

In Search of Clay

Written by Miz MerMulletMaid
Monday, 31 January 2011 20:43 -

Nancy Jefferson loves fine clay the way some people love fine wine. Her life passion revealed itself the moment she first held a lump of moist, rich clay in her hands. During her thirty year journey as a clay artist, Nancy has developed new techniques and pushed her limits of comfort. Her palette extends beyond her beautiful mugs, plates, and bowls to exquisite ceramic sculpture and items of whimsical delight. But she remains grounded in nature which is the inspiration for all her works. She draws from the tropical colors of the Florida Keys where she lived and played while evolving as an artist before coming to this part of North Florida. Her work is now inspired by the flora and fauna that surround her studio tucked back in the woods, and from the spring-fed rivers and coastline where she paddles her turquoise kayak. Nancy is also a Certified Green Guide well-versed in the woods, waters, and wilds of Wakulla with a penchant for adventure and the outdoors.

Wandering through a display of Nancy's works is always a sensory treat. Fresh seasonal flowers adorn her pitchers and vases. Turtles sleep on natural looking logs. Clay frogs cling to the sides of sculpted pots. Her beautifully designed new website offers virtual visual testament to her unique clay art, and chronicles her growth as an artist. The website showcases some of her collections – "River Dwellers", "Coral Reef Communities", "Amphorae and Floral Vessels" - and new pieces as they evolve. A hands-on class is also in the offerings because Nancy loves to guide others in hand building their own creations, hoping perhaps to help someone else uncover their own hidden passion.

Nancy has an appreciation for different types of clay, their individual properties, and the various regions from where they come. Clays are mined throughout the world, but there are basically three types, each suited to different pottery techniques. There are red clays, the color created by high contents of iron. These are the low fire clays used to make earthenware. There are the white or porcelain clays which are the purest of all clays, used to produce fine china and porcelain pieces. Then there are the stoneware clays which are limitless in variety. These clays have travelled sometimes great distances along waterways picking up various organic matter depending on the region where they are found. This gives rise to the endless array of colors found in stoneware clays. Nancy uses these clays to create her high fire pieces including raku, a Japanese technique that continues to intrigue her. Like a wine enthusiast, she has sampled and become well acquainted with the many types of clays, but it is the regional stoneware clays that most captivate Nancy.

Like a connoisseur who intimately knows wines, Nancy knows clays. She also now knows not to pack clay in her carry-on luggage like she did during a recent trip. It was a beautiful blue clay,

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gathered from a Kentucky creek bed filled with fossils and geodes. Carefully wrapped in plastic and placed inside two cottage cheese containers for the transport home, Nancy positioned it safely among her clothing the morning of her flight. At the airport as she attempted to make her way through security, she was startled to suddenly witness her suitcase surrounded by four uniformed officials. The containers were very carefully extracted from her bag and quickly taken away for analysis. A short while later they were delivered unhurt back to Nancy along with a stern warning for next time.

Because I know Nancy is always open to the discovery of new and different clays and also loves a good adventure, when I was invited to join her on a recent search, I jumped at the chance. She had been informed by a reliable source that certain areas of a close-by riverbank were thick with clay deposits. Nancy has before used small amounts of local stoneware clays as a surface wash in a technique known as the terra sigillata. Now she hoped to find some good quality clay enough to study and test, and perhaps to construct an entire piece.

It was mid-afternoon of a warm fall weekday so the usual noisy weekend boat traffic was gone. We lowered our watercraft into the river. Nancy sits atop her kayak. I carefully position myself in the bow and our guide takes control of the stern in his canoe. Our seasoned guide of Native American descent knows well this and the other nearby rivers like his distant Apalachee cousins who once lived along this area of North Florida. He had explored the river many times by canoe, and walked great distances along the banks while scouting the riverside and bordering woods. He knew where the rich clay deposits were hidden, perhaps the very same places where his ancestors had gathered clay to make pottery of long ago.

The anticipation of our search has Nancy almost breathless as we paddle upstream against the current and the outgoing tide. I hoped for Nancy that we would find the clay. But for me, just being here on the water was reward enough. This serene stretch of river lifted quickly the demands of my earlier work day and left them floating far behind. Mullet flash by in the silent clear depths shooting like underwater bullets through the waving sagittaria beneath our boats. A lone coot floats alongside a patch of pickerelweed sluggishly unaware of our close approach before finally moving away. In the distance a pileated woodpecker sounds its distinctive call. A kingfisher speeds past us going straight downstream making a loud woody rattle the entire length of his way. Fiery red cardinal flowers burn brightly against the wooded backdrop. The stately cypress show off their autumn colors, and sugar maple leaves shimmer against the sky in the gentle wind.

Our guide who has been quietly surveying the riverbank swiftly steers our canoe toward the shore. He steps out and scoops a handful of sand letting it run through his fingers. Not here, he

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tells us. We continue further up the river and now deeper into Nancy's building excitement. All of us intently scan the bank with heightened attention as we glide along. Soon I think I detect a subtle change in color. So must our guide because immediately he turns and heads straight to the riverbank. Somehow, I believe we were all just able to sense this was the right place. I turn to look at Nancy who scrambles from her boat to join us on the narrow shore. Our guide shoves his arm down into the mud and smiles. Nancy grins from ear to ear and chortles with elated glee.

By now the sun had dropped casting a warm illuminating glow that makes this my very favorite time of day to be on the water. The woods begin to come alive, awakening with sounds of wildlife and the approaching dark of night. The return trip back down the river now seems much shorter than when we first began. Our boats are finally fully loaded as dusk settles in and we prepare to go our separate ways. Each of us departs with a distinct prize – me with a handful of wild rice plucked from the riverside, our guide with the satisfaction of his job well done – and Nancy with the trophy - a bag full of top quality, rich-bodied clay of exceptional vintage and aged to perfection, just waiting to take shape beneath her hands.