

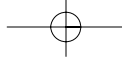
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Shining STARR



Collecting holiday ornaments is an addiction — you just can't resist the temptation of buying at least one standout piece each and every year. Whether it's tradition or just for the fun of it, when it comes to unique collectibles, one local talent really shines. Irma Starr is a Kansas City-based potter who makes ornaments and collectibles in the 17th-century English slipware style. Slipware is a form of decorative lead-glazed earthenware. The pottery is decorated using various techniques with a colored "slip," which is loose clay and water blended into a smooth consistency. The use of slip as a decorative touch has been in effect since the earliest times. It is thought to have originated in Japan; however, it was particularly popular in the mid-1600s in England where there were many slipware manufacturers that allowed the pottery style to attain a level of skill and precision that was not yet mirrored elsewhere.



A local potter creates collectible ornaments reminiscent of 17th-century style.

Starr was a student of Kenneth Ferguson, who made Kansas City a center for pottery, according to Starr. She says he taught her how to make and craft a pot — he stressed good craftsmanship and technique.

“I relied upon him to answer the big questions, but he said after a while you can answer your own technical questions,” Starr says.

She kept his wisdom in her heart as she honed her own skills after she no longer was his student. Starr says an assignment from her senior advisor at the Kansas City Art Institute was what catapulted her own love affair with slipware.

“My senior advisor told us we were to find one object from the Nelson that we loved, then research it and make it,” Starr reminisces. “I picked the Mermaid.”

The Mermaid is part of the Burnap collection of 17th-century English slipware pottery at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Starr’s close relationship with the Nelson began at this point. She would go on to recreate 17th-century owls for the museum, solidifying her presence there.

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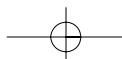


Above... Starr shows off Art (short for Arthur) the Owl Jug, her reproduction of a 17th-century type of thermos, in front of her home studio. Architect Cary Goodman, FAIA, designed the sculptural building for her electric kiln to interact with the sculpture of the garden. It’s made of Polygal, a honeycombed plastic product often used for skylights and simple buildings, Goodman says.

Opposite Below... Goose feathers are used to make the patterns in clay

Right... Examples of her work range from a traditional gingerbread man, to a soldier and an owl available in the Nelson-Atkins’ gift shop.

*By Laura Christman
Photography by Gary Rohman*





Left... Starr works on a plate at her Randall Wheel.

Below... Seventeenth-century potters used coal and wood to fire clay, but Starr uses this gas kiln for better color and richer glazes. The figurine sitting above the door is a "kiln god."
"Every kiln has one to protect it," Starr says.



Catherine Futter, The Helen Jane and R. Hugh "Pat" Uhlmann Curator of Decorative Art, began working with Starr in March 2002, shortly after Futter joined the Nelson. She says it's clear what makes Starr's work so special.

"Irma is so passionate about researching and reproducing the techniques and subjects of 17th-century English slipware through constant study and investigation. Her work captures the spontaneity, spirit and exuberance of those fascinating works of art," Futter illuminates.

Starr's research of the slipware style took her to England, to see how the pottery was made in the 17th century, and she also studied Japanese chemist and potter Shoji Hamada, whom she calls a "national treasure." Starr recounts the history of "mingi," or pottery of the



people. After World War II, much of this pottery was lost. Hamada was able to research and revive the concept of village pottery, crafted for the use of the village.

This sense of community is translated in the familiarity and individuality of each piece Starr creates. That element of personalization infuses every piece of her work. When someone approaches her to



create a piece for them, she has them draw what they want, then come back every day to make sure it's a collaborative effort.

"They can choose colors — I have samples if they don't want traditional earthenware colors — they take books home ..." Starr trails off. She seems so excited by the mere thought of the promise that future special requests hold.

Starr is recognized throughout the country as an expert in her field, and in her workshop, a small building located behind her Loose Park-area home, I see the fruits of her labor. Upon entering the building at the end of a dramatic driveway, encircling a modern sculpture that points to the sky, a holiday-themed wreath greets me. Inside, I see owls, gingerbread men and women, soldiers, Santas — all with her signature look — framing her windows. A glance outside takes me on a winding walk through her lush garden. Visitors come and go, all quietly enjoying the eclectically manicured hedges, surrounded by a dramatic white candelabra, a collection of intricate birdhouses and American flags proudly waving in the breeze to the rhythm of soothing wind chimes. Back inside, as louder noises whirr and sputter in the background, I wonder how Starr decorates for the holidays. She responds, "I have five trees up in my house all year long."

