

r o b b a r n a r d e s s a y s

BYRON TEMPLE – A ROMANTIC PRAGMATIST

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My pots spring directly from life and they serve life, not occupying a place in a glass case.

– Byron Temple

Byron Temple was probably the most enigmatic American potter since the end of World War II and both his life and career were full of contradictions. He had, for example, solo exhibitions in London, Madrid, Tokyo, Sydney, Washington and New York as well museum exhibitions at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the New Jersey State Museum, and the Harrison Museum of Art, yet there has been no major exhibition of his work at either the American Crafts Museum or the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery. He moved to New York in 1951 at the rise of the New York School of Painting's prominence. He discovered DeKooning and Modrian and was a student member of MOMA, a hangout for he and his friends, yet he never considered the making of pottery as some sort of inferior calling. Most of his career he made tableware, but chose to market his work in upscale design shops in New York rather than typical craft venues like crafts fairs. He was a shy person, almost solitary, but was known for rather forcefully speaking his mind when he felt the subject warranted it. He was never interested in a full time position in academia, but loved teaching. He taught, for example, at numerous universities in the United States including Swarthmore, the Pratt Institute, and the Philadelphia College of Art, and traveled throughout the United States, as well England, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Finland, Sweden, Holland, Hungary and Spain, giving workshops. He had a keen business sense that was rivaled only by his rather tender, romantic view of life.

As a person, my roots are agrarian and Quaker (Indiana); a product of the depression, a teenager of "The Last Picture Show".

– Byron Temple

Temple was born in Centerville, Indiana in 1933 to a farming family. If you have ever seen the movie *Hoosiers* starring Gene Hackman, you can get a feel for the landscape and culture that spawned Temple. It was filmed in Centerville at the high school where he graduated in a class of fewer than thirty people. He was raised, he proudly said when asked, on a pig farm where hard work was a necessity for survival. His farm experience, which taught him that you and your hard work alone were what allowed you to survive in the world was to have a profound effect on his sense of discipline and his work ethic as a potter. It was in high school that he first was able to play with clay. There were no wheels but he tried hand building. He had always been fascinated with the crocks that his family used for storage. His grandfather would show him the throwing rings and describe how the potter had spun clay on a wheel to make them. That was not his only recollection of handmade things, his grandmother made his and his brother's shirts and he remembered their feel compared that of their store bought trousers. After he graduated from high school, Temple decided to attend Ball State where his aunt was dean of women. It was there that he was first introduced to the pottery wheel. His teacher, Marvin Reichle and his wife Elsa were kind and giving people who would often have him over for dinner. They served their meals on handmade plates, which greatly impressed Temple. It was in that year at Ball State that he decided that he wanted to be a potter and make tableware. Reichle, however, out of genuine concern for his welfare,

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tried to discourage him because he didn't think Temple could make a living doing handmade pottery. There simply was no one, at that time, doing what he wanted to do, Reichle told him. He offered his help in getting Temple accepted to Alfred, Reichle's alma mater, where they taught industrial production. Temple, though, was stubborn. His discovery, Bernard Leach's *A Potters Book* with its romantic account of a potter's life, greatly influenced his decision. He was not, however, totally reliant on Leach's portrait of that life, when he was growing up, there were two widows living on either side of his family farm, one made her living doing hand woven rugs while the other widow did ceramic figurines. He felt that if they could survive by making a living with their hands in a male oriented agrarian society then he certainly could. His approach was one of romantic pragmatism.

