A Pot in the Hand

Mark Hewitt

NORTH CAROLINA IS A CRADLE of ceramic excellence. Though barely recognized elsewhere, the pottery tradition here is as aesthetically distinct and important as the better-known musical traditions the South has spawned. The wild cultural ferment that produced the blues, jazz, gospel, bluegrass, country, and Elvis has also produced a ceramic legacy of great richness and variety. Moravian slipware, Lincoln and Catawba County alkaline glaze, Moore and Randolph County salt glaze, and early twentieth-century Art Ware are not as well known as their musical counterparts, but they are spectacular tributes to the individual potters who created them. As an Englishman, an outsider, working here, these traditions are the spring into which I dip my pitcher, informing me in much the same way that the blues informs Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, and Eric Clapton.

Like the blues and its mutations, the Old North State's pottery tradition is not static: it is not a sullen repetition of redundant shapes and ideas, but a dynamic undercurrent of codes and symbols that can be interpreted and embellished at will. It flows with time, technology, and demand, transforming the world around it and bubbling up excitedly every once in a while.

When I look at old North Carolina pots and when making my own, I do so with eyes that are not southern, eyes that instead reflect a sensibility learned during my childhood and deepened during my early experiences as a potter in England. Although my style is different, I recognize that I approach making pots with the same passion and attention to quality and detail that enthralled my father and grandfather when whey worked at Spode. From them I am glad to have inherited a deeply ingrained sense of the breadth and complexity of ceramic culture. However, the way I look at pots now, and the sense of quality I have developed about pots, stems from the time I spent working with Michael Cardew in Cornwall. One of the most important lessons I learned took place as I sat with him early one cold spring morning, drinking steaming coffee from one of his chalices, or stem cups, at his big old oak table, just before stuttering my timid request to become his apprentice. I remember watching him turn over an empty bowl and frown eagerly and knowingly at its foot. He wasn't looking for a signature but appeared to be almost devouring the clay, scrutinizing it with intelligence and fervor.

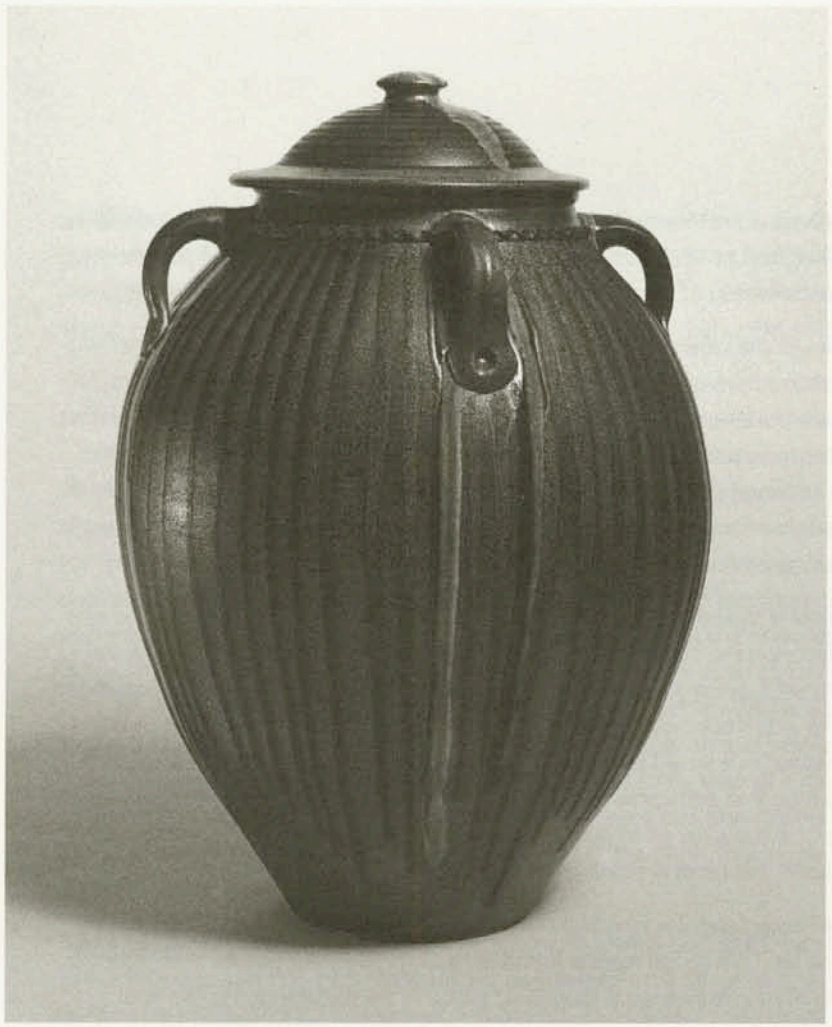
Every clay has a feel, a quality like the cut of different cloth. This quality can vary from the seductive satin of porcelain to the cozy flannel of earthenware. North Carolina's stoneware clays have the relaxed, purposeful, and unassuming quality of denim overalls. They can be clean and elegant but are prone to being unkempt and scruffy, even a little wild. Old pots made with clays that the potters themselves have dug and simply refined are vibrant to the touch, warm to the eye, and possess an elaborate microaesthetic that rewards attentive inspection. Clay has meaning and value beyond its physical properties; clay is a clue.

