The Contemporary vessel

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THE CONTEMPORARY VESSEL
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PREFACE

My interest in studying the vessel has taken place over the last two years. Before that I had concentrated specifically on jewelry. I had not considered the possibilities of working in a different form. When I began my research I had a limited knowledge of the contemporary vessel. My knowledge was acceptable and common among many people who are unaware of what else the vessel can be. The function of the vessel, for thousands of years, was contain something. Today the definition can go far beyond that. The function can be more philosophical and is often determined by the artist.

I started my investigation by leaving jewelry and fabricating small bottles, using a special technique of gold application. This was a technique that I had previously used on jewelry, and found interesting. Learning technique at the time intrigued me, so I explored many possibilities. Cutting dies from Masonite to form these images, was the method that I chose to use to create these bottles. Experimentation with different methods of achieving color on metal also interested me.

Eventually, I began to rediscover my definition of the contemporary vessel. These bottles had not even begun to deal with the issues of the contemporary vessel.
I began to experiment with my ideas and personal thoughts and began a progression that would bring me to where I am today in my understanding and in my work. I learned a whole new definition of the vessel that others had been investigating for years.
INTRODUCTION

There are many issues of the contemporary vessel that have to be considered. One issue is the sense of containment and volume. Does the vessel have to have the capacity to contain something? If so, does it have to be physical? Yes, it has to have the capacity to contain something, but no it does not have to be physical. Other issues, such as inside/outside relationships, and the formal architecture of the piece are also major concerns. Unlike sculpture, which is strictly about form, the vessel has boundaries within which one must work. This concept is about form, a sense of containment, and about having reference to functionality. "The contemporary vessel is an object that presents the formal essence of the pot exaggerated to reveal a personal artistic vision uninhibited by pragmatic issues of function" (American Ceramics, 1985).

Other than studying my exploration and development, the purpose of this thesis is to help educate those that have the same limited knowledge of the contemporary vessel that I once had. This thesis is about my definition and is one example of how the vessel is being confronted by artists today. Although there is a growing and accepted knowledge of the vessel among artist, among others there is a misunderstanding of the vessel of the present time.
Hopefully this will help others to become aware of some of the current ideas about the vessel and what many of us are trying to express.

I have concentrated on staying within the boundaries that have been defined for me. Keeping my concerns directed to the formal issues used by many to define this concept. However my main concern was to develop my form. After a time, I started to develop an understanding of the boundaries and their possibilities and apply it to my work. I felt the vessel would be successful as long as the form was strong. Clarity is very important and if my understanding of the piece and intent were apparent then the created object would be visually more exciting. There are many different views that go beyond these issues, but the artist needs to resolve what his/her definition is in order to make the piece stand confidently on its own.
CHAPTER 1
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of the vessel goes back many centuries, through many different cultures. They served many different purposes. Some were used for everyday functional pots and others were used for spiritual reasons. There were many cultures that used vessels, but it would be difficult to talk about them all. I have chosen to use the Chinese bronzes as an example. Many of the functions of these bronzes were similar to those of other cultures.

These vessels were important for many reasons. The first reason is their value. They have inscriptions on the sides of the vessel that represent accurate records of what happened historically. Also, they are considered to be beautiful works of art that are admired for their technical skill. Many of these bronzes were ornate and shaped like animal figures, and some of the more primitive bronzes have kept the more simplistic forms. "Since their function as containers neither requires nor determines the animal shape, their function does not require or modify that formal quality" (Loehr, 1968, p 11). Like Japanese architecture, the form itself is simple. In the later Shang dynasty ornament is added for decoration to the bronzes.
The names of the ritual vessels are sometimes inscribed on the side of a particular piece. The names describe the different shapes and functions. The functions of these containers are separated into five different categories. 1. They had vessels that were used for holding and drinking wine; 2. vessels for cooking; 3. vessels for serving and holding food; 4. water vessels; 5. and musical instruments that were categorized as vessels.

