

JAMES TURRELL, NICHOLAS MOSSE,
& WILLIAM BURKE

LAPSED
QUAKER
WARE

MASS MoCA



Lapsed Quaker Ware

While I was working on the Irish Sky Garden in Skibbereen, Ireland, in the early 1990s, I lived on a small island I owned called West Skeam (Inishkeam), one island back from Fastnet in Roaring Water Bay (called that for very good reason). Living in this area of Southwest County Cork, I found several pieces of pottery very similar to the basalt ware my grandmother had. It turned out that they were made by Josiah Wedgwood and were largely undecorated versions of the very decorative basalt ware he made for the English. This pottery was surprising in that it looked modern, although made in the mid-1700s.

On a trip to Waterford, I stopped in a small antique store and found they had a Wedgwood piece. It was a teapot being sold for 18 punts. It seemed like a fair price, and I went to the counter to buy it. Two women were also there — the owner of the store and a friend, a collector of pottery. I prepared to pay the amount asked when the collector stopped me and asked, “What do you know about this?” I said, “This looks like pottery sold to Quakers in America.” She asked, “Are you going to pay 18 punts?” I said, “This is the price, and it seems fair.” She then asked, “Are you a Quaker?” to which I replied in the affirmative. “Not much of one if you are prepared to pay 18 punts for that!” It turns out that she would come in every week offering the owner 12 punts, and this had been going on for more than a year. As a naïve American, I just walked in and bought it.

The pottery collector asked me if I would like to see more pieces like that, and I said certainly and followed her to her house in Bennettsbridge. In

her garage was a magnificent collection of early Irish and English pottery — some by Josiah Wedgwood. Her collection was very good. She also had early Irish spongeware and modern versions made by her son, Nicholas Mosse. I asked if he had ever made any black basalt ware. She said he had not but, of course, he could easily do that and asked if I would like to go see him. I said, “Not today. I have to get back to my island before dark as heading into the North Atlantic towards the rocks in Roaring Water Bay is a black blacker than black basalt ware.”

I later met Nicholas and his wife, Susan, and we became very good friends. Becoming very interested in the black basalt ware of Wedgwood, Nicholas and I went to Temple Newsam, a historic house museum in Leeds, England, where they had a collection of black basalt ware made for the English, and a few pieces of the simple black basalt ware made for the American Quaker market. The curators there made and served tea in the Quaker basalt ware because it had no glaze. Any of the early English pots had either lead glaze or, like the Leeds creamware, tin glaze. Both of these early glazes turned out to be highly poisonous. The curators also showed me a small flyer about the simple black basalt ware that said, “For Quakers and Funerals.” I thought it amusing to see how Quakers have generally been regarded.

Following his mother’s assertion that Nicholas could, of course, make black basalt ware, he and I set out to do so and selected some of the best of the many different versions of the Wedgwood pottery that had been made over a period of 60 years. In putting these selections together, the



Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery. Photo: J. Arnold, Impart Photography

sizes and scales were completely unworkable and had to be adjusted. So from the outset, we were making new versions of the Wedgwood basalt ware that had never actually existed. But each of our new pieces was in the spirit of what had been made before.

To make these pots, they are thrown on a potter's wheel. The different patterning on the outside—the basket weaving, fluting, and checkering—is made by rotating the pot on a lathe in a process called engine turning. Nicholas actually found and bought one of the original engine turning lathes used by Wedgwood himself. There is a cam on the lathe that inscribes the desired pattern on the pot when it is just partially dry. If the pot dries too much, the stylus scratches the surface.

But if the pot has not dried enough, the stylus drags the wet clay, making a muddy version of the pattern. After the pot is made, it must be exactly and properly dried before etching begins. Then it has to be fired to an absolutely precise temperature. If too little, it turns a silver gray. If too much, it melts and turns into a lava-like blob. It's true that Mrs. Mosse's son could make these, but it was quite a learning curve. In the end, new lathes were purchased that were much more controllable, but the original lathe with its rose and crown cams is still in Nicholas' possession.

The first presentation of *Lapsed Quaker Ware* was at Ackworth School in Pontefract, Yorkshire in 1998 for an exhibition called "Artranspennine 98" under the aegis of the Henry Moore Foundation.



Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery. Photo: J. Arnold, Impart Photography

Wedgwood had made the pottery for this school and the large basalt busts of the weighty Quakers in the area. The table and sideboard were made for the exhibition by William Burke, a woodworker in Flagstaff, Arizona, who collaborated with me on a simple, but beautiful design in cherry, the wood preferred by American Quakers. The second exhibition was in A/D Gallery in New York that same year. The third exhibition was at Pace Gallery at an art fair in San Francisco in 2019. This is the fourth exhibition of *Lapsed Quaker Ware* and includes pieces not shown before, which we made to fill out the collection that I would like to have for visitors' use at the Roden Crater project in Arizona.

This has been quite a journey for Nicholas Mosse and William Burke and me, but with a result that is pleasing to me in my hazy memory of my grandmother's pottery. We call these objects "Lapsed Quaker War" because the tradition of making simple, undecorated basalt Quaker ware had lapsed. At the time we began this project, both Nicholas and I were, in fact, lapsed Quakers. Since that time, he and I have relapsed.

— James Turrell

**James Turrell, Nicholas Mosse,
& William Burke:
Lapsed Quaker Ware**

Interior Flap: Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery.
Photo: J. Arnold, Impart Photography

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