MEANING & METAPHOR IN NORTH CAROLINA MORAVIAN SLIPWARE

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In his seminal monograph *The Moravian Potters in North Carolina* (1972) decorative arts scholar John Bivins used archaeological evidence, surviving artifacts, and the Moravians' meticulous records to illuminate the lives and work of potters active in Bethabara and Salem.[1] The bulk of his study centered on shop masters Gottfried Aust (1722–1788), who established the first pottery in Bethabara, and his former apprentice Rudolph Christ (1750–1833), who took over Aust's pottery in 1789. In Bivins' view, Aust was the archetypal immigrant craftsman, wedded to Old World modes of earthenware production and decoration, whereas Christ was an innovator who developed his own decorative vocabulary in slipware and experimented with the manufacture of refined creamware, stoneware, and faience.[2]

Christ's interest in the production of "fine pottery" is documented in the Moravian records, but there is no evidence that his utilitarian earthenware and slipware differed significantly from that of his master. Indeed, recent research indicates that most of the slipware formerly attributed to Christ was made

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Fig. 1 (main image): Shop sign, 1773. Made during Gottfried Aust's tenure as master of the pottery at Salem, North Carolina. Lead-glazed earthenware. Diam. 21½ in. Attached to the back are two clay lugs pierced to receive the cord from which the sign hung. The exceptional condition of this object suggests that it hung inside Aust's shop. The date relates to a directive from the Elders Conference, "to place proper signs at the houses of the tradesmen, store and tavern in order that strangers could find them more easily. Such signs should have the name of the master and the trade." Courtesy, Old Salem Museums and Gardens; photography by Gavin Ashworth.

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Fig. 2: Dish, Nevers, France, ca. 1685. Tin-glazed earthenware. Diam. 8¼ in. Courtesy, Musée National de Céramique, Sèvres.

Fig. 3: Dish probably made during Aust's tenure as master of the pottery at Salem, North Carolina, 1775–1785. Lead-glazed earthenware. Diam. 13¾ in. Collection of Old Salem Museums & Gardens; photography by Gavin Ashworth.

Fig. 4: Dish attributed to George Hubner, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, 1789. Diam. 12½ in. Courtesy, Philadelphia Museum of Art, gift of John T. Morris.

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Fig. 5: Illuminated manuscript designed by Frederich von Watteville and executed by P. J. Ferber, Herrnhut, Germany, 1775. Ink and watercolor on paper. 27 x 37 inches. Collection of Old Salem Museums & Gardens; photography by Wesley Stewart.

Fig. 6: Dish, probably made during Gottfried Aust's tenure as master of the pottery at Salem, North Carolina, 1775–1785. Lead-glazed earthenware. Diam. 13¾ in. Collection of Old Salem Museums & Gardens; photography by Gavin Ashworth.

by a group of Germanic potters working in or around Alamance County, North Carolina.[3] When this material is removed from consideration, the North Carolina Moravian earthenware tradition appears much more cohesive. In addition, most of the motifs used by Aust and his predecessors were deeply rooted in Moravian religious beliefs and metaphorical thought.

A shop sign (Fig. 1) made during Aust's tenure as master of the Salem pottery is the most elaborate and technically complex piece of German earthenware from colonial America. It is the rosetta stone for identifying and interpreting Moravian slipware, which appears to have been largely limited to dishes and plates. As is the case with most North Carolina Moravian slipware, the decoration on Aust's sign is highly naturalistic and superbly executed. The cavetto design is related to that seen on a faience dish from late-seventeenth-century Nevers, France (Fig. 2). Motifs found on this class of Nevers ware were largely derived from Chinese and Islamic (Iznik) ceramics that found their way into European and English collections toward the end of the sixteenth century. Aust may never have seen pottery from this period, but it is quite likely that he came into contact with European decorative arts influenced by Iznik ceramics.

From a compositional standpoint, the designs on Aust's shop sign and the Nevers dish also have precedents in seventeenth-century flower painting. In the visual arts, flowers have long been used to represent the transience of life and the ephemeral nature of worldly things. Within the Moravian community, slipware dishes carried the same connotations (Fig. 3). This should come as no surprise given the fact that several Pennsylvania German dishes have sgraffito inscriptions equating breakability with death and heavenly reward. One example by Montgomery County potter George Heubner is inscribed "no plaster can heal me, so you will want to hurry with me from this [earth] into the canopy of heaven" (Fig. 4).

