

ART MUSEUMS *of Colonial Williamsburg*

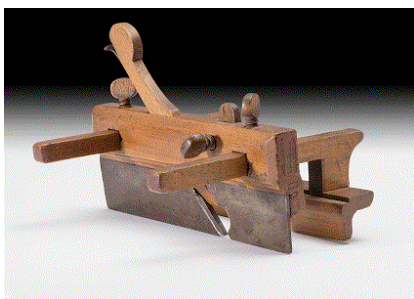
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RECENT ACQUISITIONS AND LOANS AT THE ART MUSEUMS OF COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG HERALD THE IMPORTANCE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN HERITAGE

Williamsburg, VA (January 31, 2017)—With its mission to tell America’s enduring story through its material culture, the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg has actively diversified its collections over recent years and has bolstered efforts to increase its holdings of African-American works of art and artifacts. In the past six months, the Art Museums have acquired by purchase, gift, or loan several significant pieces that further this goal.

“Colonial Williamsburg has long believed that art and artifacts speak loudly about the people, places, and events of the past. Because we strive to tell the broader American story, it is important that we continue to seek out those objects that speak to the African-American experience during the colonial and early national periods. These newly acquired works address that mission handsomely,” said Ronald L. Hurst, the foundation’s Carlisle Humelsine Chief curator and vice president for collections, conservation, and museums.



While it is noteworthy to discuss individual objects that a museum acquires, it is especially so when an entire collection joins its existing holdings. Such is the case with one recent acquisition. The Art Museums have just received the country’s most extensive collection of pre-Revolutionary woodworking planes made by African-American artisan Cesar Chelor. Prior to receiving his freedom, Chelor was owned by the earliest documented American plane maker, Francis Nicholson (1683-1753) of Wrentham, Massachusetts, and eventually became his apprentice. Chelor later became a plane maker in his own right as did Nicholson’s son John. Upon the elder Nicholson’s death, he willed Chelor his freedom, 10 acres of land and the tools and materials to

continue his work on his own, thus making him the earliest known African-American tool maker in North America. Of the more than 700 Chelor and Nicholson planes known to exist, the Colonial Williamsburg collection now owns more than one third of them. This new group of almost 250 planes was amassed over several decades by the late David V. Englund of Seattle; it was Englund's longtime vision that his collection should go to Colonial Williamsburg where the tools could be shared and studied. The example illustrated here, called a "plow plane" for its resemblance to the farming tool, was perfect for cutting long grooves in a board. Since the handy wooden adjusting screws first appeared in New England, these became known as "Yankee plow" planes.

"The Englund collection encompasses the spectrum of woodworking planes crafted by the first dynasty of truly American tool-makers," said Erik Goldstein, senior curator of mechanical arts and numismatics. "Spanning the middle quarters of the 18th century, it is highlighted by the products of Caesar Chelor, Francis Nicholson's manumitted slave, and latter free tradesman. This unique assemblage of colonial planes will serve as a core of Colonial Williamsburg's woodworking tool collection."



Another exceedingly rare addition to the Art Museums' collections this month is this pair of silver teaspoons marked by Peter Bentzon, examples from the less than two dozen known objects bearing his touchmarks (of either his initials or "P. BENTZON," as seen here). Bentzon, a free man of color, was born about 1783 in the Danish West Indies (now

the United States Virgin Islands) to a mother of African and European descent and a Norwegian father. Trained as a silversmith in Philadelphia, he worked both there and in St. Croix, moving several times between these locations prior to his death sometime after 1850. These two teaspoons were made in either Philadelphia or St. Croix between 1815 and 1830.

"Few objects survive to bear testament to the work of enslaved and free people of color as silversmiths in early America. We are very pleased to share these spoons as examples of the diversity of craftsmanship on these shores," said Janine E. Skerry, senior curator of metals.



Another exciting addition to the collections is this pale pink silk drawstring workbag made in 1827 by the Birmingham (England) Female Society for the Relief of British Negro Slaves. English and American women of the day carried workbags as a fashionable accessory to hold their pocketbooks, handkerchiefs

and even keys. While often embroidered with floral motifs, this workbag takes a more political and moral conviction. The Female Society for the Relief of British Negro Slaves, established on April 8, 1825, produced literature, printed albums, purses and workbags for sale to help raise awareness of the cruelty toward enslaved Africans and to provide money for their relief. Identical objects and literature crossed the Atlantic and helped to fuel the American abolitionist movement.

The workbag's central roundel (or decorative medallion) is printed with a copper plate image of a slave kneeling and chained to the ground. The foreground shows a group of slaves being whipped by their master. The reverse is also printed, but with a stanza from William Cowper's poem on slavery printed in "The Task" in 1784. The stanza reads:

Thus man devotes his brother, and destroys;
And worse than all, and most to be deplored,
As human nature's broadest, foulest blot,
Chains him, and tasks him, and exacts his sweat.
With stripes, that mercy, with a bleeding heart,
Weeps when she sees inflicted on a beast.

