Rock teapots

R. Preston Saunders

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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the College of Imaging Arts and Sciences in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Rock Teapots

By

R. Preston Saunders III

Date: May 1999
# Approvals

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| Submitted By        | R. Preston Saunders III  
                                 Date 05/20/1999 |

## Thesis Committee

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<tr>
<th>Chief Adviser</th>
<th>Richard Hirsch</th>
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| Associate Advisers  | Richard Tannen  
                                 Leonard Urso  
                                 Linda Hightower |

## Department Chairperson

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<td>Richard Hirsch</td>
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I R. Preston Saunders, prefer to be notified when a request for production of this document is made. I can be reached at the following address:

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Acknowledgments

This Thesis would not have been possible without the love and support from my family and friends. I would especially like to thank those who helped me in achieving my goal of attending Graduate School at RIT, Linda Hightower, Lee Benson and his loving family. Without their support and encouragement I may have never made it thus far. I also would like to thank my thesis committee for all their advice and to all the professors I was privileged to study with. I would especially like to thank Rick Hirsch and his wife Arline. Rick, who truly made my education at RIT, a unique and wonderful experience and Arline for all the sandwiches and most importantly the Pie. Thank You.
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I. Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explore functional and non-functional tea sets. I used these objects as metaphors to express my concerns about nature and my natural surroundings. I made connections with the historical traditions of tea ware in my search for a personal aesthetic solution.

I used a variety of forming and firing techniques in conjunction with other materials such as wood and metal.

II. Background

As a child growing up in Atlanta, Georgia, I was constantly spending time outside. In the South, the summer months can become very hot and dry. To balance out the long hot summer days, my family and I spent most of our time at Lake Allatona. I remember always enjoying those times, not only for the chance to be outside swimming but also for the chance to interact with the people there. People at the lake tended to take more time to enjoy where they were and what they were doing.

As I became older, I spent more and more time in other outdoor activities. I began rock climbing in my early teens and furthered this ability in college. In my second year of undergraduate school I was assisting professor Don Mendeance in
teaching his climbing class. The class traveled a short distance to Sandrock, Alabama. I enjoyed going to Sandrock; the shapes and textures of the rocks and land fascinated me. I visited Sandrock often, not always to climb, but to enjoy where I was, what I was doing, and maybe catch a sunrise or sunset. Although Sandrock possessed a natural beauty for me, it also exhibited the disrespect to nature by mankind. Sandrock was a very popular place, where many visitors respected its beauty. There were other visitors, however, who felt the rock surface was their personal canvas on which they would express their love for each other by means of spray paint. This always bothered me; they were defacing nature’s own sculpture. I also deplored the lack of respect shown to the land by the debris and trash left behind.

I still love walking in the woods, climbing mountains and observing nature’s beauty. In the last few years I have noticed more and more of our society turning away from nature and beginning to rely more on computers and technology. We tend to live our lives in the fast lane, never taking time to enjoy where we are or what we are doing. We have begun to lose respect for nature and the precious moments it can give us. My work grows from a passion to live, to sustain all types of life, to portray and to celebrate the beauty and power of our natural world. In some way, I hope my work may, by reminding others of nature’s beauty, help preserve that beauty for future generations.
III. Graduate School

When I started attending R.I.T., I began experimenting with the teapot form. I decided to concentrate inside the parameters of the teapot for my entire education at R.I.T. I took this form through many stages before developing my final thesis work. With a strong background in functionalism, I started my first quarter producing functional teapots. Although I had been involved in ceramics for many years, I had not yet fully developed a good understanding of the teapot form. My first two quarters were spent developing and experimenting with different shapes and sizes of teapots. It was not until late in my 2nd quarter that the question was finally asked of me: “Why are you making teapots?” Fortunately or unfortunately, I did not have an answer. As a functional potter, I had not been asked this question in a long time. I did not know why I had chosen this form, and did not think “Because they are fun” was the appropriate answer. With this question now put forth, I realized I must look beyond the mere act of physically making teapots.

