MARK HEWITT
VILLAGE POTTER

All of Mark Hewitt's ceramics are wood-fired, salt-glazed stoneware. Two examples of the potter's grave markers—*Requiem for Gene Howard*, 2002, incised script (Latin Requiem Mass) under ash glaze, 30 by 11 inches, courtesy of North Carolina Museum of Art and University of North Carolina Press, and (opposite page) *Bad Seed*, 2004, manganese slip and blue glass scraps under ash glaze, 44 by 24 inches.

BY EDWARD LEBOW / PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON DOWDLE

A potter's wheel in a barn at the end of a country lane: isn't this the enduring postcard of craft?

The renowned English potter and author Bernard Leach urged potters to go off and find it, then live it in a rural village in Asia. The clay-filled soil there, he suggested, had just the right roots to bring ceramics to full bloom. Yet generations of fine throwers have done all right by planting themselves on old farms along the back roads of America.

Mark Hewitt, an Englishman, did just that in the early 1980s. And ever since, his weathered complex of barns and chicken coops at the end of a winding gravel road outside of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, has been a beacon for the crockery-minded. His operation, that of a village potter, is sustained by the booming prosperity of the newly urban south. Buyers throng by the hundreds to his three kiln openings a year, snapping up armloads of the 1,000 or so pots that come from each of the firings.

Their insatiable appetite suggests there's more to the meaning of the utilitarian tradition than dead things from the past, and certainly more to Hewitt's success than his distinctive touch. Thanks partly to his location, just 35 miles from Seagrove and Jugtown, he swims along in the region's deep stream of clay. He knew that when he and his wife, Carol, settled there in 1983. Yet he also knew how well the rural tradition of "turners and burners" suited his approach to ceramic form.* Born in England in 1955, he had apprenticed with Michael Cardew before coming to the United States in the late 1970s to work with Todd Piker, in Connecticut.

Hewitt's elegant forms echo the studied simplicity of works by Cardew, Leach and Hamada, while embodying the muscular ease of the best historical works by Daniel Seagle, J. A. Craven and other great Carolina potters. This clay lineage seems to have inoculated Hewitt against the urge to make apologies for producing useful forms. If anything, his distinctive brand of wood-fired minimalism rebukes the notion that "tradition" and "craft" have ever been uttered as words of censure. And his plates, bowls, mugs, pitchers, bowls, planters and jars quietly reveal the changing modern life of the utilitarian tradition. "That tradition is a choice," Hewitt said recently, sitting and talking inside the charred, voluminous belly of his anagama kiln. "It's something you earn. It is not something you inherit."

Still, his involvement in clay easily could have come by blood. Born not far from the Spode china works in Stoke-on-Trent, Hewitt grew up surrounded by pottery and a sense of ceramic destiny. His father and grandfather both worked as managers at Spode. "And I think I was clearly being groomed to follow that line," Hewitt said. But in 1975, while heading toward a degree in geography at Bristol University, a friend loaned him a copy of Leach's *A Potter's Book*. Leach's persuasive argument for the humanity and meaning of handmade pots tipped Hewitt away from industry.

"The factory I had once seen as a big playground now struck me as oppressive and dehumanizing," Hewitt recalled in 1991. Fishing around for opportunities to learn pottery, he initially sought to apprentice with the English potter Svend Bayer, but Bayer—known for making big pots—was a solo act. So Hewitt approached Cardew, who took him on as an apprentice at his Wenford Bridge Pottery in Cornwall.

Hewitt's parents said nothing about the move at the time. But joining Cardew was the equivalent of a Boston kid signing with the Yankees. Filled with the young spunk of a cottage socialist, Cardew had once done a stint at Spode and concluded that life inside the ceramic mill was as Leach had suggested. "Michael wanted to try and change the way industrial practice happened," Hewitt said. Cardew had begun his Spode experience, Hewitt explained, by telling Hewitt's grandfather, "Everything you do at Stoke-on-Trent is wrong." "My grandfather simply said, 'We get dozens of people like you in here every week, Mr. Cardew.'"

Infidel or not, Cardew taught the younger Hewitt ceramics from the ground up, drawing the essential connection, which Hewitt still maintains, between the raw material and the final form. Hewitt, who has several apprentices working for him, does as much as he can from scratch, but not as much as Cardew did. "His system was overly elaborate and required an army of people," Hewitt recalled. "Setting up a system like that in the modern context would probably lead to business failure."

