

Feats of Clay

Famed potters Edwin and Mary Scheier honed their craft at UNH

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They may have made their name as potters, but famed New Hampshire artists Edwin and Mary Scheier dabbled in everything from puppetry to tattoo work on their road to success.

The Scheiers were both working for the federal Works Progress Administration in Virginia when they met in 1937. After a whirlwind courtship, they married, quit their jobs, and launched a new career as traveling puppeteers. They ended up in Tennessee, where the director of the Tennessee Valley Authority's Ceramic Laboratory suggested

they try working with clay and offered them free use of the lab's facilities in exchange for tending the kilns at night.

They experimented with clay, glazes and techniques and sought out some of the local folk potters to learn more. By 1939, they were back in Virginia with their own pottery business, and in 1940, they met David R. Campbell '29, director of the League of New Hampshire Arts and Crafts at a ceramics conference in North Carolina. Impressed by their work and tasked with elevating the newly organized Department of Arts at UNH, he offered both Scheiers jobs: Ed as instructor and Mary as artist-in-residence.

The Scheiers lived and worked in Durham from 1940 to 1968. They matured as professional artists and continued to collaborate on producing functional pottery while also creating pieces with their own distinctive decorating styles. Mary became an expert in throwing thin-walled vessels. Ed became noted for his imaginative glazing and surface decorations. On the bottom of all of their pieces, however, they would scratch only one name, "Scheier."



The Scheiers shared their love of the craft with their students, involving them in all aspects of the process from digging clay to loading the kiln. Working alongside the Scheiers, students also picked up lessons about life: how to work hard, live well and not to take oneself too seriously.

Beverly Fay '60 recalls asking Ed Scheier how he and Mary, who had no children, could be so happy. "His answer to me was, as he smiled and pointed to his pots, 'these are my children.'...No amount of potting elsewhere can compare to four years in the Scheier pottery classes. There was just something very special about that wonderful couple and their 'children.'"

And as for those tattoos? During World War II, Ed was one of many professors who took a leave from teaching to join the war effort. Asked in an interview for *The New*

Hampshire how he would serve, he reported that his hope was to become an Army tattoo artist, using skills he had acquired during summer vacations as a seaman.

“Tattooing,” he was quoted as saying, “is a decorative art fitted to individual personalities as much as a special design is appropriate for a certain piece of pottery; not merely a series of pictures created to enhance a sailor’s arm.”

Had the reporter been one of Scheier’s students, she would have suspected that Ed was spinning one of the wild yarns for which he was known. As it was, the story ran in the April 7, 1943, issue of the paper and for the rest of Scheier’s long life, the tattoo story would periodically surface as part of his biography.

An exhibit of Edwin and Mary Scheier’s work is on display through Oct. 2 at Discover Portsmouth, 10 Middle Street, Portsmouth, N.H. Visit portsmouthhistory.org to learn more.

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