While Pennsylvania potters employed literary allegory, their Wachovia counterparts used metaphorical imagery. One of the most commonly cited flower metaphors in the Judeo-Christian tradition is Solomon 2:1: "I am the rose of Sharon, and lily of the valleys." Since the Middle Ages, the female voice in that verse has been interpreted as the bride in an allegory for marriage of the church and soul to Christ. The Song of Solomon had a profound influence on German literature, music, and material culture.

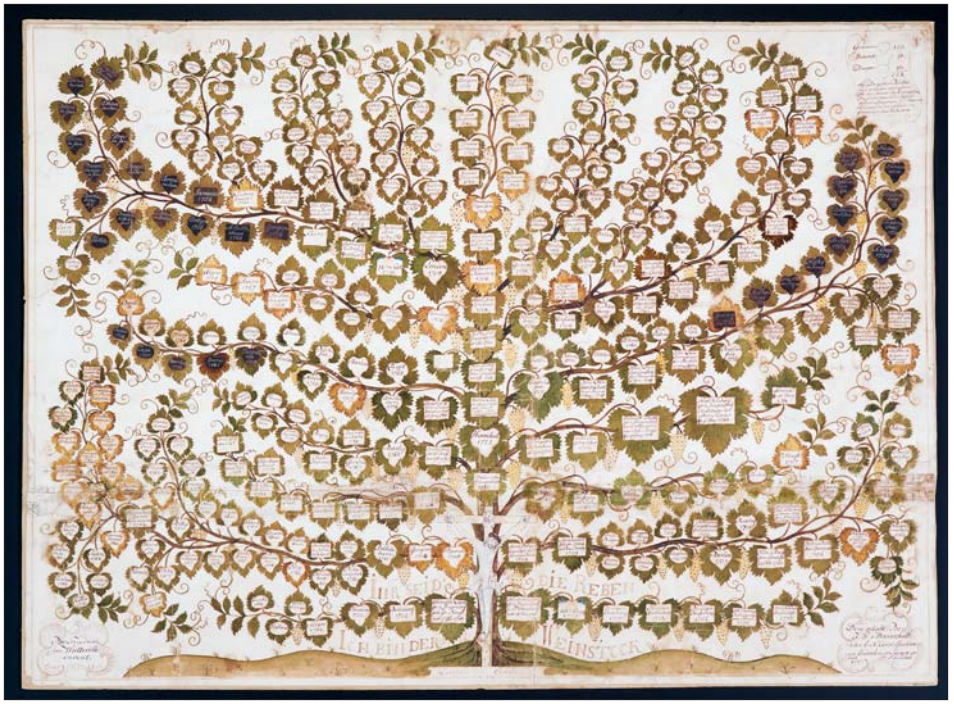
An illuminated manuscript (Fig. 5) commissioned in 1775 for Moravian administrator Frederick William Marshall provides compelling evidence that Moravians understood that symbolic art could be a powerful expression of religious beliefs. Christ's blood saturates the ground below a flourishing grapevine whose leaves depict the many Moravian congregations around the world. Inspired by John 15: 5 —"I am the vine; you are the branches; whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit for apart from me you

can do nothing"— the visual metaphor was obvious to Moravian observers and did not require descriptive text. It is but one example of Moravian art that includes graphic imagery of the wounds of Christ.

From intensely personal memoirs to publicly displayed works of art, Moravian culture was permeated with symbolic imagery that was both potent and immediately understood. Layers of meaning are perceptible in slip-decorated dishes when viewed in the context of Moravian theology and metaphorical imagery. For instance, the most frequently depicted flowers on Moravian dishes are anemones, which often appear in conjunction with lilies of the valley (Fig. 6). Christians have long associated anemones with Jesus' sacrifice, believing them to have sprung from the ground as the blood flowed from his wounds.[4] Red anemones appear directly in line with Christ in the foreground of this Herrnhut painting done about 1750 (Fig. 7). The artist's inclusion of Moravians in mid eighteenth-century dress indicates that the overall scene and individual details in the painting were symbolic of salvation.