In 1953 He moved to New York City to study at the Brooklyn Museum School under Hui, Ka-Kwong. During his first summer there he went to Haystack Mountain School where he met Jack Lenor Larsen and Anni Albers, both of who were making their livelihood from their work. At the end of the summer Larsen offered him a job. It was while working for Larsen that Temple learned the intricacies of the business and marketing side of craft. He took orders, kept schedules and supervised shipments for Larsen. In 1955 he was drafted into the Army and stationed in Germany as an MP. He eventually found the base's craft shop, which had a heavy wooden kick wheel. He bought German clay and had a friend translate the German names of chemicals for him so that he could make glaze. It was while he was overseas in the Army that he made his first visit to the Leach pottery in St. Ives. He didn't see Leach or talk to anyone at the pottery; he just remembered that he felt compelled to make the trip. After his discharge in 1957 he returned to work for Larsen, but soon moved to Chicago where he took a position at the Art Institute of Chicago as a technician in the ceramics department and worked part-time as an elevator operator. His dream was still to make production pottery, but felt he needed more training and experience. He decided to write Leach seeking an apprenticeship. Leach replied saying that he was preparing for a trip to the United States to conduct workshops and invited Temple to Ann Arbor, Michigan where he was doing a workshop at the University of Michigan. Temple boarded a Greyhound bus for Ann Arbor with a bag of pots. When he arrived he was told the workshop was only for enrolled students and was asked to leave. Eventually he caught up with Leach at his hotel and after some discussion he was accepted as an apprentice thrower at the Leach pottery.

Temple arrived at St. Ives in 1959. The years he was to spend at the Leach pottery would, in some ways, be the most important years of his professional life. There were, of course, many significant events throughout his life, but those years at St. Ives defined and shaped everything that came after. Temple thrived on the pottery's disciplined work routines and enjoyed its rhythm, the making, glazing and firing cycles and described his time there as an incredible physical experience. Leach, who was at the pottery most every day during Temple's stay, gave him numerous books to read on the history of pottery and held informal discussions around the large fireplace about pottery and its role in culture. Leach was, Temple said, totally selfless when it came to teaching. He was always available and would often sit for hours arguing with the apprentices about the placement of a handle. Leach wrote an article entitled "Ceramics – Now the Best Art Buy," for the American magazine *House Beautiful* during Temple's stay at St. Ives. It is of particular interest because it gives us insight to what Leach was think-

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ing during that period. In it he argued that, “Pots, like all other forms of art, are human expressions. Pleasure, pain, or indifference before them depends upon their natures, and their natures are inevitably projections of the minds of their creators. It is important to remember that, although pottery is made to be used, this fact in no wise simplifies the problem of artistic expression.” The discussions with Leach around the fireplace about ideas like the one just quoted, helped Temple clarify his thoughts about what kind of feeling he wanted from pottery and how to go about achieving it. Life at the pottery, though, was not entirely rosy. Temple found it totally unlike the idyllic life portrayal in the *A Potter’s Book*. There were 12 throwers about half from the continent and the other half local. Temple was the only American. He had learned in the Army how to take care of himself and get along with others but was unprepared for the ego clashes and bickering that took place daily. He once recalled, somewhat humorously, an occasion when Bill Marshall chased him around the pottery with a hammer. St. Ives was the crucible where Temple’s ideas and skills were forged.

“I don’t like pots that are derivative.” – Byron Temple

One of the things that Temple realized halfway through his apprenticeship was that he did not want to make Leach’s style of pottery. Most of the apprentices seemed intent on either remaking the Song Dynasty pots of which Leach was so fond, or copying Hamada’s work. Temple did not want to rehash Leach’s interpretation of Song vases or imitate Hamada’s work, not because he did not find any it beautiful, but because it represented to him nostalgia for the past and a vision that was not his. He wanted to make work that was distinctly his own and that spoke of his values and concerns. When much later in his career, he was asked how he knew his pottery was “his own”; he replied that throughout his travels in Europe and the Orient, he had not seen any work that looked like his in any of the museums he had visited. This is an important insight into Temple’s creative genius. It requires little skill or imagination to copy an Iga vase from the Momoyama period, a Hamada pot, or a Song dynasty vase and pass it off as “new” to a culture that has never seen that kind of work before. Temple, however, did not merely design and create pottery that “looked” new; he constantly tested his ideas and forms against the entire history of pottery.

