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Guest Editor's Introduction

Dr. Torren Gatson



It is energizing to know that African American craftsmanship, a subject that has been rendered invisible in some decorative arts circles for so long, has now reached the forefront of discussion in the *MESDA Journal*. The true power in an object is its ability to tell a story and, on occasion, capture the voice of an otherwise historically invisible person. The fine and decorative arts too often highlight only the accomplishments of the white craftsmen and white majority, while relegating skilled African American craftspeople to the periphery, to the footnotes, or erasing them entirely. The articles in the 2020 edition of the *MESDA Journal* are a strong beginning. The phenomenal stories and accompanying decorative objects in this volume fill a void in the scholarship of decorative arts.

The authors of this year's articles prove that by observing culture through a comprehensive lens, we begin to see that the real narrative is the story of us, of our shared culture, and of the ways we built America together. Although scholarship on African American material culture has recently begun to attract mainstream attention, its historiography rests on important early foundational works. Many of the scholars who contributed to this historiography never received their appropriate recognition. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars have sought to contextualize the term "artisan" in works such as Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Negro Artisan* (1902). In the 1970s, the scholarly discourse about enslaved skilled mechanics and artisans continued in James E. Newton and Ronald L. Lewis's book, *The Other Slaves: Mechanics, Artisans, and Craftsmen* (1978). Contemporary scholarship has launched into new realms of material culture. John Michael Vlach's pivotal book, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (1978) ushered in new perspectives on the decorative and aesthetic value of objects created by African Americans. More focused studies including *Where Is All My Relation?: The Poetics of Dave the Potter* (2018) by Michael Chaney; "Slave Artisans: Black Nonagricultural Workers in Colonial America, and the Antebellum South" (2016) by Frederick C. Knight; "The Dark Iconoclast: Slaves' Artistic Resistance in the Civil War South" (2017) by Jennifer Van Horn; and Gladys-Marie Fry's book *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South* (2002) present more detailed interpretations of the intricacies of African American material culture.

MESDA is poised to benefit from its full immersion into the digital humanities and disseminating new research to broader audiences. My hope is that the articles in this year's journal are the beginning of an active conversation between MESDA and the Black digital humanities community to further understand how they view craftspeople. Projects such as the [Black Craftspeople Digital Archive](#), as just one example, are prime opportunities to begin this dialogue. Ultimately, new scholarship on African American material culture will help bring life to an otherwise stagnant field. Rejuvenation is found in a host of younger scholars who will propel the field into a new age of investigation.

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