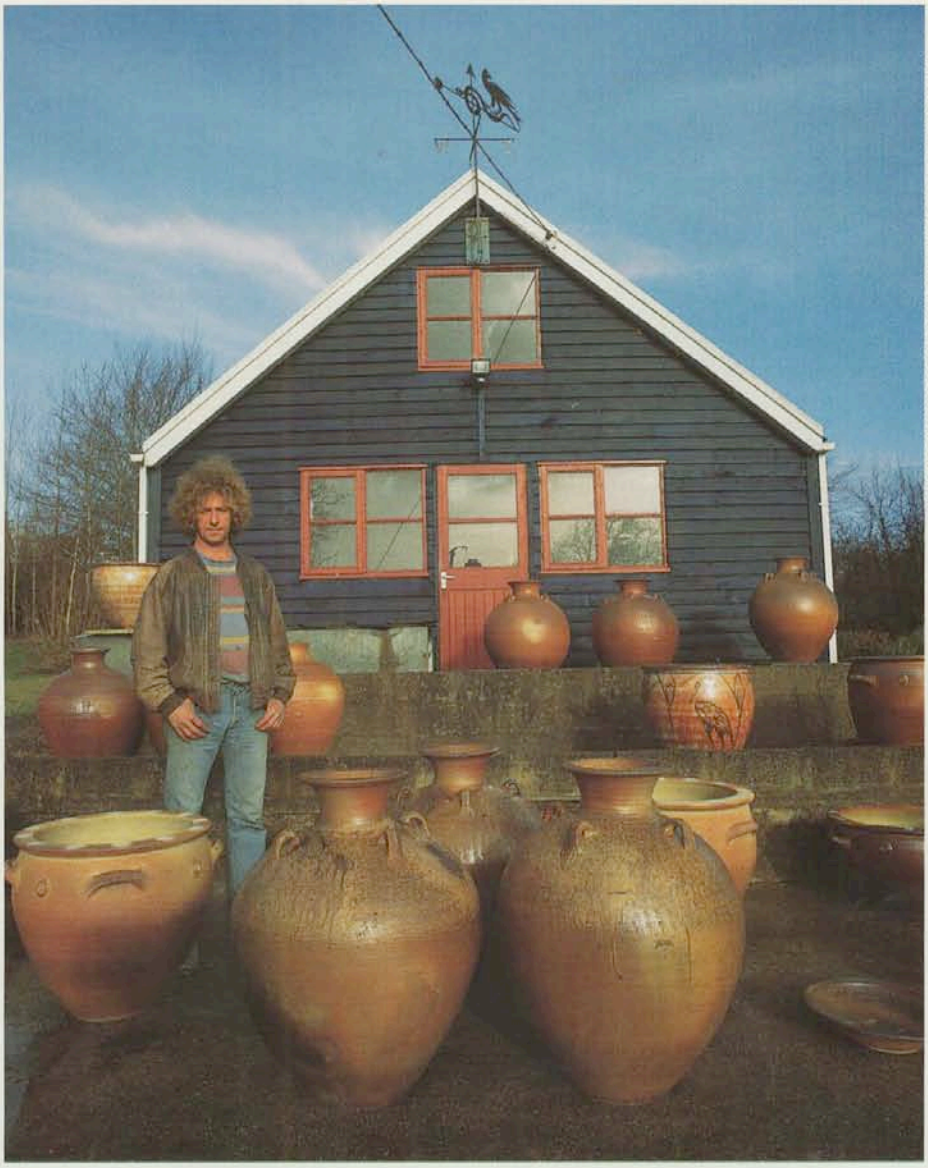


PHOTOS: MELANIE AMBROSE, CHRIS CHAPMAN, JOHN COLES, GWYN HANSSON, MARK HEWITT

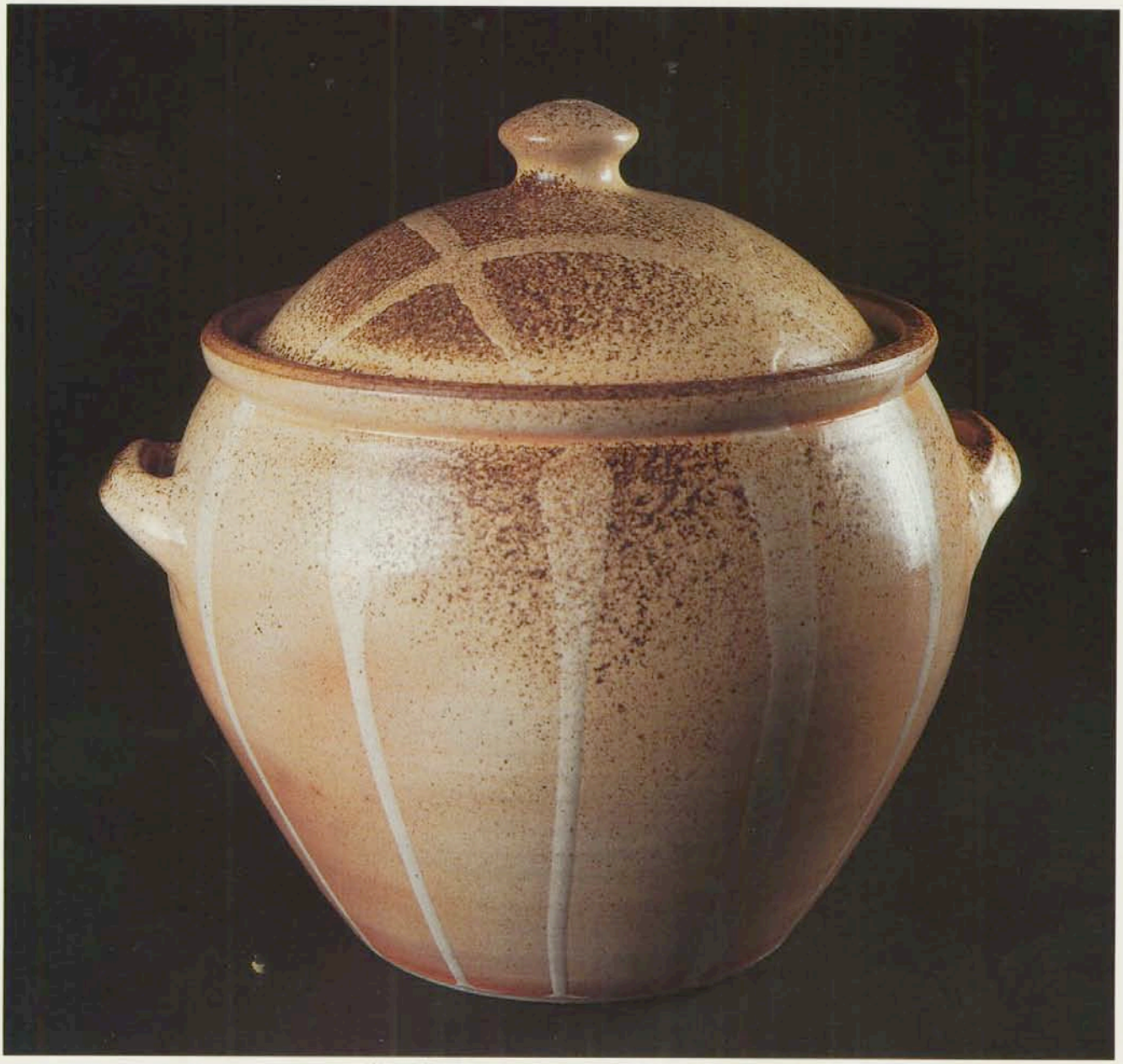
Svend Bayer

by Mark Hewitt

It is customary to think of Bernard Leach, Michael Cardew and Shoji Hamada as the summations or the terminals of 20th-century functional pottery. Apparently everything that can be said about functional pottery has already been said by these three, and to say more would be repetitious, even passé. Not so.

There is another generation of British potters who have been quietly expanding ideas from the past in a way that will have just as significant an impact on future potters as the Great Triumvirate had on them. Svend Bayer is one of these potters, who I loosely call the "functional minimalists." They don't have the same proselytizing zeal as the earlier threesome, but have instead developed skills and production systems that have enabled them to explore the earlier thinking in order to find its core. Essentially what Svend Bayer, Richard Batterham, Johnny Leach and others have been doing is making a narrow range of extremely simple, unrefined pots similar to the ones that inspired Leach, Cardew and Hamada.

