Functional Pottery

Form and Aesthetic in Pots of Purpose

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To lovers of pots, whomever they may be

Preface

Making pottery is a timeless occupation, and the best of pots through the ages have a quality of timelessness about them that transcends chronological and cultural boundaries. Their appeal is universal. The essence of form, the movement of a brush, the quality of surface, the hidden meanings, and the integration with mankind's daily existence over several thousand years, all add to the significance of the art.

This book is about pots of purpose—their forms, meanings, and functions. I hope that it will stimulate new vigor and understanding into the process of making pots for use. It is not a history book, although approximately a quarter of it is given to historical concerns. It is not a design book, although a similar space is concerned with design. It is not a "how to" book, although almost half of it does concern this aspect. It is also not a contemporary this-is-the-state-of-the-art-of-functional-pottery book, although this is included too. It is a book that concerns the development, design, and making of utilitarian pottery, and the thought processes behind it. It is primarily a "why to" book that attempts to draw together the many diverse approaches to making domestic, functional, or utilitarian pottery. It is about a process of discovery.

This book is, in effect, a compilation of essays, arranged in four parts, each having its own introduction. The concerns of the parts are: (1) historical, cultural, and ethnic variations; (2) form, growth, and design; (3) practical and analytical approaches for the working potter; and (4) a view of eight contemporary clayworkers.

There has been little written on the art of making functional pottery, perhaps because in the past making utilitarian wares has largely been viewed as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. In the contemporary art arena, pottery has been looked at as the poor cousin to painting and sculpture, in much the same way that the graphic arts once were viewed. Pottery is neither painting nor sculpture, although it has elements of both. It is significant that in many of the world's languages there is no word for *art*. Art is the result which comes from the activity known as *craft*. There may be good art or bad art, the quality being largely dependent on the combination of skill, understanding, emotion, and intent.

Pottery has concerns that are quite different from most other media of expression. First is its process of transformation from maleable mud to hard ceramic. Second is its associations with the rigors of daily life and the rituals of religious life. Third is in its multiplicity of uses. Fourth is in the infinite variety of form that may be created. Fifth is in its range of technical variation, giving a possibility of expression that is at least equal to all of the variants of painting and graphics, from watercolor to oils, and from etching to photo-lithography. And lastly, the degree of skill that is needed

to bring all these concerns to the focal point of a finely made piece of work.

In his book *The Lesser Life,* William Morris, the great nineteenth-century designer-craftsman says:

> *I should say that the making of ugly pottery was one of the most remarkable inventions of civilization.*

He was talking about the visual monstrosities of the Victorian (nineteenth century) period of industrial pottery production. This period of questionable aesthetics heavily influenced North American art pottery of the early twentieth century. A hundred years after the Victorians, we still have a remarkable abundance of visual pollution all around us.

In compiling the illustrations and writing this book, it is my hope that potters might be both stimulated by, and take courage from, the past in the search for an individual style, and to look at the making of pottery with fresh vision. Through looking at objects from the past, finding out a little of their genesis and the needs of their makers, we may establish the similarities and differences of thought between those cultures that we are attracted to and our own work. Through an awareness of form and the forces that both create and control it and its proportions, we may find the distinct direction that each individual potter must travel. Through an analysis of use and usefulness, we may establish the parameters that help us to produce work that satisfies needs. And through a knowledge of the paths of others we may establish an individual identity for ourselves.

