BOOK REVIEW

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Art and Design at Alfred: A Chronicle of a Ceramics College by Melvin H. Bernstein, published 1986 by the Art Alliance Press. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Associated University Presses, London, and Toronto.
Turners and Burners: The Folk Potters of North Carolina by Charles G. Zug III, published 1986 by the University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London.
The New Ceramics: Trends and Traditions by Peter Dormer, published 1986 by Thames and Hudson, New York, New York.

In the last seven to eight years there has been a manifest interest within the craft field in serious critical writing and historical analysis. *Art and Design at Alfred*, *Turners and Burners* and *The New Ceramics* reflect a shift (minute as it may be) from how-to, technique-oriented books toward scholarship and the history of craft.

The history of much of contemporary craft in the United States is to a large degree one of how academic institutions have acted as hothouses, protecting and nourishing a fragile and underdeveloped field. Perhaps the most prestigious institution to emerge in this role has been the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. *Art and Design at Alfred* by Melvin H. Bernstein, an Alfred professor since 1949, is a history of the College of Ceramics told through the tenures of its first six directors of art: Charles Binns, Charles Harder, Ted Randall, Val Cushing, Robert Turner and Anthony Hepburn. Unfortunately, *Art and Design* reads more like a corporate history from a yearly stockholders' report than a critical and insightful chronicle that would leave the reader with a vivid vision of what it was like at Alfred from 1900 to 1984.

Bernstein has gathered all the "facts" about the directors but is unwilling to interpret them. Consequently they are nothing more than dry data with little real meaning to an outsider. The author never expresses personal opinions, nor does he seem to have solicited any from those he writes about, except the most innocuous: he thus implies that Alfred escaped the ideological and political infighting so common in most universities. This may be an attempt at academic objectivity or simply a device to keep from offending his fellow professors. In either case, the result is a lifeless history that skims the surface of an interesting story.

It is not just the academic style, though, that makes *Art and Design* so difficult to read. Bernstein's history suffers from sloppy chronology as well. In what is potentially the most interesting section of the book, the five chapters on Harder, Bernstein takes him from birth to schooling, early employment, marriage and death (we also learn of his mother's interest in oil painting and her first show after his death) – all in the first two pages. In the ensuing chapters he has Harder die at least twice more. The book also lapses into a sort of Who's Who at Alfred; it is almost impossible to get through three or four pages without a long paragraph listing 20 or 30 names of students, graduates or faculty. This kind of obligatory review of the "accomplishments" of Alfred alumni serves little purpose other than institutional boosterism and will no doubt reinforce the contention of many in the ceramics world that there is an Alfred mafia.

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Art and Design at Alfred is nevertheless worth reading. If you are persistent, you can get a sense of how much academic institutions have shaped ceramic art in this country, a reality that we have come to take for granted. Perhaps it is time to explore the effects of this institutionalization of ceramic art and examine its faults as well as its contributions.

Turners and Burners, a complex and exhaustive study of North Carolina folk potters from the mid-1700s to the present, offers an interesting contrast to *Art and Design at Alfred.* Charles G. Zug III, an associate professor of folklore and English at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, succeeds in one of the pivotal goals of his treatise: to provide "full consideration of the cultural context" of the potters he examines. Without cultural context, Zug rightly believes, it would be too easy to both romanticize and depreciate the achievements of these potters. His primary device is the interview with surviving potters and family members who recall the making and firing of pottery from their childhood. Their words are more than colorful anecdotes; they are the means by which Zug shows us the potter's life from the inside. He quotes Burlon Craig, one of the few remaining folk potters still at work, remembering his partnership with Vernon Leonard:

> "He was paying me so much for every kiln we burnt and then paying me for turning and drying. He was getting the clay and wood and doing the burning." When Vernon died in 1946, two of his sons decided that "they wanted to try it a while, same arrangement. They'd go to sleep and let the fire go out of the kiln at night… The older boy went to sleep, and the younger one did too – he was supposed to have been firing. He let the fire go out, and he woke up before the older one did. And he didn't want him to know that the fire had been out, so he gets up, throws a heavy fire in there, and busted about two-thirds of the kiln. And I said 'Boys, I believe it would pay you to get into something else.'"

