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Development of the Montana Earth Series

Nancy Carr McNamara

The University of Montana

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MONTANA EARTH SERIES

by

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MONTANA EARTH SERIES

These sculptures are a reflection of—and a tribute to—Montana, "Big Sky Country," earth and clouds, the ever present forest and open fields which inspired and perpetuated this ceramic series.

I. CONCEPTION

The overwhelming awe of the traveler first exposed to the jutting mountains and cloud laden blue skies, dense forests and open fields of Montana has been depicted in word and picture so often it seems cliché worn. Only the descriptive attempts, however, are trite; the feeling is both real and lasting.

As a native of the urban, industrial East, I experienced this enchantment with the earth and sky of Montana. The Montana Earth Series was conceived as a personal expression of my feelings toward the earth, sky and forests of the Treasure State.

Potter Daniel Rhodes wrote:

Clay itself is relatively formless, and the forms the potter makes are entirely of his invention and draw little from the inherent form of the clay. Of course clay imposes certain limitations of shape . . . . But within these limitations the potter is free to express his preference in form, and the form of objects made from clay has been characterized by tremendous freedom and variety.1

In the conceptual phase of the Montana Earth Series, I was fascinated with the earth aspects of the clay medium cast in a half-round mold.

II. DEVELOPMENT OF FORM

While attempting to create an interesting and dynamic form emanating from the basic half-sphere, molded form, I saw the challenge of emphasizing the globular earth aspects of this basic shape and incorporated it as the basic form of the earliest sculptures in the Montana Earth Series.

Multiple experiments in developing a suitable base to support the half-sphere and accentuate its earth characteristics resulted in the cloud forms which surround the lower perimeter of the half-sphere of the sculpture shown in Slide 1. The cloud forms were made by rolling a large clay slab and folding its extending edges around the globe rather than trimming flush to the base. This base not only supports the smooth semi-globular shape but also adds surface contrast and suggests a flowing cloud movement: the global earth enveloped by a mist of clouds.

The molded plane form is a personal symbol identifying myself with the elements of air and earth. The forms add additional variance to the surface of the piece and suggest human adaptation to the earth and air elements.

When they were pressed into the half-round mold, the clay slabs rippled and undulated suggesting the possibility
of creating a dynamic form directly in the mold. However, for the sculpture shown in Slide 2, the slab was not pressed into the mold, but rather was allowed to fold over lightly, producing the surface variation suggestive of a layered earth or mountains thrusting up to the sky. The cloud-like base seemed too fragile for this more dynamic half-sphere, so a more substantial base was provided by a simple coil resting on a slab. This coil served to elevate the globular form, and the opening left between the coil ends suggests a greater depth of caves and crevices in the earth form. (This opening is visible to the lower left of Slide 2).

The Series had thus far progressed from the static shape of the half-round sphere to a more dynamic form of a globular, changing earth enveloped by a shifting sky. The addition of the forest trees to the sculpture shown in Slide 3 added to the earth symbology and greatly reduced the dominance of the half-sphere shape in the Series. The plane form seemed too heavy for the less prominent globular shape, so a small house shaded by a tree and reached by a road through the sky brought man into sculptural harmony with the elements of earth, sky and vegetation. (The house is visible in the lower left portion of Slide 3).

The globular shape set on a squat base had been the basic form of the Series thus far. With the development of vegetation and the slightly raised base, it lost some prominence. For the sculpture shown in Slide 4, the globe was
raised on a molded column base representing the sky. The new form raised multiple possibilities for future shapes and growth of the earth concept.

For the sculpture shown in Slide 5 the columnar base is representative of the earth. The undulating cloud form was built directly on the base over a supporting structure of crushed newspapers. The half-spherical shape was thus modified into a dynamic form by use of free-forming rather than molding techniques, and by combination with other structural shapes such as the column and the free-formed vegetation. At this point the progression of form was to incorporate the harmony of shapes thus far developed into functional ware. Several teapots and storage jars of this Series are shown in Slide 6.

III. GLAZING

The glazing of the Montana Earth Series was as important as the development of the globular form in conveying my impression of earth and sky. I decided to use cobalt, copper, chrome and iron oxide washes to allow me the freedom of coloring large areas as well as minute details without the inconsistency of color—or splotchiness—which often results from an unevenly brushed on glaze.

The earliest pieces in the Series, such as that shown in Slide 1, were fired to cone 10 reduction using the oxide washes under a clear (Meloy Base)\textsuperscript{2} glaze. While the earliest

\textsuperscript{2}Meloy Clear: Feldspar 167; Whiting 70; Kaolin 52; Flint 108.
pieces showed clear color definition and a smooth surface, the colors lacked the brilliance necessary to convey the dynamism of the form. Subsequently, the firing range was lowered to cone 5 and the atmosphere was changed from reduction to oxidation allowing complete combustion. A D. R. Colmanite Base was substituted for the Meloy Base on the sculptures and pots shown in Slides 2 through 6. This firing process and the oxide washes were used with complete success.

Additional highlights were made on some pieces by the use of Luster glazes. The clouds on the sculpture shown in Slide 1 appear to have silver linings, and the growing earth of the piece shown in Slide 4 seems to reflect sunlight from the olive-green Luster glaze.

IV. CONCLUSION

The challenge of creating a dynamic sculpture from the basic molded half-circle, my enchantment with the growing earth and sky of Montana, and a fascination with the globular aspects of the half-sphere inspired the conception of the Montana Earth Series.

In the progression from the first sculpture of the Series to the final function ware pieces, the half-sphere lost dominance as its size and smooth surface came into

\[3\] D. R. Colmanite: Feldspar 46.8; Flint 20.0; Colmanite 13.7; Whiting 8.3; Dolomite 6.0; Zinc Oxide 4.0; Kaolin 7.5.
harmony with sky and vegetation shapes. Finally the molded, semi-sphere was abandoned in favor of the loosely spherical shapes worked over a newspaper base. The clay, formed in this manner, undulated and folded in a way similar to the Montana earth. The clay jutted up like mountains or collapsed into caves and crevices.

From the first squat pieces, the semi-sphere soared up through coiled and columnar bases to harmonize in a dynamic vortex of raw form and suggested movement reminiscent of all the many growing things of the earth, air and forest.

V. APPENDIX

The two sculptures mentioned in this section represent an evolutionary side branch in the development of the Montana Earth Series. However, these two sculptures represent important developments in the collection and seem well worth special note.

The wall plaque shown against a bed of grass in Slide 7 represents a growing thing and was made in the half-round mold by allowing the clay to settle in natural ripples producing a dynamic form. This sculpture was among the earliest pieces which used the Meloy Base and the cone 10 reduction firing procedure. Consequently, the colors lack brilliance.

The sculpture shown in Slide 8 was also made in the half-round mold and has the cloud-like base folded along the lower perimeter of the earth form. This one piece relies on
the glazing and firing processes to develop the interpretation and movement. The silver clouds support the earth which is open to give birth to the trees. The glazed trees were the first vegetation depicted in the Series. This method lacked the impact of shape and structure developed in later pieces by the use of three-dimensional, free-formed trees.
Slide 1. "Ghost Plane"
Slide 2. "The Two-Toned Sky Plane"
Slide 3. "The Road to My House Goes Through the Sky"
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