

GALLERY GUIDE

# AMERICAN PICKLE

---

AN EXHIBIT CURATED BY MICHELLE ERICKSON  
AND THE MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Michelle Erickson was an artist-in-residence at the Museum of the American Revolution in December 2018, which featured an exhibition, *American Pickle*, a series of public programs, and filming on location for *Making a Bonnin & Morris Pickle Stand*.

Michelle Erickson, *Pickle Stand*, 2019.  
Museum of the American Revolution,  
Gift of James D. and Pamela J. Penny.





Internationally recognized for her mastery of colonial-era ceramic techniques, Virginia-based artist Michelle Erickson reinvents ceramic history to create 21st-century social, political, and environmental narratives. In her series, *American Pickle*, Erickson rediscovered the 1770s techniques of Philadelphia potters Gousse Bonnin and George Anthony Morris, who produced remarkable wares at their American China Manufactory only blocks away from the Museum. One of the 20 surviving pieces by Bonnin and Morris is a porcelain pickle stand in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, on view at the Museum of the American Revolution. Since 2008, this pickle stand and other surviving examples have inspired Erickson to create artworks that offer commentary on 21st-century global economics and national politics.

In *American Pickle*, Erickson references the Philadelphia pickle stand's complex artistic forms and political themes in contemporary versions that engage with the long arm of colonialism into our present moment, raising 21st-century issues of war, geopolitics, and trade and ongoing struggles with race and social justice in American culture. All the subjects of these works are underpinned by the juxtaposition of the natural and manmade, posing questions about environmental justice and the viability of the world that sustains us.



Robert Hunter

Erickson with her work, *Colored Skulls*, at Visual Arts Center in Richmond, VA, 2016.



Robert Hunter

ABOVE: Erickson recreates an 18th-c. pickle stand at the Museum of the American Revolution, 2018.

BELOW: *American Pickle*, displayed at the Museum of the American Revolution, 2018.



Jarin Hood



## WHAT DOES A PORCELAIN PICKLE STAND AND ITS COMPOSITION FROM REAL SHELLS HAVE TO DO WITH THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION?

In Philadelphia, Bonnin and Morris followed the 1770s fashion for pickle stands, or “sweetmeat” dishes that served pickled delicacies, often from the sea. The pickle stand’s tripartite form and naturalistic porcelain compositions features small dishes life-cast from natural shells. As a status symbol, the pickle stand brought the Enlightenment idea of organizing the natural world to British and American dinner tables.

To own porcelain manufactured in Philadelphia was to make a statement of American patriotism. In the 1600s, Chinese porcelain had captured the imagination of British and European monarchs, who became obsessed with discovering the secrets of producing this impervious, white, glass-like substance. Although the true recipe remained a mystery until the early 1700s, a nation’s ability to produce porcelain as a commodity and compete with the import of “China” became a mark of economic independence. As the Sons and Daughters of Liberty agreed to the non-importation and non-consumption of British goods in response to taxation and economic restrictions, owning American-produced porcelain in the 1770s symbolized a Revolutionary passion for independence from Great Britain.

Ten years after Erickson demonstrated her reverse-engineering of the Bonnin and Morris pickle stand, published in *Ceramics in America* (2007) and informing *Colonial Philadelphia Porcelain: The Art of Bonnin and Morris*, a landmark exhibition at The Philadelphia Museum of Art (2008), new discoveries continue to be revealed about colonial America’s porcelain revolution. In 2014, while digging the foundation of this Museum, archaeologists discovered privy pits and wells from the 1700s filled with thousands of ceramic artifacts. This dig produced an anomalous single white ceramic bowl. Through research and scientific testing, ceramic scholar and archaeologist Robert Hunter has identified this piece as a true hard-paste porcelain made in Philadelphia around 1772.



Philadelphia pickle stand by the American China Manufactory (Bonnin and Morris), 1770-1772. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of a 7th-generation Philadelphian, 2014, 2014-166-1.