These ideas were still in gestation when he left the Leach pottery in 1962. His apprenticeship concluded Temple moved to London where he came across some pots that intrigued him. They were made by Colin Pearson, who lived, about 30 minutes outside London in Aylesford. Temple went to visit and convinced Pearson to take him on. Pearson was an intellectual and a respectful renegade who was extraordinarily curious. He also was unwilling to be bound by the Leach approach to pottery making. Philip Barlow, an apprentice of Pearson’s in 1977 and later a friend of Temple, believes that both potters shared a joy and excitement at the possibilities that clay presented. Even though they understood the Leach tradition, which embraced the rigor of repetition as a way of intimately understanding a given shape, they chose, for the most part, to go off on a tangent to it. Barlow also says that Pearson understood better than anyone at the time how the viewer’s eye moved and how important it was to have places for the eye to rest as well as places of activity. There was never an unintended consequence, nothing left to chance, everything done to a pot was considered. Barlow sees that same approach in

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Temple's work. It is probably seen at its best in the "tie boxes" that Temple started making in the late 1970s. The clay is unadorned, often a dark saggar fired body, but sometimes a very lightly salt fired porcelain. The line of the jar's silhouette is straight, and clean, but taut, the lid is often just a cap that conforms to the jar's contour and has no handle. The whole shape is austere and minimalist except for the small lugs through which Temple has run a string that ties over the lid and secures it. The other point of interest that Temple provided was his stamp, which is almost always centered on the body of the piece. A variation on the tie box is a porcelain tea jar, again straight sided with a dark blue/black band on the shoulder and a lid that is recessed into the jar. The handle on the lid is a silver ring and the small delicate lugs on the shoulder of the jar hold a braided silver cord. There is a contained energy in these pieces and a sophistication in conception and execution that holds our interest and continues to satisfy us long after our initial confrontation.

"Essentially I have no competition in this country from hand potters, because most American potters are uninterested in making fifty pots alike...especially if a machine can do it."

– Byron Temple

Temple returned to the United States in 1962 and applied, with letters of recommendation from Leach, to graduate school at Alfred and Cranbrook but was rejected. Something he later viewed as a blessing in disguise. He heard about a situation in Galena, Illinois and with a loan from an old friend who had come into some money, set up his first pottery there. He only stayed for 10 months when he heard of a craft "village" that was being put together in New Hope, Pennsylvania and made the move east to be part of that. He was there only about a year when the venture folded and he crossed the Delaware River to Lambertville where he found an old brick carriage house without electricity or running water, it was perfect. He bought it and set up the pottery of which he had always dreamed. He was to stay in Lambertville for almost thirty years. He had always been fascinated with Scandinavian design and now he used some aspects of that influence as a point of departure for his new work. He kept from his Leach training the idea that his designs had to be produced in volume and simple enough for apprentices to reproduce. In those early years he produced anywhere from five to ten thousand pieces a year. He would decide on a line of tableware that met both his design standards – that were satisfying aesthetically – and that could be reproduced quickly without compromising any of the character of the pots. He often left large sections of bare clay showing and always tried to leave traces of the process of making exposed. Nothing had a turned foot and the only decoration was overlapping glazes. He was indifferent to brush decoration, saying that the raw clay was its own decoration. He also felt that there was a tendency among potters to become involved in the search for breathtaking glazes that distracted the viewer from what Temple saw as basically weak forms. Once he decided on a line of work, he would produce a catalog, sometimes it would take the form of a large poster, other times an accordion folded brochure. He put as much thought into the design of the catalog as he did the pots. One of the other subjects besides pottery that had interested him in high school was lettering and for a period in the early '50s, while he was living in New York, he painted signs to make a living. It was in his catalogs that Temple's graphic sense came to the forefront. He used the catalogs not only to focus attention on his work, but also to create a milieu for it. Every postcard, brochure and catalog, from Temple spoke to his

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sense of being modern, part of his time and part of his culture. As in his work, nothing was left to chance; everything was considered.

