

CERAMICS BATTLES ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM AT RECENT CONFERENCE

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The impact of the '60s and '70s on American art training has yet to be fully assessed, and when it is, the results will not be reassuring. They will show a pattern of indifferent teachers (painters doing it for survival) serving institutions that, for a fear of a drop in enrollments, disliked failing anyone and were none too picky about the students' motives for being there in the first place.

– Robert Hughes
Time, June 17, 1985

The ceramic arts in the United States have relied, more than any other field, on the patronage of the university system. Indeed, it is difficult to find a prominent ceramics artist who is not a teacher at some college or university. That the only goal of the thousands of ceramics artists turned out by educational institutions in the '60s and '70s was not to find a gallery in New York but to obtain a prestigious teaching job attests to the field's economic dependence on academia.

The audience for these new teachers' work was not the art-buying public but other ceramics teachers, who might help them obtain better jobs, \$200-a-day workshops, or exhibitions in university galleries. Given financial security by academia, these ceramic teachers were freed from interacting with the buying public, whose tastes ran to traditional ceramics. Desiring the acclaim, notoriety, and stature of "fine artists," they moved to free their medium from the "craft" prejudice and its emphasis on pottery. Pottery, increasingly viewed as irrelevant, became the whipping boy of ceramics teachers who felt that it was the source of the field's exclusion from the fine arts world. By the 1970s "potters" had, by and large, been exorcised from the ivory tower of academia, where the ceramics avant-garde was gearing up to meet the challenge of "art."

Until recently, the National Council for Education in the Ceramic Arts (NCECA), the only professional association of ceramics artists in the United States, was awash with these professors, who, reacting against the theory and discipline advocated by potters like Bernard Leach, assumed an eccentric anti-intellectual, often macho persona. In an ironic twist, ceramics departments in universities across the country became the bastions of anti-intellectualism in the ceramics field. Things are changing, however.

Reduced enrollments and the closing of entire departments have induced a major reassessment of the role of ceramic art education. The recent NCECA conference in San Antonio reflected the field's tentative movement away from the jejune cult of personality so prevalent at past conferences, toward a more intellectual approach to ceramics and art education.

The conference got off to an inauspicious start, however. Robert Hughes, who had originally been scheduled to make the keynote address, was replaced by Philip Yenawine, director of education at the Museum of Modern Art. Conferees were dismayed by Yenawine's unreserved praise for and acceptance of all the recent fine art trends embraced by New York publications and museums. Ceramics artists who feel that the fine arts and institutions such as MOMA dismiss and reject their work on the

arbitrary grounds of material, found it difficult, for example, to accept Yenawine's unbridled enthusiasm for Giuseppe Penone's primitive Dadaist proposition of breathing into a pile of leaves and then casting the resulting void in clay.

Discontent was brought to a head during a panel titled "Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: Educating Artists." Yenawine attempted to moderate potters John Glick, Tom Coleman, and Michael Simon and ceramics sculptors Viola Frey, Ron Nagle, and Patti Warashina. When questioned, few of the panel members seemed to have any ideas about what art education should, could, or might be. Ron Nagle, who sounded like "Fonzie" from an early *Happy Days* episode, said that students should be left alone and that teaching them technique of any kind was useless because by the time they learned it their ideas would be gone. When Yenawine broached the subject of student critiques, Nagle replied that he subscribed to the "Dumbo" school of criticism. If you put a feather behind the students' ears, he explained, and tell them often enough that they can fly, then, like Walt Disney's elephant, they will be able to fly. Nagle's further admission that he believes art education is essentially "trivial" must be embarrassing for Mills College, where he is the chairman of the art department. Even Yenawine's cheery pose was strained by the panel's hostile, anti-intellectual stance. When the subject of writing came up, Patti Warashina cried that it was unfair to ask artists to write and talk about their work. It would be like asking a painter to be a dancer as well as a painter, she said. Yenawine, in his strongest reaction of the evening, suggested that since all of us use and share verbal skills this analogy, perhaps, was not quite accurate. Tom Coleman volunteered that because it took him all day to write a letter, he used the telephone instead, while Nagle commented that he never read the text in art books but only looked at the pictures.

While this kind of prattle is typical fare from what the field refers to as the "grunt and groan" school, it was heartening that it did not permeate the whole conference. The following morning, for example, in a panel titled "Towards a New Curriculum," the moderator, Jim Romberg, director of ceramics at Sun Valley Center, and the panelists – potter Catherine Hiersoux, sculptor Roland Reis, and ceramist Paula Winokur – reacted strongly to the previous evening's panel by rejecting the view espoused by Nagle – that regardless of education, the cream eventually rises to the top – arguing that art education should be viewed as the foundation of artistic development. They repudiated the current curriculum's emphasis on ego over object and its continued reliance on performances by ceramics "stars" on the workshop circuits as being outmoded and no longer viable. They called for a "new literacy," a greater awareness of the critical process, and the positing of ceramic art in an historical context. In another panel, Ward Doubet, a visiting lecturer at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, questioned Garth Clark's application of Greenbergian formalism as a critical cure-all for ceramic art. While he acknowledged it provided an essential vocabulary for discourse, he concluded that ceramic art will not advance by identifying its aims with such a narrow critical outlook. This kind of intellectual probing and questioning in public of established figures in the field is a healthy sign and shows there is change in the wind. It is too early yet, however, to tell whether the inveterate grunt and groaners in NCECA will seek to impede this progressive attitude or will join in the dialogue.

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The ceramic arts have a long and varied history that is viewed by some in the field as a source of inspiration and by others as an impediment to their search for “originality.” The direction of contemporary American ceramic art may well depend on which of these two perspectives succeeds in establishing its influence over the field in general. The immediate question, though, is whether ceramics, in a search for acceptance by the more celebrated world of fine art, will surrender its identity or insist that the fine arts come to accept it within its own context. Herbert Read, in *The Meaning of Art*, observed that ceramic art “... is so fundamental, so bound up with the elementary needs of civilization, that national ethos must find its expression in this medium. Judge the art of a country, judge the fineness of its sensibility, by its pottery; it is a sure touchstone.” Ceramists who have not discarded the rich history of ceramic art can provide those in the fine arts who still believe in connoisseurship and the traditional modes of art making with a viable alternative to the fine arts establishment’s current obsession with, in Robert Hughes’ words, “glitz, camp, childishness and art as fashion.”