The cooking vessels usually had a wide mouth with a round body. This was supported by three legs, which were often hollow. There were also two handles, one on each side. As time went by, the vessel acquired a top. The vessel that was used for serving and holding food was similar to the cooking vessel in the shape of the body, but it had a ring foot. This vessel had two handles as well. Vessels for warming wine were oval and had a wide lip for pouring. It was based on three legs and had handles on either side. A goblet with a choked in neck, a lip and a base that flared out was used for drinking and holding wine. This vessel was usually round with a full belly, but occasionally it was square. They had high shoulders and a low belly. This is a shape that I often used in designing my forms. It is a recognizable form and easily interpreted. The water vessels were used
for washing hands during ceremonies. During the Shang dynasty they were shallow and on a ring foot, although quite large. Later they became deeper and larger. The fifth group was that of the musical instruments. They consisted of bells, chimes, and drums. The bell was large and round, and it had a long handle that served as a foot as well. If the bells were placed in groups of nine, they formed chimes. Drums took the form of a barrel standing on four short legs.

Historically vessels have also played a role in mythology representing life, energy, and existence. This is also where the comparison to the human, particularly the woman began. Vessels today offer many different meanings. We still may use ancient ritual vessels for certain special occasions, but for the artist today there are other considerations and options. Functional vessels can be mass produced and therefore cost less that those that are beautifully crafted. This has opened a new door and direction for the artist. The challenge now is to create something new, by using ones own personal expression, yet continuing to have functional or historical reference.
CHAPTER 2
HISTORICAL REFERENCE

My historical reference comes from the early Japanese architecture. This architecture had a Chinese influence. Later it became more ornate. Japanese architecture is believed by some to be the root of all other aspects of art in that country. "Japanese architecture is undoubtedly less well known and less appreciated than the architecture of any other civilized nation." (Cram, 1931, p.34.) The rhythm and delicacy in line, in massing of parts, and in the perfection in proportion all lead to a successful composition. I tried to take these into consideration in constructing my pieces.

Japanese architecture had simplicity and a directness in construction that I much admire. Keeping this in mind I have tried to simplify my pieces, by limiting the excess parts that served no other purpose other than design. I found these parts to be unnecessary and only to complicate the piece. I have concentrated on keeping the design elements the same as the structural elements. This is a concept that was practiced in early Japanese architecture. In the simplest type of architecture during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries "everything was absolutely constructional, and such orna-
ment, as there is, is only applied to the constructive
details." (Cram, 1931, p.43.)

There was subtlety in the proportion of this architecture, in which the dimensions of the length were larger than those of the width. Through a subconscious realization my pieces have followed along in that format. I seem to have a natural attraction for long proportions. Another influence that appears in my work is the frankness in the construction of the architecture. There is an honest and straight forward directness in the building of these works of art. I try to keep this true of my work as well. Hopefully, when my work is viewed there is no question of anything hidden. The peg that holds the piece together is visually seen and easy to read. Nothing tries to be something that it is not.

The royal palaces were beautiful and had a sense of dignity and clarity. They were extremely simple and everything was delicately treated, creating an effect of refinement. They were, however, not simple in content, but simple in form, therefore keeping clarity and beauty.

Later, when Japan was cut off from Chinese influence and facing the demands of a new society, decoration came into play. Ornament was no longer constructional, but rather it became strictly decoration. The develop
ment of the industrial arts occurred and more decoration was emphasized in the architecture "losing little by little its original qualities as a system of constructive design." (Cram, 1931, p.60.)
Tall, linear, suspended are accurate words in describing my pieces. There are certain formal concerns, that I mentioned earlier, in dealing with the contemporary vessel. My pieces have reference to historical works in that they follow the same rules in their architecture. The vessel has been equated with the human figure and has often been used for ritual purposes. Today it sometimes has been translated into a container for ones own personal expression. My pieces do not contain something physical and therefore do not have bottoms and are not enclosed on all sides. They are suspended to create visual weight and tension. Clarity of form and the strength in individual parts help to make the piece work successfully as a whole.

The pieces stay within the boundaries of the architecture of the vessel. Relating to the human form, these pieces all have a lip, a neck, a belly, shoulders and some kind of a foot. The bronze rods that suspend these vessels are an extension of the formal issues of the architecture. The vessel body itself has been formed out of copper, as have the feet of these pieces.

