

Carrying on a Tradition



*One Gallon Jar. Wood
fired salt-glaze.
35 cm/h.*

Article by Charles G. Zug III

CULTURAL GEOGRAPHERS LIKE TO CITE THE CONCEPT of preadaptation to explain phenomena such as the development of frontiers. The Scots and Irish, for example, accustomed to centuries of strife, hardship and instability, are said to have been ideally suited to cope with the American wilderness and lead the way west. Put simply, they possessed a set of traits that gave them competitive advantage in occupying a new environment.¹ From what I know of Mark Hewitt – and we have become good friends – I would have to conclude that he was preadapted to settle in North Carolina. Of course, there were

elements of luck too – his coming to work for Todd Piker in Connecticut, where he met his American wife. But with his earlier training and attitudes, it seems almost inevitable that he would end up here as an integral part of the North Carolina pottery tradition.

My first encounter with Mark Hewitt's pottery occurred in 1984 at the British-American Festival at Duke University. I had entered one of the picturesque quadrangles on the campus in search of Burlon Craig and Vernon Owens, two friends who were demonstrating the North Carolina pottery tradition. As I neared the potters' working area, I spotted a row of

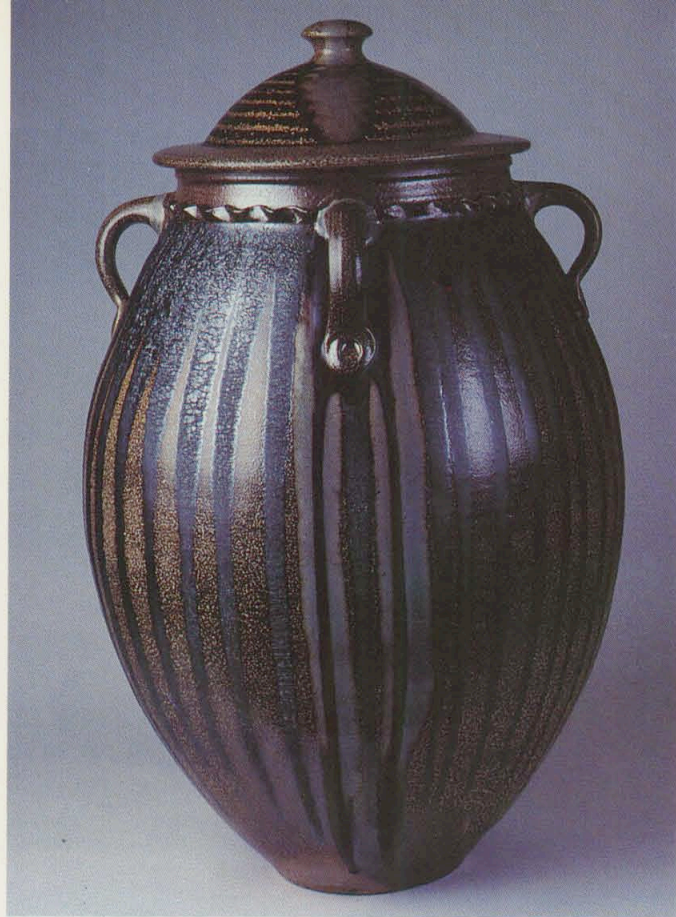


Mark Hewitt at the kiln

huge salt-glazed planters, running diagonally along one of the central walkways. Having studied the old utilitarian wares for years, I was used to big storage jars on the order of 10 to 20 gallons (40 to 80 litres). These, however, were much larger, yet entirely graceful in form and textured with a rich brown coating of salt. I had no idea whose hand had turned them but they seemed somehow familiar.

