

A PERSONAL AESTHETIC EVOLVED FROM NINETEENTH  
CENTURY AMERICAN POTTERY

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In the history of ceramics my interest centers around times in particular cultures when ceramic containers were an essential part of life. I am most interested in functional pottery produced in nineteenth century North America between the years 1800-1870. This was a period in which some of the finest pots used for containing things were produced.

The forms I am working with all involve the idea of containment such as water jars, teapots, pitchers, baskets and plate forms. My interpretation of these forms is to retain the strong, straight forward qualities such as line, termination, and attachments found in the best of nineteenth century American pottery. I depart from this tradition in that much of my work is not functional due to the non-vitrified body achieved in low temperature glaze and smoke firings. In addition I have in some cases increased the scale of the forms to the point that they would not function comfortably.

From this interest in nineteenth century American pottery, my work tends to be rural in character and intent, somewhat rugged in surface treatment; and it approaches a scale larger than would be comfortable in a domestic situation

where function and utility are important. My primary concern is to make forms that are visually stimulating rather than functional in the traditional stoneware pottery sense.

Functional pots produced in the United States circa 1800-1870 were made generally for rural agriculture, domestic, or retail trade applications. The United States at this time was essentially a rural agricultural country with a westward expanding frontier. Potters followed the expansion to the west, and potteries were established through the Ohio Valley and as far west as Iowa and south to Texas. In the early 1800's transporting bulky commodities such as grain from farm to market was quite difficult and expensive. Often for convenience grain would be converted to alcohol and then transported to market in salt-glazed stoneware jugs such as shown in slide number one.

Surface decoration on ceramics from this period largely reflect the rural condition, the optimism of the frontier, and in terms of subject matter, the decoration has been described by Donald Blake Webster as being within the nineteenth century romantic tradition:

The mainstream of stoneware decoration, however, is above all a reflection of the power of 19th-century romanticism, even in areas and among people far removed from the mainstream of American thought - a strong optimistic nationalism, . . . and a strong sympathetic feeling toward rural life and the wonders and beauties of nature, not nature as a plum for development, but nature as a vast untrammelled and endless entity before which the works of man were insignificant. This was an age of biblical literalism, of Jeffersonian agrarianism

and Jacksonian popular democracy, of military conquest and westward expansion; superimposed on all was a belief in the manifest destiny and unlimited horizons of the United States and of individual Americans. Like other folk artists in all media, the pottery decorators mirrored the moods of the times (2, pp. 53, 54).

The salt-glazed piece in slide number one is aesthetically pleasing from our perspective. The form is defined by a continuous unbroken line that is crisply terminated at the lip of the piece. The brushed cobalt oxide decoration indicates capacity in gallons, and the floral shape of the decoration is suggestive of grass or grain. One may be reminded of a head of barley, rye, or wheat and the associated harvest the image implies. This sort of image is one of fertility, maturity, and evocative of the optimism of harvest. The rich golden tans and browns on the surface of the pot are similar to the colors one finds in a field of mature grain. Thus one may find a unity of surface color, decoration, and function in this piece. The color implies ripe grain, decoration gives the image of the plant, and the function, containing grain alcohol, molasses, or sorghum syrup all relate to the rural condition. This harmony of pleasing form, surface treatment, and function is fundamental to what may be termed a rural aesthetic in North American functional pottery of the nineteenth century. Slides one through three serve as illustrations for the concept of a rural aesthetic. Through analysis of selected finished pieces the importance

and influence of the rural aesthetic on my work was investigated and is discussed in Chapter Two.

Much of my work involves the incorporation of handles within the form. The intention of the handle is to complete or enhance the total form. However, the scale of my work was limited due to the size limitations imposed by commercial cane handles which are seven inches in diameter and the limited size of available hardwood stock. One of the problems discussed in this paper involves making laminated and steam-formed wooden handles appropriate for increased scale ceramic work. The feasibility of steam-formed handles and resultant scale increase in container forms as well as various surface treatment choices are discussed in the following chapter. Types of surface treatment discussed include smoke-fired, reduction glazes, and a combination of low temperature glaze and smoke-firing.

## CHAPTER II \*

### DESCRIPTION OF WORKS

#### The Rural Aesthetic

Forms such as that found in slide number four illustrate a direct influence of nineteenth century American pottery and the rural aesthetic on my work. This form is derivative from the open jar or crock form that was quite common around 1850. The form is defined by an unbroken line from the base to the lip. Horizontal lines of detail at the base of the piece help balance the visual weight of the handles and lip. The scale of the handles and the lip are closely related. This method of form unification may be observed in nineteenth century pottery. The salt-glazed surface achieved a yellow-tan color with variations due to the proximity of the flames in the kiln. Because this piece is salt-glazed it may be used in the same functional manner as its predecessor. Thus in form, function, and surface glaze this piece is very directly influenced by the rural aesthetic.

