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M I N G E I R E V I S I T E D

in
Search
of the
Ethical
Pot

The Mind Alive

by Judith S. Schwartz

Ceramic education in America has grown at an enormous pace since World War II. Not only have ceramics courses been integrated into college and university studio art programs, but the artists and teachers trained at these institutions have exerted "downward" influences upon the elementary and secondary school levels as well. Further, the burgeoning craft fairs, the rise of adult education summer programs, and the institutionalization of artist-centered studio environments have contributed to this growth. To this can be added the myriad ceramics support institutions, how-to books, "artists as stars" videos, on-line ceramics discussion groups, periodicals, societies, conferences and museums—all competing in a cacophony of enthusiasm to provide their respective inputs to our shared experience of clay.

In spite of this input, however, there seems to me to be a lack of depth, or daring, or power, or aesthetic perspective, or historical sweep, or soul to much of the work. We are left far too often with vacuous examples of technically well made but spiritually empty objects.

Alfred North Whitehead, the British philosopher and mathematician, believes that imagination transforms knowledge. He wrote in *The Aims of Education* that when imagination is part of the learning experience, "A fact is no longer a bare fact; it is invested with all of its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energizing as the poet of our dreams and as the architect of our purposes...The tragedy of the world is that those who are imaginative have but slight experience, and those who are experienced have feeble imaginations. Fools act on imagination without knowledge; pedants act on knowledge without imagination. The task of the university is to weld together imagination and experience."¹

I was trained as a studio ceramist at Ohio State University in the early '60s. OSU was at that time a special place with seven full time faculty members engaged in teaching every imaginable technical skill and form of ceramic art: mold making, throwing, handbuilding, glaze calculations, industrial techniques and sculpture. There were always doctoral students like Howard Kottler hanging around doing research in both studio and historical areas. Carlton Atherton taught ceramic art history and everyone was required to take his class. His survey was exhaustive, covering everything from Chinese, Persian, Turkish, Mexican to European ceramics, all accompanied by vast bibliographies, slides, shard examples and, in most instances, actual objects. I'll never forget his final exam, requiring not only recounting facts but answers to thought-provoking questions. I will never forget this particular question: "Many authorities have held Josiah Wedgwood responsible for lowering the aesthetic quality of pottery by division of labor in their production, yet this was common practice in China a thousand years ago. To what can you attribute the differences in feeling between these two types of wares?" The question assumed knowledge of civilization, sociology and social history, in addition to ceramic art. He assumed us to be educated beyond the parameters of our specialized field.

My First Issue in Ceramics History Education: The undergraduate school experience is not rigorous enough in the education of the broader-based areas of knowledge to enable students to evolve into independent thinkers. We have turned undergraduate education into a vocational experience without providing a core of *relevant* knowledge and experience. The ceramics students emerging from art schools today are technically skilled but narrowly focused. They know how to make things and think they can enter the competitive world based on this ability.

Carol Becker, a liberal arts teacher at the Art Institute of Chicago, has written: "We separate the technical aesthetic acumen developed in the studio from the analytic intelligence cultivated in the classroom, and often fail to produce integrated artists capable of thinking through the problems of their work intellectually as well as visually."²

Ceramic departments in many art schools and universities tend to stress technical and creative skills rather than analytical ones. Students need intellectual guidance, but because their skills often are good we tend to treat them as fully-formed artists. How can students assume their place in society if we do not create intellectually rigorous environments to help them understand their roles in today's complex society? They must be given historical perspective. We are failing to match their technical competence with an equally sophisticated understanding of the historic and critical thinking of the world in which they live.

Today's multicultural climate requires that students possess intellectual tools. History and critical thinking courses should not be seen as adjunct to studio courses but rather as powerful tools within a core curriculum. Students should be given the opportunity to study social, philosophical and literary history in both Western and non-Western cultures and be trained to think of themselves as impacting on the intellectual life of society. Given the opportunity to expand their intellectual skills, they may be less willing to settle for slick, market-driven, superficial solutions to their work.

My Second Issue: Let us admit to the differences between craft and fine art, and specifically the differences between the ceramic sculptor and the artist-craftsman. If we want to educate artists who create sculpture in clay, then let's stop attenuating the experience by separating them from the mainstream art curriculum. Sculpture made of clay should not be seen as a separate course of study with its own code of aesthetic and critical standards. Mainstream analysis should apply to all sculpture. One only has to look at most graduate programs in ceramics to see how detached they are from the fine art sculpture programs. It is no wonder that a great proportion of the graduates in ceramic sculpture are not employable in most fine art departments unless they apply to the ceramics area, which, of course, perpetuates the system.

My Third Issue: We need to re-examine the state of *craft* education in this country. Let me make a comparison with an earlier age: In 1910 there were well over 300 individual art pottery studios maintaining the tradition of the artist-potter. These studio potters received training in ceramic schools, among which was Ohio State University, established in 1894 by Edward Orton; the second was Alfred University, established by Charles Binns in 1900; and the third was Rutgers University, established by C.W. Parmelee.

Potteries such as Buffalo, Weller, Roseville, Newcomb, Tiffany, Denver, Grueby, Van Briggie, Rookwood and Fulper, to name but

a few, produced stoneware products that were unique expressions of the potter's visions. Their challenge, according to Paul Evans, was "to achieve a harmonious synthesis of structure and ornament on a commercially sound basis, either through the work of a single individual or through the successful division of labor which allowed for the co-operative union of artist and artisan".³

Art potteries ran small businesses whose philosophy was to create products that grew from a liaison between the artist and the technician within a commercial organization. What part are we doing to revive these traditions? How equipped are we to offer our students the skills necessary to run successful businesses? Do we offer options for our students to design for industry? Are there any ceramic dinnerware industries left, or should we create special schools and programs to revive this area? Shouldn't there be greater career options?

My Fourth Issue: Technology is radically transforming the way we learn, earn and live our lives. Its impact is reaching our schools, our homes, our very lives. What impact will this have for the classroom and, particularly, for the study of history?

We have entered an information or digital age. We are now able to communicate with everyone on the planet instantaneously, sharing the world's storehouse of knowledge at the touch of a key. Every visual image of artistic merit will be scanned, digitized and stored within databases for sorting, perusal and manipulation. Students will be able to look at crystal-clear, three-dimensional representations of any work of art without ever leaving their seats. At the same time, pre-recorded lectures by acknowledged authorities will accompany such presentations. This will clearly be a boon for art education and specifically for ceramic art. An international technological repository for clay will be created, and the student, sitting at the computer, will have the world's ceramics knowledge at his or her fingertips and be able to ask questions and interact.

I end with an aphorism. It has to do with what I call the "Mind Alive," the mind that is broadly educated, that knows history, aesthetics and culture. It is this mind, in its breadth and depth of perspective and experience, that will lead us in the use of the technology that will drive all our future. The aphorism simply states: "The mind alive mingles freely with the dead and the yet to be born." Let us all do what we can to keep the "mind alive" in our students.

NOTES

1. Whitehead, Alfred North. *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*. Macmillan, 1961, p. 94.
2. Becker, Carol. "Art Students Require a Truly Rigorous Core Curriculum." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol 35, #41, June 21, 1989, p. B1-B2.
3. Evans, Paul. *Art Pottery of the United States: An Encyclopedia of Producers and Their Marks*. New York: Scribners, 1974, p.7.

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