He adopted this strategy of selling by catalog after his experiences at the early craft fairs. He was one of the founding members of the American Craft Council's (ACC) Fair at Demarest. He came away from that experience feeling that many of the potters at the fair, who were employed as full-time instructors within the university system, looked at his cups and saucers and other tableware as passé and without any artistic merit. Rose Slivka, the editor of *Craft Horizons*, had only recently published in *Craft Horizons* her seminal article "The New Ceramic Presence" in which she argued that function should be discarded in favor of expressive interests and that clay should be treated like paint. Modern craft, as we have come to know it in the United States, was barely ten years old when Slivka's article was published. Temple felt as if the rug had been pulled out from under him. Now, suddenly, he was seen as anachronistic, a maker of objects that could no longer lay any serious claim to cultural importance. It was ironic, however, that it was his own field and not the fine arts that marginalized his work. He had been a friend with the British sculptors John Milne and Barbara Hepworth while he had lived in St. Ives and both were sympathetic to his ideas. When he moved to New Hope he met the modern dancer and choreographer Jose Limon. Temple was teaching at Pratt and Limon was the head of dance at Julliard and they would carpool into New York together. Limon would talk about how movement in dance could convey feeling and meaning, an idea that was completely new to Temple. Limon also made the analogy to pottery and how its movement on the potter's wheel could be used to create the same kind of feeling within a given form. Limon, Temple said, never consider pottery an inferior expression, below that of dance or painting. The modernist paradigm of the artist as a loner, a renegade working outside the mainstream of his discipline and at odds with the established views of the culture of his times is an image that does not, at first spring, to mind when one looks at Temple's career, but as time would show, it is a model that fits extremely well.

"Some consumers of my clay objects consider that they are art; others merely handmade pots for the kitchen table. In our mechanized and depersonalized society I am not a craftsman of necessity. I cater only to a small segment of our society. A craftsman of necessity to a few; maker not of palace objects."
– Byron Temple

Temple decided to look for a new audience rather than abandon his ideas and cater to the demands of the craft fair audiences. He began to actively seek out those who wanted what he wanted. His use of catalogs was one strategy he developed, but he also directly approached shops and stores like Neiman Marcus and Bloomingdale's in New York, who normally did not handle handmade pottery. His best account was a shop that specialized in modern design on the upper east side of Manhattan called Sointu. He had walked by it on a number of occasions and loved its sensibility. It contained only industrially produced objects, but he decided to approach the owner anyway. He made an appointment and brought in samples of work from his catalog. The owner liked the clean, spare feeling of the work and how it stood up next to his industrial designed objects and agreed to include it. He advertised Temple's work heavily in design, fashion and home publications creating a new audience entirely outside of the craft world. Like so many other instances in his career, Temple had the courage to act on his intuition.

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In December of 1971 Temple was in a serious automobile accident that left him in full body cast for three months. He began reflecting about where he wanted to go with his work. His goal of becoming a self-sufficient potter had been realized. He now wanted to explore new shapes, and firing techniques, to add to his oeuvre. He had just begun to salt fire and that was his first chance to get away from his standard ware. He started thinking about how he could simplify his already Spartan life and work towards becoming completely solvent. After his recovery he developed new lines of work, one was a porcelain dinner set and the other was a stoneware dinner set with temmoku glaze. Both were more sophisticated, the porcelain dinner set had new handles on the bowls and thick rounded rims. The cup was now taller and more “casually” thrown. The temmoku cup had a trimmed foot and its saucer had an indented space to receive it. In 1978 he was contacted by Janet Leach and asked if he would return to St. Ives and take over running the Leach pottery. Leach, who was blind, had separated from Janet and had moved into a flat in St. Ives that overlooked Porthmeor Beach. Temple would spend four or five evenings a week with Leach, reading to him and talking about pottery. Temple had always thought of the cup and saucer as his trademark and while at St. Ives he worked on developing a new cup and saucer for the line of standard ware. He was quite proud that Leach accepted it even, he recalled with a hint of laughter, if Leach was blind at the time. When Leach passed away in May of 1979 Temple moved again to Aylesford to work at Colin Pearson's studio. He had applied for and received membership in Britain's Craftsman Potters Association and was also teaching at Middlesex Polytechnic Institute north of London. He was just beginning to work on some of his new ideas for one of a kind pots and start to blend aspects of that work with his tableware. It was a bumpy time and in a letter to Sarah Bodine, dated Sunday 15 July/Aylesford 1979, he wrote about his difficulties. “I am finding and just now coming to terms with the fact that my new work sits atop a fence of function (not suitable for the UK Leach purists) and not ‘out’ enough for those over here wanting Calif funk ten years after!” In that same letter he speaks about various job offers to teach, but never seems to focus on them, he was, as always, pre-occupied with his work.