Born to Danish parents, raised in East Africa and educated in England, Svend Bayer belongs at the head of a group of Cardew students and associates from the 1970s. This group includes Todd Piker in Connecticut, Clive Bowen in England, Mark Skudlarek in Wisconsin, Robert Barron in Australia, and myself in North Carolina. Historically, traditional pottery styles have been clustered in particular locations; for instance, alkaline-glazed ware in Lincoln County, North Carolina, or Bizen pottery in Japan. Today, however, despite a Cardew-school style that identifies our work, we have been blown by contemporary winds to the four corners of the globe, where our pots have assumed their own individual identities as a result of our different



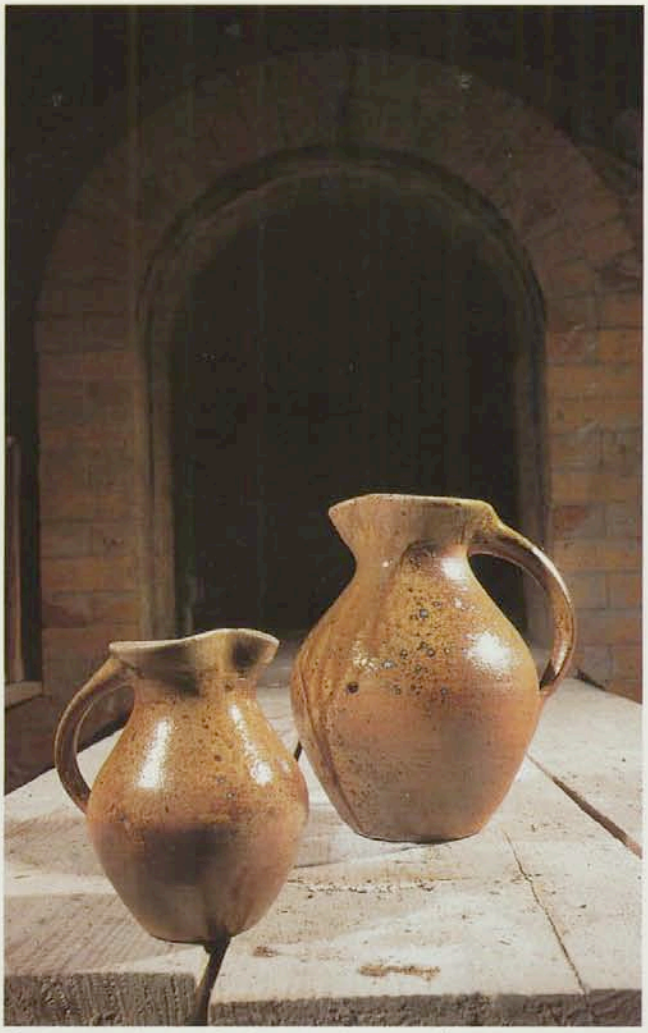
Wood-fired storage jar, 18 inches in height, wheel-thrown stoneware, with trailed slip.

personalities, histories, materials and locations. We are all different from each other and, more importantly, from Michael.

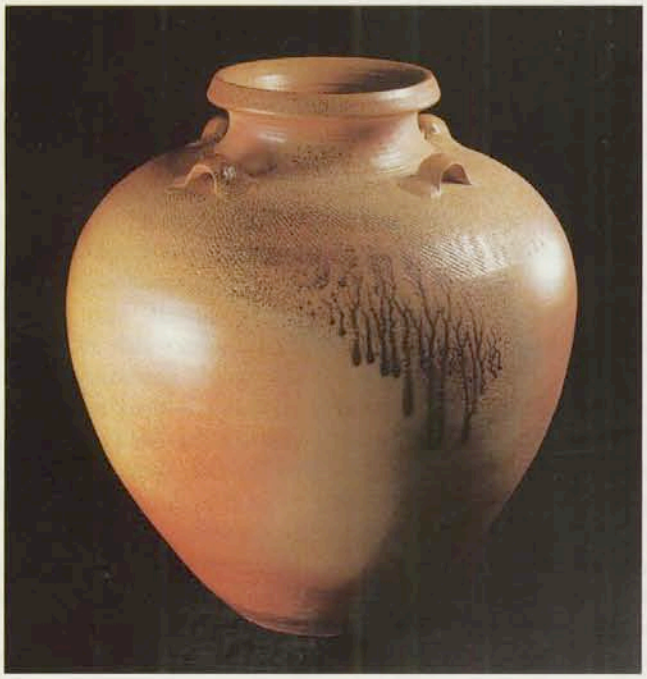
While Michael's post-Winchcombe style involved increasingly complicated systems for refining materials, Svend's approach has been to simplify. His pots have moved toward the unrefined sophistication of Japanese yakeshime ware, rather than the imperial refinement of Michael's late chüns and celadons. Svend has also thrown off large chunks of Michael's system of production, recognizing that Wenford Bridge Pottery under Michael as an old potter (when Svend worked for him) was economically unsound, and not a model that a young potter with a family to support could follow without going bankrupt. Svend's pots have more of Winchcombe's vigor about them; but rather than Michael's golden looseness, they have a more austere beauty, like an Arctic dawn viewed from a desolate peak.

