

**MARK HEWITT: POTTER**



# Mark Hewitt: Artist

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**Fine art is the *refinement*, not the antithesis, of popular art.**

—T.S. Eliot

For D.C.D.

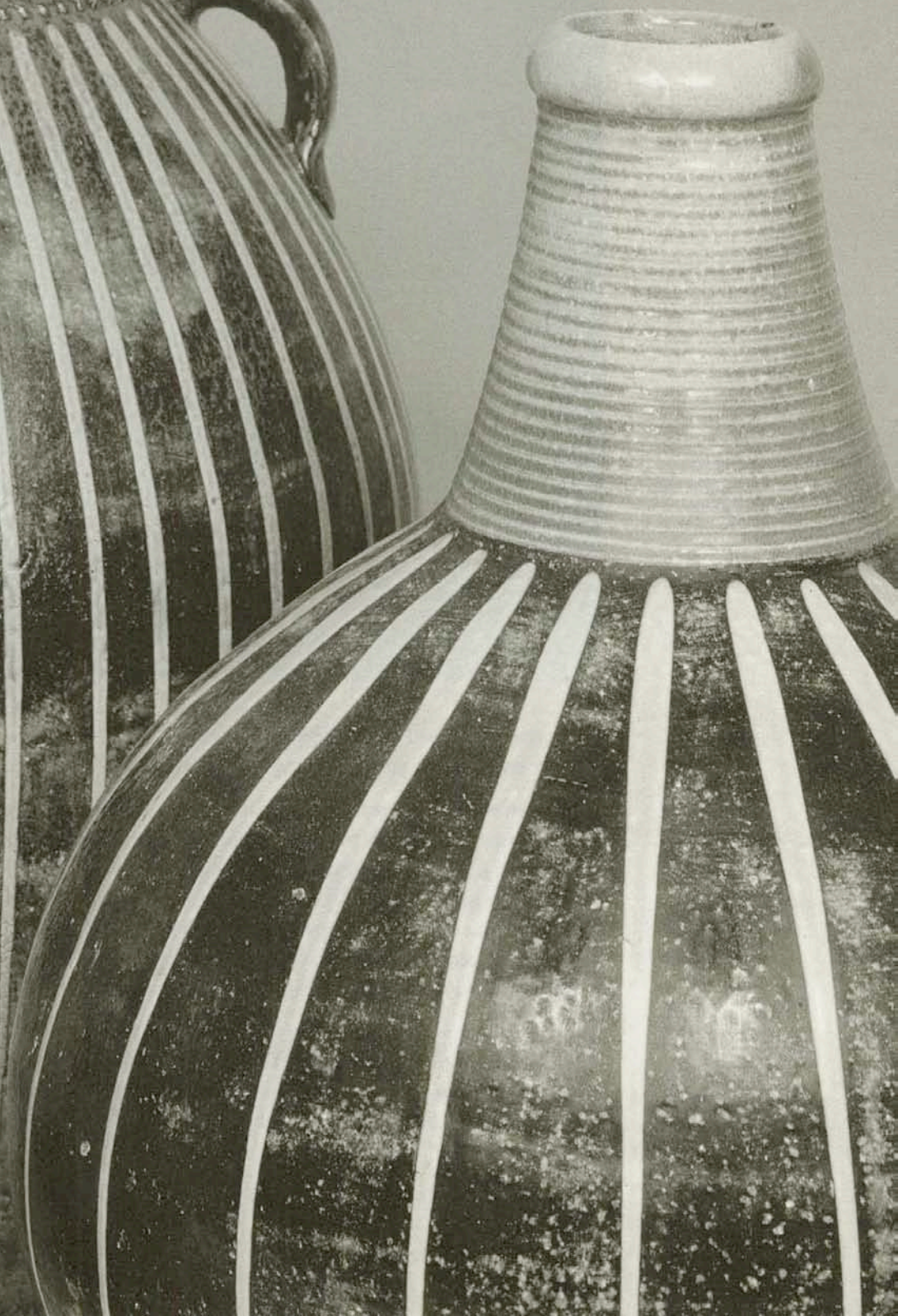
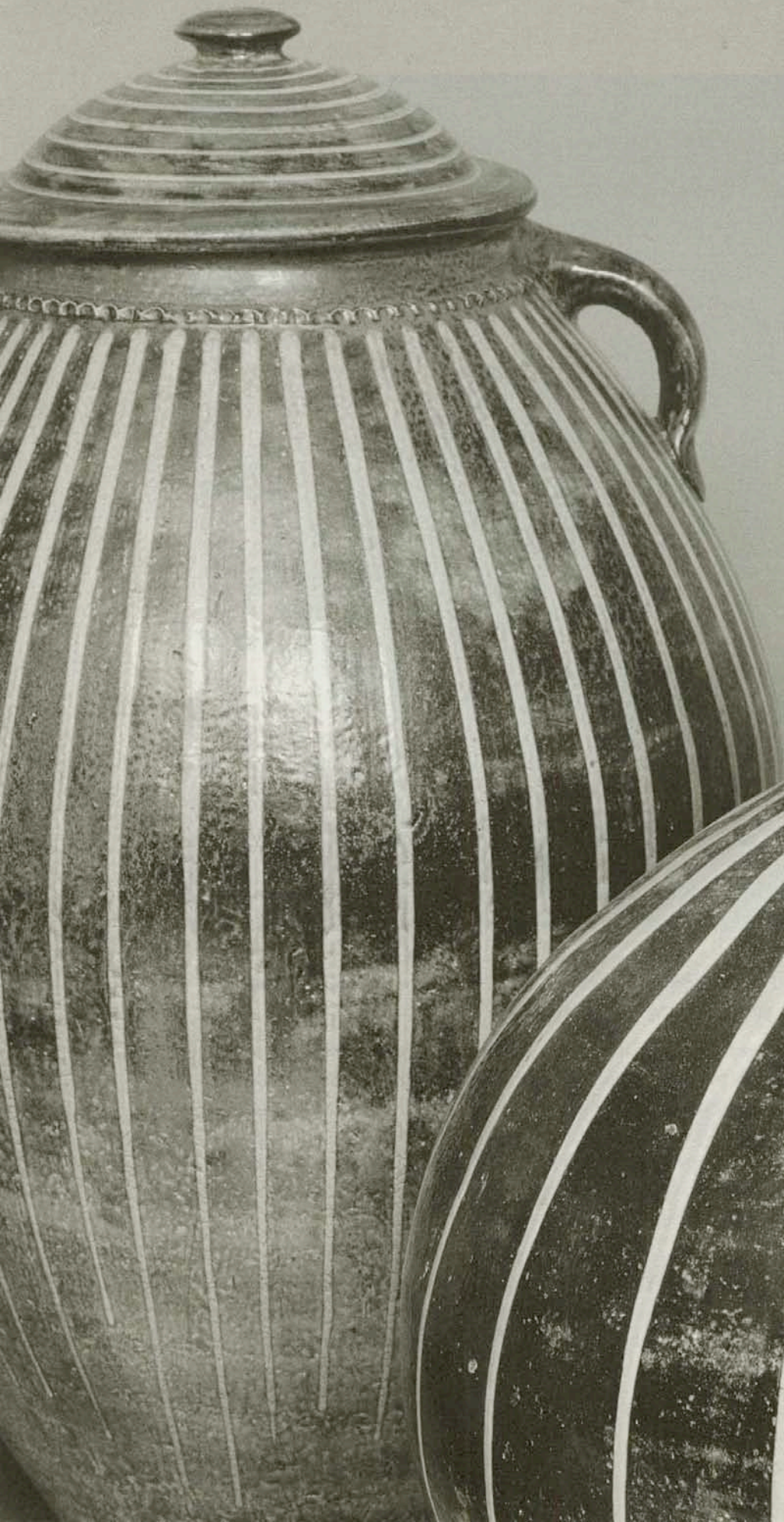
*Lux aeterna luceat ei*

**I FIRST ENCOUNTERED MARK HEWITT'S POTS** not long after moving to North Carolina in 1986. They seemed to me to be superior productions of considerable aesthetic merit, although they were then much more polite than they are now—their forms more reticent, their decoration more restrained, their glazes simpler and more conventional. In the intervening decade Hewitt has followed his pottery where it led, as he seems, without hesitation, to have followed life where it led—from Stoke-on-Trent to Michael Cardew, to India, Africa, and Japan, and, finally, to Connecticut and North Carolina. Such acquiescence in what life offers is not the least sign of an important artist.