When he returned to Lambertville in 1980, he continued his line of tableware, but also began to make more one of a kind pieces. To spend time on this new work meant that he had to cut expenses, so he moved into the upstairs of the Swan St. studio. He started having more solo exhibitions of his work in the 1980s, at least one a year and sometimes as many as four a year. The transition that he had envisioned, while recovering from his accident in 1971, was beginning to take place. In 1989 he made his first trip to Japan. He spent the summer in Tokoname working and looking at pots. In 1990 he was awarded a Fellowship from the National Endowments for the Arts. He was finally solvent and made the decision to move to Louisville. He found that he wanted to work alone; he was working more slowly now, thinking more about every piece and no longer wanted the responsibility of overseeing apprentices and the grueling demands of producing a line of work. He did not reject those earlier years; he said he loved making all those pots. He saw it as an evolutionary process and said that he did not think he could have ever had made his new work without having done all that earlier production work.

He also liked traveling and teaching and now had more opportunities to do workshops. He got rid of a lot of books and pots, put his place in Lambertville up for sale and moved into a detached apartment

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owned by a childhood friend in Louisville. He pared his life down to its essence in the same way he pared down his pots, nothing extraneous, nothing to get in the way, always focused and to the point. He rented a studio across the river in Indiana from a young potter and renewed his acquaintance with Gil Stengil, who now had a wood kiln in Indiana. Stengil asked Temple if he would like to fire with him and after looking at the kind of firings Stengil was doing, Temple began a series of work that he felt would best suit that particular kind of firing. Much of the 1990s were consumed with traveling; He spent three months in Australia and New Zealand in 1991 and six months in New Zealand in 1994. In 1995 he was invited to work at the European Ceramics Work Centre in Holland and in 1996 he was invited to be a visiting artist at the Shigaraki Ceramic Park in Shigaraki, Japan.

“My solution is not to make history roll backward as has been attempted, but go forward. Old fashioned craftsmanship is not copying (historical) forms but lies in a profound comprehension of the way in which they were created; a deep preoccupation with functional utility, a respectful fidelity to the requirements of the material and a lively desire to express the collective sensitivity of society.”

– Byron Temple

The key to understanding Temple's work is to appreciate what it means to work within a system or set of ideas while at the same time trying to expand the framework that holds that system together. Temple saw pottery as a particular form of expression. It is not that he thought that pottery was better or morally superior to either the post-modern vessel or ceramic sculpture, which dominated the modern craft scene throughout his career. They were merely different, like apples and oranges, not to be compared in the same way. It was not only his insistence on making useful pottery, but also his reductive approach to work; his desire to pare a work down until all that was left was pure feeling, that rankled his critics and put him at odds with the modern craft movement. The main reason he rejected the modern craft's embrace of the “art for art's sake” argument was that it summarily dismissed pottery from consideration as an idiom of artistic expression in its own right. Temple had found pottery through its usefulness and his life was changed forever because of that encounter. Pottery's connection with our physical existence was a never-ending source of inspiration to Temple. Octavio Paz wrote in the essay “Seeing and Using: Art and Craftsmanship”, “The handmade object does not charm us simply because of its usefulness. It lives in complicity with our senses, and that is why it is so hard to get rid of it – it is like throwing and old friend out of the house.” Temple's insistence on making domestic ware – work for other human beings to use and his struggle to inject into those objects a sense of mystery and life is, ultimately, what make his work so important. It comforts us and reminds us of what it means to be human.

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