Pottery is an art form with its roots based in science. In his collection of essays, "The Visionary Eye," Jacob Bronowski observed the following:

> *All created works, in science and in art, are extensions into new realms. All of them must conform both to the universal experience of mankind, and to the private experiences of each man. The work of science or of art moves us profoundly, in mind and in emotion, when it matches our experience and at the same time points beyond it. This is the meaning of truth that art and science share; and it is more important than the differences in factual content which divide them.*

Pottery is undoubtedly the most scientifically based art form, and at the same time one of the most universal experiences of mankind. Makers of pottery for use are part of a continuum from man's earliest experiences in fired clay in a search for usefulness, truth, and beauty. In the words of the poet, John Keats:

> *Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all*
> *Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

Historically, pots were seldom made with specific considerations or analysis of how they might best perform their duties. However, since the early Twentieth Century edict of Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus movement that "form follows function," both potter and public have become much more aware of how things work most efficiently through the study of ergonomics. In the short term, this will probably affect how the work suits the marketplace. In the long term, the potter must decide whether to make pots to suit specific functions, or to find, or allow the buyers of his or her work to find, functions to suit the pots that he or she wishes to make. In reality, most of us probably do a little of both.

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To all who have shared in this gestation, my sincere thanks.

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Part One

Made to be Used

Opposite:
From Jost Amman and Hans Sachs, *Eygentliche Beschreibung Aller Stände auff Erden* [*The Book of Trades*]
(Frankfurt am Main: Sigmund Feyerabend, 1568.

INTRODUCTION

Part One is a short exploration of the growth, development, and change in utilitarian or domestic pottery made throughout history. It relates particularly to form, function, and detail. It is heavily illustrated with photographs and drawings of pots from a variety of cultures. In the space available, it is impossible to do more than give a taste of, and hopefully whet the appetite for, the incredible wealth of historical pottery that graces the museums of the world. I have selected photographs of objects which emphasize the intent of this book. They are mainly arranged in groups which focus on form and details: spouts, handles, feet, and lids. They come from a wide geographical range, but by no means can be thought of as all-encompassing. Each is a fine example of a specific style of work which will, I hope, prompt the reader to look further into the styles he or she is most attracted to.

This book is not intended to be a chronological survey, rather an outline of what pots are and what they do. The forms of functional pottery through history may be used as a reference for potters of today to learn from and draw from to produce new work, as potters of the past often did. Each major culture had its own chronological growth and history, often in competition and contemporary with other cultures. These cultures were independent on one another prior to the development of trade routes around the Mediterranean Sea, through the Middle East to the Orient, and among various areas of the Orient. Later, they were to become linked through trade, war, religion, and the migration of peoples from one area to another.

Since the beginning of the current craft revival in the 1950s, clayworkers seem to have had a huge ambivalence toward the study of ceramic history. One large segment has been deeply concerned with understanding the paths that have been trodden from the beginning of pottery making, stepping back, as it were, in order to go forward. Another large segment of the clayworking community tends to remove itself from and ignore all that has gone before. This group attempts to live and create in a vacuum, where the medium is the only thing that matters and contact with things past is at best irrelevant, and at worst counter-productive and an infringement on personal growth. Total isolation from all outside stimulus is virtually impossible, since the nature of the artist's imagination is to get ideas and concepts from a variety of sources, no matter how unlikely or trivial they may seem to anyone else. The mundane processes of daily living bring one into contact with things to cook in, eat and drink from, wash or urinate in; things that can definitely form object images in our minds, leading to a potentially wide source of inspiration for future development. The familiarity that we may have with everyday household objects can easily lead to further visions. All forms of functional object have developed and changed throughout history, as new needs or fashions came into being, requiring different objects to suit different purposes. Mankind has always learned from his past; not always very well, one has to admit, but he has used the past to forge new tracks into the unknown.

The history of pottery making goes back at least 8000 years, to Neolithic times, when the nomadic hunter settled to the life of crop farming and animal husbandry. Exactly where and when pottery making first developed nobody can be quite sure. What is most likely is that it developed spontaneously in different places during roughly the same period of time. Ceramic history could be a great deal older than what is currently accepted. Recent finds in Australia claim archaeological remains containing rudimentary ceramics dating back

30,000 years. The area usually credited with being the cradle of civilization, that of the Mesopotamian basin in the Middle East, is also credited with having the first pottery-making cultures. Japan possibly has a ceramic history at least as long as any in the Middle East. One recurring fact is that, in what are often labelled primitive cultures, the quality of claywork and its decoration had become exceptionally well-made and sophisticated at such an early period in man's cultural history. Regardless of where the actual first developments took place, the rudimentary forms from early pottery-making cultures also have an astonishing similarity.

