

PART THREE: CLAY AND CERAMICS

Kajette Solomon: Walk towards the doorway at the front of the room. Just to the left of it, you'll find the Clay and Ceramics case. So far, we've talked about commodities like coffee and alcohol—foods and drinks that the vessels in this gallery once contained. But the vessels themselves were commodities too. They were carefully constructed by people around the world to be bought and sold and shipped across seas.

Take a moment to look at the sugar bowl at the center of the top shelf of this case, and the small rectangular blue and white tea container on the far right of the bottom shelf. Imagine the hands that meticulously painted the flowers on these objects, that fired them, that added those finishing touches of gold.

Today, we only know small bits of information about the people who painstakingly crafted ceramics like these. We have the vessels they made, but we don't even know their names.

We do know that this sugar bowl and tea container were crafted by Chinese makers in the late 18th/early 19th century as exportware, meaning that they were designed with wealthy Western consumers in mind. And for these consumers, these porcelain objects were keepsakes from a faraway place. They were almost like postcards from a distant land.

But how much can something like a postcard really tell you? Can we uncover the lives of craftspeople just by looking at the ceramics they made?

To begin to answer these questions, for a moment, we'll leave this case of ceramics, leave this gallery, and leave the state of Rhode Island altogether.

Anina Major: *Footsteps & knocking* Hello! I feel like I'm on MTV cribs. Welcome to my studio. Come on in.

That's ceramicist Anina Major at her studio in midtown Manhattan. She grew up in the Bahamas and studies the history of Bahamian craftspeople and other locals by looking at postcards.

Anina Major: A lot of my work derives from old postcards. I have an old vintage postcard collection that were supposedly of the locals.

She points to a postcard that shows a woman walking to a market in the Bahamas.

Anina Major: And you find out like, digging into this, that some of the images were staged. They were staged to look like this woman was walking to the market. She wasn't actually walking to the market. She got pulled into a photography studio and they manufactured a background, and they named it, *On the way to the market*.

In a lot of regions around the world, including the Bahamas, many local crafts were made for wealthy Western tourists and consumers. These consumers sustained and dictated the market for everything from vessels to postcards to jewelry. And above all, wealthy Westerners often wanted things that were idyllic, enticing, and unfamiliar to them—they didn't necessarily care about whether the woman walking to the market was actually walking to the market, or whether the crafts they bought were truthful or fabricated. And a lot of times, they were fabricated.

Anina Major: And after decades of doing that, decades of someone fabricating a history, you now have an extremely distorted view of your past. You don't know what's truth or fiction. And so, digging into your own history, you're inclined to ask, well, is this really so?

Now, looking back to the sugar bowl and tea container in front of you—you might notice that they appear to be formed and painted in a traditional Chinese style. And you'd imagine that these objects reflect the lives and practices of people living in China at the time. But like the postcards in Anina's studio, these objects are constructed representations of a culture.

Professor Chris Roberts, walking through Downtown Providence:

Chris Roberts: The artisans in China who were making a lot of Chinese exportware would never have used the things they were making. Oftentimes, they were making or preparing an idea of China for a consumer public who wanted a specific idea of what China is not necessarily what played out in the day-to-day reality.

Chinese people had no use for the sugar bowls like the one in front of you. At the time this bowl was made, customarily, people in China didn't put sugar in their tea. Rather than making things that they would like and use, the Chinese craftspeople who made these objects picked out forms, patterns, and subjects that would appeal most to their wealthy Western customers.

Elizabeth Williams: You know, it's a business. They have to sell these things. They have to make money.

Elizabeth Williams, curator of this exhibition.

Elizabeth Williams: This is their livelihood. So they're going to want to make things that people want to buy.

And Westerners often wanted to buy ceramics decorated with imagery that was exciting and unknown to them.

Elizabeth Williams: Well in a lot of ways it was unknown and it was exciting. So you're looking at trees and buildings and flora and fauna that is Asian rather than European or Western and it's a very different landscape. It's different from what a Westerner would be seeing when they looked out their window.

So for the wealthy Westerners who commissioned these objects, they were not only buying a ceramic vessel, they were buying a fragment of an exciting, unknown culture. But for the Chinese craftspeople who made them, this was a job.

These vessels in front of you paint an incomplete picture of the lives of the people who made them. And all around the world, there are so many gaps in our understanding of the lives of makers. And these gaps have had a profound impact on makers today—on people like Anina Major, the Bahamian ceramicist you heard from earlier:

Anina Major: The more I dugged into Bahamian culture and its history, the more I found out just that there were these missing gaps, that the narrative is written not by the actual people. It's written by others who are outsiders. And I think initially when I started making, it was about reconnecting.

To reconnect to her history, Anina began studying the traditional basket weaving techniques of her Afro-Bahamian ancestors, adapting their straw work into clay. Anina's ceramics look like huge shiny baskets. And to make them, she folds and knots strips of clay as if they were straw, retracing the hands of her predecessors to gain a better understanding and appreciation of their work.

Anina Major: My charge was about preserving some kind of culture, or getting to the root of the Bahamian culture.

Because for Anina, examining and memorializing these traditional crafts uncovers something more permanent about these makers and her culture.

Anina Major: Because what I do know that is fact is that when my grandmother was making this object, she wasn't necessarily thinking about preserving or cataloging. However, there's all this kind of evidence of what was going on at the time within the work. Because these things aren't created out of nowhere. They are evidence of a time, and a practice, and a belief in my opinion.

Elizabeth Williams: Ceramics have always been a medium for expression.

Elizabeth Williams: And ceramics continues to play a role in it because it is somewhat indestructible. Archaeologists are digging up sherds of ceramics all over the world still and they will be doing that for a long time and they tell the history of this world—which sounds like somewhat of an overly dramatic statement but it's not. It's there. It's still in existence.

Anina Major: And I think for me, that's what I find exciting.

Anina Major: These objects don't disappear, so I think working with this material, it's important to be thoughtful about the objects that are made. Because they are not going anywhere.

This gallery is full of empty spaces—of pots once filled with tea, of plates once topped with cake. Their contents have disappeared, but they live on, incomplete versions of their past selves.

But there are so many people today who are filling in these empty spaces. People who are telling stories that enrich our understanding of the past and spotlight the individuals who labored over commodities, not just those who enjoyed them at dinner tables. And what Anina Major and others have found is that though there is exploitation embedded in the empty spaces of old vessels, there is also the potential for transformation.

Because history isn't a fixed thing—the way that we interpret and understand it can change, leading us to a new awareness and appreciation of how we consume today.

Chris Roberts: We don't stand on nothing. We're not people separate from the past. The past is with us all the time. And I just think that we're at a point in being on this planet where we have to pay attention to the past, because if we don't, it's going to catch up to us.

Anina Major: A good friend of mine says the archive is now, and I believe her because it's like, if I don't make an effort to document now in some way or form, then tomorrow it didn't really exist.

John Onwuchekwa: For that part of history to not be told, I think is a disservice to the people, as well as a disservice to the beauty of what lies in each cup, right? The beauty of something is muted when you don't understand all of what went into it, right?

The Trading Earth soundwalk was narrated by me, Kajette Solomon and produced by Emma Vecchione with Jeremy Radtke, Olivia Schroder, and Liz Xu. Thanks to Janette Bloomfield, Chris Roberts, Elizabeth Williams, John Onwuchekwa, Pascale Rihouet, and Anina Major for contributing. And thank you for listening!