

Stuck in the Mud

Mark Hewitt, whose father and grandfather were directors of Spode, was fired by reading Bernard Leach's 'A Potter's Book' to become a potter. He studied with Michael Cardew at Wenford Bridge and since 1983 has lived and worked as a potter in North Carolina, USA. He examines his background and contemporary attitudes towards traditional functional pottery.

Contemporary ceramic criticism treats traditional functional pottery with the same precision as a seal hunter clubbing a baby seal. Traditional potters, like all rare species, are innocent, yet endangered by the whims of ceramic fashion and politics. "Like nature's weeds (the crafts) are continually being driven out with the forks of opportunism but they still keep coming back," said Cardew. Some weeds, with their prickly burrs, simply refuse to be brushed off.

In this age of individual expression traditional functional pottery is often dismissed as outdated. Yet following tradition does not mean creating static, conservative pots, nor does it mean merely reproducing what has gone before. On the contrary, the dynamic essence of tradition invites creativity and variation. By incorporating traditional shapes and materials into one's individual style I believe that a potter can benefit from both the past and the present. How an individual responds to a tradition depends both on the individual and the tradition.

I was raised within an industrial ceramic tradition, where to mention Wedgwood was to be asked to wash your mouth out with soap. My father and grandfather were directors of Spode. When I was a child, Stoke's ceramic culture glazed me. As a teenager I belloved the chant "We are the Potters, We are the Potters," on the terraces of Stoke City F.C.. The father of the first girl I ever kissed designed the original top-hat kiln. I'm related to bone millers, colour makers, brick makers, chinoiserie studio managers, and the proverbial saggarmakersbottomknockers. Echoing Popeye's unapologetic notion of personal identity, "I am what I am."

At age twenty, as a geography student with anarchist tendencies at Bristol University, a friend gave me a copy of Leach's *A Potter's Book*. Like many others, I felt that the first chapter had been written specifically for me.

It so happened that during the November before my graduation, Michael Cardew's 75th year retrospective exhibition opened its British tour at the Bristol Museum, and I duly went along to worship. The next day I attended a screening of his biographical movie *Mud and Water Man*. As I watched, my ears reddened with embarrassment when I discovered that during the 1930s Michael had gone to Stoke to design for industry, and was hired by my grandfather. When the film ended, I somehow plucked up the courage to introduce myself as A.E. Hewitt's grandson and a budding potter. Michael was visibly amused, but was soon carried away by the adoring throng, leaving me to puzzle out the meaning of this strange coincidence.

Some months later I decided to look for an apprenticeship, and made a list of potters I wanted to work for. Michael was

number two. The first on my list was Svend Bayer. I had met him briefly at Michael's exhibition and later, by chance, while he was delivering pots to a gallery in Bristol. I had also read his essay in Cameron and Lewis's *Potters on Pottery* and had been impressed with his pots and ideas. As quoted in Garth Clark's biography, *Michael Cardew*, Michael describes Svend as "more than just a potter, rather a force of nature . . .", and Michael was not one to give praise.

I did not get to work with Svend as he had always preferred to work on his own, but he has had a significant influence on how I think about pots and potteries. He belongs to a school of pottery that I call Post Leach and Cardew Rural Minimalism, with Richard Batterham and Johnny Leach being other examples. Form is reduced to its plain, poetic essence (Romantic Urthism?). The standard towards which their pots seem to aspire is not that of Sung Dynasty ceramics but of less refined, more universal peasant ware. Svend's pots, with their massive and simple serenity are not unlike those made in the mid 19th century by Daniel Seagle in North Carolina. The ancient rightness of their pots is a result of the greatest skill and assurance.

My next stop was Wenford, and after a memorable conversation with Michael over a steaming chalice of coffee I was offered an apprenticeship. I am sure that Michael saw my arrival as an opportunity for personal revenge on Stoke-on-Trent. Certainly in terms of the initial anguish it created within my family he was right. I, meanwhile, was more than happy to jump out of the frying pan of industrial ceramics into the fire of studio pottery.

The three years I spent there, learning Cardew's counterpoint, retain a rosy glow. Life had a 'green' flavour; Wenford was an alternative rural idyll, presided over by a charismatic and cantankerous Great Potter, where as much time was spent growing vegetables and eating hearty meals as making and talking about pots.

