

Jan Wade

Memory Jugs and the Origins of Traditional Grave Art in African American Slave Cultures in the Southern United States

I saw a photograph of my first Memory Jug when I was quite young. I also saw pictures of great wooden sculptural pieces and was amazed to find out they were taken years before in African Slave Grave Yards in the Southern United States. They fascinated me as I loved their sculptural forms and the at times, the playfulness of their content.

Memory Jugs in particular have a fascinating history. Social Anthropologists believe Memory Jugs originated from BaKongo culture in Africa, which influenced slave communities in America. Their origins come from the tradition of African mourning vessels and were used as a way of honoring family members and friends. They were placed in Cemeteries and used as grave markers.

Very early Southern Black Root Religion took much from its original Ancestors. The BaKongo belief was that the spirit world was turned upside down and they were connected to it by water. Their graves were decorated with shells, jars and other vessels that would help them through this watery world to the afterlife. The graves were always decorated with the last articles used by the departed. The Jugs were covered in every day objects that had a personal or iconic significance to the deceased. In earlier times the vessels may have been covered in mud or left plain.

Early Southern Slave cultures viewed death as an important rite of passage rather than an end of life. It was necessary to celebrate this right of passage to the spirit world. Praising, calling out and singing were usually involved in ceremony. Some times objects were buried with the dead and the earlier custom of putting things on the grave (quilts, pipes, dishes, etc) can be traced back to African origins some of these things would be buried with the individual. Many Black Communities dropped these traditions in time but in our Church the kissing of the dead was a custom maintained until recent times.

Memory Jugs had a revival in the Victorian era and even in the 50's and 60's but the original function and meaning had by then been mostly forgotten. I am dedicating mine to.... BLACK LIVES MATTER....and all those through the ages who have suffered and died at the hands of injustice....only the cameras are new.....

Jan Wade.....2016