

Stephen, Walter Benjamin ^[1]

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by Artus Monroe Moser, 1994

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Walter Benjamin Stephen, master contemporary artistic potter who discovered new glazes and techniques for producing some of the finest art pottery in America, was born in Clinton, Iowa, the son of Andrew and Nellie C. Randall Stephen. Walter's Scottish-born father was a construction worker, a rock mason, and a well digger. In 1891 the family moved to Chadron, Nebr., where they lived in a sod house. Young Stephen attended a sod school until, he once said, "[I] was so mean that my Dad took me out of school and put me to work." This ended his formal education.

In 1896, when he was nearly twenty, the family moved to Shelby County, Tenn., near Memphis, where he and his father engaged in building and masonry work. Meanwhile his parents, especially his mother, who was artistically inclined, had become interested in making pottery and experimenting with different colors and kinds of clay they found when digging a well. They soon attracted attention with the cameo pottery they were able to produce, and they entered the art as a business with enough success to make a living at it.

During their early years in Tennessee the Stephens' pottery was named "Nonconnah" for the small river that flows around Memphis. For well over a dozen years Walter and his mother, with the aid of his father, operated the plant. After the aging couple died in 1910, he sold the home place to a friend of the family and took any kind of work that would earn him a living. He visited several sections of the country examining the clays and feldspar in search of better and purer materials with potentials for pottery. He also sought someone who would back him financially in his efforts to produce a line of superior art pottery. C. P. Ryman of [Skyland](#) ^[2] in [Buncombe County](#) ^[3], N.C., agreed to form a partnership and to sponsor and finance the work to build a kiln and a shop. Ryman was familiar with the type of cameo pottery that Walter Stephen and his mother had been producing in Tennessee, but he believed that the variety of clays and of such varied colors, together with the superior qualities of feldspar so abundant in the mountain region, would enable them to turn out a much better product. And so it proved.

From 1913 to 1916 Ryman and Stephen operated the pottery with fair success, but at the end of this period they dissolved their partnership. Stephen withdrew to set up a pottery of his own, as well as to wait out the unfavorable conditions created by the beginning of World War I. In 1914 he married Mrs. Nancy Teresa Lee Case, a widow and a native of Skyland.

During the war Stephen abandoned pottery briefly to work in the aluminum plant at Badin. His return to the mountains of North Carolina marked the start of the [Pisgah Forest Pottery](#) ^[4] on Avery's Creek along the [French Broad River](#) ^[5] near [Asheville](#) ^[6]. It was here that he resumed the production of fine artistic pottery with superior clays and glazes.

One of Stephen's special interests in the Pisgah Forest Pottery was to discover new and hitherto unknown glazes and colors, particularly in the crystalline glazes, several of which he was able to produce in his new shop. He constantly experimented and made new observations, and he carefully recorded the numerous formulas that he developed for different effects and results under different temperatures. He was scientific in his work and a master of exact methods and techniques.

It was the distinct cameolike decorative work that earned Stephen his place among ceramic artists. This consists of early pioneer scenes in raised porcelain on the pottery body. His work was compared to the famed Wedgwood, but Stephen's cameo was done by hand whereas the Wedgwood decoration is produced in molds. Further, Wedgwood is decorated with scenes from mythology, while the cameo depicts scenes from early American life, such as square dancers or covered wagons.

Using a whiteware body made up of ball clay, kaolin, feldspar, and quartz, Stephen employed a large repertory of bright glazes, including turquoise, aubergine, rose pink, and jade green. He also developed a crystalline glaze that formed surface designs like snowflakes. The ability to produce this effect lay partly in mixing the different glazes in the right proportion and partly in the firing in the kiln, as Stephen explained to those who visited the shop.

His distinct contribution was that he turned out pottery with unique porcelain scenes of early America in various colors and shapes for upwards of sixty-five years. At age eighty-five, a short time before his death, he was still experimenting and polishing his skills, "trying to improve on the excellent." His work has been displayed in the [Smithsonian Institution](#) ^[7] and the [North Carolina Museum of Art](#) ^[8]. While Dwight D. Eisenhower was president, a piece was given to Mrs. Eisenhower.

Stephen died in an Asheville hospital after an illness of two weeks and was buried in the New Salem cemetery at Skyland. After his death, the Pisgah Forest Pottery continued under the direction of Mrs. Roy Case (his daughter-in-law), her son Thomas Case, and Grady Ledbetter.

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Marcia Ray, "Pisgah Forest Pottery," *Spinning Wheel*, January–February 1971.

Additional Resources:

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Subjects:

Art^[17]

Artists^[18]

Biographies^[19]

Authors:

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Origin - location:

Buncombe County^[21]

Asheville^[22]

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1 January 1994 | Moser, Artus Monroe

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