Cardew had learned his approach as an apprentice with Leach. However, their tack toward making pots diverged from there. "Leach had this division between standard ware and art ware," said Hewitt. He viewed art pots as the ones done at night and on weekends. By contrast, said Hewitt, "Cardew didn't have an art ware. He also didn't have a standard ware." He made everything in series and then picked the best of the litter for exhibitions.

From his three years with Cardew, and several more apprenticing with Piker, Hewitt derived the importance of speaking in a singular voice. "I wouldn't say it's the best or the only way of going about it," he said, "but working in series like that you can concentrate intensely on the pots and still remain fresh and flexible."

Hewitt's strength has been his ability to vary his themes without having to overhaul them. The subtle nature of the changes he makes isn't likely ever to make cultural headlines. He nudges his works ahead with tweaks of details, often adding little more than new textures, patterns of drips or, as he has done recently, numbers etched into the sides of his pots. They are the numbers of the roads leading to Seagrove.

His borrowings are extensive. There's a North Devon leap to most of his handles. And, as Charles G. Zug III pointed out in a 1992 catalog of Hewitt's work, he has drawn happily and extensively from the rich ceramic history of the Carolinas. He sometimes follows the Catawba Valley tradition of throwing with contrasting colors of clay to create a peppermint swirl. He also filched the region's historical practice of pressing bits of broken glass into the surfaces of his forms to create vibrant runs of glaze.

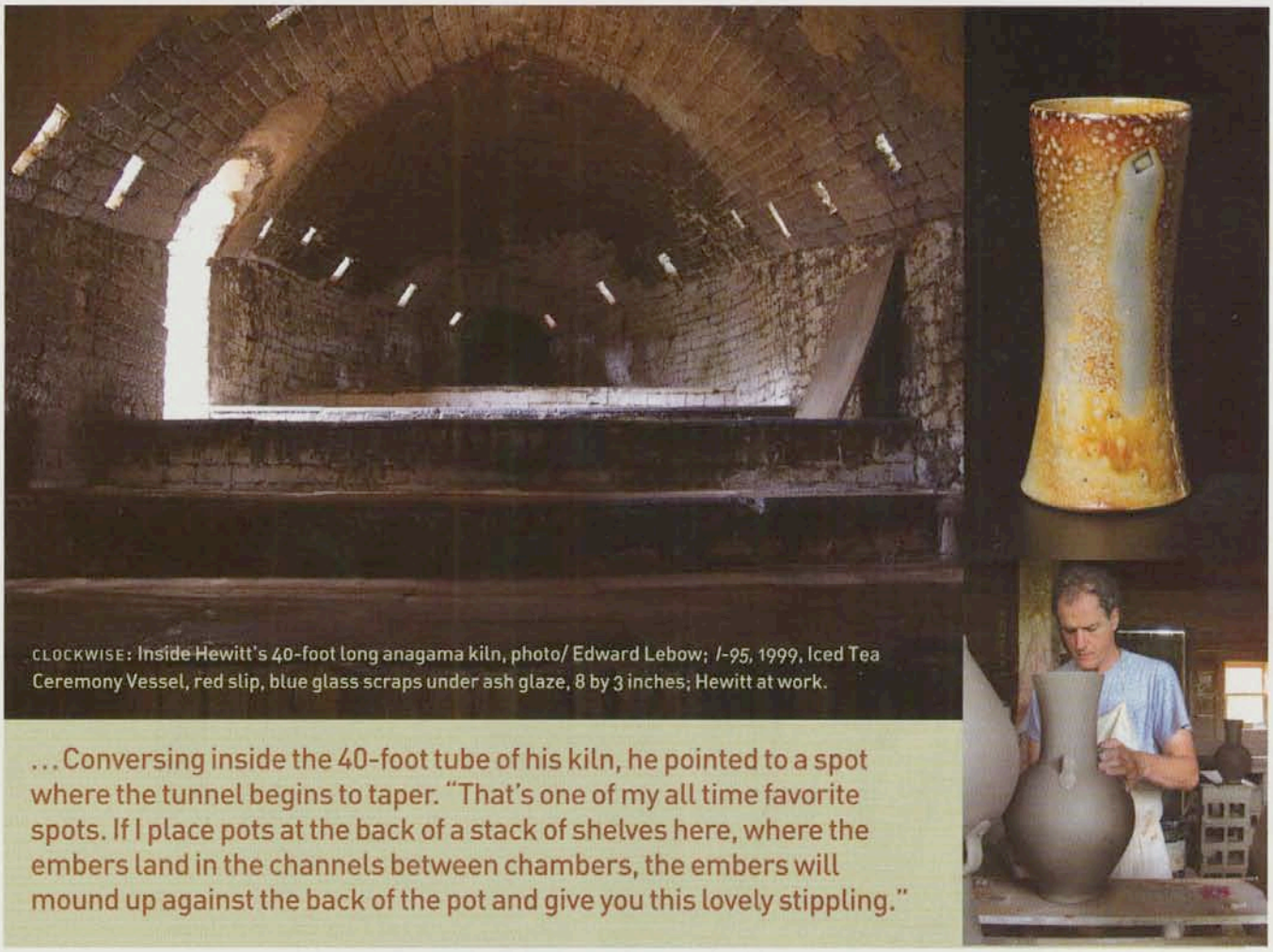
These touches do little to alter the distinctly Hewitt identity of the forms. The profiles of his pots tend to be more sinuous than static, without ever veering down the expressive slope toward looseness. Their simplicity comes with the crisp tautness that can be had by throwing on an electric wheel. "The Warren MacKenzie school of the slow wheel has a much softer look," Hewitt said. Yet the crispness of Hewitt's forms doesn't simply mirror the method by which they were thrown. He has the British gene for the well-controlled pot. Part of that is due to his loyalty to forms that function. Yet it also stems from his apparent conviction that the eye doesn't need to dance much to have a good ride across the surface of a form. The ashen and salty richness of his surfaces gives the eye plenty to ponder along the way. Even there, simplicity tops his menu. He relies on a handful of shino, chun and alkaline glazes, combined with trailed slips, some