Later, as Zug discusses the standards that folk potters applied to pottery, he gives us the reactions of some of the old timers to the thick-walled pottery from Georgia: "Hell, that ain't pottery! That ain't a damned thing but a ball of clay with a hole punched in it." It is passages like these that give the book texture and an unshakable authenticity.

Another satisfying aspect of *Turners and Burners* is the use of photographs to illustrate Zug's points. There is one of potters digging clay by a stream at the turn of the century, numerous plates of kilns and studios and an interesting one comparing the infamous Georgia churn to one of the same type made in North Carolina. The fact that most are reproduced on the pages where they are discussed is a bonus.

More than a valuable record of the history of folk potters in North Carolina, *Turners and Burners* is important documentation of a region rich in ceramic history that has been almost totally ignored by the academic institutions responsible for the education of the majority of the practicing potters in this country.

Many of the most well known of these institutionally trained potters are included in Peter Dormer's *The New Ceramics*. It might be more aptly named New Anglo-Saxon Ceramics, for Dormer does not deal

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with new ceramic art outside Europe and the United States. It is, of course, perfectly legitimate to focus on a particular area or region in studying developments in a field as long as these parameters are clearly noted and defined. This may seem a small point, but by not acknowledging this narrow focus, the author gives the appearance of cultural chauvinism.

In the opening chapter, for example, Dormer writes: “The emergence of modern studio pottery dates from the 19th century in Europe because, like handcraft in general, it was a way of opposing the tendencies of industrialization.” If one takes a wider perspective, the actual emergence of studio pottery as we know it began in the early 17th century in Kyoto, Japan, with people like Nonomura Ninsei. Another premise of Dormer’s that is uniquely European is his view of the role of fine art (painting and sculpture) and applied art (pottery and other crafts):

> “For it seems that the role which fine art has striven to find for itself is the role of enlarging experience and adding to our understanding and knowledge. Very little visual art may be said to have done this, but more than enough this century has done so to make the argument stand up. Applied art, such as pottery, is concerned with the embellishment of a given culture – in its ornament it can reflect society’s values and aesthetic interests by borrowing from the discoveries of fine art, in the latter's role of mapping out the avant-garde.”

Again, one of the most significant developments in the history of ceramic art occurred in the Momoyama period (1573-1615), when Japanese potters, influenced by tea masters, began making work that questioned some of the basic premises about beauty and quality in pottery commonly held at the time. This new work had the same role and impact on society then that Dormer has outlined for the avant-garde now. The repercussions of this early work from the Momoyama period, although not well understood in the West, have, nevertheless, profoundly affected the course of contemporary ceramic art.

One suspects that Dormer, who comes to crafts from a journalistic background is attracted to much of the work now being done because it is visually complicated and allows for the kind of intellectual analysis that, he believes, cannot be sustained with the “simple pot.” In his chapter “The Painted Pot,” Dormer says: “The absence of decoration amounts first of all to an absence of variety and texture.” He goes on to explain that we have forgotten that decoration can contain figures, patterns and symbols that mean something: “In a Della Robbia certainly, and to an extent with Frank Fleming, what we have is a liveliness of surface texture with ornament which we can ‘read.’” What Dormer does not seem to understand is that in many of the “simple pots,” especially those made by potters who have been influenced by Oriental philosophies, the surface qualities of the “undecorated pot” are the decoration. The variety of textures and colors as well as the overall handling of these variables all have meaning to the educated audience, and can be “read” as clearly as one reads the figurative narration of Della Robbia.

While Dormer’s arguments and observations throughout *The New Ceramics* are generally one-sided and underdeveloped, they raise questions that “quasi-traditional potters” (as he refers to anyone not on

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the bandwagon of overt decoration and ornamentation) need to respond to. Statements like “The rejection of the wheel is one way in which ceramists have been able to introduce new thought into pottery” and his belief that a useful comparison to the repetition and predictability of making pottery might be “cooking, gardening, painting a door, or driving an automobile” should cause some potters more than a little consternation and, one would hope, push them into being more assertive about articulating the aims of their work.

Books like *The New Ceramics* are important because they stimulate an intellectual reaction that becomes part of a dialogue so necessary for the development of significant ceramic art. It is unfortunate, however, that the intellectual complacency of many in the field, gives books like Dormer’s an authority they often do not deserve.