If the ceramic spectrum runs from the opulent to the plain, from flamboyant ostentation to subdued modesty, then Svend's style belongs at the latter quiet and reserved end. Each of these extremes stands for something of great importance; to reach either end requires a vision, a passion and a talent of rare intensity.

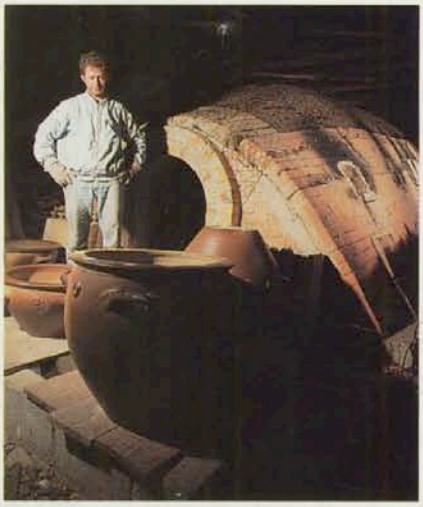
In a sense, Svend's pots stem from the aesthetics of denial, or the aesthetics of rejectionism. It is as though he has posed the question, "What would happen if I made only a very few simple shapes that I am passionately fond of, over and over, for years and years, using unrefined clays and firing them in large wood-burning kilns?" In so doing, he has chosen conditions as similar as possible to those under which his favorite pots were made. They include Fremington pitchers, Korean kimchi jars, New England stoneware crocks and the



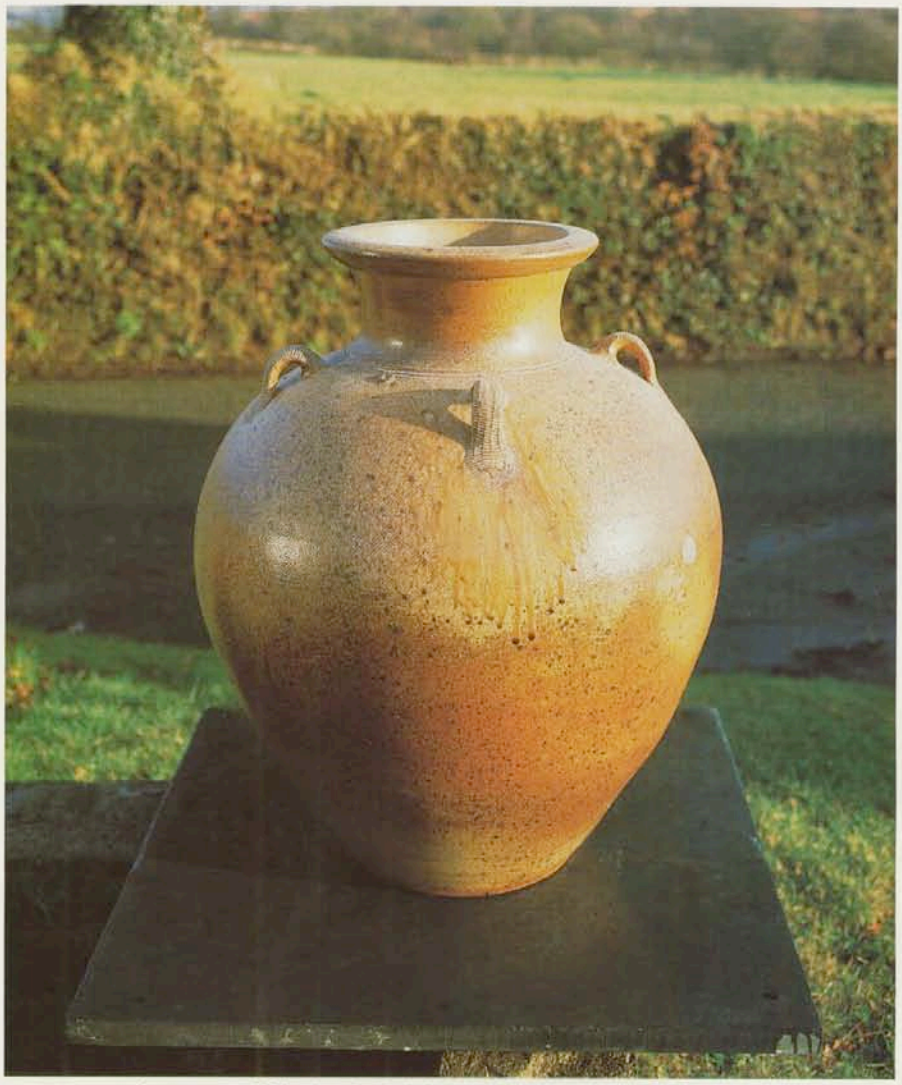
Pitchers, 1-pint and 5-pint capacity, wood-fired stoneware.



