhibition is not just the story of Penland but the story of what craft is in life. And the task is to find out how we get to the heart of craft and craft education specifically because this is a school.

*How does your work differ from that of the designer?*

The curator is the context of the exhibit. The curator chooses the objects and develops the themes, and provides the intellectual basis for the project. The designer comes in and makes a lot of the emotional decisions—the decisions that really help the curator tell the story. A poor designer looks at the

objects and arranges them in a pleasing way and misses the opportunity to help the visitor cross over into the material. Good designers will sit down and understand what the curator wants to do and try to make those entry points for the visitor really visible and tactile. So the designer has to have a profound understanding of what you are trying to do.



Ellen Denker

*Our exhibition will use the work of Penland artists to explore ideas about craft and handmade objects. What is the relationship between the ideas and the objects?*

For me as a material culture person, the objects don't illustrate a theme, the objects *are* the theme. You start with the object and say, what do we know about it? What does it tell us? That's where the story grows from—out of the object. That's why craft is such an exciting thing because craft is really that point where human intellect meets environment, meets material, meets resource, and puts those things together into something that conveys a message about yourself to someone else.

*What is your goal for this project?*

Making things is a basic component of learning about the world, and my goal is for everyone who sees this exhibition to leave with an overwhelming desire to make something. Then I think we will have gotten it across. How we will make that happen, I don't know yet, but that's my goal.

### YOU MAY BE ABLE TO HELP

Ellen notes that the readers of the *Penland Line* can help with her research, particularly with regards to the early part of the school's history. We still have a lot to learn about what was actually made during the era of the Penland Weavers and Potters, both by members of that organization and by students who came to the school during those early years. She would love to hear from anyone who has or knows about objects made at Penland during that time period, especially textiles, lapidary, metalwork, and pottery.

If you have access to these materials, please contact Ellen through the Penland archive by calling 828-765-8060 or by email at [archives@penland.org](mailto:archives@penland.org).