The water jar in slide number five is an example of a more interpretative approach. However, it retains some fundamental aspects of the rural aesthetic. The form is suggestive of a field jug, a ceramic container used for carrying water for farm hands which was common in the mid

1800's. A departure here is found in the separate clay ring on which the form rests. The clay ring serves as a small foot or pedestal that emphasizes the roundness of the form. Further, the piece was smoke-fired at a low temperature and is thus non-durable and non-functional. These aspects distinguish the water jar from the field jug of the nineteenth century.

"White River, Mellete County," and "Kings Canyon Precinct, Arapaho County," slides six and seven, are examples of my involvement with describing and containing specific sections of topography within wall relief works. These pieces have both glazed and unglazed surfaces. The glaze is transparent commercial glaze fired to cone 06. After the glaze firing they were smoke-fired in sawdust and leaves. This treatment resulted in contrasting mat and gloss surfaces that added interest to the work. In "White River, Mellete County," and "Kings Canyon Precinct, Arapaho County" I have depicted sections of isolated landscapes and the subtle contrasts one finds in such settings are the focus. Here the combination of low temperature glaze and smoke firings worked together to support the topographical theme, particularly in "Kings Canyon Precinct, Arapaho County." The result of the smoke firing created a surface that appears to be topography marked by water erosion. These pieces are conceptually related to the rural aesthetic in that they reflect



an involvement with the description of a rural condition or atmosphere. In addition, the effect of surface treatment in these wall relief works is closely related to the idea of the form, as was found in the examples of nineteenth century pottery associated with the rural aesthetic. The importance of nineteenth century American pottery and the rural aesthetic on my work evolved from a direct influence as in the salt-glazed piece, slide number four, to a stronger personal interpretation reflected in the water jar, and then towards a more abstracted concept as depicted in "White River, Mellete County," and "Kings Canyon Precinct, Arapaho County."

#### Handles

In the course of the studio investigation for this paper I experimented with clay handles, commercial cane handles, solid and laminated wood handles as shown in slides eight through twelve.

Clay handles were the quickest and easiest to produce but are structurally weak when used as arch forms over diameters larger than about fifteen inches as in slide number eight.

Commercial cane handles are relatively strong but are available only in sizes up to seven inches in diameter, as slide number nine depicts.

For larger ceramic containers I used handles formed out of solid wood, refer to slide number ten. However,

the limited size of available hardwood stock prohibited any real increase in the scale of my container forms.

Using laminated wood handle forms I was able to achieve an increase in scale, but the angularity of the wood and the cylindrical wheel-thrown ceramic form were difficult to visually unify. An example of a laminated handle is shown in slides eleven and twelve.

### Steam Forming

I achieved an increased scale in container forms with attached handles by steaming and then bending wood into a curvilinear shape. The wood steaming process is quite simple requiring only inexpensive materials and is therefore feasible for anyone with minimum studio facilities. The steam chamber consisted of a section of metal pipe five feet in length and two inches in diameter. The lower end was capped and heated with a natural gas burner. The pipe was filled with water at the upper end, a length of three-quarter by one and three-quarter inch wood was inserted into the pipe. A cap with a small vent was placed over the upper end. The burner was regulated to maintain boiling temperature inside the chamber. After approximately one hour of steaming time as Feirer (1, p. 556) suggests, the wood could be bent around a circular arch form and clamped into place until dry. This formed wood was used in combination with laminations to make handles for container forms. An example is shown in slide number thirteen. This piece is twenty-eight

inches in diameter and it represents a considerable increase in scale from the previous pieces.

In that the steam forming process allowed construction of larger pieces with integrated handle forms, this was a suitable solution. The resultant larger scale work now has more presence and increased interest. This steam forming project represented a final step in a series of containers with attached handles. Wood sections formed by steaming offers a viable direction for future work in formed and laminated wood sculptural pieces or in combination with other materials.

#### Surface Treatment

In my work I have attempted to create a degree of contrast on the finished surface, both within an individual piece and also in the body of my work in general. The types of surface used to achieve this contrast are smoke-firing, reduction stoneware glazes, and a combination of cone 06 clear glaze and smoke-firing.

Slides five and fourteen are examples of smoke-fired pieces. The surface is generally subtle in tone, from gloss blacks to soft browns and light grays. The type of combustible material used in smoke-firing and the compactness of the material around the piece determine to a degree the character of the surface obtained. Dry grass clippings were used in smoke-firing these pieces; and a burned on grass pattern is visible on the side of the water jar, slide

number five. In pieces where scale is important, smoke-firing has the advantage of considerably less shrinkage compared to high temperature stoneware firing.

