

Useful Pottery

eight artists

William Brouillard

Bruce Cochrane

Tim Crane

Andrew Martin

Walter Ostrom

Mark Pharis

Paul Rozman

Michael Simon

Sensual Inflections of Functional Pottery

The form of an object is often capable of awakening and producing emotions that become more intense to the degree that the form is less literal. This is certainly the case with functional pottery, which is based on an abstract form language connected to the real world through inflection and reference. This interests me. Although there are many possibilities and approaches one could take in discussing functional work, I want to make some brief comments concerning the sensual and potentially erotic undercurrents of pottery.

Pottery and humans share anatomical forms: feet, bellies, shoulders, necks, mouths, lips. These connections were not lost on the pre-Columbian potter of Peru who made a cup in the form of a woman with an immensely spread and exaggerated vagina, not unlike the moment when a baby's head crowns during childbirth. This is the only orifice of the cup and, one surmises, serves to be filled and drunk from. It is not surprising that the word "lips" derives from the latin *labia*. There is a richness of implication here that encompasses both literal and symbolic nourishment. It is a potent metaphor and weighted image.

These artists were astute and intuited the androgynous aspects of pottery— both male and female, to fill and be filled, active and receptive. We see in another pre-Columbian favorite of mine, which also shows their wonderful sense of humor, a drinking/pouring container in the form of a man with an erection, whose penis is practically the same size as he is. The top of his head, which is open, appears to be the place one drinks from, but the artist has played a practical joke on the viewer by piercing the head repeatedly just below the rim, making drinking impossible. One then realizes that he intends us to pour and drink from the penis.

From the frankness of these two pots, one can start to imagine the history of functional pottery as the development of an abstracted and couched language. It can be seen as the movement of the primal image (as the pre-Columbians knew it) further and further away from its recognizable source, archetype, and meaning.

The notion of design plays a role in this removal. I'll take a guess and say that the pre-Columbian potters weren't thinking about design and weren't speaking as we might about the parts of the pouring container and their formal relationships; they understood what parts they were dealing with. Cultural preference and its effect on the development of form, style, and design are all things that have served to remove pottery over time from the source that those pre-Columbians knew so well. What interests me about functional pottery today is that it is not as explicit as the pots described above; although the primal image is still present, it remains somewhat buried. The teapot or cup, for example, can be a kind of elastic image encompassing a rich set of subterranean implications. Rather than images of giant erections or formidable vaginas, there can be a subtle, non-narrative expression of sensuality enlisted through material, color, texture, and form. Those blatantly sexual images are lurking somewhere, perhaps both in the form and our unconscious, and our active participation with the object, on a physical level, can help us to find them. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard puts it this way: "By dreaming between the thing and word in the modesty of familiar things...the object, the modest object emerges to play its role in the world."

Functional pottery has the potential to affect us like mythology. Myths and fairytales can be read on many levels and satisfy a number of needs within a culture. Prometheus stealing fire from heaven makes a great story, but it also can be read as a metaphor for a psychic process. In the same way, functional pottery can exist on numerous levels. It is in the unique position to be an art of use and simultaneously satisfy a hunger for evocative and resonant form.

With the proliferation of two-dimensional media, removed from touch and actual objects, we are more and more familiar with life's surrogates—the TV, computer, VCR, slides, etc.—all contributing to what Philip Rawson, in his book *Ceramics*, calls "sensual castration." Good functional pottery is an antidote. As it exists in our daily lives and routines, it has the potential to fulfill a need in us for rich sensual reverberation and act as a trigger for daydream, memory, and association.

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