

Just Another Mug

By Mark Hewitt

Aesthetics Panel 1999

I have a mug that travels with me wherever I go--we are curiously attached to each other. Sometimes I pay little attention to it; we share the easy familiarity of a good marriage, but like any relationship, ours is complex and changeable. When I inspect my faithful mug, I realize that it appeals to my senses on several different levels; it is a labyrinth of aesthetic values that I am forever trying to understand.

Of course, on a rudimentary level, it is simply something I drink out of, a useful functional object. It works, it does its job. But it also has therapeutic value, much like a teddy bear or a blanket used by a child for comfort and security. It is also a material object, a thing of substance, a highly specific configuration of molecules. It is an abstract object with substance, shape and color that provokes my poetic sensibilities, providing an exploratory lens to understanding that draws me into deep meditations. It is an object with historical significance, in that it relates to all the other mugs and pots that have ever been made. It is an ideological object that attempts, in some modest way, to resist and redress the imbalance of global capitalism. It is an economic object, because, having failed ideologically, it must live in the real world and I might have to sell it. It is a valuable, inclusive, functional ceramic object.

The fact that this mug is wood-fired is both particular and incidental. Had it been electric-fired, it would have certain defining characteristics. But because it was fired with wood instead, it has special meaning and value to me. As a useful functional object, it doesn't rely a bit on wood firing--a plastic cup is also useful and functional, and is probably technically and hygienically superior. So the mug's usefulness is in some ways its least significant aesthetic attribute, except that when using it, it engages my senses and I begin to recognize its unique character traits.

Therapeutically, on the other hand--on an intimate rather than social level--the wood-fired mug, unlike its plastic counterpart, has a life of its own. A richness to the surface, both in the soft gentle complexity of the orange peeled glaze, and the bristly burr of stuck ember, is a direct function of wood firing. Combined with the indentation, or scar, left by a melted scrap of stained glass stuck under the rim which tickles my lip when drinking, these elements stimulate my tactile sensibilities in a way that is unique to wood firing. We wood firers own the turf of organic fictive complexity. There is so much going on aesthetically that I cannot dismiss it; I am still learning from, and being comforted by this mug. It is beautiful and it makes me feel good.

My mug is also a material object, the product of a specific set of decisions made about clay, glaze, and fire. These decisions were partly scientific and partly intuitive. Potters

enjoy reading the technical information contained within the actual physical substance of our chosen materials, our tastes are revealed by our preferences. I favor local, unrefined clays and glaze materials, and have sufficient scientific knowledge about them to ensure that my aesthetic and intuitive desires reach a successful conclusion. The mug is technically able to withstand prolonged, ordinary use, and also to impart enjoyment from its essential qualitative substance.

As an abstract object this mug provokes me. As a piece of abstract solid geometry, it is a truncated cone--strong-based, elegantly handled, standing with a proud air. Its shape, as it was made, was not assumed or dismissed but noticed and elevated. Its form is fluid without being loose and sloppy, and tight without being rigid. It is secure and clean, with an athletic handle that invites you to pick it up, while the expectant soft flair of its rim demands you put your lips to it. Formally it is simple, but far from dull.

In color it is predominantly yellow and brown, with three pale blue and lilac glass drips. Proximity to a pile of embers while cooling from top temperature has given a choked milky iridescence to the surface that evokes a brutal Carolina dawn, dirty yellow sun lazily beating back the haze, water trembling as it evaporates.

I can pick it up, stare at the slick gray black bottom with its three hurriedly placed pink wad marks, and think of skin and the sweaty wetness of salt. How could I forget!--this mug is also a sensual object. By picking the mug up you have color in your hand, the electricity of texture against skin, and the muscular instruction of balance in your mind. Some mugs may be exuberant, full of the joys of spring; others may have the quieter beauty of a hidden smile, or of a friendly whisper. Some stammer, some shout. Each one earns our attention.

The particular qualities of this mug would not have emerged had it not been wood-fired. I wanted these qualities and sought them out in my kiln. They didn't happen by chance, as Philip Rawson suggested at the last wood-fire conference, but as a result of the reckless precision with which I fire my kiln, and my control of all the complex variables of the process. The markings were deliberate, not accidental.

Historically speaking, this mug is part of a continuum of mugs: it wasn't the first, nor will it be the last. It stands as a momentary document of my ceramic understanding. Because it is one of my mugs, it is a personal as well as a historical object. No one else has ever made a mug quite like this one, yet it is laden with references from the past. It echoes medieval beer mugs, Leach and Cardew's interpretations of medieval mugs, North Devon handles, North Carolina handle butt finger pushes, the Lincoln County alkaline glaze, Daniel Seagle's glass drips, face jugs, salt glaze Asian ash glazed stoneware, the Tea Ceremony, contemporary anagama firing, Svend Bayer and Chester Nealie. It is not a slavish genuflection, nor a cheeky homage masquerading as a mug. It is a bearer of intelligence.

As an ideological object this wood fired mug is little more than a quaint, nostalgic and tired cliché. It is a blind, romantic parry against the inevitability of modernism, a feeble

lance against a monstrous windmill. Made many times before with sickening earnestness, I wonder how many have been ignominiously shunted to the back of the shelf, their handles between their legs, dismissed, unappreciated, irrelevant, obsolete?

But not this one, nuh ah, no way! This one is up front and center, stubbornly refusing to submit to scornful criticism. It is "The Little Mug That Could," saying, "I think I can, I think I can, look at me, look at me, use me, use me, there's more to me than meets the eye." It valiantly pricks the conscience, goading the spirit, providing hope that the world can be put right. Pathetically Ruskinian, adamantly Cardewian, maddeningly Mingei-ian, absolutely! In the final words of the prophet Brian in Monty Python's "Life of Brian," as he hung on the cross, "I'm not dead yet." Mugs spring eternal.

Wood firing is central to the political ideology of the homespun, of getting off the grid with our own anti-technological manifesto. It is a romantic, regressive, and quaint idea to decide to fire with wood. In this sense, the wood firing movement reminds me of one of those whacky political parties like "The Sunshine Party" or "The Elvis Impersonators Party." It's a wonderful idea, we have every right to pursue our dreams, and it's vital to bite the hand that feeds you, but heaven help us all if we ruled the world (Mansfield for President!), or if everyone fired with wood, or if we had to provide mugs for the masses.

What we make is not the pizza you eat at Pizza Hut, but the wood fired pizza you eat at Ian Jones' gourmet restaurant. It is delicious and expensive, and well worth the trouble to go the extra mile to make. But to all except us potters, it is still only a meal, not a life.

To get through life, however, we all need some dough, we all need money. And--to return to the saga of my favorite mug--it also works well as an economic object. It is exchangeable for money or can be bartered for goods and services. People like wood fired pots, they may need a little help to start with, but once they get the message, they have been known to spend good money on them. My mug is rare, it is precious, it is highly valued.

The more technologically sophisticated and wealthy a culture, the more people value good wood fired pots. Ours is a balancing aesthetic at one end of the technological spectrum. It is also an aesthetic that can be manipulated and marketed like any other aesthetic. As has been said, pottery is, at one level, merely about "turning mud into money"; whether it is Spode, Saxe, or Tsujimura.

This mug is a product of materials, skill, teamwork, and the rhythms of a lengthy wood firing. Through repetition, refinement, insight and concentration, its aesthetic value rises above the ordinary, standing as a reflection of all that has gone into it. It is a beacon of thought and energy, shining brightly in the dark.

It is just another mug.