Robert Hunter

### *Made In USA*

Michelle Erickson

2018

Purchased Starbucks "made in usa" mug, with artist's ceramic transfer print and luster enamel decoration

Erickson's series, *Made In USA*, repurposes commercially-available, American-made Starbucks mugs for social and political commentary. Erickson makes a historical connection between American football quarterback (now Nike spokesman) Colin Kaepernick's action to take a knee against the injustice of mass incarceration and institutional racism and the iconic image of the 'kneeling slave,' made famous by English ceramics manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood's 1787 abolitionist medallion stating, "Am I not a Man, and a Brother." By the 1800s, commercial ceramic tablewares, such as sugar bowls, inscribed with pleas for freedom depicted this image as a call to boycott sugar produced by slave labor. Even today, mugs, bowls, and other household ceramics can directly instruct social activism.



### *Am I Not*

Michelle Erickson

2010

Porcelain slip-cast, thrown, and hand-built with life-cast shells and starfish, transfer printed with hand-painted overglaze enamel decoration

Erickson's child soldier series references a genre of abolitionist ceramics that began with the English ceramics manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood's 1787 kneeling slave medallion stating, "Am I not a Man, and a Brother." Erickson's shell dishes correlates colonialism with 21st-century child soldiering and slavery.



Robert Hunter

*"This piece brings specific attention to the issue of youth experiences with violence and wars that fight for the territorial control of regions that contain not only precious gems and metals, but also the less conspicuous commodities of sugar, chocolate, and coffee." - Michelle Erickson*



### American Pickle

Michelle Erickson

2008

Porcelain, slip cast, sprig-molded, and hand-built with underglaze cobalt decoration and overglaze transfer prints

Reeves Museum of Ceramics, The Museums at Washington and Lee University

Erickson's twists her faithfully-rendered recreation of the Bonnin and Morris pickle stand placing the oversized trademark "Made In China" boldly on its face.



*"The play-on-words describes both the early term for porcelain, 'china,' and its origin, 'China,' to make an overt statement in red, white, and blue about the modern American corporate exodus to China."*

- Michelle Erickson



### Pickle Stand

The Bow Factory

London, England

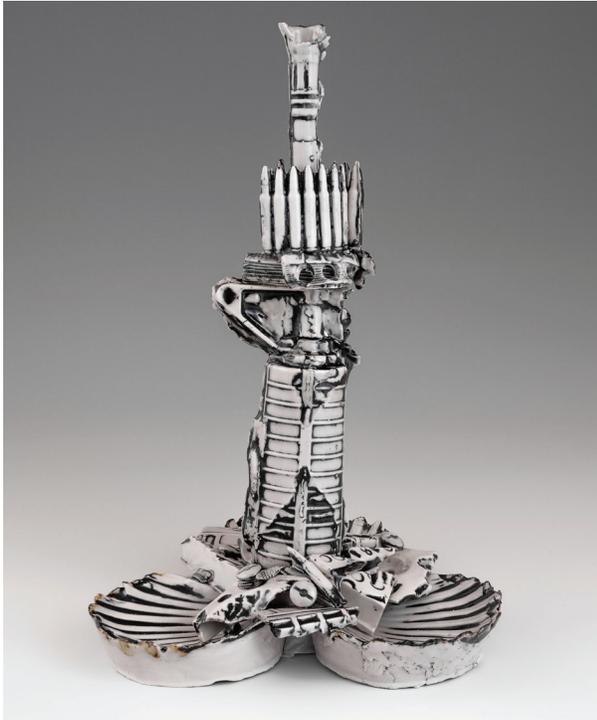
ca. 1750-1760

Soft-paste porcelain

Reeves Museum of Ceramics, Museums at Washington and Lee University

This pickle stand was made in London at the Bow Factory, which was active as the first purpose-built porcelain factory in England from around 1744 until 1776. The Bow Factory produced soft-paste porcelain in imitation of Chinese porcelain wares designed for an upper-middle class market. The Bow Factory became known as "New Canton," after the port of Canton or Guangzhou, China, which introduced Chinese porcelain to global markets.