Compelling evidence for the symbolic importance of anemones in Moravian art can be found in John Valentine Haidt's (1700–1780) *Cornelius Foreseeing his Christianity* (Fig. 8), a work that was probably owned by one of the Moravian congregations in North Carolina. It depicts the Roman centurion Cornelius, considered to be the first Gentile converted to Christianity, and Mary, holding the Christ child. Below the hem of Mary's robe, two white anemones flank a stem with lily buds draped over a book that probably represents the New Testament. In this context, the white anemones represent the death of Christ to come rather than his crucifixion. Aust and his successors used similar floral compositions on their slipware dishes (Fig. 9).

The lilies on slipware dishes (Fig. 10) may also have been visual analogues for the marriage metaphor common in early Moravian theology, which explained the relationship between Church members and Christ as a mystical marriage. As a flower that blooms early in the spring, the lily in Solomon 2:1 symbolizes both the advent of Christ and each believer's relationship to him. In the rustic Christian mysticism of German theologian Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), who influenced other pietist theologians, lilies are also a symbol of God and the regenerated spirit of man.



Other motifs on Moravian slipware dishes have similar theological underpinnings. In a 1742 hymn composed by Ludwig Zinzendorf

Fig. 7: Unknown artist, painting depicting the crucifixion of Christ, Herrnhut, Germany, ca. 1750. Watercolor on paper. Dimensions not recorded. Courtesy, Unity Archives, Herrnhut.

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Fig. 8: John Valentine Haidt, *Cornelius Forseeing His Christianity*, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, ca. 1755. Oil on canvas. 24⅝ x 20 inches. Collection of Old Salem Museums & Gardens; photography by Wesley Stewart. Haidts paintings were used as educational tools in Moravian congregations throughout Europe and America. The flowers illustrated in this painting were symbolically charged, as suggested by the rose held by the Christ child as he gazes into his mother's eyes. In Christian theology, Christ is described as the rose among thorns and Mary as the rose without thorns. Roses also served as symbols for the messianic promise and the Virgin Mary. Not surprisingly, roses are common on eighteenth-century Wachovia slipware.

(1700–1760), bishop of the Moravian church in Germany, pomegranates are used as a metaphor for Christ's blood and sacrifice.[5] This analogy may have been inspired by Solomon 8:2, wherein the bridegroom [Christ] offers his bride (humankind), "spiced wine to drink, the juice of my pomegranates." Zinzendorf used that imagery on other occasions as an allegory "for the beauty of the bride of Christ filled with the blood of Christ." [6] Italian Renaissance artists were also fond of that metaphor. Leonardo da Vinci and Sandro Botticelli both depicted the Madonna and Child with their hands resting on a pomegranate.

A dish shard recovered from an unidentified cellar at Bethabara is one of the earliest examples of North Carolina slipware with pomegranate decoration (Fig. 11). This motif was not previously recognized as part of the Moravian tradition because it was mistakenly identified as a flower. Like their British and European counterparts, Aust and his workmen often depicted this fruit partially cut open. On Moravian dishes, diapering or parallel trailed lines typically represent the interior and jeweled dots represent the seeds. Aust began serving his apprenticeship at Herrnhut, Germany, in 1742, the same year Zinzendorf wrote his hymn with the pomegranate metaphor, and worked there during the peak years of the "Sifting time," when Moravians had begun "to explore alternative notions of gendered power and authority,"[7] and the blood and wounds imagery coalesced in Moravian theology.[8] It would be difficult to imagine that the symbolism of this period did not affect the young potter, just as it did his master.

The meaning that Moravians may have assigned to certain motifs raises questions about how slipware dishes and plates were used in their communities. Were they displayed on furniture, mantles, plate shelves, or other fixtures, or were they intended for private contemplation? At the very least, the pristine condition of many dishes and plates and the lack of archaeological evidence for the production of related pitchers, jars, and other hollow ware forms suggests that this class of Moravian slipware was not intended for physical use.