During my third quarter, I started researching other artists who had also chosen to work with the teapot. Although I had looked at many artists in my first two quarters, I was simply concentrating on the structural forms they had used and not the conceptual content of their work. As my teapot research continued, I also began studying the historical basis and culture of tea and the teapot.
IV. Historical Perspective

My research on tea drinking was directed almost exclusively toward the Far East. I assumed that tea drinking originated in Asia and found my postulation to be true. An article by Simon K.S. Chiu contained in the *Art of the Yixing Potter* gave a historical outline of the origins and development of tea drinking in China. I learned that the consumption of tea began in China around 2200 years ago during the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 200 AD). Adopted as the beverage of choice in several Asian cultures, tea was used in many ceremonial rituals as well. The preparation and serving of tea underwent several transformations since the Chinese initially began drinking it for medicinal purposes. The influence of Buddhism and its utilization of tea as a meditative aid, as well as the rise of tea connoisseurs, resulted in tea drinking being accepted as a formal custom in most of China by the Tang Dynasty (618 AD - 907 AD). It is at this point that specialty tea ware began to become available. Tea adherents felt that the quality of the tea was affected by the ware used in its preparation (Chiu et al., 22-31). This attitude has continued up to the present day.

Tea has also impacted and become a vital part of the Japanese culture. Tea first came to Japan in the year 729 AD (Hammitzsch, 63). Brought from China, tea was used as a medicine, but its consumption soon became more widespread.
Zen Buddhism and the Japanese passion for Chinese and Korean tea wares resulted in the synthesis of a particular Japanese aesthetic of beauty, as evidenced in Chanoyo, the Japanese Tea Ceremony (Hammitzsch, 63). The Tea Ceremony became a way of life starting in the Momayama period in Japan.

In the Tea Ceremony, each part of the teahouse and utensils within it have a purpose. The overhang of the roof above the entrance indicated the shifting ability of the weather and of human life. The gateway was low, so that guests had to humble themselves by stooping. Outside the house, the stepping stones, the water basin and the stone lantern indicated a willingness to be used: the stones, to be trod upon; the water, to remove the dirt of the hands; the wick of the lantern, to be consumed that a little light might fall to guide one’s steps and symbolize the spirituality in each person.

Within the house, the faint incense satisfied the sense of smell. The sound of water boiling or being poured greeted the sense of hearing. The alcove, with its single painting and simple flower arrangement, pleased the sense of sight.

These impressions were repeated in the forms and use of the objects of the Tea Ceremony itself. The fire, the water, the spoon to measure the tea, the whisk to mix it, the iron kettle and the bowls used to serve the tea, all fulfilled their part aesthetically.

As I learned more about the Japanese Tea Ceremony, I began to find a direction in my own work. The Japanese idea of humbling themselves and sharing
a moment in time through the use of tea was evident in the aesthetic attention given to each aspect of the Tea Ceremony. The prized ceramic Tea bowls from which the tea is consumed, the process and preparation of serving tea, and the utensils used all intrigued me. I began to look deeper inside myself, to find out why I was so drawn to this ritual. I remembered the reason I was first attracted to clay: the ability to produce objects which inherently were meant to be used; the idea of sharing a moment with something that was hand made, not machine made; to appreciate through its use, and contemplation of where you are and what you are doing. I began to attempt to produce work which would somehow convey these feelings.

V. Fresh Start

I have always been attracted to other mediums, especially wood and metal, and wished to incorporate these mediums into my ceramic work. George Nakashima’s approach to wood has always fascinated me. His use of the material in its natural state appealed to my aesthetic sense. I attempted to make clay respond more like wood by fashioning slab-formed boxes to contain my tea sets. These mimicked the wooden encasing boxes traditionally used to house the tea bowls in Japan. This idea related to the Japanese Tea Ceremony. By creating more components to the teapot, cups, tray and a container, the viewer was now
forced to stop and go through a process of opening the box and removing its contents, thus spending more time with the work. Doing this, I hoped the user would slow down, take time to appreciate and even reflect upon the ceremony and its meaning. I produced many of these box form tea sets by the end of my third quarter. I was also able to introduce other mediums, such as wood and metal, into the design. Although I was generally pleased, and the response from my professors and peers to these new forms was positive, I knew I would have to push the idea and forms further in my second year.

VI. Second Year

In the beginning of the thesis year, one is required to submit a proposal of intended work. Although I felt I had made great strides in my first year, I was still somewhat confused as to the direction I wanted my work to take. Therefore, writing the thesis proposal proved to be somewhat difficult for me. I sought advice from my undergraduate professor and friend, Lee Benson. Lee’s advice was to “work in a direction of something you believe in, to be sincere and make good work.” Listening to his advice reminded me of the times I had spent at Lake Allatona, Sandrock, and the message I was trying to convey at the end of my first year. I knew I still wanted to work with the teapot form, so with help from my
professor, Rick Hirsch, I devised the previously stated thesis proposal in the introduction.

