

Asian Ancestors

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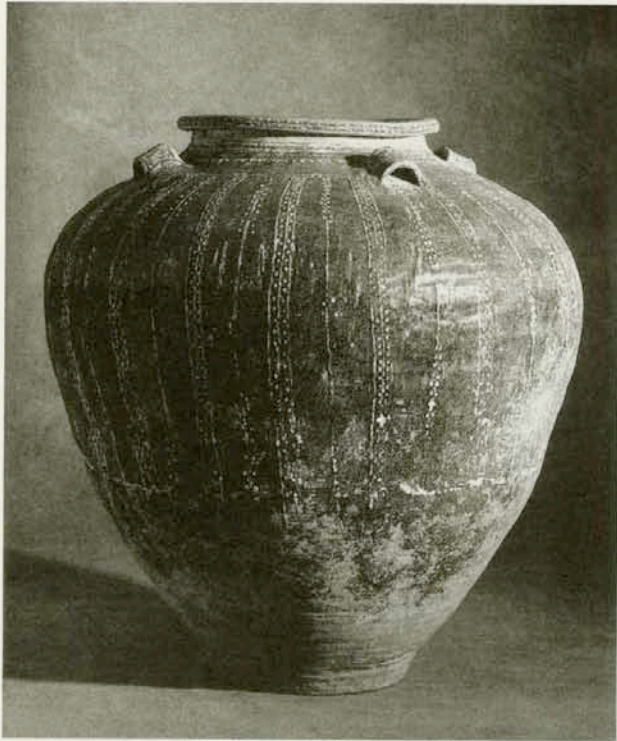
FIVE BIG JARS STAND BELLY TO BELLY on Mark Hewitt's mantelpiece. The sitting room of the old house is small, the mantel a plain wooden board. The jars crowd quietly and confidently into the room. They are not a decorator's statement, however, but a sort of reference library of utilitarian shapes from various corners of the world—Nigeria and China as well as North Carolina and New England. Their well-worn bodies of smoky, burnished earthen ware or grainy stoneware and their dull, dark glazes speak a visual language comparable to the rough rural dialects of their respective makers and users.

For Mark, these pots constitute a sort of ancestral shrine; through his work he is, in a way, a descendant of the Asian potters who made them. Mark told me the jars speak to him, and they spoke to me, too. Although it is only natural to compare Mark's work with that of other potters, living and dead, in the North Carolina community of which he is a part, to me the pots he has gathered also call up images of the many plain, practical jars once (or still) made in Asia, created and sustained by the needs of local users. Such pots have been the focus of much of my own research over the past twenty-five years. Most of that study has concentrated on the past, because jars of this type have been largely displaced throughout much of Asia—as they have in North Carolina—by metal, glass, or plastic containers or by the processes of canning, bottling, and refrigeration, and the number of places in which they are still produced for the local market has shrunk alarmingly. In some areas, however, one can still visit active communities of potters, whose work traces its genealogy to those older, historical jars.

An examination of some aspects of the utilitarian stoneware ceramic traditions in Asia can help to illuminate the environment in which Mark works in this country. The examples of a sunken ship, a living potters' community in Thailand, and a historical jar-making community in Japan will illustrate the demand for stoneware pots, the community basis of their production and use, and a unique instance in which their everydayness has been reinterpreted as the embodiment of a refined aesthetic.

It is hard for us to imagine the sheer quantities of jars once required for daily activities. Those numbers have been confirmed by recent excavations of shipwrecks in East and Southeast Asia that also tell us how jars from major manufacturing centers were distributed along the thriving international trade routes. Perhaps the best-documented of these wrecks is the *San Diego*, a Spanish galleon that sank off Manila in December 1600 (Desroches, *Treasures*).





"Martaban" jar excavated from the *San Diego*. Burma, circa 1600. Dark red stoneware clay with trailed white slip under black glaze. H: 90 cm. National Museum of the Philippines, Manila

Detailed documents in the Spanish national archives show that this small wooden ship carried over 350 passengers; evidence from the wreck reveals that more than 800 jars were packed on board to store water and foodstuffs, including wine, oil, pickled fish and meat, and preserved fruits and vegetables. The jars had been acquired from ports in Burma, Thailand, and southern China. They are as distinct from one another in their shapes, glazes, and decorations as the inhabitants of those port cities would have been.