touches of sgraffito and runs of glass. The resulting softness of his pottery is the kind best felt in the hand. Beyond the visual critique is the practical one of how his rims fit lips, his handles fit fingers and the rounded bellies of bowls and cups fill out the palms of one's hands.

What's clear is that Hewitt's orientation to surfaces and forms has shifted over the years from the clean and smooth to more complex combinations of the runny and craggy. "I really like the fluid quality of glazes that the salt-glaze kiln can produce," he says. "There's a lustrousness that I find particularly exciting and a certain cragginess that you get with wood firing. What I've become increasingly fond of is the interplay of surfaces that can be charred with embers on one side and slick and smooth on the other."

Still conversing inside the 40-foot tube of his kiln, he pointed to a spot where the tunnel begins to taper. "That's one of my all time favorite spots. If I place pots at the back of a stack of shelves here, where the embers land in the channels between chambers, the embers will mound up against the back of the pot and give you this lovely stippling."

These roughed-up surfaces are the folk skins worn by pottery throughout the world and history. As Louise Allison Cort pointed out in a 1997 catalog for a show of Hewitt's work, the surfaces and forms resonate beyond the Carolinas, linking him with the great traditions and pots of Japan, China and Southeast Asia. The same could be said of the growing size of his pots. In recent years, he has inflated some forms into gallery, garden and porch monuments. Hewitt sees them as odes to the storage pots, grave markers and other icons that were once standard issue from potters in farm communities. Yet he scoffs at the notion that he is reaching the age when some critics expect production potters, as he puts it, to finally see the light, give up useful pottery and make art.



CLOCKWISE: Inside Hewitt's 40-foot long anagama kiln, photo/ Edward Lebow; *I-95*, 1999, Iced Tea Ceremony Vessel, red slip, blue glass scraps under ash glaze, 8 by 3 inches; Hewitt at work.

