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*Journal of Black Mountain College Studies*

Volume 12: Expanding the Canon (Spring 2021)

Article URL: <http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/arauz-haystack/>

Published online: May 2021

**Published by:**

Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Asheville, North Carolina

<https://www.blackmountaincollege.org>

**Editors:**

Thomas E. Frank, Wake Forest University

Carissa Pfeiffer, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

**Production Editor:**

Kate Averett, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

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Black Mountain College and Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in the 1950s**

M. Rachael Arauz, Ph.D.

The founding years of Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, an acclaimed alternative institution for craft education still thriving on the coast of Maine, were the subject of a 2019 museum exhibition and scholarly catalogue organized by the Portland Museum of Art, Maine. Diana Greenwold and I served as co-curators for the project, and our research revealed Haystack's connections to several mid-century experimental and craft-based educational programs such as Black Mountain College and Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina, Cranbrook Academy in Michigan, and Pond Farm Workshops in Guerneville, California. Drawn from that research, this article offers a brief summary of events and specific artists who forged early points of contact between Haystack and Black Mountain College, and suggests the ways in which Black Mountain College's demise provided a touchstone for Haystack's innovative beginnings.

Although Haystack is widely known for its award-winning coastal campus in Deer Isle, designed in 1961 by architect Edward Larrabee Barnes, the school was founded a decade earlier, in December 1950, in Montville, a rural location about 90 minutes inland. A small group of local artists including Edgar and Marjorie Sewell, William and Estelle Shevis, and Elizabeth Crawford undertook an ambitious plan to organize a craft school, and realized their dream with financial support from Mary Beasom Bishop, a wealthy arts patron from Flint, Michigan. At Bishop's suggestion, a young man named Francis Merritt was hired as the school's director and the campus opened in July 1951.<sup>1</sup> Avoiding the aspirational risks of a full-time utopia, Haystack valued process, experimentation, and intergenerational learning in the context of brief, but intense, rural community living. Within the first twenty years, studios in pottery, weaving, printmaking, woodworking, glass blowing, and jewelry combined with philosophy lectures, poetry readings, music performances, dance, and culinary projects in a curriculum that embraced informality and improvisation. Haystack offered sessions only during the warm summer months, and did not offer degrees.

Haystack's founders envisioned a community of creative individuals dedicated to combining modern art and design with rural life, and their plans for a craft school took

shape within the larger context of the burgeoning mid-century studio craft movement and increased educational opportunities in the arts across the nation. Founded in 1933, Black Mountain College's alternative learning model was well-established by the time Haystack's founders began to conceive of their own pedagogical project in the late 1940s. Unbeknownst to them, however, Haystack's nascent development specifically coincided with shifting ideals at Black Mountain College, prompted by the 1949 resignation of Josef and Anni Albers from the faculty.<sup>2</sup> Having graduated from art school in the 1930s, William and Stell Shevis may have been aware of Black Mountain College as an innovative arts program, and Haystack patron Mary Bishop had taken a weaving course at nearby Penland in 1950, but there is no evidence to suggest that Black Mountain College provided any direct inspiration for Haystack. As they developed plans for the Maine school in 1950, the Haystack founders were certainly unaware of the struggles and changes at Black Mountain College that would eventually result in its closing. Nevertheless, Black Mountain College's success and failure would become a valuable point of reference for the experiment in craft, education, and lifestyle advanced by Haystack.<sup>3</sup>

After Haystack's second summer, the fledgling school made direct contact with Black Mountain College when instructor and co-founder Elizabeth Crawford attended the 1952 pottery seminar. Her application for the seminar described her teaching role at Haystack, and included a brochure for the new craft school, perhaps hoping to draw Black Mountain College students to Maine.