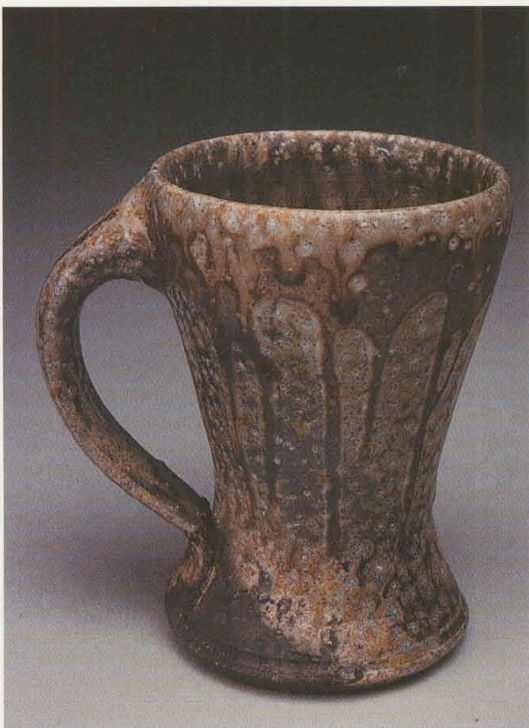
I met Mark Hewitt that day but it was some months before I drove down to Pittsboro to see where these behemoths had come from. Hewitt and his wife Carol had purchased a small farm which has proved an ideal location for a pottery. With a traditional hall-parlour farmhouse, a large barn for storage and display, and a substantial shed (ex-chicken house) for a workshop, the only new element was the big cross-draft kiln buried in the side yard. Like the pots I had seen earlier, the setting looked entirely natural and familiar too, like the weathered, frame pottery shops around Seagrove and Vale.

In an autobiographical essay in *Ceramics Monthly*,² Hewitt has described the pivotal influences on his decision to become a potter: Bernard Leach and Michael Cardew. Born into an industrial pottery family in Stoke-on-Trent, England, where his father and grandfather were directors of Spode, it was expected perhaps that he would become involved in the pottery industry. It was Leach's publication, *A Potter's*



Jar. Manganese saturate slip with blue glass runs. Wood fired salt-glaze. 86 cm/h.

Book,³ that started his interest in hand-made pottery and it was a three-year traditional apprenticeship with Cardew at Wenford Bridge that turned him into a potter. Much that he learned from Cardew was by "osmosis. You just were there. I had only one hands-on lesson from him. And it was how to pull a handle, and I wish I'd never had it. You lived the life – you were an apprentice in his house". This may sound alarmingly casual and unfocused to those trained in the university where learning is highly formal and closely regulated and where each achievement is measured out by exams, grades and, hopefully one day, an MFA. But such an informal, on-the-job education possesses a powerful logic and completeness of its own. Hewitt began with "mugs and cereal bowls and pint pitchers. And you gradually started making quart pitchers and then bigger serving bowls....plus the repertoire of decoration: slip trailing and combing, and all the nuances of dipping glazes...packing the kiln and firing the kiln...preparing all the materials." What Hewitt absorbed, above all, from Michael Cardew was an enduring sense of tradition. Cardew himself was initially inspired by the harvest jugs, bowls and comb-decorated baking dishes of Edwin Beer Fishley, one of the last folk potters in north Devon. In turn, Bernard Leach reinforced and tended that sensibility to the point that Cardew "reached a more or less enlightened state where the treatment of

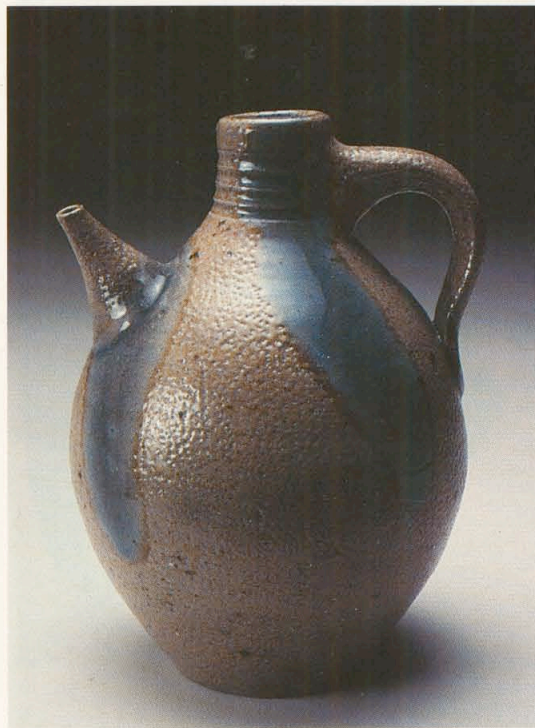


Mug. Wood fired salt-glaze. 14 cm/h.

