Art Professor Emeritus Ron du Bois represented the U.S. as a Fulbright Scholar to South Korea in 1973-74. “When I got my hands in clay I had an epiphany,” du Bois says. “I’m not unlike others in the field who began as painters only to put their brushes away in favor of clay.”

Hosted by three South Korean universities, the OSU art professor taught Western clay concepts and forming methods to students who were themselves heirs of ancient and illustrious ceramic traditions.

But his fascination with Korea’s folk potters led to a lifelong interest in little-known clay artisans in India and Nigeria who practiced traditional methods of clay construction.

His interest in their clay forming skills as well as their culture, traditions and religions resulted in six documentaries, all valued by educators, artists, historians, anthropologists and museums worldwide, especially as modern technology and sociological changes threaten the continuation of these ancient clay processes.

In 2010, his documentaries, Potters of the World film/DVD series, were part of an art exhibition, Cross-Cultural Visions, sponsored by the 60th anniversary of the U.S. Fulbright program in South Korea. The art exhibition featuring Fulbright grantees premiered in New York City and traveled to Washington, D.C., and Seoul, South Korea.

Also in 2010, du Bois’ documentaries were part of an international symposium, the Onggi Expo Ulsan Korea, sponsored by the South Korean government to honor the historical and cultural significance of its traditional folk potters. For centuries they produced large clay vessels essential to the existence of Korean society yet were once considered to be at the bottom of a hierarchical society.

Du Bois’ Korean documentary introduced the Western world to the impressive skills of these folk potters and helped reverse the generational stigma toward them. All of du Bois’ films have become important to scholars and ceramics educators worldwide.

The Fulbright Foundation’s mission to foster mutual understanding between countries and promote world peace is not unlike the potter’s goal.

“Clay is a metaphor for life,” says du Bois, who taught at OSU from 1960 to 1986. He holds a master’s in painting from the University of California, Berkeley.

Du Bois uses the biblical quotation, “Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor?” to assert that most people, regardless of diverse objectives in life, seek to create order out of chaos.

For that reason, du Bois says, art educators believe the production of artists is one of the most important objectives of education.

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KOREA 1973-74

Du Bois became fascinated with onggi pottery produced for pickled vegetables that are a staple in the traditional Korean diet.

“I went to study the high art of porcelain and white ware, but I became more interested in the folk art of the common people.”

After du Bois returned from Korea, he showed his film about onggi potters to the National Council for Education through Ceramic Arts, causing a great interest among university ceramic educators and artists.

“It was the first time the Western ceramics world was exposed to traditional onggi pottery. No one knew anything about it,” he says. “Later on, my film on the construction of a massive Indian terracotta horse received a similar response.”

Du Bois’ wife, Thora, an OSU piano teacher for decades, accompanied her husband to South Korea, India and Nigeria and taught piano at their Korean and Nigerian host universities under Fulbright auspices.

Her Korean students, mostly women, didn’t speak much English, but communication isn’t a problem between people who speak and read the international language of music, says Thora du Bois, who also performed as a soloist and accompanied faculty and students in recitals in both South Korea and Nigeria.

She was invited by the cultural attaché to play a mini-recital in honor of the U.S. ambassador’s visit to Daegu, South Korea. She also took lessons on the traditional multi-stringed Kayagum from a master woman performer and singer.

“Because of Thora’s contributions to Nigeria’s University of Ile Ife and her human relations skills, the comment was made that the Fulbright program had supplied two Fulbright scholars for the price of one,” Ron du Bois says.

Ron du Bois spent six months filming The Working Processes of the Korean Folk Potter during his Fulbright lectureship in 1973-1974. This documentary shows the production of onggi, large vessels for storing pickled vegetables. The film is owned by many university art departments throughout the world as well as museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.
Ron du Bois, sponsored by the Indo-American Fellowship Program, filmed construction of what may have been the last massive terra-cotta horse built in India. The horses stand 9 to 25 feet high and are among the world's largest hollow clay constructions. They have been built for thousands of years to serve as mounts for a protective deity called Aiyanar, who rides the village boundaries to protect them from untoward forces. This indigenous religion is so ancient it precedes Hinduism.

“I've always been interested in how art products interact, reflect and are the expression of culture and religion,” says du Bois, who also filmed a colony of 700 hereditary potters near New Delhi, India, during the international exchange.

