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Mackenzie-Childs: Hand-Crafted Charm

Every summer, for just a few days the population of Aurora explodes. The picturesque village of 724 suddenly teems with lovers of whimsical dinnerware, drawn by the annual Barn Sale at MacKenzie-Childs. For more than 30 years, the home décor company has been handcrafting colorful ceramics and, more recently, a full line of home furnishings and accessories – all immediately recognizable by their characteristic patterns of checks, squiggles, dots, scallops and stripes.

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Passion and patience are at the heart of every MacKenzie-Childs product

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Written by Olivia M. Hall, photos By Robyn Wishna

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This July, the chance to acquire overstock and seconds items at steep discounts drew 21,000 visitors over four days, according to customer service manager Jerry Ryan.

“People literally camp out for two nights on our brick driveway to get into the sale on Thursday morning,” Ryan says. “We entertain them on the line, they interact and develop friendships. It’s really a community with a great connection to Aurora.”

And no wonder the fans feel right at home, as the village features prominently in the MacKenzie-Childs catalogs.



“Everything, all our products are inspired by what’s outside our doors,” Ryan explains.



That pastoral scenery includes flowers and meadows, a duck pond, a gothic revival chicken palace aviary and views of Cayuga Lake, surrounding the company’s production studio, showrooms and shops on a 65-acre, former Victorian dairy farm just north of Aurora. Company founders and ceramic artists Richard Childs and Victoria MacKenzie moved to

this location in 1986, three years after they decided to try to sell their pottery and managed to attract luxury department store Neiman-Marcus as their very first customer. When the initial order flew off the shelves, the couple began to hire employees and relocated production from its home to a small apartment, later an old Wells College dormitory – the Wallcourt product line pays tribute to this era – and finally its current site.

Under new ownership, first of Pleasant Rowland, the creator of the American Girl dolls and, since 2008, of a private equity firm, MacKenzie-Childs has continued to grow rapidly, recently more than doubling its staff to 300 and selling an ever-expanding array of products – nearly 400 new designs are launched every season – out of stores in New York and Palm Beach, as well as a number of high-end department stores, retailers and a catalog.

Even with everything from desk accessories to outdoor furniture and grandfather clocks now populating its pages, hand-painted ceramics (and slightly lower-priced enamelware) remain at the core of MacKenzie-Childs' lineup. Their raw material is red terracotta (“baked earth”) clay from the southern United States.

“It creates a very dense and durable body that’s also unpredictable, which is why we choose to use it” Ryan says. “Each piece is a little different, so if you buy four dinner plates, they aren’t going to nest perfectly. That also lends itself to the hand-painted nature of the products.”

In 59,000 square feet of the former dairy barn, they are manufactured in the truest sense of the word: Nearly 100 employees are directly involved with making the products, and every piece is touched by several pairs of expert hands, some by as many as a dozen. Any artisan

contributing handwork will put his or her initial stamp on the bottom of the item, right next to a small MacKenzie-Childs logo.

After the design department has sketched, sculpted, or carved a prototype of a new idea – Ryan calls the style “tradition with a twist and a sense of humor” – mold makers Penni Morse and two colleagues set about to create plaster molds.



“First I have to make the mother mold that makes all the production molds,” Morse explains, pointing out that the latter need to be replaced about every six months. Big items such as platters and bowls are handpressed into the forms, while smaller plates and handles come out of a ram press that uses hydraulic pressure to push the clay shape off the mold. In yet another room, slip cast experts such as Mary Handzel pour slip – liquid clay as thick and

smooth as molten milk chocolate – from two large holding vats to create hollow pieces. The plaster mold absorbs the moisture from the outside in, growing thicker walls the longer the clay stays inside, so Handzel relies on daily humidity and temperature readings and years of experience to tell her when to carefully pour out the excess slip. Cookie jar lids, for example, may require 30 minutes, mugs 35.

Once the pieces have been unmolded, trimmers such as Linda Scott use wet sponges and wooden tools to carefully remove ridges left by the molds.

“The clay is very soft, so if she were to squeeze too hard, it would bend,” Ryan explains while Scott focuses on a heart-shaped dish. “Even if she were to straighten it out and put it in the kiln, the clay would warp. But if we wait a little longer for it to be more firm, it’ll crumble if we mishandle it.”

Before the dishes can go into the kiln for their first firing, they dry on racks for a few days up to three weeks, depending on their thickness and the ambient humidity. Twenty-four hours at temperatures up to 1810 degrees then turn the raw clay into hardened bisque, ready to absorb the first layer of glaze.

“We think we’re pretty special for using terracotta clay, and we want to show some of that off in the end product,” Ryan says.

So Mike Wheeler of the wax and glaze department demonstrates how he grabs a scalloped plate with tongs, smoothly dips the bottom into hot paraffin wax, and briefly submerges the dish in a vat of glaze. “The wax is eventually going to fire away, exposing the terracotta clay,” Ryan explains.



Majolica ceramics such as the carnival-colored Piccadilly line now receive an in- glaze decoration, consisting of stains made from frit – ground glass – and minerals suspended in water. As head of pottery decoration, Tish Gibson applies stripes to a ceramic tufted foot while Ryan comments on her skillful brush technique:

“The frit is heavy and settles out of the water, so she has to get down in there with her brush to really put color on. And depending on how firmly you press down, different amounts of mineral get released into the glaze. This is where you’ll get variations in color from decorator to decorator and even within her pieces. No two will ever be the same.”

While majolica decorations are fired right into the base glaze, other patterns, such as the company’s signature Courtly Check, consist of china paints applied on top of the glaze, allowing decorators to pull additional colors into the black and- white checkerboard squares.

These and any lusters – metals such as 24-carat gold suspended in pine oil and camphor – that might be applied around the edge of a plate each receive another firing in the kiln for a total of two to three per item. All told, a piece of pottery may take as long as four weeks to turn from a hunk of clay into a shiny, colorful MacKenzie-Childs dish.

“The question that sometimes comes up is, ‘who is our competition?’” Ryan says. “It’s almost like no one is, because no one is crazy enough to do what we do, given the amount of work and labor that goes into each and every piece that we make. It’s a different breed on its own.”

Olivia M. Hall is a freelance writer and anthropologist whose food research and travels have taken her around the world. Her food writing has appeared in such publications as the Vegetarian Times and the German magazine TagNacht.

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