These were the parameters I would work within for most of the duration of my time at R.I.T. My performance in the studio began to be influenced by new sources, and my work reflected this. The first major influence in my work was a visit from Ohi Chozaemon, the 10th, and his family to R.I.T. The Ohi family has worked in ceramics for almost 400 years and are one of the primary makers of ceramic tea ware in Kanazawa, Japan. During the Ohi’s family visit, I learned more first-hand information about the Japanese Tea Ceremony and the Japanese aesthetic and respect towards ceramic art and nature.

In my own work I was struggling to make a clear connection between the tea sets and nature. Through observation of the Ohi family and their work, I began to develop what I call the first stages of my thesis work. I was still working under the realm of functionality and would continue to do so until later in my third quarter. I began to produce a series of tea sets encased in rock-like ceramic forms. To make a better connection to nature, I had replaced the original slab-formed boxes with the more natural rock form. I was generally pleased with my work and called my first thesis committee meeting. Although the overall response was good, there were still many questions raised about the tea set, the rock form, its functionality, and how it connected to my concern about nature. With these questions in mind, I returned to my investigation on the teapot form, especially
those forms which made reference to nature. My primary source of information came from my professor, Rick Hirsch. He copied many articles and showed me his personal collection of Yixing teapots. The Yixing teapot tradition or style originated in China as tea became a popular beverage. The teapots were greatly valued for their functional and aesthetic qualities. Many of the Yixing teapots Rick showed me were organically shaped and made reference to a gourd or other natural objects. As I continually tried to find my own voice in clay, I became aware of other artists who had worked in the Yixing tradition, a Taiwanese potter named Ah-leon and an American potter, Richard Notkin. Both artists worked in the Yixing teapot tradition.

As my exploration continued, I investigated an exhibit entitled Ceramic Echoes-Historical References in Contemporary Ceramics. This exhibition attempted to elucidate the connections that contemporary artists were making to tradition. Garth Clark states in his introduction that artists should be “ready to absorb and grow from which they inherit. As such tradition is a natural cycle wherein death facilitates the continuity of life” (Clark, 25). He insists that “tradition remains the sustaining force in all art, without which all art is without context or basis of quality. Indeed without tradition there cannot be innovation” (Clark, 25). I found this connection and reinterpretation to be particularly evident in the works of Richard Notkins and Ah-leon.
Richard Notkin and Ah-leon's ceramic work clearly exemplified this "Echo" of tradition to me. Their teapots of the 1980's contemporized the Yixing tradition and was the basis on which I first understood the connection between tradition and innovation. This connection was amplified more in a catalog titled Strong Tea Richard Notkin and The Yixing Tradition. As stated in the opening pages, "In response to the rigorous formalism and subdued coloration of Yixing ceramics, particularly the teapots valued by Ming and Qing dynasty literati, Notkins reduced his palette, concentrated on intricate permutations of functional teapot design, and found a voice particularly suited to his exacting craftsmanship, cerebrality, and reflective populist politics. When he adapted a Yixing like stone ware clay body that beautifully exposed minute sculptural details unobscured by glaze, comparisons to Chinese forbears were invited" (Harper, 2). The catalog outlines the development and reinterpretation of the Yixing Tradition evident in Notkins work. It does so by depicting a number of his pieces next to their Yixing prototype. Nowhere was this more apparent to me than the relationship between the Yixing double chambered teapot and Notkins piece titled Cooling Towers #24 (Halper 1990,25).

The reinterpretation I witnessed in Notkin's work opened my eyes to some of the qualities lacking in my own work. The teapot forms I had been working on exhibited competence in manipulating the material, but as stated earlier, I was still not making a clear enough connection to nature or to the historical basis of tea and
Richard Notkin
Cooling Tower Teapot
its ceremony. To clarify this, I started producing a more functional teapot with reference to natural objects using fruits, nuts and tree branches as visual resources. Once again, I was pleased with my results but felt I had begun to stray from my original concept of the rock forms. I still felt drawn to the rock forms with which I had been working earlier in the year and wished to somehow reincorporate these forms into my work.

Another major turning point in my work was a trip to the Royal Ontario Museum in Ontario, Canada. It was there I learned of Chinese Scholar Rocks. Immediately, I was drawn to these rocks and wanted to incorporate these forms into my work as tea sets. I expressed my interest in Scholar Rocks to Rick Hirsch. Once again, he proved to be a great source of information and inspiration. Rick showed me several books and catalogs on Chinese Scholar Rocks. As my exploration on Scholar Rocks continued, I learned some of the history and philosophy behind them.