Large stoneware jar, 36 inches in height, with cord impressions on the shoulder and ash runs.



Unloading the kiln: Bayer fires all his work to Cone 12 in an 800-cubic-foot tube kiln; approximately one-third of a typical load is small pots (up to 20 pounds) and the remaining two-thirds are large pots (50 to 120 pounds).



Large urn, 36 inches in height, natural-ash-glazed stoneware with subtle rolled-cord, combed and incised decoration.

great jars of Martaban. These icons of the global folk pottery tradition are cruder and gutsier than the refined standards of the Song dynasty toward which Leach's potting was directed.

Svend has adopted a life of almost monastic rigor, focused intently on a narrow task, out of which have exploded tens of thousands of pots, which even in their denial are generous and engaging, and which even in their repetition keep changing. At the same time, his pots are hard and raw. As Leach coyly described unglazed pots, they are "naked." They hide nothing, exposed to the cold light of day with an unnerving honesty. To complain about this blinding focus, this introverted and stoical repetition would be like complaining that Stradivarius made only stringed instruments, that it is a shame he did not also make trumpets.

Svend's pots have none of the ironic self-consciousness apparent in much contemporary work. They are pure. His big pots have a commanding and majestic presence, occupying space the way a lone oak in full leaf dominates a meadow. They have the same sense of volume and internal resonance as the nave of a Romanesque cathedral. They guard their own internal solitude.

Svend's talent lies in striking a balance between the skeleton of a pot and its flesh. His pots are neither bony nor flabby; neither are they earthbound—they are poised. They have expectant bellies, a characteristic that separates Cardew-school pots from Leach-school pots. A good belly on a pot is an indication of good clay and great skill.

Beyond the incisive clarity of his work, Svend's contribution to 20th-century ceramics lies in his expansion of the scale at which individual potters operate. For if his pots exhibit an exuberance of scale, then so too do his kilns and manner of production. Rather than perpetually firing a small kiln, he has built a series of huge, beautiful and innovative cross-draft kilns to handle the prodigious number of pots he makes.

His current kiln is an 800-cubic-foot, catenary-arch, wood-fired tube kiln that holds approximately 3½ tons of pots and is fired four or five times a year. In the Far East, such a kiln and production system would be operated by an extended family or a village. Svend works alone, making all the pots himself, occasionally even firing the kiln himself. His capacity for hard work is almost self-destructive.

It used to be that a potter was judged by the number and size of the pots he made, and the ease and efficiency with

Excerpts from a Svend Bayer Conversation with Lucy Birtles

On leaving university in 1969, I wrote to Michael Cardew and was taken on initially for 6 months, and ended up staying 3½ years. I've never fired with anything but wood; having said that, it is the area in my potting life I am least confident about. I have a feeling Cardew was not either—he didn't like anything to do with firing; clay was the important thing.

What was happening at Wenford was very confusing. I was getting a lot of praise from Michael, which was very good for my confidence, but it also made me very arrogant. In a way, I was being groomed for a partnership, and I knew that was wrong. It was too easy to stay in a place that had found its way. I needed to find my own way. If I had stayed at Wenford, I would have become one of those sad people who is always in the shadow of someone else (no matter how generous that person is). Michael Cardew cast a very big shadow.

After Wenford, I worked at Brannams in Barnstaple, North Devon (an earthenware flowerpot and pitcher manufacturer). Earning money was in itself a novelty—being paid to make pots. Also working in a production pottery was a good experience, having to make 120 pots a day, all exactly the same, instead of the 20 I'd been used to making.

I've become very stuck in this place (Sheepwash, North Devon); I am the sole breadwinner and have become very isolated in my way of thinking and working. My trip to America (March to May 1994) to do demonstrations and workshops was to finally give myself permission to get out. I find that I enjoy them and need to get out to see what other people are doing. It is nice to have your ego stroked, get well treated. Working alone, that tends not to happen. Dealing with galleries, only a handful bother to visit, see where the work comes from. What goes into it. Ultimately, all they seem to care about is what sells.

