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Alums Return to Celebrate Pottery Sale's 25th Anniversary on Dec. 5

Winthrop University

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Alums Return to Celebrate Pottery Sale's 25th Anniversary on Dec. 5

Quick Facts

- The ceramics program's signature event, the annual holiday pottery sale – and this year is its 25th year – will see the return of more than 25 alumni who have thrived in the fine arts business.
- Many alums will be, once again, selling their wares in the Dec. 5 sale, which is one of the iconic events for Winthrop and Rock Hill during the Christmas season. This year's event is from noon to 6 p.m. in the basement of the Rutledge Building.



Jim Connell

ROCK HILL, SOUTH CAROLINA – To say that Winthrop University **Professor Jim Connell** has modeled the **ceramics department** in his image would be an understatement.

The program, like the potter, is successful and prolific.

Its signature event, the **annual holiday pottery sale** – and this year is its 25th year – will see the return of more than 25 alumni who have thrived in the fine arts business. Many will be, once again, selling their wares in the Dec. 5 sale, which is one of the iconic events for Winthrop and Rock Hill during the Christmas season.

This year's event is from noon to 6 p.m. in the basement of the **Rutledge Building**. (See video below)

These Winthrop fine arts alums have established their own studios, or taught in public or higher education, or run and owned art galleries. "This will be our biggest and best sale ever as far as quality and quantity," said Connell, who will have well over 200 of his own pieces available for sale.

Most alums attending say one of the highlights of their fine arts career was getting ready for this annual pottery show. The event has brought in more than \$450,000 of which well over **\$130,000** has gone to buy equipment and fund scholarships. The average sales are about \$22,000 each year of which a fourth goes to buy equipment and five percent goes to scholarships.

The event is set up so pottery students sell their wares, keeping 70 percent and donating 30 percent back to the ceramics program.

Frank Vickery '03 said the pottery sale has been a chance for students to take what they learned in the studio from Connell and put it into action. "It provided a goal to work towards throughout the year and as students, we all looked forward to this day. It was a lot of hard work but provided extra money and real-world experience with every sale," said Vickery, who now heads the ceramics program at **The Bascom: A Center for the Visual Arts** in Highlands, North Carolina.



Teapot by Jim Connell



When he was a graduate student at Western Carolina, Vickery said he encouraged the ceramics department there to host a similar pottery sale and to start a tradition that has been so successful at Winthrop.

Another alumna called Winthrop's ceramics program fantastic. "I have gained so much from time spent there over the years auditing classes, then seeking my degrees," said **Sandy Singletary** '90 '08 '11, a Lander University assistant professor of art. "Jim Connell is a great instructor and he has always been supportive of my ceramic effort, whether sculptural or functional. I have nothing but good things to say."

Connell's Contributions

Connell, a native of Woodstock, Illinois, has been working in the ceramics medium since 1975. Throughout his career, Connell's work has appeared in more than 500 exhibitions, averaging about 24 a year for the last decade. Fifteen of his pieces have been acquisitioned by museums and in 2004, he traveled to China to study ceramics on an **International Residence Award** through the **National Council on the Education for the Ceramic Arts** (NCECA).

Mostly working in stoneware and porcelain, Connell is known for his teapots. "It is the most challenging form you can make," he explains. "Mine are unique in the field. It's a very hard form to master and, thankfully, no one copies my pots."

His pieces are easily recognizable. The sandblasted red color is a glaze that has taken him 30 years to master. "Sandblasting gives the shiny fired glaze a nice matte surface and a warm texture," he said.

When he throws – or forms - his **teapots**, he never makes one at a time, but 10-12 in a series. "People tend to think potters make one piece; start to finish and then move on to the next piece. We work in a series as there are numerous stages and there are drying times to gauge.

"People commonly ask how long it takes to make a teapot and it is a hard question to answer because you work on many at the same time," Connell said. "Actually, there are two answers that I like to give and both are proper and appropriate. I tell them the teapot has taken me 39 years to make as that is how long I have worked in the medium to achieve the skills necessary to make the piece. Or, after they give me an odd look, I tell them I make 10-12 and they take me 7-10 days."

When he arrived at Winthrop in 1987, Connell found the art department had only one electric pottery wheel and three old electric kilns on their last legs. Because ceramics work can be hard and grueling on the equipment, repair and replacement of appliances, furnishings and devices is necessary and frequent.

In his years heading the program, Connell said he's purchased and/or built more than a dozen kilns and 18 pottery wheels, as well as slab rollers, kiln shelves, hand tools and instructional videos. The list goes on and on.

"Buying all the items necessary to run a ceramics program is ongoing for us," Connell said. "Through the sale, we've been a self-sustaining program and haven't had to ask for much in the way of equipment and tools."

He's happy with the condition of the program now, even calling it "**state-of-the-art**," compared to what other institutions offer. He tells students that if they want to become professionals, they should consider attending graduate school. Many that do and often comment that Winthrop's facilities are better than their graduate schools.

Connell described learning ceramics in the beginning as taking baby steps. It takes a lot of time to master the process before a perfect piece can be thrown. His students must learn many different tasks including throwing, trimming, decorating, glazing and firing. They usually spend 50 percent of their time on the wheel, 50 percent off.

The sale offers the students a good business model, he said, allowing them to figure out their own sale pieces and pricing. Most of the items in the pottery sale range from \$10 to \$100, though for this year's sale, some items by the professional alums could cost more.

Clay is a Forgiving Medium

Senior Tanner Sullivan has taken six ceramics courses with Connell. "Clay is my favorite of all mediums because it is forgiving and malleable yet strong when put under the pressure of intense fire," Sullivan said. "It's both the art medium and the people that have kept me interested.

"It is full of character, just like the people I have met along the way who partake in it, and therefore is inspiring to me," Sullivan added. "In the past four years, never have I met people as hard working or genuinely caring as my peers in the ceramics studio."

The Christmas sale is a way, he said, for all of the hardworking potters at Winthrop to showcase many of the incredible results of things that have inspired them to build and create.

There is a **small sign** hung above the sink in the studio with several pieces of advice that have ultimately guided Sullivan over the past four years. It reads: “Work hard, arrive on time, tell the truth, and above all don't get too attached to the results.”

For more information about the **Dec. 5 sale** or the ceramics program, contact **Connell** at connellj@winthrop.edu or call him at 803/323-2657.

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