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MYSTERY AND THE ART EXPERIENCE

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"If mystery is manifest through things, the universe becomes as it were, a holy picture. You are always addressing the transcendent mystery through the conditions of the actual world."¹

– Joseph Campbell

We human beings are burdened with self-awareness and with that comes a longing to know why we are here and the purpose of our life. Religion and new age psychology both provide seemingly reasonable answers to these questions, but still this sense of mystery about our nature remains as strong in us as it was in our ancestors thousands of years ago before recorded history. How do we know this, because those ancient peoples left behind compelling objects that eloquently addressed these questions. Objects that still are able to create, for those who are sensitive to it, the kind of transcendental moment often referred to as the art experience. I believe that a key aspect of the art experience is a sense of mystery. It is the senses of mystery, for example, that these old objects possess, that give them the ability to connect with that part of us struggling to come to grips with the nature of our own existence. And it is what makes them resonate as strongly today as they did when they were made. Now the kind of mystery I am alluding to has nothing to do with the object being rare or culturally unknown. Work that is truly mysterious maintains its power even after we come to know its provenance. The kind of mystery I am speaking of poses questions rather giving us answers, it is not old or new, beautiful or ugly, clever or dumb, and is unresolved yet somehow seems perfect. It points to what is not known, and causes us to reflect on that ultimate mystery of what it means to be human.

Of course, when we talk about mystery, the question arises, is it an essential or even a desirable element in this modern age. Our immediate access to unprecedented amounts information has caused culture to sometimes look on those not having the facts about every manner of thing as lazy and lacking intelligence, curiosity and creativity. Even the field of art is caught up in this information frenzy. Postmodern art, for example, seems increasingly to be about itself. Unless an artist stays up with all the current names and trends (and by this I mean their work reflects them) then he or she runs the risk of being dismissed as a second rate, provincial artist. It is the known and recognized that is celebrated. This has led to the pronounced tendency in the arts for artists to measure their success in the field by their celebrity status. In the name, ironically of "bridging the gap between art and life" postmodern art objects have become non-aesthetic, conceptual works whose main purpose seems to be to gain notoriety and commercial reward for its maker. It is obvious that the idea of art as a kind of transcendental experience is not the view of art that is commonly held at this moment in postmodern art. Donald Kuspit in his book, *The End of Art*, says; "What the artist always fears has become reality in the social phenomenon called postmodern postart. It is the end of art as it has existed from the prehistoric caves to the Rothko Chapel. It certainly no longer exists in sacred space, but on the street, and there is nothing sacred about it because it's made for the street crowd."²

We in the ceramics field are not immune to this trend. However, we still believe, at least to some degree, in the idea of aesthetic beauty. Unfortunately, our idea of aesthetic beauty has a tendency to

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manifest itself within the narrow confines of taste. Taste by definition deals with the known and when it is used as our measuring stick for aesthetic beauty, the pleasure we derive from an object comes not from its sense of mystery but rather from ones ability to identify the characteristics that cause it to fit within the parameters of ones taste. For example, the proponents of “American mingei” have their own frames of reference for what they believe are the qualities of good ceramic art and have fashioned a kind of philosophy that defines those characteristics. While the advocates of “modern ceramics” have an entirely different set of criteria that ceramic works must possess in order to be relevant in contemporary culture and have created their own jargon to argue the primacy of their position in culture. Both of these constructs are calculated attempts by ceramics artists to satisfy their specific audience.

Mystery and the art experience though, cannot be easily processed or planned; in fact its nature resists any attempts at formularizing it or the intellectual codification of the aspects of its existence. For example, when a person first has an art experience, it usually comes to them unexpected. They may be in a museum looking at painting, sculpture, pottery or photographs, when suddenly an object seizes them and creates a kind of mental confusion. They may be strongly drawn to it, for example, when in fact they thought they would or should detest it. It unexpectedly causes them to transcend their prejudices and taste and somehow makes the world seem a larger and a more beautiful place to inhabit, a place where suddenly all things seem possible. Their fears and worries vanish and they leave feeling like they are walking on air. At least, that is how it happened to me. This intense experience is fleeting though and it is the desire to re-experience it that causes people to seek out art whenever and wherever they can find it. I believe that artists are people more sensitive to this experience than others and that they cannot wait for someone or someplace to provide that next experience for them, and they are willing to spend their entire existence struggling to create it for themselves.

Not only is this notion of a transcendental art experience highly suspect to some, but, when I suggest that it may be brought on by an object as mundane as a cup, the level of skepticism is even higher. The reason some find it difficult to believe that a piece of pottery can deliver this experience is twofold; first they have lived with these common objects so long that they have ceased to see them as mysterious, as being capable of carrying any higher meaning and second; as a culture, we generally do not consider the physical or tactile aspects of a ceramic object – an integral component of a useful object – as possessing any kind of aesthetic expression. One of the interesting things about the rejection of pottery by postmodern art as being unworthy of the moniker “art” is that this rejection coincides with the rejection by postmodern art of the very idea of any kind of art experience. The tendency of one who has experienced this profound and life altering experience with a piece pottery – one that I have indulged in to some degree – is to try to convince others of its existence by making rational intellectual arguments that outline how a cup, for example, has the potential to produce such powerful feelings. I have learned though that people cannot be convinced by intellectual arguments that a cup or bowl can deliver the intense feelings associated with the art experience. One only learns of it by having it happen to them.

The question is, how does a potter transform a cup from being a ordinary object into one of mystery that is capable of transporting us from our mundane circumstances to an inner world where we are

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able, no matter how briefly, to experience a moment of clarity? First of all, I do not believe one can make work of this nature unless one has had the kind of life altering experience I am speaking about. One cannot make a cup that has the kind of mystery Joseph Campbell alludes to unless one has had an object as “ordinary” as a cup or bowl change the direction of their life. Moreover, the work has to spring from the core of ones being, out of feelings about, and ones relationship with, the world in which they live. I don’t believe, for example, that one can intellectually structure work or rely purely on technical skills to realize objects that cause such a profound experience. Nor do I believe that can one make work with that kind of emotional resonance if one is constantly thinking about praise from ones peer group, audience or the monetary rewards of fame and notoriety. It must be done for oneself. This, of course, applies to any serious or meaningful endeavor. In a talk to Harvard law students in 1886, for example, the 19th century American philosopher and Supreme Court Justice Olivier Wendell Holmes, Jr. eloquently addressed this point:

“Only when you have worked alone – when you have felt around you a black gulf of solitude more isolating than that which surrounds the dying man, and in hope and despair, have trusted to your own unshaken will – then only will you have achieved.” ³

To artists who make art because they need and value this art experience more than anything else in life, art-making is a scared act that is both consuming and extraordinarily rigorous. They measure their success by their ability to create work that gives them that heightened sense of awareness, work that challenges and expands their view of the world and in doing so refreshes them with a renewed sense of reality. Ceramic artists, indeed all artists, who have had their lives changed by the sense of mystery that exists in great art, recognize that the ridiculous prejudices against the form an object takes or the material it is made of, whether it is a clay cup, marks of pigment on cloth or an assemblage of steel, wood or stone have little to do with the ability of an object to, as Campbell said, “address the transcendent mystery”. Throughout human history peoples have struggled using all manners of form and material to make objects that do precisely that. They engaged in this activity for the same reasons we do now, because it brings joy and meaning to life and makes us better human beings.

References:

1. Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myths*, Doubleday, 1958.
2. Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.
3. Louis Menard, *The Metaphysical Club*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2001.