a Chinese porcelain plate or bowl speaks of clay, and of the needs, functions and expressions of human users and makers in the same language as a European earthenware pitcher or a West African water pot".⁴ Cardew defined himself as a potter by insisting that his work be central to daily life. His wares were not art works to be revered from afar on a mantel or encased in glass. "Pottery in its pure form," he affirmed, "relies neither on sculptural additions nor on pictorial decorations, but on the counterpoint of form, design, colour, texture and the quality of the material, all directed to a function. This function is the uses of the home."⁵

Cardew's eloquent yet down-to-earth affirmation of tradition and purpose aptly characterizes the North Carolina pottery heritage that the Hewitts entered in 1983. Earlier, while working in Connecticut, Hewitt recalls, he had been interested in Southern folk pots. Drawn increasingly to the numerous North Carolina potters such as Burlon Craig, Dorothy and Walter Auman, and Melvin and Vernon Owens, Hewitt found "the qualities that I admire so much in pots out of the folk tradition. I like the pots that are made quickly and easily." More broadly, he discovered essential ingredients important to his work: "local clays, pots made in large quantity, simple technology, frequently fired in wood kilns and simple".

Once settled in, he also began studying the old, historical North Carolina pots. "They've provided me with a tremendous amount of information concerning shapes...I love Daniel Seagle's pots, J. A. Craven is



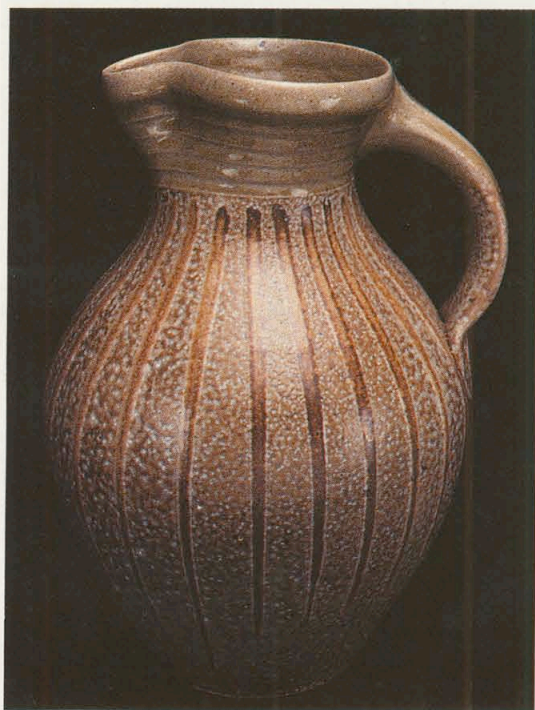
Cruet. Blue glass runs. Wood fired salt-glaze. 17.5 cm/h.

another potter I like particularly, and Nicholas and Himer Fox...if I can make pots with their same spirit, then I think I'll be doing all right". Hewitt's admiration for these virtuosos is well founded. Their work went far beyond necessity and demonstrated unusual attention to essential form, texture and surface detail.

