

Expressive, Utilitarian Earthenware

by Bruce Cochrane



Covered serving dish, 12 inches long, thrown and altered earthenware, with terra sigillata surfacing, Cone 04 reduction fired.

COMBINING individual expression and utilitarian demands is the focus of my work. Making an object that can have an intimate connection with others through usage is a privilege, and a distinct and special part of being a craftsperson.

Walter Ostrom, professor at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, was a catalyst in the development of my appreciation of historical ceramics. And, over the years, I have amassed a personally influential collection of early North American redware and salt-glazed pottery, as well as contemporary Chinese folk pots. It is easy to be attracted to the robust and energetic forms of such traditions derived from everyday specific functional needs. My earlier stoneware pots attempted to emulate and reinterpret these qualities to suit a more contemporary situation.

More recently, I have become interested in the porcelain and faience (tin-glazed earthenware) of 18th- and

19th-century Europe. In contrast to the folk aesthetic, this work was often excessive and exotic in nature, and was designed to service the formal occasion.

The idea of the pot helping to make an occasion special, while maintain-



Canadian potter Bruce Cochrane with an assortment of his ware outside his studio in Mississauga, Ontario.

ing an aesthetic role when idle, currently defines my interest in tableware. Earthenware should be both fun and elegant in its utilitarian role. The balance of form, handles and lids can confront the user and force a conscious interaction.

These pots originate on the wheel, and a sense of the throwing process is still important to the final form; however, 90% of the shaping, cutting and reassembling occurs off wheel. While my earlier stoneware pots required quantity, repetition and minimal handling to express vitality, these pieces rely on attention to detail and complex construction techniques. For example, a butter dish may take four hours from start to finish.

I do very little designing outside the studio. During the slow process of producing a pot, I have the chance to discover possibilities for other pieces with entirely different functions. As a result, I find myself being more inventive with form, relying less on his-



torical examples; however, those references are still important.

With controlled drying, the following body lends itself well to an excessive amount of manipulation:

Earthenware Body

(Cone 06-04)

Ball Clay.....	10.00%
Cedar Heights Redart Clay.....	70.00
Plainsman Redstone Clay.....	20.00
	100.00%
Add: Frit 3124 (Ferro).....	3.00%
Red Iron Oxide.....	0.25%

The addition of 0.25% iron gives a richer color and, along with frit, ensures fired strength and density.

Some of my ware is coated with terra sigillata, then fired to Cone 04 in a gas kiln, which is lightly reduced with wood toward the end of firing. This produces a range of color from a warm oxidized terra cotta to a dark metallic sheen.

Terra Sigillata

(Cone 06-02)

Dry Clay.....	30.0%
Water.....	70.0
	100.0%
Add: Calgon	0.5%

The materials are blunged for a half hour, then ball-milled for eight hours. After 24 hours in a glass jar, the ball-milled mixture settles into layers and the middle section (approximately one-third of the total volume) is siphoned off. This terra sigillata is sprayed onto bone-dry clay. I use one of a variety of red clays (including local deposits) in this mixture and, occasionally, will spray a thin coating of white terra sigillata under the red to lighten the fired surface.

Akin to the way clothing can alter one's exterior character, terra sigillata and majolica offer two contrasting ways of treating the same form. While the terra sigillata retains the fresh plastic clay quality, the majolica tends to soften and fatten the form. Over a majolica base (see recipe, page 50), I use strong solutions of copper and cobalt oxide. The copper sinks into the glaze and the cobalt floats on the surface. Through application with sponges, in an overlapping pattern, these oxide combinations create a rich and penetrating surface. Lips, feet and handles are left unglazed, as linear details, following and supporting the texture of the form.



TOP Butter dish, 6 inches in length, earthenware with terra sigillata, fired to Cone 04 in a gas kiln, lightly reduced with wood toward the end of the firing.

MIDDLE Covered serving dish, 18 inches in length, earthenware, with cobalt and copper brushwork on majolica base glaze, fired to Cone 05.

ABOVE Reduction-fired earthenware serving dish on raised foot, 24 inches long, wheel thrown, shaped, cut, assembled, sprayed with terra sigillata.



ABOVE AND LEFT Two views of a red earthenware butter dish on raised foot, wheel thrown, shaped, cut and assembled, rutilate-tinted majolica glaze, 8 inches in length.

TOP Fruit basket, 10 inches in height, thrown and altered earthenware, with terra sigillata, fired to Cone 04 with gas and wood.

Matthias's Majolica Glaze

(Cone 05)

Frit 3124 (Ferro).....	83.34%
Ball Clay.....	8.33
Edgar Plastic Kaolin.....	8.33
	100.00%
Add: Rutile	1.11%
Zircopax.....	11.11%

Since graduating from Alfred University in 1978, I have taught ceramics at Sheridan College, School of Craft and Design, in Oakville, Ontario, just outside of Toronto. Here it is satisfying to be involved in helping students reach their potential. Fortunately, I am also able to maintain an active role as a practicing potter. Without this opportunity, my teaching would be shallow and meaningless. It is a matter of being able to relate to the students' needs through my own experiences. Students keep you on your toes; the research and dialogue that go on at school force questions about my studio work, keeping it alive and evolving. ▲



ABOVE *Elevated entree dish, 8 inches in height, earthenware with sponged cobalt and copper on majolica glaze.*

BELOW *Majolica-glazed bowl, 12 inches long, thrown and altered earthenware, fired to Cone 05, by Bruce Cochrane.*



PHOTOS: PETER HOGAN