



Internationally-Renowned Ceramics Artists Bring Their Talents To Hollins

Roanoke, Va. – Two artists who were in the vanguard of a creative movement three decades ago are now sharing their skills with a new generation of artists at Hollins University.

Donna Polseno and Richard (Rick) Hensley, who live in Floyd County and have received national and international acclaim for their work in ceramics, began teaching beginning classes at Hollins last fall. The courses have proven to be so popular that the artists are looking to add advanced classes in the near future.

“Donna and Rick bring to our studio art program a wealth of personal experience and significant accomplishments as potters,” says Bill White, professor and chair of Hollins’ art department. “It is rare that folks who are as nationally known in their field as they are, and who have devoted themselves to their own art work, are willing to take on the start-up of a program like the one they are developing in ceramics here at Hollins.”

Polseno and Hensley were both students at the Kansas City Art Institute in the late 1960s when they both, quite by accident, became interested in ceramics.

“Rick saw a friend of his one day knee-deep in clay,” remembers Polseno. “He thought it looked exciting and decided to sign up for a class. I just happened to see a slide show of historical pieces and thought, ‘I want to do that.’”

Polseno and Hensley went on to attend the Rhode Island School of Art and Design and studied with an icon of contemporary ceramics, Ken Ferguson.

“We found ourselves part of a true movement where ceramics was beginning to become accepted as an art form instead of just a folk craft,” says Polseno. “Rick and I were both hooked from that point on.”

After school, the two artists packed up a U-Haul and headed to southwest Virginia to live and work in rural Floyd County. “I was from New England, Rick was from the Midwest, so we thought Floyd would be a nice compromise,” she says.

Polseno and Hensley in a way were pioneers, not only in their chosen art form but also in where they chose to live. While Floyd County today is widely known as a haven for artistic creativity, in the early ‘70s the influx had barely begun. The two potters were among the first artists to settle in the area.

Despite having little money, Polseno and Hensley were able to set up their own ceramics studio and soon were selling their works to galleries in cities such as Atlanta and Washington, D.C. Their creations were welcomed with great excitement.

“We were fortunate in that we were creating unique works that were ahead of the times. From the beginning, we were successful and never looked back,” says Polseno.

After years of knocking on gallery doors and working craft fairs all over the East Coast, Polseno and Hensley were able to cut back on traveling and set up their own showroom where customers could come to them. At the same time, they began working with others in Floyd’s burgeoning artist community. In 1998, they joined with area craftsmen to form 16 Hands, a network of creative, technical and professional support that also encourages those who are interested in the artists’ work to visit their studios.

In addition, Polseno and Hensley became more and more involved with teaching. “We began receiving more and more invitations to conduct workshops,”

explains Polseno, “and we discovered that in sharing a lifetime of experience we started enjoying our craft in a whole new way.”

One of the people who recognized that Polseno and Hensley had a gift for teaching others was Bill White, who felt the artists would be a great addition to Hollins’ Richard Wetherill Visual Arts Center. The facility, which opened in 2004, features a state-of-the-art ceramics studio, and White wanted it to be the catalyst for a dynamic new program in ceramics in Hollins’ art department.

“We knew of Hollins’ reputation for supporting the arts since we’d led workshops and served as sabbatical replacements there on and off for the past 20 years,” says Polseno. “Bill White and the university have given Rick and me a lot of freedom to shape this program, and so far it has been a perfect fit for us.”

Polseno and Hensley still find time to teach to bring their passion for ceramics to others outside the Hollins campus, even if it is on the other side of the world. Last fall, the pair spent a month in China as part of an exchange program sponsored by West Virginia University, and worked there with both Chinese and American students.

Closer to home, Polseno and Hensley are looking forward to continuing teaching at the Richard Wetherill Visual Arts Center.

“The students are incredibly enthusiastic,” says Polseno. “We’ve never had a bad day at Hollins.”

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