Scholars will never be able to fully interpret the designs on Moravian slipware, because the motifs probably had multiple meanings for the craftsmen who employed them. Aust's shop sign (fig. 1) illustrates the point. On one level, it can be interpreted as a display of its maker's technical skill and familiarity with cosmopolitan designs. On another level, the sign and motifs associated with it may have served as symbols of specific virtues or represented the ephemeral nature of life. The bird on his shop sign may have been inspired by European imitations of Islamic pottery, but that does not mean that it lacked religious significance. In the Song of Solomon, the "Bride" is described as having the "eyes of a dove," and in one of Zinzendorf's litanies, his followers proclaim: "We doves will fly in through the window/ And we will gaze fully on the Godhead/ That so blinded us here;/ Before that glorious lightning we had/ to take flight deep within the wounds."[9] Similar parallels can be drawn with the dish illustrated in figure 12. Although its composition may have been inspired by rustic pottery, such as that made popular by French Huguenot potter and natural philosopher Bernard Palissay (1510–1590), the motif of the pond, as seen on this plate, was also a metaphor for Christ's side wound in Moravian texts. Believers were described as fish in the "sea Wound" of Christ, "swimming in the bed of blood."[10]

Throughout history various cultures have used iconic objects to proselytize, to set them-

selves apart from others, and to promote community or religious cohesion. The floral slipware of the Moravians may have served any or all of these purposes. In a community trying to reconcile its missionary efforts and need to trade with outsiders, with its determination to remain isolated from the negative impact of "strangers," material expressions of faith and symbols of ideology served to reinforce a common identity.[11] For Moravian potters and their brethren, the use of floral imagery allowed them to express coded beliefs and values without drawing criticism from outsiders or making their products less marketable.[12] It may be no coincidence that the decorative tradition introduced by Aust and perpetuated by his apprentices began to disappear in Moravian pottery during the period when Salem ceased to be a closed community and the Church's control over the lives of its members began to wane. AFA

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Fig. 9: Dish probably made during Rudolph Christ's tenure as master of the pottery at Salem, North Carolina, 1790–1810. Lead-glazed earthenware. Diam. 12½ in. Collection of Old Salem Museums and Gardens; photography by Gavin Ashworth.

Fig. 10: Dish probably made during Rudolph Christ's tenure as master of the pottery at Salem, North Carolina, 1790–1810. Lead-glazed earthenware. Diam. 15½ in. Courtesy, Albert Barnes Foundation; photography by Gavin Ashworth.

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Fig. 11: Dish shard recovered from an unidentified cellar, Bethabara, North Carolina, 1760–1770. Lead-glazed earthenware. Collection of Historic Bethabara Park; photography by Gavin Ashworth.

Fig. 12: Dish probably made during Aust's tenure as master of the pottery at Salem, North Carolina, 1775–1785. Lead-glazed earthenware. Diam. 13 in. Courtesy, The Henry Ford.

2011–June 24, 2012; Huntsville Museum of Art, October 7, 2012–January 6, 2013. Works showcased in the exhibit can be viewed online in a database with over 1,000 photographs. For more information visit www.artinclay.org.

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1. John Bivins Jr., *The Moravian Potters in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for Old Salem, Inc., 1972). Unless otherwise noted, all historical and biographical information on the Moravian potters in this article is from *Moravian Potters.*
2. Unless otherwise noted, all of the historical and biographical information on the Moravian potters presented in this article is from Bivins, *Moravian Potters*.
3. *Ceramics in America* (2010) and *Antiques & Fine Art Magazine* (Autumn/Winter 2010).
4. George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 27. The use of the anemone to signify sorrow and death, which extends back to pagan mythology, is "based on the legend of Adonis who was believed to have died on a bed of anemones."
5. E-mail to Johanna Brown from Craig D. Atwood, author of *Community of the Cross: Moravian Piety in Colonial Bethlehem* [University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University, 2004]). May 28, 2008.
6. Ibid.
7. Aaron Spencer Fogleman, *Jesus is Female: Moravians and Radical Religion in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 73 and passim.
8. Aust joined the Moravian congregation in 1744 and was "received into the holy communion" three years later (Memoir of Gottfried Aust, photocopy, research files, Old Salem Museums & Gardens).
9. Zinzendorf *Litaney Bucheln* as translated in Atwood, *Community of the Cross*, p. 244). The quoted section was based on Isaiah 60:8 and Solomon 2:14.
10. For more on this imagery, see John R. Weinlick, *Count Zinzendorf* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 199-200.
11. The motifs on Moravian dishes may have signified "community affiliation" to those who understood the complexity of the symbolism, according to Colleen McDannell in *Material Christianity* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1995), 45.
12. The fern-like leaves on Aust's shop may have been understood as an analogy for the position of the Moravians because ferns are a symbol of the "honest seeker" in Christianity. See George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christin Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 30.