

Daniel Rhodes: Pottery & The Person

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Most discussions of pottery, or historical references to it, give it a kind of impersonal existence, as if pots sprang into being as a result of process, almost without the intervention of people. Pots of the past are described in detail, but their makers are seldom mentioned. This is partly because the pottery of the past was largely an anonymous art, and nothing much specifically is known of the actual potters.

As we learn to make pots, and as we deal with the sometimes difficult and intricate facets of the craft, our attention is directed to the *pot*, to the thing we are making. The fact that the pot is but a reflection of our inner being, of where we are at the time, is not intruding into our consciousness, and this is well, because any art or any craft requires full, directed attention, and self-consciousness, while it may be revealing or even fruitful, has no place in the moment of expressive action.

Looked at subjectively, however, pottery-making can be thought of not so much as an activity resulting in so many bowls, cups, or jars of some assumed function, value, or aesthetic merit but rather as the outcome of our urge to form and, in forming the clay, to find our own form. The changes and developments in the form of the clay which passes through our fingers can parallel, complement, signify, and support the changes and the evolution of our own inner consciousness. To form is to actualize, to bring into reality what was not there before, to create one's image, to expand and develop this image. This impulse to form is basic to the human condition, existing among all of the tribes.

Today, the impulse to form, and the opportunity to deal directly with our own self as projected in tangible form in the outer sphere, is thwarted. Mechanization, industrialization, division of labor, commercialism, and standardization have wiped out most of the formerly abundant opportunities for the individual to function through craft. Great gains bring great losses, and men and women have been left with a feeling of being cut off from themselves with a loss of identity.

Craft, almost eliminated from the practical world and a seeming anachronism, has become a precious remnant. In it, we can sense the potential for full development of the person, for the restoration of wholeness. The artist and the craftsman, laboring outside of society's system of production-money-consumption, keep alive a different way of working and living. They work for the joy of working and they seek and find their identity in the work of their own hands rather than in commercialized images on screen or paper, images projected by promoters of a world which does not exist.

The way of the artist and the craftsman is difficult. Cut off from the main thrust of his society, he must go it alone. The very traditions from which he seeks nourishment tend to wither, to become weakened and confused. There is the problem of finding bread. The artist working within the context of fine arts as they are defined in our culture, faces

almost insuperable difficulties. He is cut off from any coherent tradition which might be shared with others in a supportive way. Alone, he struggles to assert his original and personal statement. By definition, his statement, since it must be starkly original and not based on the past, will be illegible except perhaps to a few. Obsolescence and neglect follow directly on success, a success which in any case is improbable in the extreme. The life of the dedicated artist can only be regarded as a heroic encounter, a struggle against impossible odds. It is significant that the work of children, folk artists, or the naïve often has a freshness, vitality, and charm lacking in “professional” art; these less sophisticated artists are still able to work without undue self-consciousness or concern about the ultimate meaning or acceptability of their work.

The potter works toward more modest goals than the sculptor or painter. He creates something of utility; aesthetic values are not its sole justification. With intelligence, skill, and practice he is reasonably assured of making something of value. Pottery exists within a framework or boundary—perhaps defined as constricting by some—but within this defined area some measure of security can be found. For the craftsman, function is a balance wheel. It is something to work with (or, in searching for the boundaries of one’s expression, to work against). It is a fixed point of reference. To the question, “For whom is this work?” the “fine” artist can answer only that he hopes his work will eventually find an audience and move them as he has been moved. The potter can answer; “I present this pot, which embodies my skill, my insight, my respect for the material and process, my sincere search for form. It will be useful in the kitchen and on the table. It may bring a small touch of warmth and beauty to those who use it. Whatever exists in it which might be called ‘art’ will function through daily use, through touch, through intimate acquaintance.”

Pottery-making then, is a shaping of material, a postulation of form, an actualization of dreams which can occur in a natural way without an undue challenge to the ego. It is not pretentious. Its commitments have to do with right making more than with exhibitionism. The potter can achieve a certain relaxation in his work, learn to be comfortable with it. Out of this natural relationship to work may grow a natural expression of self, an unforced, unselfconscious, genuine flow of person to pot. However modest, the pot can be an authentic image of the potter.

To find reality in one’s work, to project honestly into it, is to become *centered*. For better or worse, the pot becomes the projection of the potter, his image. In it are summed up the integration of his powers, his thoughts, his feelings, his action. Pottery form is an emblem of this integration, and we must avoid thinking about the form of pots as if it were something impersonal. Forms grow from the person. That is why it is impossible to assign any hierarchy of value to pots or to impose standards aside from the equation *person=pots*.

I have talked about the various pottery forms in terms of their adaptations to various functions and how they were shaped. But the true import of forms, their vitality, cannot be analyzed because they are the outcome of complex generative forces at the point where the potter interacts with material and process.

As the development of personality is a slow process and a response to innumerable influences both external and internal, so the development of style in the work unfolds gradually. We are not making today what we made a year ago, and tomorrow we will be making something different, something not now imagined. The image grows, changes, fades or blurs at times, then sharpens, enlarges, becomes perhaps diffuse and then concentrated. These developments, like the changes in life, can bring joy, satisfaction, pain or despair, but they must be lived. The evolution of the clay under the hands cannot be forced. Time is required for each stage. Each fallow period must be endured; the seemingly negative factors in the work, after the passage of time and more work, may turn out to be faltering steps in the right direction. Failures can be defined as searches in the byways, and as such can be absorbed without damage to the self.

Pottery requires on one hand active effort, concentration, and tension, and on the other, relaxation. These two qualities, in fact, can be identified in many pots. Some pots, such as certain ones made in classical Greece or Etruria, are tense, sharply fashioned, with exaggerated curves and relationships between parts. Handles rise from the rims with sprightly vigor, and feet are made almost as separate forms. Some old Chinese pots are almost limp by comparison. Their proportions are modest, their parts closely integrated. The clay has not been asked to do that which is difficult for it. Of these two qualities, relaxation is the hardest for us to achieve. That is why the works of the contemporary Japanese potter Shoji Hamada are so impressive. Each of his pots, although usually modest in scale and in proportion, speaks to a sense of ease. The clay has not been pushed beyond a certain point. They are in the tradition of Zen inspired arts—"No Fuss."

Pottery as mediation, as selfless concentration, requires the abandonment of anxiety and the perfection of skill to the point where it can be forgotten and one's consciousness becomes absorbed in the tactile sensations of process. In this state, the work will form itself, and the potter may feel presumptuous even to take credit for the happenings which emerge from his kiln. The question of originality will have been solved. Who asks whether their own pattern of speech and expression are original? No one, because we all achieve originality in speech by a lifetime of concentration on what is said rather than on how it is said.

As in the growth of plants, the emergence of forms from the hands proceeds in small steps, gradual unfoldings. One must be satisfied with small gains, evolution rather than sudden revelation.

The potter approaches the clay with just his hands. There is no intervening superstructure, no frozen or mechanized system, no network of authority between him and his work. The forms he makes are his alone.

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