

**National Council for Education in the Ceramic Arts (NCECA)
March 9 – 22, 2014, Milwaukee, WI.**

Panel Discussion: “Where Are the Studio Potters?”

Moderated by Mary Steggles

Panelists: Tony Clennell, Lisa Hammond, and Mark Hewitt

**Notes from the Workshop
by Mark Hewitt**

What do you mean, “Where are the Studio Potters?!” We are here, now, making the greatest studio pots in the history of Ceramics. I think we deserve a collective round of applause!

However, no art or craft movement lasts forever. Tastes and habits change, and so do economic conditions. Old potters die, times are tough, and it’s harder than ever to make a living as a studio potter. Which makes me wonder whether there will always be studio potters?

I think there will be, because there will always be people who love handmade pots so much that they are compelled to make them, but there won’t be as many studio potters as before.

Those of us who love studio pots have a responsibility to ensure that these future potters get the best training possible.

I’m going to generalize about the ways potters are trained today...

Many contemporary studio potters are trained in undergraduate and graduate programs at Art Schools, followed by Residencies. This system provides very good technical and aesthetic training, but sometimes fails to give students sufficient practical skills for them to survive the rigors of the marketplace, and often encumbers students with such onerous levels of debt that it becomes even harder for them to create economically viable studios.

Apprenticeship, by contrast, offers a narrower aesthetic vision than art school, but, under ideal conditions, can provide the on-the-job skills and business training necessary to prepare an apprentice for a career as a potter in the real world. Unfortunately, however, the availability of apprenticeships is extremely limited.

Art schools and apprenticeships have their good points, but neither system is perfect.

A fledgling collaboration between East Carolina University’s ceramic department and the North Carolina Pottery Center to match students with working potters in Seagrove for summer

internships, attempts to build a bridge between academia and the marketplace. Such programs may better prepare students for the aesthetic and economic realities of life as studio potter.

Students: be realistic about your financial resources. Do you have access to capital or land? It takes lots of money to start and operate a studio pottery. Total all your likely annual costs when you are, let's say, 35, and you have a mortgage, a business loan, car, spouse, children, babysitters, health and other insurance, food, entertainment, *and* all your business expenses, and then divide by the price of a single mug. How many mugs do you have to make per month, per day, per hour, to live your dream. And don't forget you'll have to sell them all too. If you don't like the sound of this, don't become a studio potter.

If, despite all warnings, you are still utterly compelled to be a potter, and you haven't done so already, blow up your TV, sell your car, give up your smart phone, don't get distracted, live even more frugally, and take on as little debt as possible. Study hard, practice long, and play a patient game. Read! Love the medium in all its aspects. Develop your talents and an unwavering strategy to get where you want to go, not just a strategy to get to the next party (except tonight!).

Visit potters whose work you like. If you really want to become a studio potter, offer to cut their wood, mow their lawn, update their mailing lists, babysit their kids, and clean their toilets - for free. Get your foot in the door, work hard, make yourself indispensable, be humble, and get an internship or an apprenticeship. It will cost a lot less than art school. You may not learn as varied an aesthetic, but you might learn skills that will allow you to support a family by making and selling pots.

Despite the long odds, if you can figure it all out, it's actually extremely rewarding to be a potter!

Unfortunately, very few of the second generation of studio potters in the US and Britain, (who are now in their 60's and 70's), take apprentices. However, my first apprenticeship started with a master who at the time was 76, so maybe it's not too late. Old potters need help.

I think the key to transferring skills to the next generation of studio potters depends on practicing potters taking on an apprentice or two.

Potters: remember that teaching is an act of generosity, open up your studios, and yourselves, and teach everything you know, from material preparation to customer relations.

I've had 20 apprentices over the last 20 years. Six are making a living entirely from potting, six are making pots but have extra income from a second job or from a spouse, six are either in various stages of training or are pausing to have babies, and two are no longer potting.

My most successful apprentices are those who work the hardest, want to succeed the most, and do the best work. If they settle close to me, they tend to do better financially (they steal my business!). Some are hard-driving working-class kids; others are owning-class with esoteric

motivations to succeed. The apprentices I enjoy the most are the ones who are the most willing, and the most grateful. After all, the more you give, the more you get.

Even with an ideal training, whether it's through an art school, or an apprenticeship, or a combination of the two, it's still hard to get a pottery built and a business started. Land and materials are expensive, competition is fierce, and the market is shrinking, but the students who are going to make it won't give up, and, somehow, they will find a way forward.

It certainly helps if craftspeople have a spouse or partner who is supportive. My wife, Carol, and I are team; she steers, and I pedal really fast.

We need more *mainstream* advocacy for pottery, to expose our pots to the widest possible audience and expand our markets. Most craft organizations don't cultivate the mainstream economy; they'd rather curry favor with the art world. Craft magazines are predominantly self-serving and have a tiny audience, and while gallery representation is all very well, wouldn't it be nice if "Ghost" was remade, or an epic movie about the slave potter, Dave Drake? Or, how about a sitcom set in a pottery studio? Why are there no potters in People Magazine? An exception, of course, is British potter/artist Grayson Perry. Take note of his example, for talent and intellect, matched with sensationalism, works.

Where you set up a pottery matters too. Places are not created equal, even with the advent of the internet. A potter cannot go just anywhere and expect to succeed, some places make life easier for potters than others. Potteries need a nearby "threshold population," a catchment area, big enough to make a craft enterprise viable. Otherwise you have to travel to sell work, which is costly. Some places have the advantage of strong pottery identities created over the years by scores of potters and advocates.

Study your market, understand the cultural and economic terrain of a specific location before moving there; go where there are other potters, where people already like pots, where there is a cultural memory. Build on preexisting support structures, build community. Go where there is clay. Go where there is money.

And then be brilliant, let your little light shine, absorb new technologies, relentlessly explore all marketing avenues, and make fabulous pots until you drop.