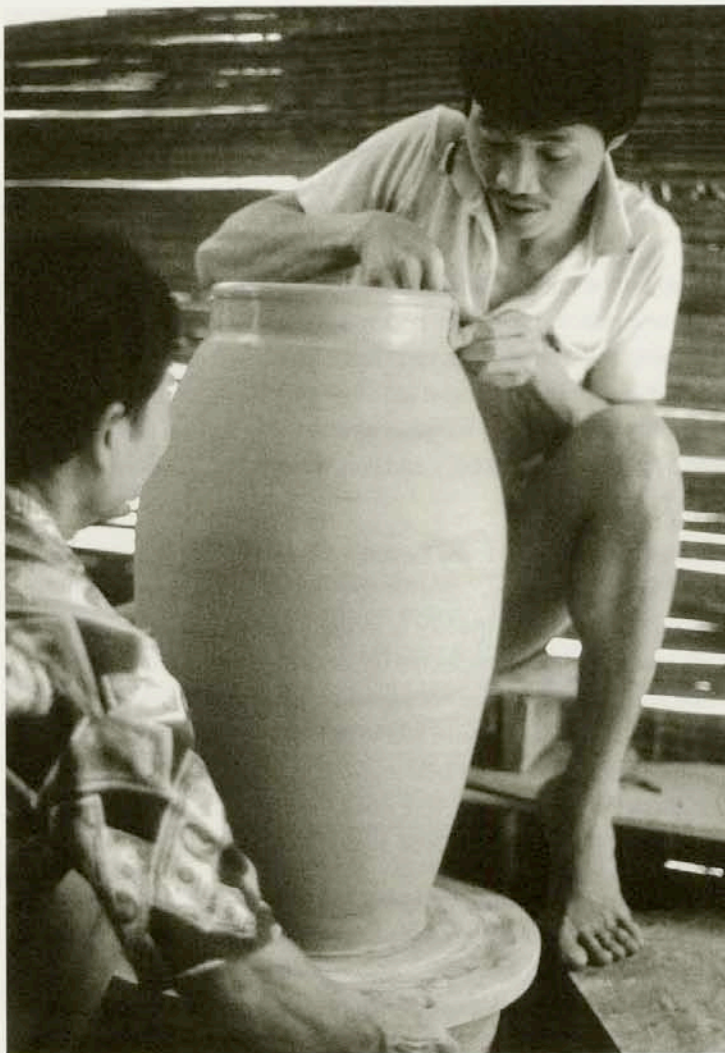
The Burmese port of Martaban was famous for its round-bodied, brown-glazed jars fitted with wide, horizontal lugs on their high shoulders and ornamented with vertical stripes and dots of trailed white slip, which appears amber beneath the dark glaze. The term *Martaban* denoted such jars in the diverse languages of traders throughout Asia. The exact source of the

Martaban jars is not clear, but potters in upper Burma still make similar jars and ship them down the Irrawaddy River by roping them together to form rafts. The largest Martaban jars aboard the *San Diego* held ninety-two gallons of water.

The Thai pots were narrower in shape and more somber in color, with no decoration other than a few lines incised around the neck beneath the brown glaze. Made at the riverside kilns of Baan Bang Rachan in Singburi province, they were sent down the Chao Phraya River to the royal capital and international port of Ayutthaya, where they were purchased as containers for commercial products or for storage of supplies on board the European and Asian ships that visited the port. (Numerous Singburi jars have been excavated from sixteenth and seventeenth century levels of Japanese port cities.)

Finally, many different types of jars on the *San Diego* came from coastal kilns in southern China. Some were homely in appearance, but many more bore elaborate relief sculptures of dragons, their bodies rising to form a circle of lug handles on the shoulder. The decorations on these jars bespeak a kind of generosity and enjoyment on the part of their makers, who were surely under pressure to fill up the kilns quickly yet amused themselves by squeezing clay coils into writhing creatures to impress and entertain the unknown purchasers of their creations.