I remember cycling down from Bristol to Wenford like a youth to war, convinced that making simple pots by hand with local materials would change the world. Well, the world changed, but not for the better. From my perspective it is in danger of becoming an even more technological and consumerist wasteland (not just here in America). Making

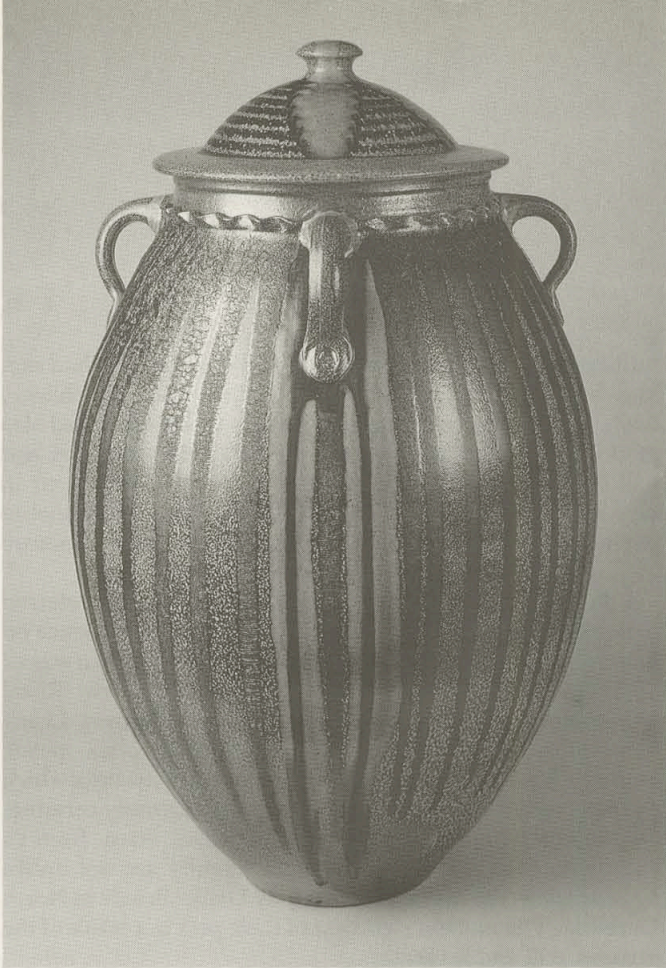
Back of kiln loaded with planters



OPPOSITE TOP Mark Hewitt — Lidded jar, wood fired saltglaze with manganese and iron slip, 34" tall.

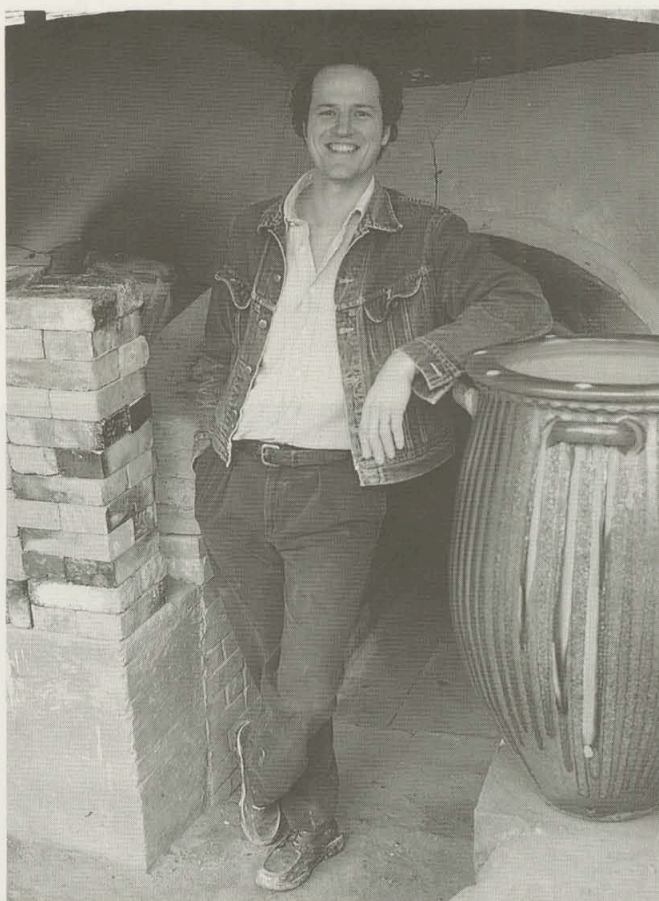
BELOW LEFT Teapot, saltglazed with swirl ware, 18cm h.

BELOW RIGHT Mug, saltglaze



Mark Hewitt — large lidded jar, wood fired and saltglazed over trailed slip decoration

Mark Hewitt



pots is my effort to avoid that perilous route.

I maintain that the ethical production of simple functional pots is valuable; even a mug can be a tool of social and utopian activism. I see my work dovetailing with a host of progressive and pragmatic social and environmental ideas, all of which strive to make the world more just, peaceful and beautiful.

I am aware that ideologies can be dangerous illusions; witness the demise of communism for example. But it alarms me, as Milan Kundera suggests in his book *Immortality*, that ideology is dead and has been replaced by imageology, that our lives are no longer influenced by lofty spiritual or intellectual leadership, but by the values of political campaign managers, advertising agencies, fashion stylists and show business stars. I, for one, am deeply suspicious of basing our values on social and commercial images.

If, instead, I am able to make tangible talismans of hope amid the disturbed prattle of our world, then my efforts have been worthwhile. But good pots do more than give docile consolation, for they objectify our individual peculiarities, and, in use, communicate the complexity of the human essence between the maker and the user with a voice distinct from all others. Good pots speak a language of their own, with a vocabulary as expressive, rich and sophisticated as any other art form.