Cardew writes:

A good potter cannot treat raw materials merely as a means of production; he treats them as they deserve to be treated, with love. He cannot make things as mere utensils; he makes them as they have the right to be as things with a life of their own. When a potter not only knows his job but delights in it, when technique and inspiration become identified, the glow of life will begin to appear in his pots. Nobody can say in rational terms exactly what this glowing consists of, or how the inanimate can be capable of transmitting life from the maker to the user, but it is a fact of common experience (if not describable in terms of common sense). This aspect of pottery is not always discernible to first casual inspection; but provided it is in daily use it will gradually become visible, just as good character comes to be appreciated only through continued acquaintance. Its presence will fill the gaps between sips of tea or coffee at those moments when the mind, not yet focused on activity, is still in an open and receptive state; and will minister to the background of consciousness with a kind of friendly warmth, even perhaps on some occasion with a kind of consolation. (Pioneer Pottery, 250)

This way of looking at materials and pots Cardew learned from Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada, and Soetsu Yanagi (Leach, *Potter's Book* and Hamada; Yanagi, *Unknown Craftsman*). Cardew added the idiosyncrasies of his own character and taste when preparing his own materials and making his pots, just as I do, but the root of our inspiration is common, traceable to the Japanese folk art movement, folk pottery from around the world, Asian ceramics, and the tea ceremony. It is no longer fashionable to be still connected with any of these schools, or with their way of treating materials. Unfortunately, a convenient "MacPottery" approach is becoming the norm, almost a "potting by numbers," with polyester pots being the inevitable qualitative result.

Living in North Carolina, combining my own aesthetic preferences and peculiarities with the materials and technology I have assembled, I make connections between, for example, Lincoln County alkaline-glazed jars, Burmese Martaban jars, early Seto glazes from Japan, earthenware "buzzas" from North Devon, and Hausa cooking pots from Tatiko, Nigeria. I then filter this information while making, let's say, a few dozen chubby gallon jars in a day, giving each one my version of Cardew's lids and my version of Svend Bayer's interpretation of North Devon handles, before impressing these handles at their butt joint with a sideways North Carolina finger dent. After making them, I might glaze their necks and lids with some



FOUR HANDLED LIDDED JAR
1993
Salt glaze, glass runs, black drips, wood-fired stoneware
H: 35 ½ in.
Collection of The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia; Museum Purchase

thing that occasionally ends up looking like a Chinese proto-porcelain glaze, one of whose ingredients is an appetizing dark-red clay dug from behind the bleachers of the baseball diamond at my children's school. I might then decorate the jar with deliciously dripping, looping South Carolina swags (which I blithely claim as my motif), giving the swags a "Merrily, merrily, merrily," lilt before placing the jar in the kiln in a dangerous but treasured spot, where embers may char a halo at 2375°F underneath the swags. The pot that emerges may not be southern, but with luck it may emit the same rhythm that links southern folk pots to other traditional pots from around the world.

When I work, making connections between these different traditions, I am not engrossed in an academic exercise to see how obscure or clever my references can be. Nor am I engaging in dry revivalism. Rather, I am acknowledging the lives of the real individuals who made the incredibly beautiful, often simple and frequently unsigned, useful pots that I love above all others. I try to imagine the lives of the people who made them, sensing what sort of person or team of people touched the clay in such a way as to have made a particular pot. I wonder how humanely they were treated, how efficient they were required to be, and how structured were the parameters of their creativity. I gather as much information as I can about their historical precedents, their organizational structures, the mechanics of their tech-

I do not work alone. My wife, Carol, is with me in all that I do. Her love, compassion, wisdom, and persistence bring me to where I am. This exhibition is hers, too.

My daughters, Emma and Meg, illuminate my days, delighting and inspiring me as they go.

In the background, always, are my parents, Gordon and Sybil Hewitt. Their faith and encouragement are my foundation.

I thank and love them all.

—Mark Hewitt

nologies, and the nature of their markets and patrons. I notice their eye, their skill, their sense of balance, their effort, their pride, their flair. They guide me out of isolation and provide me with a standard of excellence.

Each decision I make, consciously or unconsciously, while making a pot, every movement I make within the choreography of a production cycle, needs to be fresh and alive and executed with a full heart. For everything shows. Pots are a record of a potter's thoughts, character, and actions. In the words of Japanese basketmaker Hiroshima Kazuo, "Making a good basket is more like a form of prayer. When I'm working I keep telling myself, 'Do it well, do it well.' I want to make something that will please the person who uses it and suit that person's needs" (Cort, "Basketmaker").

How my pots are used is to some extent outside my control, for a labyrinth of obstacles can keep people from enjoying the simple pleasure of using handmade pots. These obstacles include unfamiliarity, price, prestige, competition, beauty, and fear of breakage. None of these is a good reason. The smell of an old, well-used crock is proper; it is the equivalent of the carefully fostered patina on a prized tea bowl that has been used for centuries. So too is the chip on the rim of a mug that somehow adds to the relationship you have with it. In the refrigerator, on the table, or in the sink, good pots act as brave contradictions to the impersonal and the shoddy. A pot in the hand is worth two on the shelf.

A customer of mine has a daughter who salivates Pavlovianly in response to the rattling of the lid on their gallon jar. That sound means Monday night football and popcorn will soon be served. Likewise, my friend Rae keeps a mug that I made in his car, usually on the floor somewhere, surrounded by assorted junk. It looks pretty good down there. He drinks coffee out of it on his way to work in Chapel Hill. He says he thinks of me when he uses it. I like that.

The pots in your house are watching you; they are witnesses to your behavior. They record and store your activities. Engaging with them will bring them to life, allowing them to sing their songs, unlocking their sweet mysteries. Treat them well.

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