Robert Hunter

### *Black & White Pickle*

Michelle Erickson

2014

Porcelain and black porcelain, slip cast, press-molded, and hand-built from the casts of AR-15 rifle bullets and natural shells

Erickson evokes the historical precedent of ceramics produced and used to advocate for social and political change.

*“This piece makes a ‘loaded’ statement on 21st-century gun culture in American as protest to the overt power and influence of the gun lobby in the United States Congress.”*

- Michelle Erickson



### 3D Printed Pickle

Virtual Curation Laboratory

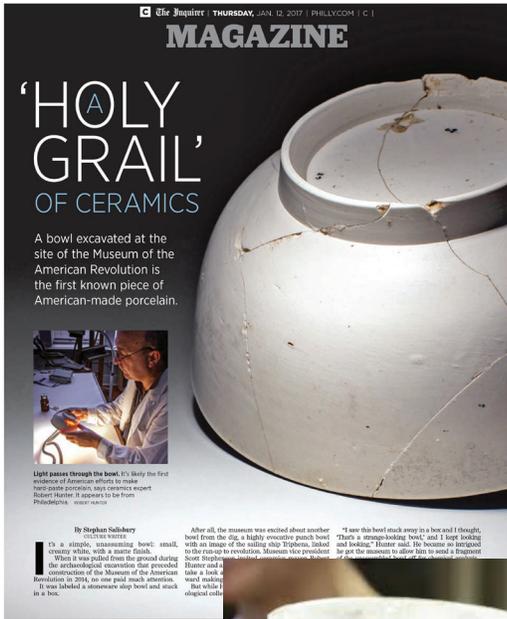
Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia

Plastic (Polylactic Acid)

2018

Erickson collaborated with Bernard K. Means, Ph.D., Director of the Virtual Curation Lab at Virginia Commonwealth University, to have her porcelain recreation of the Bonnin and Morris pickle stand 3D scanned and printed. These various 3D printed versions, done from the scan by 3DPrint RVA, employ a 21st-century technology to recreate the piece while exploring the added dimension of the physical language of the process of 3D printing. Dr. Means demonstrated 3D printing at the Museum as part of Erickson’s artist residency in 2018.





## Punch Bowl

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
Museum of the American Revolution  
Hard-paste porcelain  
ca. 1770

Archaeologists from Commonwealth Heritage Group found this small bowl, thought to be used for serving punch, among the 85,000 artifacts recovered from the site of the Museum of the American Revolution in 2014. Analysis by geologist Dr. J. Victor Owen and his colleagues revealed that this bowl is made of hard-paste porcelain and was most likely manufactured here in Philadelphia.

At the American China Manufactory, Bonnin and Morris produced soft-paste porcelain using both phosphatic and glassy-frit paste from 1770 to 1772. This newly found bowl of aluminous-silicic paste may reflect experiments with white clay (kaolin) sent to Bonnin and Morris by Henry Laurens of Charleston, South Carolina in 1771. These experiments, meant to develop American porcelain that could compete with imported porcelains from Great Britain and China, have a revolutionary Philadelphia story.



**Explore the Museum:** Learn more about the porcelain pickle stand and the roles of artists to make political statements during the Revolutionary War on your visit to the Galleries and nearby Revolution Place, a hands-on space where you can continue exploring archaeological ceramics, politics, and Revolution in our Philadelphia neighborhood.

### Watch: *Making a Bonnin & Morris Pickle Stand (2020 Film)*

by Michelle Erickson and the Museum of the American Revolution

Made Possible by

The Kaufman Americana Foundation

Reeves Museum of Ceramics, The Museums at Washington and Lee University

The Philadelphia Museum of Art

Thanks to

James D. and Pamela J. Penny

Gavin Ashworth Photography

Special Thanks to

Ceramics in America

Robert Hunter

Graham Hood

Ceramic Artist

Michelle Erickson

Shot and Edited by

Jorin Hood