"This small work bag shows the very active role that Female Societies took in working towards the abolition of slavery during the nineteenth-century. While many fancy workbags survive from this time period, these politically and morally charged women's accessories are seldom found and make this piece a unique acquisition to the Colonial Williamsburg's collection," said Neal Hurst, associate curator of costumes and textiles.



From roughly the same time period as the workbag, comes another extraordinary acquisition: a signed, ash-glazed stoneware storage jar made in 1849 by the enslaved African-American potter, David Drake, often

known as "Dave," who worked for various owners in the Edgefield district of South Carolina for more than 50 years. This is the first signed piece of Drake pottery to join the collection. At a time when it was illegal for slaves to be literate, David Drake not only signed many of his pieces but also was known to inscribe verses on them. Although this jar, which stands almost 17 inches in height and includes distinctive features, such as five incised punctuates to indicate its five-gallon capacity, does not include any of Drake's poetry, it is, however, signed "Mr. Miles Dave" and dated October 15, 1849. Miles refers to Lewis J. Miles, who owned David Drake from about 1840 to 1843 and again from 1849 until Emancipation.

“The work of David Drake is important for many reasons: It speaks to the role enslaved labor played in the manufacture of utilitarian wares in nineteenth-century South Carolina; it helps to illuminate some of the complexities of that system; and most of all it gives us a glimpse into the life of this man and the world he inhabited,” said Suzanne Findlen Hood, curator of ceramics and glass. “This storage jar relates directly to the attributed, but unsigned example that has been in the collection since the 1930s and will allow us to more fully interpret the life and work of David Drake.”

Although Drake’s stoneware vessels were made for strictly functional purposes, often for storing large amounts of food, they were refined works of art in their own right. To make some of these containers, he combined turning and coiling techniques in which he turned the bottom portion of the pot on a wheel and then coiled clay ropes around the top of its walls. This enabled him to create vessels of remarkable height and diameter.



In 2016, *A Century of African-American Quilts* opened in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum to great acclaim and features twelve quilts created by African-American quilt makers in the years following the abolition of slavery (from the 1870s to approximately 1990), half of which had never before been exhibited. By generous loan, this colorful variation on the typical “schoolhouse” pattern joins the exhibition, which remains on view through April 2018. According to family tradition, Margaret Carr (b. ca. 1909), an African-American school

teacher in Rogersville, Tennessee, made the quilt or inherited it from her mother, Lema Carr, between 1940 and 1960. The quilt features eight houses facing each other on either side of a central vertical band. Shiny synthetic fabrics in bright solid colors create the houses, each of which is further embellished with charming embroidered flowers around the foundations and bordering the windows, doors and rooflines.

“Margaret Carr’s quilt is a wonderful addition to the exhibition of African-American quilts. The charming “schoolhouse” pattern seems especially appropriate for a woman who was a teacher,” said Linda Baumgarten, senior curator of textiles and costumes. “We are indebted to collector and scholar Mary Jo Case for lending us this bold and colorful example of Tennessee quiltmaking.”

As the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg continue to acquire important pieces to its collections, the priority will remain to expand the scope of them to reflect the cultural diversity of our country both past and present.

About The Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg

The [Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg](#) include the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum and the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum. The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum is home to the nation's premier collection of American folk art, with more than 7,000 folk art objects made during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. The DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum exhibits the best in British and American fine and decorative arts from 1670–1840. The Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg are located at the intersection of Francis and South Henry Streets in Williamsburg, Va., and are entered through the [Public Hospital of 1773](#). Expansion of the museum complex is expected to break ground in 2017. Once completed, the museums' new entrance and will provide improved public access, increased exhibition space and guest services among other enhancements. Museum hours from March 18, 2016, to January 2, 2017: 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. daily. From January 2, 2017, through March 16, 2017: Sunday to Thursday, 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Friday to Saturday 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. After March 16, hours will be 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. daily.

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Images: Plane, Casear Chelor, Wrentham, Massachusetts, ca.1753-1784, wood, iron and steel, Bequest of David V. Englund; Two Teaspoons, Marked by Peter Bentzon, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, or St. Croix, Danish West Indies, 1815-1830, silver, Museum Purchase, T002-2017, 1-2; Workbag, Female Society for Birmingham for the Relief of British Negro Slaves, Birmingham, England, used in Christianstown, Ireland, 1827, silk and cotton, Museum Purchase, 2016-166; Storage Jar, David Drake, Edgefield, South Carolina, 1849, ash-glazed stoneware, Museum Purchase, The Friends of Colonial Williamsburg Collections Fund, 2016.900.2; Schoolhouse Variation Quilt, Margaret Carr (b. ca. 1909) or her mother, Rogersville, Tennessee, 1940-1960, Synthetics and cotton, Lent by Mary Jo Case, T072-2016, 1.

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