I look at the mugs and pitchers and abstract works of art through the same eyes, I do not categorize works of art by function. The fact that you can use pots simply adds to their beauty, it certainly does not detract. Aesthetic entertainment is superseded by function. A working mug or pitcher can communicate and express feelings as effectively as something made to be contemplated. Contemplation is good and so too is use, but it is in use that I gain access to the user's soul.

Mugs and pitchers have a specific place in the culture of the American South. Tea drinking in the South is unlike English tea time, or the Japanese Tea Ceremony. Here we have the Iced Tea Ceremony, replete with ritual vessels, the mug and pitcher, and ritualized surroundings: formica, linoleum, ceiling fans, humming refrigerators, Sweet n'Low and Johnny Cash (if you're lucky).

Despite, or because of this, moving South in 1983 felt like coming home. I had spent three previous years working in Connecticut with Todd Piker, another Cardew student, gathering more skills and learning about the whole business of making a living as a potter in the USA. It was while there that I met my wife, Carol Peppe, and we decided to stay in America.

We found our Shangri La in a ramshackle farmhouse at the end of a dirt road, about 35 miles from Seagrove on the Piedmont of North Carolina. A large barn and long chicken house offered space for my workshop and showroom. Good local clays and an abundance of the highly calorific Southern yellow pine were available nearby.

I choose to dig and refine my own wild clays. They are alive. I think pots made out of wild clays are Songs of the Earth, and that wood firing adds the harmony to these Songs.

The qualities that many people admire in old pots from Tamba to Yi dynasty Korea, from Frederick Carpenter in 19th century Boston to Hamada derive largely from the clay itself. You can not end up with a living pot without living clay. Potters make clay speak, but the language depends on the clay.

I am drawn to pots that are generic and universal. I like simple folk pots made by hand in large quantities, using local materials that have been fired in wood fired kilns. This is by no means a formula for good pottery, but, for me, these elements are a necessary beginning. I see the same qualities in a Daniel Seagle jar, a Korean kimchi jar, and a West Africa water pot. Similarly, I associate a saltglazed Nicholas Fox jug



Mark Hewitt — three tumblers (*Iced Tea Ceremony Vessels*), *slipped saltglaze*, 15-17cm h.

from North Carolina with a Japanese Tamba jar, or a bottle from La Borne in France. The pots I make are a synthesis of all these folk traditions, so my place within the North Carolina tradition corresponds with the way North Carolina's pots relate to folk pots from around the world. The context is expanded, but the location is the same.

In using many of the same shapes, materials and recipes as the old folk potters I am able to splice together elements of technique, shape and decoration from different parts of the world to produce a hybrid style that is individual, yet common. Musically speaking, my style would be more World Beat than Bluegrass.

My 900 cubic foot wood kiln is a sleek and volatile beast that must be treated with respect. It is a modified version of a 14th century kiln from Northern Thailand around Swankhalok, and is similar to Svend's second kiln at Sheepwash. Wood kilns are sacred places, they have their own spirits. They are also like big paint brushes, decorating pots in a sophisticatedly uncertain, but not random, manner. Every cubic inch of a big wood kiln has an aesthetic potential, and my task is to cunningly tease out the full richness and complexity of the space.

I fire three times a year. The kiln holds about 1,000 pots weighing a total of 6,000 lbs. wet of clay. About 40 of the pots are big planters and jars ranging from 45 lbs. to 120 lbs. The rest is a full range of kitchen and table ware. After each firing I have a sale lasting one weekend. A notice is sent out to people on our mailing list and most of my pots are purchased at these sales. I also have occasional gallery shows.

Handmade functional pots are still very much in demand, and, as long as people have hands and mouths and get hungry

and thirsty, they always will be. Ceramic culture once deemed it fashionable to be a production potter, but now there is a stigma attached, largely connected with exclusive and, to my mind, misguided notions of creativity and originality. It may be more fashionable to make original, personal, clay expressions than to make straight pots, to make vacuous VOCOs (vessel oriented clay objects), rather than passionate pitchers. But I sometimes wonder what sort of pots Daniel Seagle would be making if he were alive today. I think it is possible, and certainly desirable, to make a mug that has the same quality, the same monumental spirit, as a Seagle jar. Just as some violinists are able to draw their bows across their instruments to play a single note that makes the soul cry, so too can a potter still make a mug that elevates the act of drinking to an act of intense communication between the soul of the maker and the soul of the user.

Regardless of my own strong preference for traditional functional pottery, the pantheon of potters has always had a diverse aesthetic spectrum, from peasant to imperial, studio to industrial, folk to funk. Making pots should not place potters in a dismissively competitive Ceramic League characterised by fiercely guarded hierarchies, petty jealousies and destructive rivalries. It should place us in a world that delights in diversity, where our work, whether traditional or modern, is valued and appreciated. If potters are unable to do this, how can we expect the rest of the world to?

Mark Hewitt has an exhibition of his work at Harlequin Gallery, 68 Greenwich High Road, London SE10. August 15-September 11.