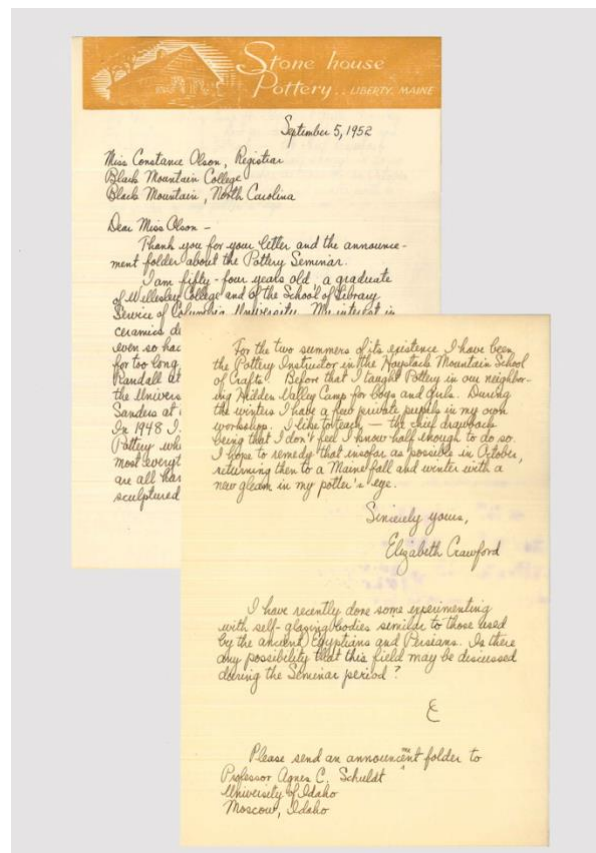


Figure 1. Correspondence from Elizabeth Crawford to apply for the 1952 pottery seminar at Black Mountain College, held in the Black Mountain College Papers, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

Another Maine potter, Denis Vibert, also attended the Black Mountain College pottery seminar, citing his affiliation with Haystack.<sup>4</sup> Considering its relatively unknown reputation, Haystack made a strong showing at the pottery seminar. Crawford and Vibert not only met instructors and organizers Bernard Leach, Marguerite Wildenhain, and Shoji Hamada, but also likely connected with Black Mountain College's resident potters David Weinrib and Karen Karnes, as well as potter Warren MacKenzie and weaver Trude Guernonprez who were also in attendance.<sup>5</sup>

CERAMIC WORKSHOP

## Black Mountain College Holds Pottery Seminar

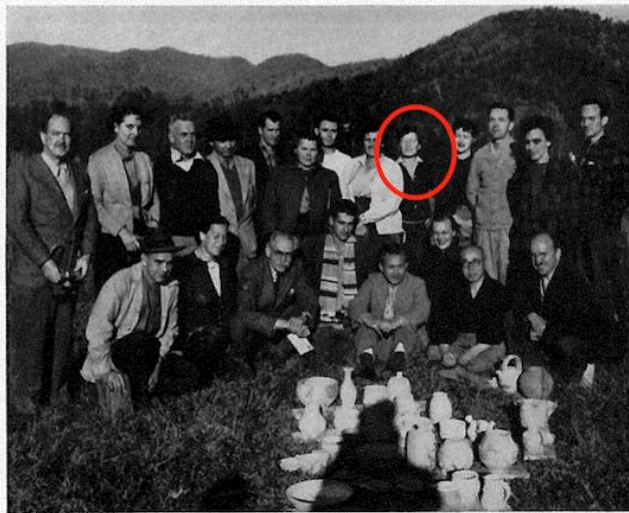
By ROBERT L. DIFFENDAL

Principals and the potters attending Black Mountain College Pottery Seminar, Black Mountain, N. C. with unfired demonstration ware in foreground, made by Leach, Wildenhain and Hamada.

BLACK Mountain College, Black Mountain, N. C., began its 20th year of instruction on September 20, and added to its regular curriculum the first of four eight-week institutes—that concerning the crafts, designated as an Institute in the Crafts, with a special two-week seminar in pottery, held October 15 to 29, inclusive.

The latter constituted the fourth and fifth weeks of the Institute. Karen Karnes and David Weinrib, new resident ceramists at the College, presented lectures during the first and second weeks of the program, these covering such subjects as the materials of the craftsman in ceramics, loading and firing the kiln, basic ceramic processes and concepts, and other phases of pottery activity, including demonstrations. An address was given on the relationship of some American potters to the historical craft. During the third week, Marguerite Wildenhain, Pond Farm, Guerneville, Calif., host potter for the event, presented the opening lecture of the pottery seminar to follow for the next fortnight.