In choosing copper and bronze as the medium, I have chosen a material with which I feel comfortable. I
also feel that it is one that is appropriate for the concerns that I face. I enjoy the manageability of the material and what can be done with it. Many of the techniques used in these pieces were widely used, such as the method of forming. When using a die to form metal, I will carve it out myself. I enjoy the process of construction and building on to my pieces and believe it is possible for one to work organically and yet keep a constructive attitude.

Color also is important in my work. Color sets a mood and helps to build a certain character about the vessel. It also helps to make the piece visually pleasing and exciting. It does not have to be a bright, intense color to fulfill these functions: a subtle color can achieve the same effect. Color is one aspect, for me, that helps to make the piece complete. I have made several tests to achieve certain colors. My most preferred method is using the torch to produce colored oxides on the metal. Heat oxidizing the metal has a primitive effect that I would like to see carried through my work. I enjoy the browns and reds that can be a result in this technique. It also carries through with the straight forward primitive attitude that occurs in the construction of my pieces. I have also experimented, with successful results, using the
kiln to create bright, intense colors. I chose the bright intense colors because I found them to be visually exciting and I responded to the contrast that they posed to the piece. These intense colors are more sensitive than colors achieved with the torch. In this process it is important to keep the metal clean and free of oils. I prefer a matte finish, which also helps to hold the color better. I place the piece in a preheated kiln. The size of the piece determines the length of time it needs to be in the kiln: if it is a larger piece, it is necessary to keep the piece in for at least ten minutes before checking the color. Because the pieces are copper a natural patina will eventually come forward. I have also experimented with some chemically produced colors, but prefer to use heat. Using torch to achieve heat oxidation creates a layering effect which aids to accomplish a range of colors.

Most of the suspension rods are colored similar to the foot in a dark range. This is to create a contrast with the intense color of the vessel form. This helps the viewer to visualize the image piece easily. The piece may have several parts, but the viewer will see it first in two separate elements. I try to keep all the individual sections equally important and strong.
In choosing the scale in which to work there were many considerations. The size was one that I felt comfortable with. It was accessible and still carried a presence. Expanding in the vertical direction is something that I have considered and would like to pursue. Now that I have an understanding and a philosophy of the vessel, I will be able to achieve a larger scale successfully. The proportions of the elements of the vessel are important in the making of the piece. I used the thinner rods to create visual tension in the weight. The thin rods are supporting the massive body, which appears to be heavy. The vessel proper itself is influenced by the full bodied functional pot. It is often choked in at the neck. Initially it is a classical form, but the sides are then left open and there is no bottom to hold something physical.

My work has gone through a metamorphosis and has changed a considerable amount since I first began. In the beginning I had an understanding of the formal issues and the questions that I wanted to confront, but the work was more primitive than the concept. Today, my philosophy is that the vessel is a vehicle for which the artist can express himself. It need not be functional, for the vessel contains the ideas of its creator. When one looks at my
work after development, I feel that there is a better comprehension of the form and content. Through the different shapes and the transformation of my work, the underlying concepts have always been the same. What has changed is my understanding of those concepts and the concerns with which I was dealing. As a result of my growth, I believe the vessels are visually stronger.
CONCLUSION

In my thesis proposal questions of functionality were posed. The issue of functionality is not a major concern to me. The form and the content are more important to me in developing my work. I believe it can either be functional or not as long as the artist is clear in the understanding of what it is. The artist needs to deal with the formal essence of the vessel and then explore it using his/her own expression.

Some final concerns that I felt important to be considered were design cohesion, color cohesion and the use of negative space. In making the piece work as a whole, I wanted to have the individual parts be strong independently, but they had to be consistent with the rest of the piece to be successful. Seen in the perfection of Japanese architecture, proportion and cohesion of the different aspects were aids in making it the root of all other modes of art. The concerns that were carried out in the architecture were concerns that have been important to the success of every other Japanese art form.

My definition of the vessel has grown along with my artistic expression. The contemporary vessel will never be something as simple as a recognizable form that is used
to contain something. The definition of the vessel to me is a functional object that has been transformed into one's own personal expression with functional references. The vessel is a vehicle for the artist to express himself staying within certain formal boundaries. To view a vessel that is a clear representation of the artist's expression and one that is beautifully crafted is pleasing and can be a powerful image.
REFERENCE


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