The earliest writing about Scholar Rocks goes back to the Zhou Dynasty (1122 - 256 BC) and concern happenings as early as the Xia Dynasty (2500 - 1766 BC). Musical or resonant stones are discussed in Zhou Dynasty writings. In tombs of those periods, there are bronze bells and stone chimes which were hung to produce a tonal scale when struck in sequence. These early writings also pertain to the so-called precious stones, which were trade goods, as well as tales about the rocks and famous people associated with them (Mowrg, 20).
In the Han dynasty (206 BC - AD 220) great gardens were built which incorporated aesthetically pleasing stones as sculpture in the garden. In the Han Dynasty, the sculpture of nature was admired by the wenren (cultivated gentlemen). Also of personal interest were the ancient incense burners (boshan). Green glazed ceramic incense burners were found in Han Dynasty tombs. The boshan were objects with mountain themes carried out in three dimensions. They were ceramic and man-made, yet the material is from the earth (E. and J. Frankel, 8).

Smaller rocks were also valued for their aesthetic beauty. They were placed on stands or bases and brought inside. Rocks were viewed as small mountains. The Chinese scholars regarded rocks, not only as mountains, but as a representation of the universe in a microcosm. They appreciate rocks in their natural form. As with mountains, these smaller rocks have peaks, cliffs, ravines and grottoes. Rocks are stationary but are said to arouse a feeling of motion and action. As I learned more about the philosophical view of rocks, I began to realize how these forms could make a clearer connection between nature and my work.

As I continued to experiment with these rock form tea sets, I also became aware of and began to struggle more with the idea of their functionality. My original concept dealt more with contemplation through use. Now, with my latest teapot forms, I had taken away their functional use. I expressed this concern to Rick and to my other thesis committee members. They reminded me that an object does not have to function in order to have a use. Some objects serve as vehicles.
for contemplation, appreciated more for their aesthetic merits than for their functional possibilities. In turn, I realized my new work related more to my original concept, which dealt with the art of slowing down and appreciating nature and one’s natural surroundings. The actual functional use of my work could become less prevalent, and the use could come from contemplation and appreciation for the work, as evident in scholar rocks and in the Japanese Tea Ceremony.

VII. The Final Project

The last and final turning point in my thesis work was another book given to me by Rick Hirsch. It was a book concerning a show in 1989 at the National Arts Museum in Taiwan. A Taiwanese artist, Liao Tien-Chao, worked on hand-carved stone teapots as well as other stone carved forms. The work of Mr. Liao was extraordinary. It allowed me the chance to see how I could produce ceramic rock form tea sets, still make reference to their historical bases, and address my concern about its functionality as a tea set.

VIII. Building and Glazing
As I approached my show date, I continued to be influenced by the Scholar Rock forms and the work of Tien-Chao. I was still somewhat concerned with the functionality of my tea sets, but it was no longer a major concern. Up until this point, I was still working primarily on the potters wheel to produce the tea sets. After my research of the Chinese Scholar Rocks, I stepped away from the wheel and began hand building most of my work. The pieces prior to this seemed to be slightly overworked and held more traditional functional pottery reference than I had intended for them. I wanted a more natural feeling in my work.

As Einstein once said “90% perspiration and 10% inspiration;” this statement proved to be true once again. During my time as a graduate assistant, I made a lot of clay; usually I thought of this as a mindless task, but there is always that ten percent factor. As stated, I had been hand-building my latest forms but was always searching for new ideas. Unloading the clay mixer one day, I noticed a texture that was created in the clay as it was pulled apart and taken out of the mixer. As the clay separated, I realized this process could be the perfect solution to create a more rock-like surface texture. As I pulled the clay out, I began to separate it into smaller clumps and brought it upstairs. By allowing the clay to naturally take its own shape and combining it with tearing, cutting, or smoothing the surfaces, I was able to achieve a very natural, rock-like appearance. I allowed these forms to become leather-hard and then began carving them into hollow tea pots. I continued this same procedure in the making of the cups. After creating
several teapots and cups, I realized I needed to create relational ceramic displays that suited the tea sets in order to fully complete the emotional response I wanted from my work. I began sculpting shelves, trays, bases, pedestals and containers to work as stages for the tea sets. Doing this allowed me to create a better environment as well as a relationship between the bases and tea sets. This approach also provided me with more surface area to further develop the relationships of the glazes and firing techniques.

