

## BEYOND ENTERTAINING

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Published in *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, No. 9, 1992.

When we think of dinnerware, we think of the European tradition of round, matching components, whose function, more often than not, has been selected to display the wealth and social aspirations of the owner rather than for the purpose of holding food. It seemed that inside this construct the chances of any kind of art experience were impossible. That is the view held by many of us who turned to pottery in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The making of pottery by hand seemed a way one could establish some kind of new domestic order where the mundane aspects of life might be elevated and transformed into meaningful artistic propositions.

This movement was intuitive rather than formal and was intertwined with the movement towards alternative lifestyles which had evolved out of a resistance to the Vietnam war that the 'sunday-dinner, chinaware-culture' of our parents seemed collectively to support. Once the war ended, however, the moralistic fervor of potters seemed to wane. The philosophical idea of creating a domestic art was all but abandoned when potters realized that the buying public was interested in pottery that was colored blue rather than aesthetically challenging concepts. Before we knew it, the materialistic '80s were upon us and critics in the crafts and fine arts establishments with good reason, looked at pottery, whose audience was primarily those who attended craft fairs, as crass and commercial boutique ware. It lost any, if not all of the intellectual or moral credibility it once had and was pushed aside to make room for the 'vessel', a sort of non-functional pottery with pretensions.

We seem to have come full circle and pottery is coming back into fashion. It seems that pottery's utilitarian nature is one of the reasons for this comeback. Usefulness is what makes pottery accessible to us; we recognize its forms and relate to its limitations. These aspects, after all, are a reflection of our own physical limitations. But mere usefulness guarantees nothing. There are countless examples of mute, cloddish pottery that are usable but are hardly better than paper plates (one could even say the paper plate is superior because, unlike handmade pottery, it is without pretense). The insentience of that kind of pottery has, unfortunately, led many in our culture to the mistaken assumption that pottery is incapable of serious and meaningful expression. I would suggest, however, that this kind of pottery should be seen as an indictment against its makers, rather than a limitation of the genre as an art form. The question now seems to be whether this time around the potters will offer our culture work that does more than merely entertain and titillate, work that has aesthetic aspects that can help turn occasions like a meal into the kind of art experience we normally might expect only from painting and sculpture.

Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth* tells us: "If mystery is manifest through all things, the universe becomes as it were, a holy picture. You are always addressing the transcendent mystery through the conditions in the actual world." This, it seems to me, is what all significant pottery throughout history has done, and what should be the goal of the modern potter. That is, to address the mystery of what it means to be human through use – 'the actual world'. It is the effort to communicate this idea of mystery by a potter that can give a seemingly mundane object like a cup the sort of impact that leads the sensitive user to a previously inaccessible area of awareness.

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How does pottery achieve this aim? An intrinsic element of pottery is that it is made not only to be seen, but also to be used – that is, to be touched, held, and even tasted. This simple fact that pottery is meant to be perceived by all the senses gives it possibilities for communication unavailable to most other art forms. For example, when one first confronts a pot, one uses the eye and the intellect to make judgments about it. Is the shape pleasing? What about the color and surface decoration? Once one picks it up, however, the intellect takes a back seat to the physical senses. The sense of balance is confronted and touch comes into play. Is it heavier or lighter than it looks? How does the surface feel? Rough? Smooth? Uneven? Finally there is the experience of taste – how it feels as it touches our lips and how we relate the pot with the food or beverage it contains. Is it comforting? Stimulating? Does it refresh us or leave us wanting more? How we find ourselves responding to those sensations and what they cause us to feel are all elements the intelligent, creative potter uses to communicate his or her own particular vision. The pot becomes a whole universe that intimately speaks to our physical, psychological and spiritual aspirations, doubts and fears. It is this ability to appeal simultaneously to both the highest and most basic aspects of human nature that makes pottery special.

John Ruskin wrote in *Modern Painters* that there were two kinds of art. The first kind induced “in the spectator’s mind the faithful conception of any natural objects.” The work of the first kind of artist, he says, “is usually united with the selection of such objects as may be naturally pleasing to all men, at all times; and this selection, when perfect and careful, leads to the attainment of pure ideal.” The second kind of artist on the other hand, “selects his objects for their meaning and character, rather than for their beauty; and uses them rather to throw light upon the particular thought he wishes to convey, than as objects of unconnected admiration.” It is art of this second type that Ruskin feels has the higher aim because it is involved in the expression of the awakening of individual thought. When we look at the work of the second type of artist we are not, Ruskin says, “looking at a specimen of a tradesman’s wares, of which he is ready to make us a dozen to match, but at one coruscation of a perpetually active mind, like which there has not been, and will not be another.”

The creation of good pottery is largely a matter of expectations. The potential for Ruskin’s second type of art is there, but if it is to be realized, potters must not only want it for themselves but also insist that their work be seen and treated as a serious form of expression in its own right.

References:

1. *Modern Painters*, republished by Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.
2. Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myths*, Doubleday, 1988.