Archaeologists generally agree that, like most of mankind's major discoveries, the earliest pottery probably developed by accident. There are two basic theories of development. It may have come from observations of the way the earth became baked around firepits, with the subsequent experimentation of making and firing pinched clay pots. On the other hand, it may have come from the accidental burning of clay-lined baskets. Baskets were the original storage containers. They were made from grasses, reeds, roots, or soft, pliable tree branches, primarily for carrying and storing grain and seeds, the major part of the diet at that time. Baskets are anything but impervious to the loss of small seeds, which easily find their way through the basket weave. After a while inner coatings of clay were probably smeared into the baskets to prevent loss. Some of these mud-lined baskets were possibly accidentally burnt, leaving a fired clay lining. Pottery could even have developed from the process of wrapping foods in a skin of clay and placing them in the embers of a fire, or on heated rocks, to cook. This method was common among the Indians of North America, and may also have been the precursor of the common cooking pot. From these simple beginnings has developed an art form which has served mankind for thousands of years, for his daily needs from birth to the grave, and beyond. Throughout man's pottery-making history he has developed a huge repertoire of shapes and surfaces to fill his many needs. This book is mainly concerned with those needs, and of the development of the shapes and details which were made to fill them.

1

Origins

Clay is one of the earth's most abundant raw materials. It is constantly developing from the decomposition of certain igneous rocks. The earth's crust, to a depth of at least four miles, is primarily composed of igneous rocks, which decay and break down as they become exposed to weather conditions. Clay is in fact forming more quickly than it is being used. Since it is a common material over most of the earth's surface, pottery making probably emerged in sporadic developments, quite isolated from one another.

Throughout the civilized history of mankind, after the gradual change from nomadic hunter and gatherer to settled farmer and animal breeder, clay has probably been the most consistently used material for improving the quality of life. Ceramic objects made since Neolithic times have included figurines and sculptures; lamps; bricks of all kinds; walls; roofing; flooring and decorative tiles; granaries; feeding troughs; chimney pots; pot stands; ovens; kilns; tannurs; beads; sickles; hoes; wall hooks; molds for foods; molds for pots and figures; molds for metallurgy; crucibles; waterwheel jars; drains; dovecotes; beehives; churns; latrines; sling stones; spitholders for cooking; potter's wheels; pipes for smoking; pipes for water, irrigation, and sewage; cuneiform writing tablets; ostraca; execration figures and bowls; jar stamps; ossuaries; coffins; libation vessels; tax measures; tokens as coin substitutes; medical pastilles; gaming pieces; toilets and wash basins; and an endless variety of vessels.

Looking at pottery in museums, or as illustrations in books, one can't help but be amazed by the huge and subtle diversity of forms that man has molded clay into, for a wide variety of possible uses. Beyond the natural instincts of enjoying the purely manipulative quality of the material, and the function which is required of the formed objects, ceramic form has been influenced and altered by many factors and forces.

Pottery developed as a response to the needs of mankind. Pots became containers and dispensers: pots of purpose. The forms that they took developed for a variety of reasons: the use required; religious associations; as a substitute emulating other, more precious, materials; geographical and climatic considerations; and the many variations in cultural customs. Once the basic needs became evident, forms were developed and made to serve them. The variety of ceramic vessel forms that have been created is almost infinite.

Religious associations also had a profound effect on form development. Pots were made for fertility rites, deflowering of young girls, ritual libation vessels for the pouring of wine or oils, usually over sanctified ground, through to flower vases for temples and shrines of many Oriental countries. They also include pots made for funeral rites and ceremonies dating far back into the earliest of cul-