Functional teapots

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“Functional Teapots”

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My thesis project was about teapots and the various ways they can be used. I choose three different settings in which people use teapots. I attempted to alter the character of the pot to be appropriate for the situation in which it was intended. In simple terms, the three kinds of teapots were: a large teapot for a group of people, a teapot for a single person for private time, and a breakfast teapot.

A Brief History of Tea

The history of tea goes back four thousand years. The practice began in China where it was first used for medicinal reasons and later as a beverage. At first, tea was made of compressed leaves that were stirred into water. The teapot was developed during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) for the purpose of steeping the tea after the water was boiled. Tea was introduced to the West in the seventeenth century by way of Portuguese traders.¹

In the East, the drinking of tea developed into a very elaborate ceremony. This was also true of the West. By the early nineteenth century, tea had become an important element to British society. "Carefully selected tea implements, strictly observed etiquette, and exaggerated politeness..." became the
socially accepted norm.² The custom became very lavish with each hostess attempting to outdo the other.

Though the tea party lost its popularity in the twentieth century United States, it continued to be associated with the idea of formalness and socially accepted etiquette.

Japan also developed a tea ceremony. The Japanese aesthetic was concerned with the relationship with nature. An important element of the Japanese tea ceremony was to create a harmony with the surroundings. The simple environment and utensils were specially selected to enhance a state of mind, a quietude.³

Some Other Influences

I became interested in borrowing ideas from a variety of sources while reading a book on Post-modern Architecture. A lot of Post-modern architects use elements from different styles and periods and combine them into one structure.⁴ Often this results in buildings that are very elegant and beautiful but still have a slightly cartoon-like presence. I wanted to get this kind of character in my work.

At this time, I also became interested in the work of Italian designers. I like the feeling of experimentation within the functional objects they make. The objects are designed with the idea of stimulating the imagination and encouraging fantasy even if they are not practical for everyday use. I particularly liked the philosophy of Ettore Sottsass. He has concentrated on
objects of an intimate scale that will "inspire a greater awareness and a more heightened sense of the rituals of life." I admire this serious approach to work while doing it in a fun way.

The influences for some of the shapes of the teapots were from Yixing teapots from China. The Yixing teapots have an incredible amount of variation in design from very simple forms to tiny sculptures of natural objects. Some of these are my favorite ceramic forms.

Of course the pots I made, with so many changes and other influences, did not look anything like the Yixing teapots. Another influence that I wanted my work to have was an American feel in some way. In a general way, the American character tends to be big and bold compared to the Oriental values of delicate and graceful. I wanted this feeling of boldness in my work even though it was not present in the teapots I was looking at.

A Teapot For A Party

One thing I wanted to do, was suggest a different idea of what a teapot was rather than the idea that most people have of a teapot. I did not realize it at first, but most people have a preconceived idea of what a functional teapot should be (and there are a few common types). Some of my ideas fit this, and some do not.
One common idea that most people have is the teapot for "high" tea whenever they think of a group of people having tea together. A mental image is drawn up of a formal setting with dainty old ladies sipping from delicate china. Being a tea drinker myself, I always thought this was funny. This is not my idea of a good time. This kind of gathering was too formal for what I had in mind. However, since tea is not usually served at casual parties, I had to present something else that was appropriate to my personal interest.

I decided to use this idea of a formal gathering without taking it too seriously (see plates 3 and 4). I wanted to suggest a gathering but approach it with some humor. These pots suggest a special occasion when tea would be served, but without being very formal or refined. The occasion would be more of an off the wall tea party rather than one of good taste. I wanted more of a festive atmosphere. They are certainly not dainty pots and would not be used for anything but a casual situation.

Another idea that I wanted to suggest with the large teapots was that functional did not necessarily mean everyday use. The fact that they are functional teapots is important. Many teapots from history are made that are not practical for everyday use (or practical at all) but are made as novelty items. These pots may be used only on rare occasions and may be on display the rest of the time. That they are functional adds to the charm of them in that it gives a potentially formal setting
a bit of eccentricity. The novelty of using an object with such an
odd character adds to the fun.

