

Comment | functional pride: putting the fun back into functional pottery by Mark Hewitt

I am a maker of mugs, pitchers and plates, among other things. I do not want to make nonfunctional pots; I tried it once and I did not like it, neither the process nor the outcome. I am neither a ceramic artist nor a sculptor: I am a potter and I am proud. My pots are expressions of my individuality; they illuminate the world; they rage against it; they fascinate me with their myriad details. My reasons for making pots are complicated and keep changing, but make them I do, and make them I will. My soul is at stake each time I squeeze eloquence out of dirt.

I have a favorite mug that I use every day, which I value at \$6 million; \$300,000 more than the highest price ever paid for a piece of contemporary ceramics. My mug is worth every penny of the asking price, though I would be quite willing to give half of the money to whomever sells it. Until it sells, however, I'll use it every day.

My mugs are valuable beyond their monetary worth, because people tell me so. One customer even said that one of my mugs saved her life. She is sick and takes pills daily to keep her alive, and she sips water from my mug to swallow down her medicine. Maybe it's a magical mug. Other testimonials are equally moving. A woman I know was sitting behind me at my daughter's homecoming basketball game the other day; she tapped me on the shoulder and said she was still enjoying using the mug I picked out for her ten years ago. It is a direct and simple reward to know my aesthetic has touched her life. I know I am not the only contemporary functional potter who has experienced this.

Here is an illustrative statement from Ayumi Horie's emblematic web page, "Pots in Action," that is representative of what I like to call the Neo-Functional Movement: "In part, I am a potter because I see pots as having the incredible privilege of being part of people's private, everyday lives. Because of this intimacy, we let our guard down around pots, allowing them to convey ideas about aesthetics, function and social issues. Through repeated use, pots can become habit-forming and comforting, creating memory for those using the pots. They are objects of service and conduits between people. These pots are independent of me; they are finding their own way and accumulating histories with various people, in various homes, in various places around the world."

Do these stories and images of ordinary people using pots validate the cultural and aesthetic relevance of functional pottery? Yes, I think they do. They illustrate the role functional pots play in our culture. Advocates can help explain and endorse a potter's work and place it within a wider historical and cultural context; certainly, artists and craftspeople need all the champions, all the encouragement, they can get. It is important that we aspire to the highest standards, but it is not necessary to wait for positive criticism before recognizing the value of what we do. I make pots to please myself; I love making pots. I am responsible for my work, and, with my wife Carol, who is my business partner, we are responsible for our economic well-being. My work may not titillate the "potterati," but that is not why I make pots. I make pots because I want to, and any extra attention I get for doing so is a dividend, not a goal.

Historically, the world of ceramics has been divided into different, and often rival, camps. There are the divisions between Imperial ceramics and folk ceramics, between industrial and handmade, between brown pots and white pots, between functional pottery and ceramic sculpture, between tradition and modernism, between the academy and the marketplace, and—heaven help us—between art and craft. Which category is better, "cooler?" Which is more culturally and aesthetically relevant, which is more exciting, which camp has most of the most power, which is ascendant, which generates more money? The debate can be educational and quite entertaining if not taken too personally. It can also be maddeningly acrimonious and bitterly divisive, as people jockey for money, power and status, and, wittingly or unwittingly, knife their fellow potters and ceramics artists in the back. Mistrust and incomprehension habitually lie between the tastes of a libertine and an ascetic. Sadly, these rivalries between ceramic camps frequently prevent excellence from being acknowledged. What connects us all is quality, and that is what potters and ceramics artists work toward, and what good pottery criticism encourages.

After years of relative power in the ceramics world when Leach, Hamada, Yanagi and Cardew were alive and active (and let's not forget Rie and Wildenhain), the critical fate of functional pottery has steadily declined during the last forty years or so, coinciding with the ascendancy of ceramic sculpture associated

with Abstract Expressionism and Post-Modernism. The debate between functional pottery and the Post-Modern camp took a serious turn for the worse during the unfortunate argument between Garth Clark and Warren MacKenzie several years ago. This sad episode had the effect of intimidating the voice of functional potters for several gloomy years (we tend to be a shy lot, preferring the sanctuary of our workshops to the thrust-and-parry of conferences and criticism.) But we did not stop making pots; we merely went underground, trying new things, welcoming many new voices into our midst, until an even larger and more colorful rainbow of styles of functional pottery emerged. This, for me, marked the beginning of the Neo-Functional movement.

Examples of the broad range and high quality of the Neo-Functional movement can be found at the annual Santa Fe Clay exhibition "La Mesa," held during NCECA (National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts) conferences, and in the delightful Artstream traveling gallery. The Utilitarian Clay Symposia at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts highlight the superb talents and differing approaches of many leading contemporary practitioners. Functional potters in the U.S. and in Britain are enjoying the interest from galleries like AKAR in Iowa City and Goldmark in Britain. The British "Spawn of Leach" are having a well-deserved re-appraisal thanks to the promotion of gallery owner Michael Goldmark, in Rutland. His lavish monographs, handsome exhibitions and attentive patronage have cultivated connoisseurship, generated strong sales and put these veterans back in the spotlight. Sanjay Akar's elegant online presentations have also created a vibrant national market for many styles of functional pottery in America. These galleries are not located in the metropolis, but they are undeniably cosmopolitan, and their successes point to a healthy and increasingly evolved market.