Glazing and firing decisions were made on the basis of wanting some of the pieces to further accentuate the rock-like form, whereas other tea sets and bases were made to portray a harmonic relationship between base and tea set. Color choices came from tests which I had been conducting throughout the year, seeking mostly cool and natural rock colors as the basis for glaze testing and development.

Firing the pieces took several steps. I had several pieces to work with in order to complete one tea set. By using a variety of firings techniques, I was able to experiment with many different glaze types. Most of the teapots I produced were fired to cone 10 to maintain a connection to the functional aspect of a tea pot. The bases, trays, containers and pedestals were fired either Raku, low fire electric, gas or even primitive firing. The variety of glazes and firing techniques allowed me a freedom of choices on how I wanted each piece to be represented.
IX. Installation

Installation in the gallery was another factor in my thesis work. I had worked very hard to achieve a certain feeling or invoke a certain emotion in my work. The display of my work in the gallery would either enhance this or possibly destroy it. My mission was to suggest a picture and provide an arrangement that visually captivated the viewer from a number of different vantage points. I aspired to accomplish in my environment what the Tea Garden setting did for the Tea Ceremony. “From the symbolic point of view it is the first step on the way to enlightenment. It is here self absorption begins, that the heart is purified, and the great forgetting takes possession of man. With every step along the garden path the heart loosens its link with the world” (Hammitzsch, 85). The challenge was to create a visual setting that drew in the observer for any number of reasons. With the help of Rick Hirsch, the goal of enticing the observer to investigate the environment was achieved by opening a visual and metaphorical dialog. No longer was the observer in the gallery. The connection to nature and the teapot would transport them to a different place, a place where a created environment elicited memories in the viewer and in turn created a new personal experience. Just as the Tea Garden helped transport those who walked upon its stones into a place where worldly troubles could be suspended, it was my intention to provide a rest stop from the craziness of contemporary life.
Thesis Show
Bevier Gallery 1998
Top: Box Series 3 Closed
Bottom: Box Series 3 Open
Top: Box Series one Closed
Bottom: Box Series one Open
Top: Rock Garden Series 1
Bottom: Rock Garden Series 2
Top: Wall Series 3
Wall Series 4
X. Conclusion

For the development of this thesis, I have striven to solve my own problems and concerns which critiques often brought up regarding my tea sets. I produced over twenty pieces for my show. By using visual and technical information I had learned through-out the year, I was able to combine many different techniques and styles to ultimately achieve my goal.

My goal was to produce a body of work which expressed my respect and concern about nature and how we perceive our natural world. By using both visual and historical connections to tea, the Tea Ceremony and Scholar Rocks, I believe I was able to make a correlation between them and my work. Tea and the Tea Ceremony have been a sacred ritual for hundreds of years. It has been, and still is today, a time for reflection and appreciation through the use of tea. Rocks have been visual representations of nature since the early Zhou dynasty. By combining these two traditions and their forms, I was hoping my work would show the respect and appreciation that society should give to nature, our natural surroundings and how we should live our daily lives on this planet, our Earth.
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XI. Technical Information

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<td>OM4</td>
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<td>Custer Feldspar</td>
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Glazes: Cone 10

**Copper Red**
- Custer Feldspar: 30%
- Spodumene: 20%
- Whiting: 20%
- Silica: 25%
- EPK: 5%
- Copper Carb: 1.5%
- Tin Oxide: .5%

**Joes Blue Green**
- Stromiun Carb: 29.4%
- Nephylin Sy: 55.6%
- EPK: 6%
- Flint: 6.8%
- Lithium Carb: 1.7%
- Copper Carb: 5%  For Blue Green
- Copper Carb: 10%  For Yellow Green

**Satin Doll Black**
- Albany Slip: 65%
- Nephylin Sy: 15%
- Barium Carb: 10%
- Tale: 10%
- Chrome: 1%
- RIO: 2%
- Manganese Diox: 2%
- Colbalt Carb: 2%

**Furguson Varation (yellow)**
- F-4 Feldspar: 35%
- Barium Carb: 25.28%
- Dolomite: 12.15%
- OM4: 7.22%
- Flint: 5%
- Opax: 15%
- RIO: 3%
Reference List

Bartholowmen, Terese TTSE “A Concise History of Yixing Ware” in The Art of The Yixing Potter The KS. lo Collection, Flagstaff Museum of Tea Ware, Urban Council, Hong Kong, 1990.


7. Smith, Bradley, Japan A history In Art,1964.