The *San Diego's* inventory of jars was unusually large, because the vessels had to fill all the needs of the passengers during a voyage of unknown duration, with no possibility of replenishment along the way. But similar containers were used on land in farming communities in northeast Thailand, a rural area where stoneware jars still occupy an important place in farm households. In kitchens, for example, large, unglazed jars hold husked rice ready for cooking. Others hold water for kitchen use. Special pots with double rims serve in the process of fermenting sardine-like fish into a pungent sauce that is at once a condiment, a flavoring, and an essential source of protein. The space between the two rims is filled with water and an



A potter finishes the neck of a large stoneware jar as his helper spins the solid wood wheel. Laos P.D.R., Luang Prabang province, Baan Chaan, 1990.

inverted bowl is fitted over the jar mouth with its rim in the water, creating an airtight seal that promotes fermentation while keeping out ants and rodents. Squat, broad-based jars with holes punched into their shoulders keep small fish, caught in ponds or rice paddies, alive and fresh until mealtime. Conical, unglazed mortars with heavy bases are used to macerate and pound together the ingredients for raw papaya salad, a favorite food of the northeast Thai. In a separate shed used as a bathroom, a very large jar holds water for ladling over oneself to bathe.

These and other unglazed stoneware vessels are still made in some communities in north-east Thailand and Laos. Stoneware-making villages (such as Baan Chaan on the Mekong River near Luang Prabang, Laos) typically are located near a source of clay but also alongside a navigable river, which the potters need to bring in firewood and to send out their wares. The potters are farmers first, and during the rainy season they are preoccupied with growing rice. After the harvest in December, however, they clear the weeds away from their kilns, which are single chambers either tunneled out from the ground or built into a slope using homemade bricks, and which are situated on rough, unfarmable land at the edge of the village. Then they spend the four or five months of the dry season making pots.

The potters erect temporary thatch-roofed shelters in which to make and store their pots until the firing. Two people work together as a team: one person (always a man) is the

maker, while the other, who may be the maker's wife or a male relative or friend, acts as helper, preparing the clay coils and spinning the low wooden wheel on which the potter forms the vessels by coiling and throwing. In some villages, each team uses a set of ten wheels lined up in a row, moving from wheel to wheel to make ten identical pots in the course of a day. The most skillful potter is easy to spot, as he will have an extra wheel in his row. He is also the person most carefully watched by the boys and young men who are just learning how to make pots.

The survival of such communities is threatened today by various outside influences, including the replacement of homemade fermented-fish sauce with commercial products, competition from factory-made jars brought in by truck, and the lure of better incomes offered by construction jobs in Taiwan or the Near East. Yet unexpected opportunities may sustain production or even revitalize it. Unlike Thailand, Laos does not prohibit the home brewing of liquor for festivals, and Laotian villagers use their stoneware jars to ferment rice beer. As Laos's economy has improved in recent years, demand for beer-making jars has increased, and the number of potters working in Baan Pon Bok, on the Thai side of the Mekong River, has actually increased as they have found a good market for their products in Laos.

Neither the makers nor the users of unglazed stoneware jars in Laos and northeast Thailand seem unduly concerned with the appearance of their pots. A warm brown flush to the clay or a thick coating of green glaze on a jar's shoulder—the accidental result of wood ash accumulating and melting during the firing—does not increase the jar's selling price simply for aesthetic reasons, although it may show the buyer that the jar was particularly well fired. (Or again, it may caution the shopper to look for cracks resulting from overfiring.) Baan Chaan potters sometimes apply small clay figures of snakes, frogs, and other water creatures to the shoulders of their jars, but Baan Pon Bok potters begrudge the time it takes to add even a single row of combing around the shoulders. They say the decoration does not bring them any more money for the pots.

A much more intense concern with the appearance of stoneware jars—among users and collectors if not the potters themselves—developed in Japan. Early stoneware pots from Japanese kilns followed only an approximation of standard sizes, and workmanship varied markedly. The swelling forms, balanced on narrow bases and often asymmetrical or leaning to one side, reflect the part-time potter's basic desire to create a functional container. Later, as the jars began to be distributed more widely through commercial networks, the forms contracted, becoming narrow and more cylindrical in response to the need for efficient packing in warehouses or ships' holds; the changes also suggest the impact of consumer taste.