Some Neo-Functional pots made today are traditional, some have emerged from art schools, and some are design-based. Within each of these approaches, potters have developed recognizable personal styles; each has a distinct voice. Individual expression, repetition and refinement create our individual styles, whether we are functional potters or sculptural artists. And once we have found our mature voices, we improvise like jazz musicians on

songs we already know—modifying, exploring and innovating as we go. It could be argued, for instance, that what Voulkos was doing for the last part of his career was improvising on the same stacks, platters and *mizusashis* (water jars) that he'd been making for years, and that he was moving toward his own personal classicism. It matters less what the subject matter is and more that your voice rings true, your skills are honed, your passions alive. All art has to be made so, in a sense, all art is performed, whether design- or tradition-based. For instance, I might decide to make 175 mugs in a day, endowing each one with all my knowledge, passion and talent, allowing my voice to resound in each one. Indeed each mug is an idea, a symphony and a performance; in making them, I am theoretician, composer and virtuoso.

Pots can be performers in their own right: they hold people's attention in a way that is specific to pots alone. They "entertain" in your hands, on your tables, in your fridges and in your sinks. Pots are not music, nor poems, nor painting, nor sculpture, but they can be equally engaging. By extension, potters too are entertainers, having a place in communities across the country that is a step or two outside the mainstream, where they are more independent. We hold collective creative dreams in our hands, fighting against the forces of uniformity, providing insight, hope and reverie. Our pots become part of people's lives, where they accomplish more than the task at hand.

Some contemporary potters, myself included, choose to make pottery that is in some way connected to regional traditions. What is the continuing appeal of these folk pots? Louis Menand, reviewing Bob Dylan's music and writing in the *New Yorker*, comments, "When my children were little, we used to have a cassette around the house of songs for kids by pop stars, on which Dylan did 'This Old Man' (with a knick-knack paddy-whack, give the dog a bone). That performance had the weight of the whole world in it. I listened to it a hundred times and never got tired of it. 'You can refute Hegel,' Yeats said, 'but not the Song of Sixpence.'"

When I go out to the workshop and make a mug, I'm like Dylan singing "This Old Man." He didn't write the song, and I didn't invent the mug form, but my voice identifies the mug as mine; it can be used a thousand times and you'll never get tired of it. Its sim-

licity, however, is deceptive. Traditionally inspired pots are a continuity remembered and myths newly minted. Like landscape paintings, they reflect the character of a region; in evoking history, they guide us to the heart of a culture.

I enjoy being part of a regional, performance-based tradition. My work is part of a venerable heritage but is also new and fresh. By grafting North Carolina traditions to what I learned as an apprentice with Michael Cardew in England, I produce wares that have a regional aesthetic, as well as a contemporary sensibility. My "Iced Tea Ceremony Vessels," for instance, are a counterpoint to the Japanese tea ceremony, and combine both the North Carolina alkaline glaze and the salt-glaze traditions on the same pot. They are also alive with contemporary ceramic references; the alert decorative lines and loose geometric placement of glass scraps relate to the work of Peter Voulkos, Liz Fritsch and Adrian Saxe. These tall tumblers are good to look at, think about and use. Sometimes I like my pots to be spare and minimal, sometimes elaborately ornamented. I am not root-bound, but choose to use these healthy Carolinian traditions as the rootstock for my own hybrid growth. I also gladly acknowledge that traditional pots are but one part of the ceramic spectrum. The aesthetic and technical qualifications for excellence within such traditions are too high to be brusquely dismissed. It has been suggested that some members of my school of functional pottery are negative and anachronistic "fundamentalists" and should be contained and quarantined. One can only ask, "Where?" Perhaps in some aesthetic prison? Would a music critic suggest that musical "fundamentalists" like B.B. King, Tony Rice, or Doc Watson be quarantined, or silenced?

There is, of course, a pejorative sense accompanying the word fundamentalist, now often connected with radical religious fundamentalists who are blinkered by a strictly maintained set of orthodox religious beliefs. Many potters, from all different schools—not just potters from the Leach school—hold strong opinions about the state of the world, especially regarding issues such as social justice, the environment and globalization (Richard Notkin, Matt Nolan and Adelaide Paul come to mind as examples of ceramics artists with a conscience). I too view my work as a humanistic, even moral, protest against an unjust world, though at

times it serves as a buffer against it. Many potters care about natural materials, finely-tuned aspects of functionality, and have a romantic sensibility about the role of functional pots in daily life, but does that mean we should be branded as fundamentalists?

The word *fundamental* is more acceptable, of course, as it gives a fairer sense of the role that functional potters play in contemporary ceramics. *Fundamental* goes to the root of the matter, serves as the base or foundation, and is essential or indispensable. All parts of the ceramic community could claim to be fundamental, but for the sake of argument: if, as a functional potter, I think of myself as part of the foundation of the house of ceramics, then I have no problem with what I support; a colorfully decorated interior, a flamboyant finial ornamenting a cornice, or an interesting roof line made of new, exquisitely engineered materials. In fact, I love the beautiful complexity of this big house and don't want to be pitted against my will, or misrepresented as a rival, to all those other potters and ceramics artists who contribute to its glory. We live in the house together and it is big enough for us all. Foundations are not always buried, however, and we functional potters are often decorated and playful, and enjoy our own days in the sun. We are strong and essential, so the suggestion that no one would miss functional potters if they didn't exist seems to me inaccurate, if not unkind. I know my family would miss me, and my friends, community and customers too!

Functional pottery is an acknowledged part of American cultural life. We potters address ceramic history and finesse it in individual ways. We are always trying to make better, more-intelligent, more-inspired pots. We would all like to make a little more money, work a little less and gain recognition for our work. Each of our voices and spirits is unique; we are independent operators fighting for our livelihoods in a highly competitive market. Since its beginnings in the 1920s, the functional pottery community has changed from within. It is now more diverse and less strident than in the past, and we can rightly be proud of the quality, range and maturity of the Neo-Functional movement. To address these changes, I would like to propose a way of shifting people's perceptions toward the many different types of functional pottery being made today: *(continued on page 96)*