

feats of clay

Nicodemus pottery's paying a pretty penny.

Nicodemus, the late ceramic artist, was well known around central Ohio for selling his hand-crafted work at low prices from his modest Clintonville home.

Today, his figurines of birds and animals, and functional pieces that include plates, vases and ashtrays are fetching high prices — sometimes hundreds of dollars — in the collectors' market.

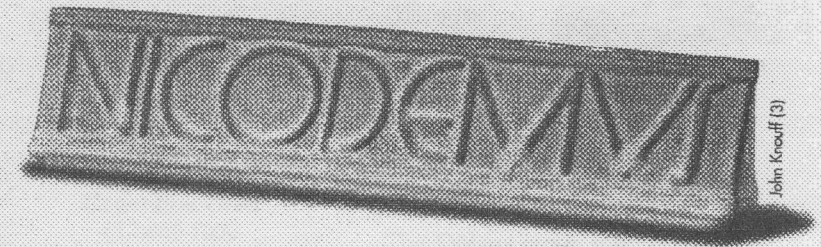
"Right now the market is very strong for Nicodemus, especially on the rarer pieces," said auctioneer Mark Van Hook. "The most commonly found robins are doing OK, but the harder-to-find animals are really up there. I watched an eagle figurine sell for either \$800 or \$825 a month or so ago."

It should be no surprise to collectors that Nicodemus pottery is demanding so much. Each piece is of high quality, produced by a man who dedicated his life to perfecting his art.

Nicodemus earned a degree from the Cleveland Art School in 1923. He taught sculpture at the Dayton Art Institute and drawing at Wittenberg College, and in 1932 became dean of the Columbus Art School, now Columbus College of Art and Design. He also studied and later taught ceramics at Ohio State University in the 1930s, and served as president of the Columbus Art League.

On a trip to New England in 1939, Nicodemus discovered a strong market for small, ceramic collectibles. In that same year, he opened Nicodemus Ferro-Stone Ceramics, and distributed his product to stores throughout the country.

Nicodemus' trademark baby robin is still spotted at auctions and antique shops around Columbus.



John Krauff (3)

Constructed from high-iron content clay mined in Ohio, Nicodemus' pieces are attractive, practical and durable. Teapots and pitchers pour without dripping, ashtrays resist air currents and vases hold water without leaking.

Nicodemus produced more than 1,000 molds in his basement workshop. His daughter, Eleece Ash, remembers working alongside her older brother and younger sister cleaning the greenware of any mold marks before firing the pieces in one of two homemade kilns in the garage.

"Dad didn't want any piece sold that didn't meet his high standards," Ash said. "Any piece that had a flaw or imperfection was destroyed."

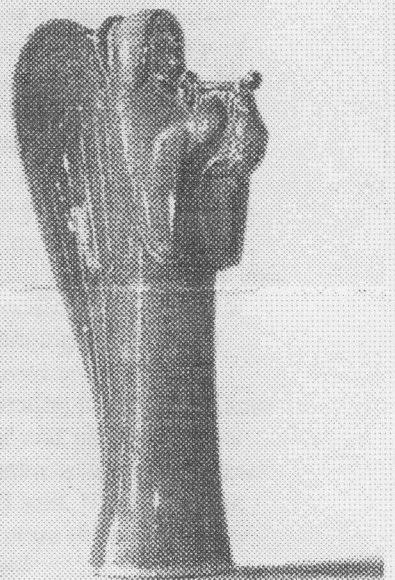
While many of the pieces were sold in shops around the country, Nicodemus and his wife Florine also would sell them to local residents from their garage showroom.

"He had a lot of regular customers from Worthington and Bexley looking for sophisticated ware," Ash said.

Nicodemus pieces are known for their translucent glaze, which the artist created. The glaze highlighted the clay's red tint, producing russet brown undertones. His palette included pussy willow, cobalt blue, turquoise, antique ivory, golden yellow and mottled green.

Collectors Richard and Beverly Dolan of Columbus found the

Nicodemus >



TOP: This rare Nicodemus 2-by-8-inch dealer sign, from Richard and Beverly Dolans' collection, is valued by collectors today. In excellent condition, it can fetch up to \$1,300.

ABOVE: This 7-1/2-inch angel with harp is part of a nine-piece Nicodemus nativity set that sold complete for \$17.50 in the 1960s, and now is valued at \$1,500.

glaze superior to that of Frankoma Pottery — a similar looking pottery that they had collected before discovering Nicodemus.

“Because some of the original clay shows through,

there’s more depth in the texture,” Beverly said of Nicodemus’ works. “It’s more alive.”

The Dolans credit much of the recent interest in the Nicodemus market to Jim Riebel — author of *Sanford’s Guide to Nicodemus, His Pottery and His Art*. Before writing the book, Riebel collected the artist’s work and researched him for nearly 20 years until Nicodemus’ death in 1990, at the age of 89.

Riebel described the artist as a shy, but charming and talented man who loved animals.

“His inspiration for animals came from friends’ and neighbors’ pets as well as animals at the Columbus Zoo,” Riebel said. “He had a rare ability to capture their personality in his works.”

Upon his death, Nicodemus requested that all the molds and glazes he had created be destroyed. Riebel, along with Nicodemus’ son Darell, carried out the request.

“I think he wanted them destroyed out of respect for his collectors,” Riebel said. “They supported him all his life. I think he figured, ‘They made an investment in me, and I’m going to make sure that it was an investment.’” ♦

By Wendy Welton, special sections writer for The Columbus Dispatch. She can be reached at wwelton@dispatch.com.



Chester Nicodemus in his studio in 1978.

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