“No Hindu artist or craftsman would even think about starting any project without a prayerful ritual to create an image fit for a deity to inhabit. They want their work to be worthy of the gods.”

The documentary *The Working Processes of the Potters of India: Massive Terra-Cotta Horse Construction* demonstrates the 15-day construction of a massive clay horse by the heirs of an ancient tradition in which horses inseparably link clay and religion. Produced with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, du Bois' documentary was shown during the 1985 Smithsonian Festival of India and featured in “The Horse,” an exhibition by the American Museum of Natural History, and most recently during the exhibit's visit to Canada’s Museum of Civilization. Inset: Ron du Bois and his translator in south India in 1980.
NIGERIA 1987-88

After retiring from OSU in 1986, du Bois received a Fulbright Senior African Regional Research Award in 1987. “My grant was to study art on the West African coast, but I spent all of my time in Nigeria because it is the leading art producing nation in Africa,” says du Bois, who later produced the documentaries with a Ford Foundation grant.

His Nigerian documentaries focus on two compounds where women potters created vessels essential to survival in Nigerian villages.

Women at the Dada compound produced massive water vessels, while women at the Ogbena compound produced smaller, lidded soup bowls.

Only women make pottery there, and they pass their knowledge on to their daughters and granddaughters.

“They understood I was a potter because I helped them with their clay and wedging tasks, even though I couldn’t keep up with them,” du Bois says. “They must have thought it odd that males from the U.S. could be potters.”

Both compounds were closed to outsiders, but du Bois gained entry after he and Thora met OSU alumnus Julius Afolabi in a local restaurant near the University of Ile Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University.

Afolabi was a Nigerian who had earned a doctorate in epidemiology from OSU and later returned to the U.S. to teach. His uncle was a city official in Ilorin, Nigeria, who knew the Dada compound’s head mistress and arranged special permission for du Bois to film there.

While du Bois filmed, Thora taught piano at the university in Ile Ife. Even with her piano tuning kit, the humidity, warm temperatures and lack of air-conditioning made keys stick and accurate pitches difficult to fix on the practice pianos and concert hall piano.

She says the students, mostly young men, were a joy to work with. Besides teaching, she also accompanied individual recitals and the university choir, including a performance at the Lagos National Theater.

Before going to Nigeria, Thora was pursuing a doctorate in music performance from the University of Oklahoma. Instead of having to re-enroll upon her return, the university allowed her to submit a written account of her Nigerian teaching experience in place of a pedagogy class requirement.

She taught at the Nigerian university until April 1988 when political unrest suddenly shut down the campus mid-semester. “Overnight, they closed the university,” she says. “I didn’t see my students again. They all left that night. It was very sad.”

Ron du Bois’ films include scenes of daily life and festivals in Ile Ife where, according to Yoruba belief, all humans were created. He managed to interview and film a traditional Ifa priest performing his daily rituals.

At the time he wasn’t sure how the scenes would fit into his documentaries but later realized they provide a striking contrast between contemporary city life and the traditional pace and practices of the women potters.

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Ron du Bois’ documentary Yoruba Potters: Mothers and Daughters — Ogbena Compound is the first film showing the culture, religion, everyday lives and remarkable hand-building skills of the women potters of Nigeria’s Ogbena compound. Their craft is passed down from mothers to daughters, who begin learning it as children. The film documents the process of building isasun, a round-bottom vessel with a flanged rim covered with a knobbed lid. Ron du Bois says the vessels, remarkable for their resistance to thermal shock and ideal for cooking over an open fire, have long been essential to life in Nigerian villages.

Yoruba Potters: Mothers and Daughters — Dada Compound is the first documentary ever made of the superb Nigerian Yoruba craftswomen at work. Ron du Bois’ video shows the entire process from working the clay to the dramatic open-field firing of more than a thousands pots. His photo, left, of a woman working on a huge, perfectly symmetrical water vessel was part of an exhibit this summer at the National Museum of Scotland. Du Bois’ Nigerian documentaries are included in the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art’s film archives in Washington, D.C., where they are available on loan to U.S. educators. In Africa, educators and potters can access the films through the National Museum in Lagos, Nigeria.
Ron and Thora du Bois will celebrate their 59th anniversary in October. They met in 1951 in Paris, where Thora, a Canadian, was studying piano, and Ron, a Californian, was studying painting in Andre L’Hote’s studio. Over the years, they have represented the U.S. in Korea, India and Nigeria during three Fulbright exchanges.

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