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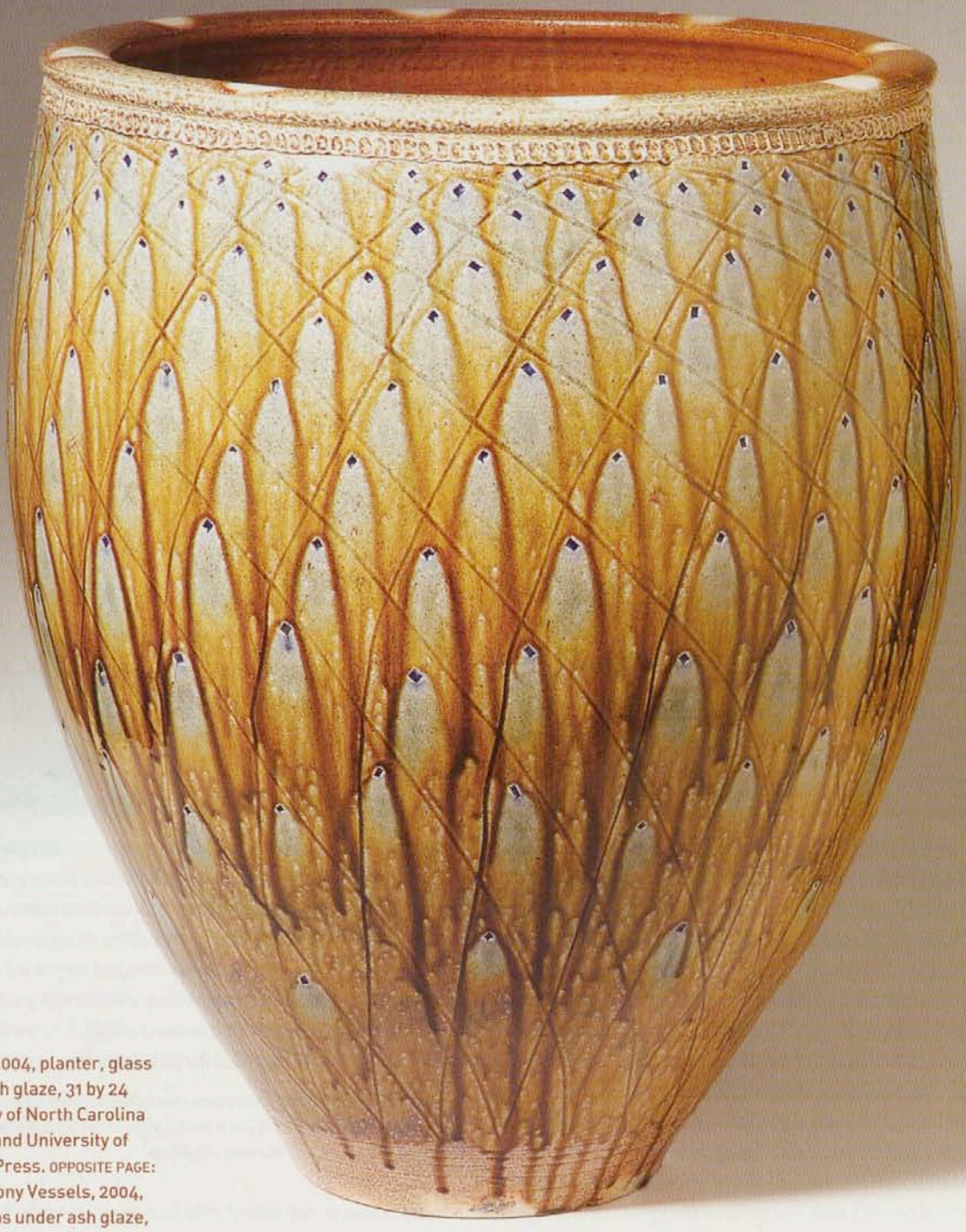
He's curious about where his own longevity as a utilitarian potter might lead him. "Older potters who stay with functional pottery can wind up producing work that's quite different from anything before." Mark Hewitt likens the shift to what Beethoven made of the string quartets in his later years. "He was still working in quartet form, but they're unbelievable, and so different from the work he was writing when he was young. That's one of the things I'm looking forward to about old age—to see what you let go of, what things you try and what things become important." ■

*Mark Hewitt will be co-curator, with Nancy Sweezy, former director of Jugtown Pottery, of "The Potter's Eye: Art and Tradition in North Carolina Pottery," at the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh (October 2005 – March 2006).

Edward Lebow, a staff writer for the Daily Press, *Newport News, Virginia, writes frequently on ceramics.*



The Elucidator, 2004, planter, glass scraps under ash glaze, 31 by 24 inches, courtesy of North Carolina Museum of Art and University of North Carolina Press. OPPOSITE PAGE: Iced Tea Ceremony Vessels, 2004, blue glass scraps under ash glaze, each 8 by 3 inches.