The seminar brought together Mrs. Wildenhain; Bernard Leach, well-known English potter; Shoji Hamada, leading potter of Japan; and Dr. Soetsu Yanagi, director of the National Folk Museum, Tokyo, and pioneer of the Japanese craft movement and its leader for about 30 years. The first mentioned three held daily lectures during the two weeks' period, and gave demonstrations of their individual techniques at the pottery. Mr. Leach



(L. to R. — front row): William Watson, Florida State University, Tallahassee; Marguerite Wildenhain; Bernard Leach; David Weinrib, resident potter at Black Mountain College; Dr. Soetsu Yanagi; Betty Edgar, Spring Valley, N. Y.; Shoji Hamada; and Karl Martz, instructor in pottery, Indiana University, Bloomington; (second row — standing): David Edgar, Spring Valley, N. Y.; Helen Kruger, Floral Park, L. I.; Allen C. Hoffman, Newport News, Va.; E. L. Holtzclaw, Hampton, Va.; Douglas Ferguson, Pigeon Forge, Tenn.; Frances Reys, South Amboy, N. J.; Richard Hieb, Cos Cob, Conn.; Marjorie Dutton, Wallingford, Pa.; Betty Crawford, Liberty, Me.; Gillian Boschen, Freehold, N. J.; A. J. Spencer, St. Petersburg, Fla.; Janet Darnell, Spring Valley, N. Y.; and Gordon Goehring, Akron, Ohio.

Figure 2. Article by Robert Diffendal about the 1952 pottery seminar at Black Mountain College, with group photo of participants including Haystack co-founder Elizabeth Crawford. Robert L. Diffendal, "Black Mountain College Holds Pottery Seminar," *Ceramic Age* 60 (December 1952), page 54.

Almost immediately, students and instructors from Black Mountain College began to find their way to Haystack. In 1954, former Black Mountain College student Stan VanDerBeek came to Haystack to study woodworking, and became friends with director Fran Merritt. VanDerBeek returned to Haystack in 1959 to teach a special workshop on experimental film, and would continue to visit Haystack throughout the next decade. Also in summer 1954, Black Mountain College instructor Ellen Siegel taught weaving at Haystack. Jack Lenor Larsen, a young textile designer and recent Cranbrook graduate who first taught at Haystack in 1952, helped expand Haystack's curriculum with his own network of artists. As Black Mountain College declined, Larsen facilitated introductions between Haystack and the college's weavers including Anni Albers, Lili Blumenau, Trude Guermonprez, and Marli Ehrman.<sup>6</sup> While teaching at Haystack in August 1955, Albers wrote almost daily from her cabin to her husband Josef in Europe, praising the students and appreciating their enthusiasm.<sup>7</sup> Blumenau wrote to Merritt after teaching at Haystack, specifically comparing the Maine school to Black Mountain College:

I certainly enjoyed teaching at Haystack. . . . I think the school is unique, there is nothing like it in this country. In many ways I was sometimes reminded of Black Mountain College, especially in the emphasis towards serious craft work. . . . Then I admired your handling of the social aspect. . . . In a small group with people from different backgrounds and ages are mostly complications, but at Haystack everyone was content.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 3. Haystack co-founder and graphics instructor William Shevis (left) with weaving instructor Lili Blumenau in the Haystack dining hall, 1955, photographed by student Ross Lowell. Image courtesy of Haystack Mountain School of Crafts.

The exchange between the two schools, initiated by Crawford's attendance at the 1952 pottery seminar, came full circle in 1956 when potters David Weinrib and Karen Karnes taught at Haystack. Although Crawford was no longer an instructor, she remained on the school's board of trustees and still lived next to the campus. She would likely have greeted Weinrib and Karnes that summer. Weinrib and Karnes left North Carolina in 1954, and Haystack, at least briefly, offered a supportive space for their creative practice as Black Mountain College began to close its doors. Karnes would return to Haystack twice to teach in 1964 and 1966, along with other Black Mountain College artists who found their way to the Maine school in the 1960s, notably Warren MacKenzie, Daniel Rhodes, and M. C. Richards. Richards, a key figure in Black Mountain College's final years, taught at Haystack and served on the school's board throughout the 1960s and 70s.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 4. Karen Karnes and David Weinrib at Haystack, 1956. Image courtesy of Haystack Mountain School of Crafts.