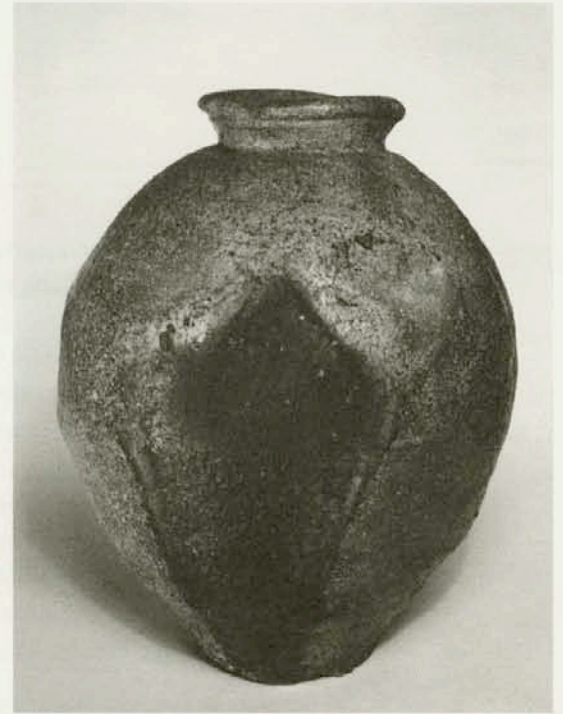
The variation and unevenness of early jar forms also reflects the part-time and nonprofessional status of the potters. The makers of these early pots were primarily farmers or woodcutters; in areas where clay was available, though, they also fired a few kilnloads of pots for the local market during quiet intervals between farming seasons. Coming back to the potter's trade after months of doing other work, they did not necessarily retain the appropriate motor

skills very well. Quality control was minimal: pots too poorly made, of course, simply collapsed during the forming or firing stages, but anything that survived the firing intact was taken to market. We know nothing of how customers evaluated the wares, or whether prices varied depending on a potter's skill.

In the late 1960s, storage vessels made in local kilns during Japan's medieval period (the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries) acquired sudden fame when a book by photographer Domon Ken featured portraits of such jars from the Shigaraki kilns. Domon placed the pots against stark black backgrounds and focused on the dramatic pits and crags of unglazed reddish stoneware clay dense with white granules of feldspar, on the streaks of natural green glaze formed by melting wood ash, or on gray clouds of unmelted ash. Soon, jars like these began appearing in dealers' galleries, private collections, and museums. Dealers commissioned agents to make the rounds of farmhouses in rural areas, asking for jars still in use in barns or privies. Amazingly, many jars were there—having survived steady use, with little more than chipped or broken rims, for at least five centuries.

The recent craze for medieval jars in Japan, however, is not without precedent. It echoed a remarkable revision of Japanese taste in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries that revolutionized attitudes toward ceramics and changed the potter's role as well. This original "discovery" of unglazed storage jars—which were at that point not antiques but new pieces from local kilns—took place in the context of *chanoyu*, the Japanese tea ceremony. At the time, tea drinking as a social activity was undergoing a profound transformation in form and motive, from an opportunity to display proud collections of Chinese ceramics to an occasion for aesthetic contemplation and appreciation of a select group of utensils. Inspired by diverse sources, including Chinese ink painting and East Asian poetic theory, Japanese practitioners of *chanoyu* began seeking out utensils that, while functioning appropriately in the preparation and service of tea, would also convey an aesthetic of restraint, understatement, and subtlety, a mood sometimes characterized by the term *wabi* and exemplified by poems that evoked not the showiness of cherry blossoms in full bloom but the subdued color and melancholy mood of a rural landscape in late autumn.

Someone—we do not know who—seized upon the local unglazed stoneware as embodying these desired traits. A famous treatise written around 1500 by a tea master used the language of poetry to characterize the appearance of unglazed jars from the Shigaraki and Bizen kilns as "chilled and withered." Large local jars began to be used (in place of Chinese glazed ware) for the storage of tea leaves; small jars and basins became vases for a handful of wildflowers or containers for fresh water used to replenish the iron kettle that was kept simmering on the tea room hearth. The very architecture of tea rooms came to reflect the choice of utensils, with many being modeled after thatched farm huts—even though they might be constructed within the garden of an urban residence.



