

Celebrating Seventy-Five Years



Dana Moore

An installation view from the exhibition at the Mint Museum of Craft + Design.

It's been a long time coming. Seventy-five years, if you count from the beginning. Five years if you start with the first conversations about how to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of Penland School of Crafts. On an obvious level, a major round-number anniversary presented an excellent opportunity to attract attention to Penland's history and its contributions to American craft and the lives of thousands of individuals. On another level, however, this event was an opportunity to focus attention, resources, and thinking in a way that might bring something new to craft: an anniversary gift from the school.

Out of these conversations came two primary projects and two partner institutions. A major museum exhibition was developed in conjunction with the Mint Museum of Craft + Design in Charlotte, NC. An accompanying book was published with Lark Books of Asheville, NC. Both projects were shaped so they would illuminate the Penland story while also giving the viewer or reader a new take on craft.

The exhibition, titled *The Nature of Craft and the Penland Experience*, is on view at the Mint Museum of Craft + Design until January 30, 2005. It includes 136 objects which span the school's entire history (with the bulk of the work dating from 1964 to the present) and the incredible range of materials, styles, and approaches that collectively constitute Penland's definition of craft. All of the work is by artists who have been instructors or resident artists at Penland, but curators Ellen Denker and Dana Moore did not want to assemble

Penland's Greatest Hits or a history told through objects.

Instead, the exhibition is organized around the themes of *Skill, Source, Expression, and Community*. Although most of the objects could logically have been placed in more than one of the categories, these themes created a structure which juxtaposes the work in surprising

ways, as they cut across divisions of time, period, style, and media. The idea is for these potent objects, filled with information, gesture, and intent, to engage with each other in new ways, giving the viewer an expanded idea of craft along with a rich experience of both the continuity and diversity of its practice.

The exhibition is accompanied by an extensive website developed by the museum's staff and Interactive Knowledge of Charlotte. This is a website unlike any Penland has had before. It includes an illustrated history of the school, photos of the work from the exhibition (including a special zoom function that lets you see the details), streaming video clips, and an online reunion page where Penland students and instructors can post information. Everyone who has been part of the school is encouraged to participate in the reunion section to share memories of Penland's history and information about their work. The site, which works best with a broadband connection, is found at www.mintmuseum.org/penland.

Another component of the exhibition is a compilation of video interviews with Penland instructors which is continuously available at the museum. This thought-provoking piece was edited by Dana Moore from interviews conducted by Joe Murphy, Tom Spleth, Robin Dreyer, and others.

The book, also titled *The Nature of Craft and the Penland Experience* was published in July and is available now from the Penland Gallery, online booksellers, and through book stores nationwide (any bookstore can

order it). It is 228 pages long and contains images of all of the work in the exhibition and 143 additional illustrations. Ten original essays were commissioned for the book. The first is a short history of Penland by staff member Robin Dreyer. It is followed by an essay on craft history by exhibition co-curator Ellen Denker. The other eight essays approach craft, education, creativity, and the Penland experience from various points of view.

The essayists are not craft experts; rather, they are interesting thinkers from a variety of fields who were invited to spend time at Penland and then to write an essay on any aspect of craft that interested them. The essayists are sociologist Galen Cranz, interdisciplinary scholar Ellen Dissanayake, poet and Nobel Laureate chemist Roald Hoffman, cultural commentator and MacArthur Fellow Lewis Hyde, cultural anthropologist Norris Brock Johnson, folklorist Michael Owen Jones, poet Eileen Myles, and art critic Patricia Phillips. The content of their writings is as varied and diverse as the content of the exhibition. In addition to presenting the first detailed history of the school since Lucy Morgan wrote her memoirs in 1958 and cataloging an extraordinary selection of objects, the content of this book makes a real contribution to contemporary writing and thinking on the subject of craft.



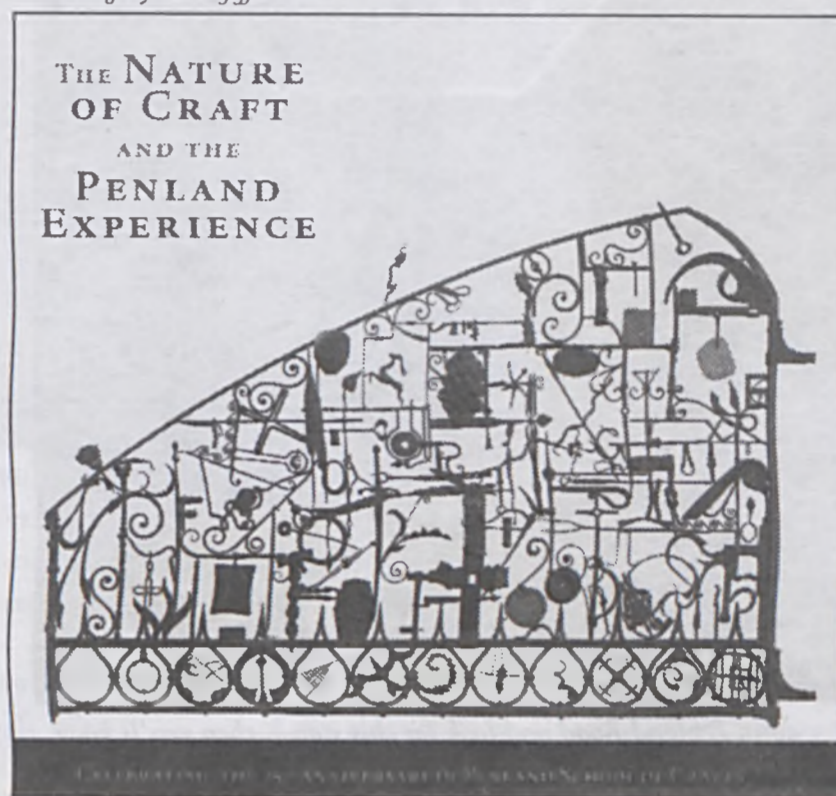
Robin Dreyer

In process here is a commemorative glass murrine created by a class taught by Dinah Hulet, Richard Ritter, and Jan Williams. After it was stretched and cut, the brightly colored murrine slices were about two inches in diameter.

The book was introduced at a book release party at Blue Spiral 1 Gallery in Asheville. Gallery owner John Cram arranged for an exhibition of Penland artists to coincide with the party.

The history of Penland School was also celebrated in a memorable exhibition at the

Cover design by Kristi Pfeffer



The front cover of "the book." The cover image is David Ramsey's photograph of a large iron gate created by instructors Japheth Howard and Alice James along with the students in their fall, 2000 iron class.

Penland Gallery, titled *Penland Retrospect*, which ran from March 2 to April 25. Curated by archivist Michelle Francis and exhibitions manager Kathryn Gremley, the show included objects owned by the school and some loaned by friends, neighbors, and the families of Lucy Morgan and Bill Brown, Penland's first two directors. It was exciting to see promotional materials for the Penland Weavers and Potters next to examples of their work—to find craft work made in honor of Penland's fiftieth anniversary sitting in front of photographs from that celebration. The response to this exhibition was so strong that it was hard to take it down when the time came.

Penland is also organizing a special exhibition and a panel discussion on craft education for the SOFA Chicago exposition in November (see page 8). Potter and Penland trustee Nicholas Joerling wrote an essay about summer workshops which will appear in the SOFA catalog.

The first event of the year was a special work session for Penland instructors. For a week in late February, ninety-seven artists were given the run of the place. Some