

LA MERIDIANA

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF CERAMIC ART IN TUSCANY



THE CREATIVE POTTER



The dichotomous nature of functional pottery is one of its most fascinating features. In fact, the successful bridging of the division between practical problem-solving and individual expression becomes a central creative challenge for the potter. How the potter sees a way to fuse these seemingly opposite concerns defines the quality of his or her perception and artistic ingenuity.

Limits are essential to the creative process because they trigger reaction and focus energy. The greater the limitations the more vigorous the challenge. Functional pottery puts many restrictions on expression. It takes a highly sensitive, inventive, and patient individual to turn these constraints in poetry. The teapot must pour. It must be well balanced at a comfortable scale. Its handle must provide security in lifting, and its lid shouldn't fall into the cup as the tea

flows from its spout. Simply stated, the teapot must "work" or be relegated to the shelf. One sure test of quality for a functional pot is whether or not it can be used. However, whether a pot is used is also inextricably connected to the pleasure it gives in the process of functioning. Paper plates work but provide little except convenience.



Human desire seems torn between a quest for pragmatic solutions to problems and a longing for pleasurable release. The art of the potter addresses this conflict by proving that it need not exist. More than a balancing act, the fine useful pot is an example of creative vision that transcends constraint by turning specific limitations into moments of artistic expression.

Uniqueness of decoration and a clever manipulation of material and process can provide a potter with a signature style. But the important statements within the realm of the useful pot are made by potters who have firm control of their egos and are willing to face squarely the problems of creating for use. The good useful pots are those that reveal artistic individuality and sensitivity, particularly at the points where the pot must function. The way the lid fits or

handle responds to the hand are dynamic factors critically related to the quality of a useful pot. This clearly suggests that functional pottery is one of those rare forms of art that gives pleasure not only through visual-cerebral connections, but through physical-sensual ones as well.

Unlike architecture and the products of the artistic problem-solving activities of design, handmade pottery provides a person-to-person intimacy. The hand of the artist reaches through the object to touch the hand of the user, creating a bond of friendship, caring, and



aesthetic gratification that nurtures human life and fortifies it against indifference.

Harmonising the dual forces of imagination and logic lies at the centre of all artistic labour. The utilitarian pot is one of humanity's most enduring examples of how this duality is reconciled to achieve objects of intelligence and beauty.

-----000-----

The idea of appropriate or preferential media has hamstrung thinking about what constitute art today. Since the Renaissance, fine art expressions have traditionally been classified – until the 1960s, that is – as painting, sculpture and architecture. Painting, for the most part, was oil, tempera, watercolour and gouache. Sculpture was hewn of stone or wood, or fabricated or cast from various metals.

But media proscriptions for artists began to dissolve early in the twentieth century with the impressionists. Paul Gauguin experimented with ceramics; Matisse used coloured paper; Chagall made pots; and Picasso and others added newsprint, sand, and other materials to their art. As Africans had done for centuries, Europeans were suddenly free to use diverse and non-traditional media in their artistic expressions. But even as media restrictions were fading, the rules regarding utility continued. From the '70s onward, even though fine-art objects could be fabricated from all manner of unique and non-traditional materials, “fine art” could not be utilitarian. Located in museums around the world are countless objects of art that incorporate utilitarian values. The effects of these fabrications has been long lasting and detrimental. Potters have had to struggle against being classified as merely artisans or crafts persons rather than artists.



Much of the antagonism over the “art” and “craft” is about perception of value as it relates to both media and expressive intent. Perceptions of what constitutes art have dramatically changed over the years. One big problem is that contemporary artists do not universally share the definition of art and of beauty. In fact, many artists today often create objects disassociated from the concept of beauty. If there could be a short definitions probably it could be: Beauty is that pleases the senses and exalts the mind.

And while it is true that pottery possesses sculptural attributes such as volume, depth, positive and negative space, shape and richness of surface, pottery is not, and can never be, sculpture.

To appreciate a work of art is not a particularly difficult undertaking but to discuss about visual art is difficult because artists use a plastic language to convey emotions and ideas. Artists use lines, shapes, colours, patterns, textures and images as their alphabet. This makes for profound difficulties in saying why there is such insightful meaning in these expressions. Art has been, with a few exceptions in the last century, and still is about the creation of beauty. Notwithstanding the discussions presented by many modern day philosophers and critics, this concept has always been and continuous to be a cardinal motivating force for artists.



