

THE HEADPOTS OF
NORTHEAST ARKANSAS AND
SOUTHERN PEMISCOT COUNTY, MISSOURI



JAMES F. CHERRY

FOREWORD BY ROBERT C. MAINFORT JR.

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Foreword by Dr. Robert C. Mainfort Jr.

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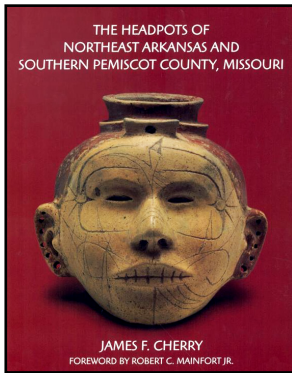
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The Headpots of Northeast Arkansas and Southern Pemiscot County, Missouri

James F. Cherry. 2009. The University of Arkansas Press. 384 pp., 828 color photographs, 232 illustrations, glossary of terms, bibliography, index. \$59.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by John P. Hart, Research and Collections Division, New York State Museum.

Headpots. What archaeologist working in the mid-continent has not been intrigued by these three dimensional representations of the human head in fired clay? Unlike many Mississippian art forms, they are frequently life-like (or death-like) representations of humans. They provide a visceral connection to the human past and it is little wonder that they have been pursued by archaeologists and looters for almost two centuries. James F. Cherry became so intrigued by the headpots of northeastern Arkansas and southeastern Missouri that in 1981, he initiated a project that resulted in the documentation of 138 headpots of the classical form—that is, “vessels in which the mental concept executed by the potter was to create a pot entirely into the shape of a human head” (p. 1). A physician by trade, Cherry was able to record headpots held by museums, universities, and other institutions, as well as by private collectors. This book is the culmination of his efforts and a valuable resource for archaeologists and others interested in Mississippian art. Richly illustrated with 828 color photographs and 232 illustrations, this book is a testament to an effort that few would have the patience or tenacity to complete.

Following a foreword by Robert C. Mainfort, Jr., Cherry begins his volume with brief discussions of the various forms of headpots, early publications documenting headpot finds, and early artifact hunting expeditions that resulted in headpot discoveries. The bulk of the volume, however, is given over to documentation of every classical form headpot Cherry was able to trace, including fragmentary examples. In his inventory, Cherry groups together vessels he believes may have been made by the same artisan based on stylistic similarity. These groups are, in turn, ordered according to the chronology of finds, so that the first pot described in each group is the earliest one found and the next in sequence of finds to the earliest found in the preceding group. Each pot is documented by at least one photograph. More typically, six to eight photographs from different angles are provided, even —

for fragmentary examples in some cases. Cherry indicates the current location of each pot, the date of its find (if known), catalog number, location of origination and the reliability of that information, any contextual information available for the find (e.g., location relative to a skeleton, associated artifact finds), use wear, damage, and metrics (height, width, depth). If known, a brief history of each pot's discovery and ownership is provided, as are an identification of any reconstruction and a brief description of any unique decoration(s). Following the inventory is a brief analyses and conclusions section. This is followed by appendices that document modern reproductions, correct mistakes about headpots in the literature, and provide line drawings of hair patterns, eye surrounds (incised decorations enveloping one or both eyes), and facial 'tattoos' on standardized templates. This is followed by maps and tables of find locations, a table of metrics for each headpot, and a tabulation of find dates and finders of each headpot.

Anyone expecting a definitive interpretation of headpots will be disappointed. Cherry does agree with the general perception that they generally depict the dead: "The predominant theme in viewing the total group of headpots is the projection of death" (p. 173). However, Cherry is smart enough to not make a grand pronouncement on the meaning or function of these effigies. I have spent hours flipping through the images in this book. Beyond the sheer artistry encompassed by these pots, what strikes me more than anything is the sheer diversity of the pots, including at least six infants. It will greatly surprise me if anyone having viewed this wide spectrum of human facial depictions is bold enough to offer a single interpretation as to meaning and function. Rather, it seems to me that what these vessels represent is simply an art form. The original meaning(s) enveloped in any given example is simply whatever the artist intended. The function of any given pot was what the owner at any given time wanted. Can we recapture the original meanings and functions of these objects? Perhaps. And this is the main value of Cherry's efforts to document all of the known examples of this art form. By making available a detailed documentation of the known examples, Cherry provides a firm foundation for future research that may lead to better understandings of the meanings and functions of these magnificent artifacts. For this, the archaeological community owes Dr. Cherry a debt of gratitude.