Jar. Japan, Shiga Prefecture, Shigaraki kilns, ca 1400–2450. Dark red stoneware with accumulations of natural ash glaze and unmelted ash. H: 82.29 cm. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., F82.29.

Once tea connoisseurs began to focus on the aesthetic possibilities of utilitarian stoneware, it did not take long before they communicated their desires to the potters (through the intermediaries of merchants specializing in tea utensils). From the mid-sixteenth century on, certain rural potters began to specialize in making utensils for the tea ceremony, still using the unrefined, unglazed local clay, fired in single-chamber kilns. This combination of rural technology and urbane taste created an unprecedented body of ceramic masterpieces from the kilns in such places as Bizen, Tamba, and Iga. Inspired by the rough, uneven forms of the common storage jars and encouraged by their urban patrons, potters made imaginative use of hand-modeling and carving to sculpt massive vessels that conveyed a powerful feeling of spontaneity. This new outlet for the potters' skills led, by the end of the century, to the emergence of full-time, professional potters, with concomitant improvements in technology and technical standards.

Ironically, in their newfound self-consciousness the potters quickly passed beyond the point of sculpting spontaneous masterpieces. But the love of unadorned, wood-fired clay for its "landscape" of color and texture and for its metaphoric evocativeness had become an entrenched part of the Japanese understanding of ceramics.

In the twentieth century, the earlier Japanese appreciation of storage jars resurfaced in several guises. One was the folk craft movement initiated in the 1920s by Soetsu Yanagi; this was an urban movement that responded to an intensive modernization and internationalization of Japanese culture by seeking out and validating the work of still-extant rural utilitarian potteries. Yanagi and his colleagues encouraged potters in such locations as Ryumonji and Onta to continue making pots in traditional shapes and using local materials—although their destinations were now the drawing rooms and dining rooms of cosmopolitan urban collectors. In addition to the folk craft movement, the revival of sixteenth century techniques by potters Kaneshige Toyo in Bizen, Arakawa Toyozo in Mino, and others, and the storage jar craze of the 1960s described above, testify to the endurance of the utilitarian aesthetic. Thanks to this widespread, deep-rooted, and abiding appreciation of handmade ceramics, some ten thousand potters are active in Japan today.

How do the stories of pots made and distributed in Asia relate to Mark Hewitt's own work in North Carolina? Primarily, it is in the fact that Mark aspires to continue in the spirit of the early Asian potters, who made jars because people just couldn't do without them. In older times, pots were a necessity, not a luxury. The containers of those days were the antithesis of many sad modern pseudo-jars, made according to the taste established by "country living" magazines, artfully posed on shelves and in corners, existing only for the image they project and containing nothing but dust. Despite the perceived "crudeness" of their shapes and styles, the early Japanese and Chinese and Southeast Asian jars are at least *alive*.

Mark understands the gratification bestowed by a customer who appreciates the functionality of the potter's products. He told me, "I desperately want these pots to be *used*. I want the feedback from the user that is the proper reward for all this labor and effort, and that

energizes toward the next round of effort." The user's demands may vary, focusing here on a watertight storage jar and there on a tea-ceremony vase artfully touched by fire. Lacking such clear-cut needs to be filled by pots, a modern user must become more creative. One might choose, perhaps, to replace a glass jar with a clay one for storing rice and grain on the kitchen counter.

Being a good user, especially today, is a responsibility. If a gardener buys a large jar to ornament the yard, she must learn that even the most durable-appearing "ornamental" containers need care and must be brought inside before the winter frost cracks them. Customers should be aware, too, that their expectations can sometimes lay a heavy burden on present-day potters. One potter has told me that he continually has to turn down requests to make mugs with attached pockets for used teabags and other "innovations" inspired by trivial commercial ceramics.

The old jars on Mark's mantelpiece speak of necessity and the maker's response to it; of reciprocity between maker and user and the responsibilities of those roles; of the rewards of finding beauty in a full form and unadorned surface. We are fortunate that North Carolina continues to nurture pot makers and pot users, and that the former have welcomed Mark Hewitt in their number. May the old jars continue to inspire him.

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