I don't think my pots are going to change dramatically, just the way they are fired. In a way, what I have done has been slightly pioneering; making big pots is no longer a macho thing, but a scale barrier has been broken; it is not a big deal anymore.

If you fire with wood, you might as well go whole hog. I can no longer see the point of fast-fire kilns or in the way in which I have been firing, which is a largely macho kind of thing—big kiln, super economical, very fast firing, very high temperature. You can fire an anagama really fast, but what's the point? Only bland pots come out; you might as well fire and glaze them in an oil kiln.

This last kiln, the 800-cubic-footer, has served its purpose, but I won't get rid of it. Sometimes I think that maybe I'll just make garden pots and sell them cheaply, and I need a big kiln for that. But I also want to build a smaller kiln where I can experiment with longer firings and how pots are affected by their place in the kiln. The opportunity to play.

To me, throwing has always come first. Wood firing has occupied another pinnacle. Deviate from these and you are in deep trouble. But all these things are only techniques that are there to help express yourself—just processes. If it's a bad pot, it's worthless. It doesn't matter how you get there. Same with a good pot. It is interesting to watch someone to whom it is unimportant how a shape is achieved. Shape and form are all-important. Kilns, glazes, decoration must never take over—they are only there to help.

To throw a large planter, Bayer begins by beating 30 pounds of clay into a mound, then centers, opens and pulls.

When he is satisfied with its shape, the 26-inch-diameter bowl is removed from the wheel and set aside to dry.

Meanwhile, Bayer rolls out several thick coils, which will later be attached and thrown to form a wide rim.

When firm, the rim of the bowl is curved in by beating with a paddle and anvil.

Each coil is attached by carefully pinching it onto the rim.

After the lip is thrown, four roulette-impressed handles are attached.

which he made them. Based on these criteria, Svend's ability places him in intimidatingly good company. Today what seems to matter are photographs, artistic statements and frequency of publications; the emphasis is less on making pots than on their image and presentation.

For many years he has refused to sign his pots, dismissing identification as vanity, as creating too great an intrusion upon the relationship between user and pot. Functional pots communicate best in use. The burden of knowledge of who made a pot can frequently prevent the owner from using it, and certainly colors the way a pot is judged. Not all Leach and Cardew pots, for instance, are good, but their signatures make them appear so. Better to allow a pot to slide quietly into an unknowing consciousness where the pot, not the maker, can perform its magic.

Contained in this argument is a sublime arrogance, a hope that people won't know what his pots are, but because of their power, will have to buy and use them anyway. There is also self-flagellating reluctance to be recognized, and an unwillingness to capitulate to market forces. He remains a potter of conviction, not of economics.

A conundrum in contemporary functional pottery is that if you make wonderful useful pots, you end up making a name for yourself, and people stop using your pots for fear they will be broken. Part of the solution lies with the owners. Rather like buying a Rolls Royce and never driving it, it is possible to derive great pleasure from mere ownership, but the consummation of that pleasure happens only in use.

Shallow dish, 22 inches wide, wheel-thrown stoneware with rolled-cord and combed decoration, shell marks and natural ash glaze, by Svend Bayer, Sheepwash, Devon, England.

The other part of the solution lies with the potters. We potters must continually examine and explore the subtle and delicate intricacies of usefulness and fine-tune all our skills to ensure that the pots we make can't help but be used. They must possess a quality of confident inevitability concerning their usefulness. To be used, our pots must fill both a utilitarian necessity (the owner must want something to drink from) and a psychological necessity (that because of our vision and skill the owner chooses ours). It is as though we must make our customers addicted to our work. We must make pots that reach for the highest possible aesthetic qualities while ensuring that they remain accessible to repeated, simple use.

Like all great functional pots, Svend's planters, pitchers, plates, casseroles and jars receive constant use. They are active pots, not passive. They neither disturb, nor console. They work. They show no trace of deceit.

In an unpublished letter, Cardew talked about potters who drift into "harmless obscurity." Svend has lived in obscurity for too long, self-consciously isolating himself in pursuit of his vision. Like the heroic early 20th-century British desert explorers who suffered great privations in their quest for esoteric and abstract knowledge, Svend continues to make pots as pure and rarefied as the very air these explorers breathed. He has paid his dues, and we are the fortunate recipients of these great pots.

The author *Studio potter Mark Hewitt (see* Ceramics Monthly, *April 1991) resides in Pittsboro, North Carolina.*