

SEARCHING FOR BEAUTY
Letters from a Collector to a Studio Pottery
by
Richard Jacobs

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Reviewed by Mark Hewitt

“Searching for Beauty: Letters from a Collector to a Studio Potter,” documents a series of forty letters written by collector Richard Jacobs to American potter Christa Assad. They are less a correspondence than a series of lectures prepared in letter form by a retired non-conformist, interdisciplinary academic. Charming, informal preambles set the stage for free-ranging discussions on a wide range of subjects all of which magically turn on aspects of pottery, for as Jacobs describes, he is a possessor of a “chronic ceramic instability.” His letters, “attempt to explore and understand the cultural context and aesthetic principles represented in the struggle of potters to achieve contemporary standing and recognition.” They do so with an intellectual breadth that is exhilarating, with references distilled from a lifetime of scholarship outside the world of pottery, or pulled from his up-to-date reading of the Guardian Weekly and the Times Literary Supplement.

“I bring exotic gifts from other worlds into the domain of the master potter,” he proclaims, as he guides the reader to examine the relationship between passion, morality, politics, beauty and pots. While his tone is polite and fair, he is unafraid to perform careful surgery on several sacred ceramic cows. For instance, in letter Eleven, he takes on Voulkos, ending by saying, “I can marvel at the audacity of Peter Voulkos and his originality. I do not need to nullify Bernard Leach to do so. No one has the last word. Voulkos has the advantage of later historical placement, but it is a temporary advantage.” In letter Twenty-seven Jacobs’ discusses Rawson’s seminal book, “Ceramics,” developing a thesis that quotes from John Dewey, Anna Quindlen, Nicholas Basbanes, C. Wright Mills, and Louis Menand quoting Oliver Wendell Holmes. While paying Rawson many well-deserved compliments, Jacobs comments, “he (Rawson) offers many facts about pottery. I have always distrusted facts...I particularly don’t trust them as the basis for a fully developed aesthetic....Facts do not just get in the way. I would maintain they distort the possibilities of a memorable encounter.... Facts give the false promise of a single certainty.” Jacobs concludes by saying, “Rawson defined the complexity of the pot. He constructed and codified the facts of the pot. I am looking for a protocol for the perception and experience of pottery. It might well exist, but I haven’t found it yet. Like (Oliver Wendell) Holmes, it must empower the ‘average member of the community’ to appropriate and appreciate pottery within the context of past experience...It is a liberal and democratic impulse.”

Occasionally, however, his analysis gets the better of him, even earning him the grand distinction of being quoted in “Pseud’s Corner,” a section devoted to navel-gazing purple-prose in the muck-racking British weekly, “Private Eye.” He self-mockingly describes his collection as, “The Richard C. Jacobs Collection of Medium Priced Art,” and comes across as a sweet old fusspot as he humorously acknowledges his obsessive rearranging of the pots in his house. His outsider status and modest taste for vessels, not

ceramic art, does not, however, diminish his intellectual clout. He argues persuasively for the role pots play in “impacting the quality of life in the most intimate world possible for people; within that enclosed space which harbors (our) very lives,” and he establishes an intriguing dissonance between his leftist political views and his advocacy of the middle class and the relative safety of a home in the Californian suburbs, “How ironic,” he declares “I have discovered in a natural media placed in a temporal setting the means to escape an awful reality.” It is customary to read criticism of artists on the cutting edge of ceramic art, and we are all the better for it, Jacobs’ writing, however, advocates on behalf of the rank-and-file of the pottery world, his aesthetic is more populist than elitist, and his book carefully explains and vigorously champions the role of regular pots in today’s world.

A familiar idealism, based on the writings of Ruskin and Morris, pervades Jacobs’ writing. He argues on behalf of the poor and disposed, and deplures, “The power and wealth of the few today, so unchallenged, need no excuse or apology, no cosmetic camouflage of idealism or altruism to defend themselves. They simply coexist in the world with war and poverty, hunger and deprivation of the multitudes, without embarrassment.” He quotes Curtis White in his discussion of globalization, “Let art out of the museum and out of the university. Deinstitutionalize it. Take off the straightjacket of philanthropic support. Defeat the corporate ownership of what little imagination we have left.” And he takes a leaf from the cottage socialists and Yanagi when he writes, “I want to use the word beauty promiscuously for everything that pleases me and makes each day a little easier. I embrace beauty but don’t want to make it special. I want beauty to remain ordinary for me, as ordinary as daily engagements with familiar sights that form my common habits.” Such tender domestic sentiments are rare in this age of bombastic electronic narcissism. Above all, Jacobs is a humanist, believing in a more peaceful, just, and beautiful world. “To love the aesthetic gifts of human civilization you must first respect the dignity of the humanity of all its members.” Toward that end, he urges us all to, “Make your pottery the manifesto of your ideals and hopes.”

“Searching for Beauty” is clearly more than a pottery book; it examines pottery from a literary, metaphysical, liberal arts perspective, written by a teacher whose encouraging style elucidates the role of potters in contemporary culture. His conversational discussions about art history, politics, and educational philosophy put potters’ concerns at center stage in the events of our times. Most of his letters include a barrage of intriguing questions, provoking us all to ruminate on matters such as, “Why do your pots look the way they do?” Or, “What constitutes over-embellishment?” Or, “Is the conversion to a new school that rejects your previous school or style somewhat like the conversion of communist to Catholic, or socialist to arch-conservative?” Or, “When does the exactitude of literalism become sentimental in a visual language.” Or, “Can you save the world through your pots? Should you even try?” Jacobs understands the dilemmas and difficulties we all face as creators, but does not let us off the hook easily. We would all do well to keep Jacobs’ book handy as much for these questions as for the cogent insights Jacobs provides by way of answer.