After knowing this woman for just a brief time, this somehow doesn't shock me. Starr is just the sort of person who would want to embrace the holiday spirit year-round.

"I love the holidays. You should enjoy them and have fun. Happiness is what we make it every day — it's a choice. Creating happy things for the holidays makes me happy," Starr shares, calmly dispensing such valuable words.

Happiness *is* a choice, and you can share in the joy Starr pours into every piece she makes by choosing one of her Holiday 2006 collectibles to spread some holiday cheer and indulge your little "addiction."

Starr-ting Lineup

Irma Starr's cheer and character shine through in every piece of slipware pottery she makes — and you, too, can take some of that same effervescent spirit home for the holidays. As Starr often says, "The more you share, the more you get back." She has partnered with the gift shop at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and Halls on the Plaza to do just that.

Constant Collaboration

Perpetual teamwork is what gets Starr's holiday collection of figurines, plates and ornaments from her workshop to Halls, and finally

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Left... Cookie cutter shapes hanging from the ceiling inspire some of her ornaments.

Below... Starr's workspace is filled with light and overlooks magnificent gardens cared for by husband Fernando Bozzoli.



into the homes and hearts of families in Kansas City and beyond.

“There is year-round planning,” says Melissa Fritz, vice president, divisional merchandise manager for Halls. Fritz began working with Starr four years ago, and she says that it really is an ongoing process.

“There is a lot of collaboration; Irma is a wonderful partner. We sit down and brainstorm ... [we are] inspired by everything from a cookie cutter to an image,” Fritz says of their creative process.

“Irma has a fabulous collection of antique molds and cookie cutters. We decide what the decoration will be, how much more three-dimensional the pieces should be to keep with the slipware style and we use Irma’s expertise with colors and adaptation.”

John Hamann, manager of the Nelson-Atkins Museum Gift Shop, began working with Starr in 1992.

“We started carrying Irma’s Burnap Collection-inspired plates then began work on smaller pieces inspired by our collection,” he says of their collaboration.

New Year, New Collection

According to Fritz, each year Starr’s new holiday collection debuts at Halls in September. This year’s collection includes a family tree plate with the year 2006 at the base of the spruce tree. This plate will become an instant heirloom not only for its incredible craftsmanship but also for the optional personalization. Starr makes a couple of public appearances at Halls on the Plaza to sign customers’ purchases and truly make the pieces one-of-a-kind. You can have the artist list the names of your family members around the sprawling spruce tree and on any of her other works.

Hamann says the Nelson-Atkins Gift Shop currently offers a new ornament based on the English Owl Jug (1690-1710), and other pieces are to follow.

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A few key items to look for in this year's collection are a Santa on a sleigh, a standing Santa, a Nutcracker soldier and a new Halls Plaza collection dome — the Parkway 600 Tower, Fritz says. This tower is part of the Plaza collection, which is available year-round at Halls. The Nelson-Atkins Gift Shop carries large plates, cups, seasonal items and small Burnap plate reproductions throughout the holiday season and beyond.

Simply Unique

Once purchased and hanging on your tree, an Irma Starr ornament may become the envy of the rest of the decorations and the apple of your eye.

Hamann says the ornaments are one-of-a-kind and this slipware process is unique, but what really sets these works apart is the person who creates them.

“[Irma’s] sense of humor makes her pieces whimsical and charming,” Hamann attests.

According to Fritz, a combination of factors makes her collection so irresistible.

“The incredible history of slipware, her remarkable talent ... [make] her ornaments so unique in the marketplace,” Fritz enthuses.

Fritz says she knew Starr was nationally renowned as being an expert in slipware, but what she may not have guessed was what an incredibly productive partnership the two would enter into.

“Really what we did was incorporate classic items — Santas, gingerbread men, et cetera — then developed the Halls collection. It started with the Plaza series, inspired by different Plaza landmarks and domes.”

What began with the Giralda Tower continues every year with what Fritz describes as very classic, iconic pieces all with that trademark slipware twist that is as unique as Irma Starr herself.

You can purchase works from Irma Starr's collection at Halls and the Nelson-Atkins Museum Gift Shop at prices ranging from approximately \$30-75.

Finis!