Figure 5. M. C. Richards on the deck at Haystack, c. 1962. Photograph by Michael McGarvey. Image courtesy of Haystack Mountain School of Crafts.

In autumn 1956, Merritt wrote a letter to Bishop, effusing about that summer as the most vital program they had ever had at Haystack, and asserting an ambitious vision for the school:

The school now, in some respects, is becoming a successor to other important educational projects which enjoyed national recognition and respect—projects which were based on profound and liberal concepts—namely, Black Mountain College and Pond Farm Workshop. Somewhere in these programs the energy failed. There is a lot that can be learned from these examples. The Haystack prospects are based on valuable concepts too and the gathered momentum now, with good spirit supported by continued encouragement from friends afar, should keep us in the vanguard of the craft movement in America.<sup>10</sup>

Black Mountain College had not yet officially closed in September 1956, and Haystack had only been established for five years, yet the newer school was already beginning to claim its role as a space for experimental, creative work. Merritt's invocation of Black Mountain College referred to the North Carolina school as both an inspiring peer and a cautionary tale. The significant contributions of Black Mountain College to modern art in America immediately became the subject of archival study and ongoing scholarship after its closing. Haystack's remarkable longevity has inadvertently masked the ferment of its early years, yet the school's extensive archives connect Haystack to a complex network of ideas, artists, and institutions that shaped American art at mid-century. The exchange of people and possibilities between Black Mountain College and Haystack in the 1950s, previously little recognized, offers new insights for the future study of craft and modern art in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Our exhibition catalogue provides detailed resources for understanding the chronology and context of Haystack's founding. M. Rachael Arauz and Diana Jocelyn Greenwold, [\*In the Vanguard: Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, 1950-1969\*](#) (Portland, ME and Oakland, CA: Portland Museum of Art and University of California Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Historian Mary Emma Harris writes specifically about the months around 1950 as a crucial period of transition for Black Mountain College: ". . . the critical years 1949 through 1951 were a period of indecision and internal conflicts, and by the fall of 1951 only a miracle could have saved [Black Mountain] college." Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987): page 168.

<sup>3</sup> The model of distinct sessions held only during the summer, with invited instructors, existed at both Penland and Black Mountain College when Haystack's program began, but does not seem to have provided specific inspiration for the Maine school. Seasonal concerns—cold weather and snow

winters—provided practical reasons for Haystack to open the campus, and draw artists from across the country, only during the summer months.

<sup>4</sup> Crawford and Vibert correspondence, “Pottery Seminar 1952,” General Files, Box 25, Black Mountain College Papers, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

<sup>5</sup> A letter in the Haystack archive suggests that Crawford traveled to California to study with Wildenhain in summer 1953, building on the introduction at Black Mountain College. Marjorie Sewell to Mary Bishop, undated letter [autumn 1953], SpC MS0234, Box 2, Folder 16, Haystack Records, Fogler Library-UMaine.

<sup>6</sup> *In the Vanguard: Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, 1950-1969* provides a full chronology of instructors at Haystack in the 1950s and 1960s. The Black Mountain College connections are specifically discussed in my essay for that exhibition catalogue, pages 53-54 and 61.

<sup>7</sup> Letters from Anni Albers to Josef Albers from her time at Haystack in summer 1955 are held by the Archives of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, CT.

<sup>8</sup> Lili Blumenau to Francis Merritt, August 19, 1955, SpC MS0234, Box 2, Folder 18, Haystack Records, Fogler Library-UMaine.

<sup>9</sup> Diana Greenwold’s catalogue essay “Inscriptions in History: Haystack 1961-69” takes its title from an unpublished essay that M. C. Richards wrote about her time at Haystack. *In the Vanguard*, pages 66-95. Greenwold briefly discusses Richard’s important connection to Haystack as both potter and poet within the larger context of Haystack’s activities in the 1960s. Her research suggests there is much more to be understood about the philosophical similarities and differences between Haystack and Black Mountain College through a fuller understanding of Richards’s involvement with both institutions.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Merritt to Mary Bishop, September 14, 1956, SpC MS0234, Box 2, Folder 11, Haystack Records, Fogler Library-UMaine.