An eager seeker after new challenges, Hewitt has also become a master of the series of complex aesthetic decisions he must make. No medium of which I am aware allows, indeed demands, such a constant series of those decisions as pottery. Starting with what clay is used and how a pot is made—how its shape takes form on the wheel and how it is glazed and decorated—these decisions include the nature of the kiln and fire in which the pot is hardened, the placement of pots inside the kiln and, in Hewitt's case, how, when, where, and how much salt is added, in what way and how much ash is stirred up, and so on. These are only the aspects of potting over which the potter has some control. Those over which he has little or no control are legion, and Hewitt has increasingly provoked and accepted effects such as the unexpected and enlivening configurations of drips and runs produced by firing pots on their sides or upside down, and the matte or coruscated areas that result when pots fall into the fire's ash.

Listening to what his pottery tells him has led Hewitt to new shapes, to bolder versions of old shapes, to rougher surface textures resulting from more complex glazes and heavier ash deposits, and to an increase in sheer size. His large covered jars are among his most impressive achievements and are unrivaled, to my limited knowledge, in contemporary pottery. As to shape, the spring from base to shoulder has become at once stronger and more subtle, the shapes and attachments of handles and lids jauntier. Blue glass runs add color and elegance to Hewitt's decorative repertoire and confirm the usefulness to him of the local tradition in which he has chosen to work. The fact that his pots go well beyond that tradition without at first seeming to do so evidences the subtlety behind their boldness. The freedom with which they make use of and surpass that tradition bespeaks their contemporaneity. As with all









Hewitt at the entrance to his groundhog kiln which can hold up to 1200 pieces of pottery and is fired only three times a year.

important art, Hewitt's contemporaneity is neither antic nor defensive nor self-conscious, but rather attests to the ability of the best of the past to liberate the future.

Although he is concerned that those who acquire his pots use them and find them well-made for use, Hewitt never fails to react aesthetically to what comes out of the kiln. Indeed, his immediate reaction on seeing the products of a kiln opening is almost exclusively aesthetic—enthusiasm at the beauty of the successes and disappointment at what he perceives to be the weakness of less than first-rate pots. These judgments may, and often do, change as Hewitt's perceptions of individual pots become subtler, but the mechanism remains the same. He reacts as an artist, not as a technician, and he is right to do so.

Mark Hewitt's pottery rises triumphantly above both fashion and the art-craft dichotomy that has so often in the past bedeviled thinking about ceramics. While beauty and the aesthetic were once, in the West, seen to reside in refinement, the long-range effects of Romanticism have allowed us to perceive them also in the rough and unfinished and in other places where

they were not previously thought to exist. As a result, the boundaries of the aesthetic have been significantly extended in ceramics as in other media. Rather than seeing "fine" and "applied" arts as opposed to one another, we are able to perceive them today as parts of a continuum through which either may rise to the qualitative top. It would be a hardy soul who would now maintain that the best pots of, say, Daniel Seagle are aesthetically inferior to those of potters working in more widely known traditions.

To speak of the development of Hewitt's art is at once to take note of his rapidly increasing technical mastery and to suggest the aesthetic power of what he creates. That power cannot be argued but only witnessed, as Cardew so eloquently suggested when he wrote: "Whether pots are good or bad in a technical or practical way is a thing in which it is possible to acquire some knowledge and some degree of control; but as to whether they are good or bad in their real character and their inner life—this is something which is not in the control of any intellectual system but can only be perceived directly." Suffice it to say that were I asked to name the best contemporary artists known to me Mark Hewitt would be prominent among them.