The basic shapes for the large teapots came from
designs of Yixing pots (see plate 1). I became interested in the
forms that had flat sides and were kind of box shaped. I
decided to borrow the general shape and make it in a different
way.

I also liked the slight irregularities that were present in
the Yixing teapots and was attracted to some of the teapots that
showed space on their underside whether by design or by
accident. I exaggerated the space at the bottom with the arch
form. Because of the method in which my teapots were made,
the irregularities of the form were also slightly exaggerated.

I was interested in the way the Yixing pots were
displayed. Many of them were put on pedestals or small
decorative bases that gave them so much prominence. The
bases complemented the beauty of the object and gave it a
feeling of specialness. I wanted to use this idea in my own work
and made bases to go with the large teapots.

I tried to make the look and style of the tea sets
appropriate to the occasion when they would be used. The first
consideration was the scale. Of course a tea set for several
people would be large and have a set of cups.

I made the form of both the teapots and cups large and
exaggerated compared to a more elegant teaset. I tried to give
the forms a bold feeling with the boxiness of its shape and the
large cut of the feet and spouts. The glazes I used were richer in
color and surface with the satin finish of the Copper Matt and the glassy depth of the Green Shino. These were more fitting to both the bold, festive appearance and to the luxuriousness of an elegant object. Black color was used for the base and for the feet of the cups. This was for the sharpness in color contrast with the glazes used. The base of the teapot was used to put the piece on display as a way of pointing out the significance of the teapot.

A Small Teapot For One Person

The other types of teapots were my own idea of what I would use for breakfast or for time alone. These are more conventional in their style for what a person would use for tea in an everyday activity. But as with the other sets, the feeling of these teapots and cups were to be consistent with the time at which they are used.

I wanted the feeling of this teaset to be quiet and personal in character (see plates 5 and 6). I imagined this pot as being used by myself or a person for the purpose of enjoying solitude for relaxation or as a time to meditate and think constructively.

The individual teapots were also influenced by Yixing teapots (see plate 2). One of the styles of Yixing were teapots that were very minimal in design. These were an influence in that I wanted to capture a simple form. I felt that a simple form
would not create any visual distractions that would take away from the feeling of quietness.

The combination of influences was a problem for the individual teapots. I had trouble making a small, simple teapot that did not look like a poor imitation of a Chinese pot. I tried to make it more contemporary and bold by using the fat round shapes of the foot, spout, and handle.

Trying to be consistent with the feeling of quietness, I made the form, color, and surface subdued. The scale of the pot was small and intimate. The body was made in a simple dome shape. The spout, lid, and handle were also made of the simple dome like forms that were consistent with the motif. Every piece was made of soft rounded parts. There were no sharp edges or details and the pot fit comfortably in the cupped palms of the hands.

The surface and color were also subdued to emphasize quietness. The chosen colors were neutral in either an off white or an iron red. I wanted the surface matt or stone like to get away from the richness of a glassy surface and make it more earthy.

The Breakfast teapot

I felt that the teapot and cups for breakfast would only need to be big enough for one or two people but should still give the feeling of fullness and generosity.
In the breakfast set, I wanted to get a different kind of character (see plate 7). I wanted a more cheerfully, upbeat look without being too abrupt for first thing in the morning. I used brighter colors on these pots and made combinations of color such as the blue-green and the purple. I also used different colors on the cups for more interest and variation. The form of the breakfast teapot and cups was fairly conventional but with a fat, clownish look about it.

This teapot is the most straightforward of the pots and the most practical for everyday use. I think of this teapot as being used for a typical daily breakfast. Morning is my favorite time of day and I like to take the time to relax, wake up slowly, and have a pot of tea.

Conclusion

After looking back on my thesis work, I ask myself, what did I learn? Did I accomplish my goals and get out of graduate school what I feel is important?

I went to graduate school because I wanted to learn more about ceramics. With hindsight, I realize that the important part of my education was not about making a specific kind of work. (I will not always want to make teapots.) I feel I gained more by opening up to new ideas and shedding ideas and habits that had restricted me.