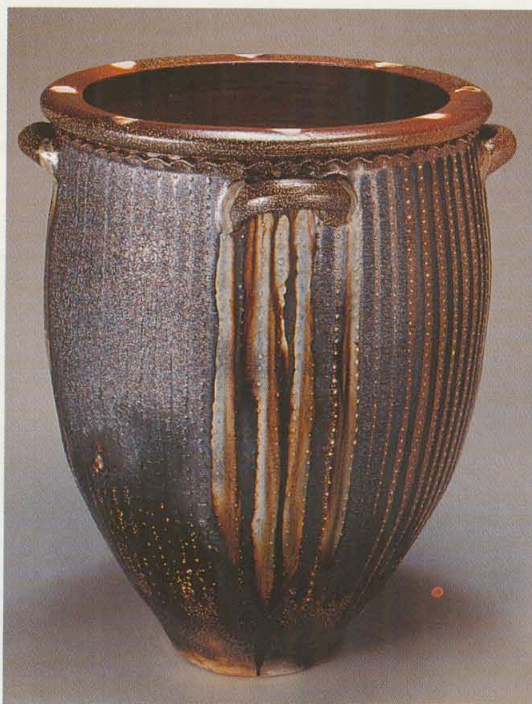
In studying the old North Carolina masters, Hewitt was emulating Cardew's love of Devon slipwares or African water pots and affirming the importance of the past to the present. "I like to think of the tradition being carried on," he explains. "And in order to do that, you have to plug into what's here...it would seem improper to me to come to an area and ignore what's there, what's been there".

Hewitt's affinity for folk tradition is clearly reflected in his penchant for making huge planters and covered jars. Here he was specifically influenced by Cardew (who once made a 40 pound teapot mounted on a gun carriage) and Svend Bayer (a renowned maker of bigwares described by Cardew as "more than just a potter, he is a force of nature").⁶ However, these wares also reflect the large storage jars of West Africa and Asia (areas Hewitt has also visited) and of course, the South, where they were once critical for supplying rural families with foodstuffs to last them through the winter. Such large forms are rarely in the repertoires of contemporary potters.

Hewitt continues a wide range of domestic utilitarian forms, many with slip decoration, but his work has changed in important ways since coming to North Carolina. The dense brown coatings of salt that I



One Gallon Pitcher. Wood fired salt-glaze. 40 cm/h.



Planter. Manganese decoration. Wood fired salt-glaze. 70 cm/h.



Quart Teapot. Swirl wave. Wood fired salt-glaze. 20 cm/h.



Quart Teapot. Kaolin slip, celadon glaze trailing. 20 cm/h.

immediately admired were developed here. Cardew dismissed salt glazing as "ignorant," and Todd Piker used it only sparingly to create a "light flashing". Hewitt's models range from 19th century Northern potters such as Frederick Carpenter of Boston to the rich local salt-glaze tradition which continues unabated in the Seagrove-Jugtown area. In addition, Hewitt has developed a Southern alkaline glaze, concocting a blend derived from Burlon Craig and Lanier Meaders of Georgia. Also, from the Catawba Valley, he now throws forms in swirl patterns using contrasting clay bodies and decorates many pieces with melted glass runs, a technique that originated in the Seagle and Hartzog families in the early 19th century.

Perhaps the only Southern influence Hewitt has actively resisted is the face vessel.

Although he has "been offered hundreds of dollars to make a face jug, name my price," he has refused to make a single one. And in resisting this fad for what he terms "collectibles and curios and whimsies", he reaffirms the principles absorbed at Wenford Bridge—"the sort of pots that I like to make are ones that you can use". This is the essence of traditional pottery, which builds on the past and serves genuine contemporary needs.

Ultimately, he ascribes much of his success to the many knowledgeable North Carolinians who attend his quarterly kiln openings. "I don't think I could sell the sort of pots I make in many places other than here. This place is like Japan. It's not as intense in its appreciation but it is the only similar place I know."



Half Gallon Jar. Southern alkaline glaze. Swirl wave. 30 cm/h.

References

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Charles G. (Terry) Zug III is professor of English and folklore at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Turners and Burners: The Folk Potters of North Carolina*. Chapel Hill University of North Carolina Press, 1986. The quotes from Mark Hewitt are from a taped interview with the author, Pittsboro, NC, 10 June, 1992. This essay was written for the occasion of an exhibition held by Mark Hewitt at the Belk Gallery, Western Carolina University, Cullawhee, September/October, 1992. An exhibition of the work of Mark Hewitt, *Wholly Land: Pots from North Carolina*, will be held at the Harlequin Gallery, London, August 15 to September 11, 1993.