

American Face Vessels



OBJECT NAME: Face Vessels
MATERIAL: Alkaline-glazed Stoneware
MAKER: Attributed to Black Slave Potters
LOCATION OF MANUFACTURE: Edgefield District, South Carolina
DATE OF MANUFACTURE: Mid-19th Century
MARKS: None
DIMENSIONS: 5" High X 3" Wide
CATALOG NUMBERS: 324313 AND 324314;
Negative number 92-16903
ACQUISITION INFORMATION: From the Estate of Mary Elizabeth Sinnott

DESCRIPTION: Two small stoneware jugs modeled in the shape of human faces. The jugs are covered with a mottled, dark green alkaline glaze. Unglazed kaolin is used to form eyes and teeth.

HISTORY: This distinctive type of ceramic face vessel first appeared in the American South in the mid-1800s. Jugs such as these are attributed to a small number of Black slaves working as potters in the Edgefield District of South Carolina. None of these skilled potters have been identified by name and their inspiration for making face vessels is unknown. Scholars speculate that the vessels may have had religious or burial significance, or that they reflect the complex responses of people attempting to live and maintain their personal identities under harsh conditions.

Information or research assistance regarding American face vessels is frequently requested from the Smithsonian Institution. The following selected bibliography has been prepared to assist those interested in this topic.

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Face Vessels, Stoneware, United States, 19th and 20th century, Makers unknown.
Negative number 92-16905.
From the Eleanor and Mabel Van Alstyne Collection of American Folk Art

Prepared by the Division of Home and Community Life,
Ceramics Collections, in cooperation with Public Inquiry Services,
Smithsonian Institution

PIMS/CER28
Revised 10/00

Smithsonian Information
PO Box 37012
SI Building, Room 153, MRC 010
Washington, DC 20013-7012

202.633.1000 (voice)
e-mail: info@si.edu