In a pot, each visual element contribute a “particular” voice in the pottery expression. Each form, technique or material has with it associated meaning and emotional consequences. Round against square, smooth against rough, white clay against red clay. Porcelain, for example, speaks of purity, coolness, rarity and preciousness, while red earthenware clay suggests a more common earthiness, warmth and softness. The inspiration to elucidate a specific ceramic form arises from deep within each potter. This power cannot be superficially acquired and is the seed that shapes the flower of expression. All aesthetically

successful pots are complete, whole and unified. And herein lies another series of harmonious relationships that must come into play. The centre of balance and location of spouts, lids, handles and lugs are instrumental in the efficient use of the pot and contribute to its beauty.

In considering pottery, the varied sensory impressions produced may startle us in their immediacy and impact. It is only after careful, earnest consideration of the visual orchestration before us that a glimmer of intellectualised understanding may occur. Inexperience in seeing, in knowing, or in doing may blind us to what, for some, may be obvious. These deficiencies can be a barrier to understanding and appreciation. To see the richness, subtlety and complexity in the best of these pots requires effort and focused attention.



As we know the Renaissance started to differentiate between art and crafts expression. Works produced by a fine artists were seen as unique, never to be repeated or duplicated. By contrast pottery meant for practical purposes was produced on a communal basis in guilds, pottery villages or as familiar endeavours. The success of a pot was dependent upon the incorporation of many skill sets by many people who formed, decorated and fired the work. But this communal orientation (with little exceptions) helped to promote a schism between art and craft expressions. The lingering effects of this fundamental difference in the nature of “artist” and “craftsman” still exist when evaluating the aesthetic worth of pottery.



Today, we live in an era where individual art, largely unfettered by tradition or social conformity, is the norm. And surely there is no place for utilitarian values which are so inherent in pottery expressions. This brings us to the question of education and training of potters today.

Since a formal master/apprentice system, for the most part, no longer exists, potters receive their training in universities and colleges. This system is far removed from traditional, historical, craft-oriented practices where utility was an important consideration in the evolution of pottery form.

The values represented in the repeat work of historical folk pottery are not commonly encouraged in these institutions. Indeed, content is often emphasised at the expense of skill acquisition or utility. While it is crucial to exercise rigorous discipline in order to enhance one's pottery skill level, it is not considered a particularly creative enterprise. But the acquisition of skill provides for expressive potential that can only be imagined by those without those abilities. Literally hundreds of pots must be made for the craftsman to acquire the skills necessary to reach a level where intuition may speak transparently.

While historically the division of labour contributed to an enhancement of skill level and rapidity of learning, the contemporary potter is compelled to become expert in all phases of pottery production. This requires a tremendous amount of discipline and time. Since so few potters are trained in universities and colleges in the traditional fashion, aspiring potters must exercise extraordinary self discipline in order to perfect their craft.



The creative potter is not blindly repeating shapes, but exploring specific form types in a subtle and sophisticated fashion. Some imagine that potters make the same thing again and again but there are so many variables in the process of ceramics that it is impossible to create two objects with identical characteristics. The balance between the repetition required to produce forms that spring fresh from the hand and the repetition that drives the life from pots is a precarious one. Only truly creative artists resist succumbing to the deadening of the spirit. And this is the case whether one is an artist or a potter.

It is only at the very end of the ceramic process that the potter may recognise the one piece that embodies all the formal elements cohering in an exceptional aesthetic fashion. This recognition can only occur when the door of the kiln is opened after the final firing. Some may suggest that few differences may appear among twenty similar tea bowls. But this apparent lack of distinction may be a result of inexperience or lack of knowledge on the part of the observer. Like any kind of connoisseurship, years of observation and study can foster a discriminatory ability that is both enlightening and sometimes frustrating because of how few artworks truly satisfy.



The repetitive ritual of producing multiple aesthetic forms based upon an idea as simple as a "bowl" lends its own voice to the potter's work. Repeat work contributes its own cadence and insight. By being attuned to the subtle variations and minute changes that arise when working, with clay, slips, glazes and the kiln day after day, the potter reaches for secrets normally hidden in that first tantalising experience with clay.

Coupled with the expressive meaning lying dormant in the soul, one finds that the potter's repeat work can produce art work that, indeed, stands the test of time and can be imbued with the power found in any great work of art.