I feel a valuable part of my education was the experience of the creative process, the process of exploring, developing,
and realizing ideas. This is very important and relates to not only ceramics, or even art, but to all experiences. There will always be periods of change and development where values will have to be sorted out and expressed.
Technical Considerations

The clay used for the work was a stoneware body good for throwing on the wheel. The formula used was adapted from a Doug Casebeer stoneware recipe. Substitutions were made for available clays and the Redart was removed. Later, silica was added for more strength to prevent cracks from thermal shock.

The pots were formed primarily from throwing on the wheel. The largest pots were made from a thrown rim turned on its side. Slabs were then used for the sides and spout. The breakfast teapot was thrown without a bottom for the purpose of ovaling and the attached to a thrown slab. The lids were thrown in an upright position so that they too could be ovald easily. The smallest pots were simply thrown and trimmed.

Several glaze recipes were chosen after many tests and retests. These glazes were accepted for their colors and surfaces which were appropriate for their use. For example, the Copper Green Matt was chosen for the pots with raised surface decoration because of its variation in color where it pools and the Green Shino was chosen for the flat, wide surfaces. Further tests were with these glazes to determine variations in thickness, overlap with other glazes, and differences in firings. Some of the glazes proved to be very fussy as to how they were applied and to where they were put in the kiln.

I kept careful notes on the loading and firings of the kilns. Two of the glazes I used were carbon trap glazes (the Green Shino and the Angela Shino) and reacted strongly to the
firing schedule and to the stacking of the kiln. I found that a strong body reduction just before the kiln reached color had the best result. This reduction was apparent by a thick, sooty appearance that lit up when the kiln was blown into. The rest of the firing was a steady medium reduction until temperature was reached. At the end, I would open the damper for a minute or two to clear out the atmosphere before closing it all the way. The other glazes did not react too much to the body reduction but required reduction for the rest of the firing.

In stacking the kiln, I found that the carbon trap glazes worked best at the sides of the shelf where they came into contact with more of the flame. It also helped to have these pots surrounded with a self just above them and taller pots to the side. This reduced the air space that the flame could travel through. Pots with the other glazes could be put in the center of the shelves.

The individual size pots needed some work after the glaze firing. These pots, with the Angela Shino and Iron Saturate, had a sandblasted surface. After sandblasting, they were washed and polished. The lids were also finished at this point. Some grinding material was put on the rims and the lids were ground into place. This gave a very smooth feel to the contact between the lid and body while allowing for a tight fit.
## FORMULAS

Cone 9-10, percent by weight

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stoneware clay</th>
<th>Copper Green Matt</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky Stone</td>
<td>Barium Carbonate 27.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foundry Hill</td>
<td>Dolomite 4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawthorne</td>
<td>Custer Feldspar 50.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Custer Feldspar</td>
<td>Kaolin 9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flint</td>
<td>Flint 9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grog</td>
<td>Copper Carbonate 4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rutile 4.0</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Green Shino</th>
<th>Angela Shino</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neph. Syenite</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-4 Feldspar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spodumene</td>
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<tr>
<td>OM#4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soda Ash</td>
<td>Soda Ash 4.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>EPK</td>
<td>EPK 2.4</td>
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<thead>
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<th>Black Matt</th>
<th>Purple Matt</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dolomite</td>
<td>Zinc Oxide 2.2</td>
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<td>Kaolin</td>
<td>Whiting 2.7</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kaolin 6.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iron Ox.</td>
<td>Flint 8.7</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<p>| Chrome Ox.              | Copper Carb. 4.0            |
| Cobalt Carb.            | Cobalt Carb. 0.3            |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Red Iron</th>
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<th>Red Shino</th>
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<td>F-4 Feldspar</td>
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FOOTNOTES


2. Ibid.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


PLATES

1. Yixing Teapot.
2. Yixing Teapot.
3. Party Tea Set with Copper Green Matt Glaze.
5. Individual Teapot with Iron Saturate Glaze.
6. Individual Teapot with Angela Shino Glaze.
7. Breakfast Teapot and Cup.