Contrasting with the non-durable smoke-fired surface previously discussed are the smaller reduction glazed functional porcelain pieces in slides fifteen through seventeen. In the casserole a crisp white semi-opaque exterior glaze is contrasted with a dark iron saturate interior glaze. The porcelain pitcher is glazed with a textural fluid ash glaze, and the top of the piece is dipped in a celadon glaze. A slip glaze was sprayed in the area of transition between the celadon and the ash glaze. This is most evident in the brown blush near the handle attachment area at the top of the piece. In addition to the textural glaze contrast, the green and rich golden tans reflect a continued interest in the spirit of nineteenth century American pottery and the rural aesthetic.

Combining low temperature glaze with smoke-firing added another dimension to the surfaces of my work. An example is the basket in slides eighteen through twenty. The exterior of the basket is unglazed and colored only by the smoke-firing process. The handle and interior of the piece were glazed with cone 06 transparent glaze. The action of the smoke-firing on the glazed surfaces range from a dark black carbon deposit to speckled brown patterns, and to some areas that are highly iridescent. The interior of this piece was glazed excessively thick which resulted in the glaze not

smoothly adhering to the surface during the firing. The finished piece has a highly physically textured interior which contrasts with the smooth exterior surface.

Each of the methods of surface treatment that have been discussed possess individual qualities. Smoke-firing gives a subtle, restrained surface appearance. The reduction glazes I used on porcelain forms yielded a tight crispness that seems appropriate for the inherent qualities of porcelain clay; yet allow a wide range for contrasting surface texture and color. Of the types of surface treatment used in the course of the studio investigation, the combination of low temperature glaze and smoke-firing offered the widest range of surface color and texture which enabled me to achieve contrasting surfaces within individual pieces.

## CHAPTER III

### SUMMARY

In the course of this paper the influence of nineteenth century American pottery on my work has been discussed. This influence over the course of time has evolved from a very direct to a more abstracted and interpretative personal approach.

A steam forming process for making wooden handles to be integrated with ceramic container forms was investigated. This process helped to achieve a desired increase in scale, thus representing a viable solution to the problem. More significantly perhaps, the steam forming process suggests exciting possibilities for steam formed and laminated wood pieces, as individual works or in combination with other materials.

Smoke-firing, reduction glazing and the combination of low temperature glaze and smoke-firing were discussed in terms of the finished surface on individual pieces. The use of smoke-firing alone tended to produce a subdued result. A more dramatic level of contrast was achieved with reduction glazes and low temperature glaze combined with smoke-firing. In works where maximum impact depended on a fairly large scale, low temperature firing worked well due to the small amount of shrinkage compared to stoneware firing. Of the

three methods of surface treatment discussed the combination of low temperature glaze and smoke-firing offered the widest variety of contrasting surface textures and colors.

In conclusion, I feel that each area investigated in this paper, the rural aesthetic, the question of larger scale container forms, and the various methods of surface treatment, are closely related in that each represent a step in the synthesis of a personal body of work. This investigation has provided me with the fundamental elements of a personal aesthetic requisite for future growth.

## APPENDIX

### SLIDE IDENTIFICATION

#### Slide

1. Two-gallon jug, salt-glazed, Nathan Clark, Mt. Morris, New York, prior to Civil War.
2. Salt-glazed jug, cobalt decoration, American, prior to Civil War.
3. Salt-glazed jug, cobalt decoration, American, prior to Civil War.
4. Open jar, salt-glazed, height, 20 in.
5. Water jar, smoke-fired, height, 16 in.
6. "White River, Mellette County," cone 06 glaze, smoke-fired, 20 X 26 in.
7. "Kings Canyon Precinct, Arapaho County," cone 06 glaze, smoke-fired, 17 X 22 in.
8. Basket, cone 06 glaze, smoke-fired, diameter, 15 in.
9. Basket, stoneware, cane handle, diameter, 7 in.
10. Basket, stoneware, walnut handle, diameter, 10 in.
11. Canister, stoneware, teak handle, height, 25 in.
12. Canister, open view.
13. Basket, stoneware, pine handle, diameter, 28 in.
14. Covered basket, smoke-fired, height, 14 in.
15. Casserole, porcelain, diameter, 8 in.



APPENDIX

SLIDE IDENTIFICATION--Continued

Slide

16. Casserole, open view.
17. Pitcher, porcelain, height, 11 in.
18. Basket, cone 06 glaze, smoke-fired, diameter, 14 in.
19. Basket, detail.
20. Basket, detail.





1. The first of the specimens is a small, dark, rounded object, possibly a seed or a small fruit, with a smooth surface and a small, pointed tip. It is shown in a close-up view, highlighting its shape and texture.

2. The second specimen is a larger, more elongated object, possibly a seed or a small fruit, with a smooth surface and a small, pointed tip. It is shown in a close-up view, highlighting its shape and texture.



































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2. Webster, Donald Blake, Decorated Stoneware Pottery of North America, Rutland, Vermont, C. E. Tuttle Co., 1971.