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History in the Hand Through Functional Ceramics:
Looking to the Past, Creating in the Present, and Sharing with the Future

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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The College of Wooster
Department of Art and Art History
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Advised by Walter Zurko

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“Try to put thought, time and care into making these useful objects with the hopes that the users will somehow connect with them beyond their intended purpose.”

Jennifer Harnetty, Ceramic Arts Daily

Introduction

Some might say I'm old fashioned, but there has always been something about objects from before my time that I've felt drawn to. From the time I was a young child, I have been surrounded by objects that revealed evidence of use from their past. My room is full of vintage odds and ends—you'll find old records or old posters from movies before I was born; aging books with pages so crisp and browned, they are like leaves in autumn; slightly rusting tins filled with everything from safety pins to buttons to earrings; old mason jars of various sizes, shapes, and colors scattered across every surface containing knitting needles, kitchen utensils, and paint brushes; even an old medicine jar to hold pencils next to my computer. Objects such as these have history, previous owners that used these items in their own way, and now they have passed into my hands and become a part of *my* daily life.

I always say that antique shops are “dangerous” places for me—particularly for my pocketbook—but it's in those places that I feel very **at** home. I grew up in a family that prizes antiques—my grandparents were frequent buyers and sellers at sales and auctions, and my own house featured more than a few old objects as well. It wasn't uncommon for me to tag along when they'd go to a sale just to snoop for a few diamonds-in-the-rough. During these outings, I learned a lot about various pieces, their origins, and, with the occasional oddity, what they were used for. Perhaps the most frequent comment I heard was, “these just last forever” or some variation. Over time, I have come to think of old things as not just beautiful, but also dependable for their individual, utilitarian purpose.

As an aspiring potter, the notion of well-crafted, durable, functional items appeals to me. Since my medium is clay, it was an easy decision for me to choose to make functional objects at the potter's wheel. As I began to conduct research for my Senior Independent Study project, I looked at historical functional wares from daily life, many of which survive to us today. The sturdiness of these pieces, in combination with the obvious wear and tear exhibited, affected me in the same way objects do in an antique store. I realized that as a result of their durability, they had survived to be part of the lives of many, and thus created a link from one individual to another over the course of time.

All that said, not everyone in the world is like me, and not everything in my life is pre-owned; I'm still a child of Generation Y who grew up in a world with cell phones, internet access, and a constant cultural focus on being young. My point is, in our culture of easy access, instant gratification and disposability, many, if not most people have a desire for the "new." Because I'm creating new functional wares, I have an innate desire to see them being used in someone's kitchen or home. It is my hope that these handmade wares may somehow help to establish a connection from one the user/owner to another, somewhat like the connection I feel when using antiques in my daily life.

Old objects have a history; they have been owned and used, and sometimes last longer than a human lifetime. Though I cannot recreate that history when making new wares, because my objects are made by hand, I can act as the initial person in the object's potential lineage of human interaction. The objects I have acquired from sales and antique shops have all been part of someone else's life, and

even though I may never meet the people to whom those items belonged, a link between us has been created. It is my intention to create hand-made functional objects, using a hybridized aesthetic gathered from a variety of historical sources in order to parallel the unexpected bonds the history of objects makes between overlapping generations.

Process

The process of my Senior Independent Study project has been both physical, and conceptual. Clay is, as a medium, inherently process-oriented; my approach to conceptual ideas is also very process-oriented; as a result, these two sets of processes have continually informed each other throughout the entirety of this project. This interaction has allowed for me to grow in my understanding of the medium and its properties, and its history in America and Britain.

Wheel-Throwing

At the beginning of every throwing session, I would grab some clay (brown stoneware or grolleg porcelain), and begin wedging. The wedging process is crucial because it ensures even consistency of the clay and also rids the clay of air pocket. This process takes some muscle and patience, but is mostly a technique of leverage; the rocking motion of wedging has meditative effect, which allows me to consider which forms I should focus on that particular day. It is also a time to reflect on new inspirations I have discovered. After wedging, the clay is rolled into balls of specified weights, based on the predetermined forms that each ball will be used for.

Next, I set up my wheel, which included fetching water, getting my tools set out, getting a bat mat and some bats at the ready, and throwing thrown down a ball

of clay.¹ The first step at the wheel is to center the clay by pulling the clay up into a cone shape and then, while using the right hand to control the bottom, using the base of the left hand to press the cone back down into a mound; this action displaces the clay from its original position, allowing me to have more control over the placement of the clay on the wheel, ensuring it is centered properly.

This is followed by opening the clay, by slowly creating an indent in the center of the mound and, while supporting the outside of the clay with the other hand, pressing down until the desired depth is reached. Then, the base is created by the gentle, but firm, outward movement of the hands to expand the base to the desired diameter. Following that, the clay is collared (brought in) at the top to make the rim smaller in diameter than the base, and the rim is gently compressed.

The next step is pulling up the walls of the low, hollow form, which serves to thin and even out the walls of the form and to extend the piece's height; this step begins at the base and the clay is slowly pulled in an upward direction to expand the body. Collaring and compressing of the rim is repeated in between each pull, until the desired thinness/size is achieved. The final step is to slow the wheel significantly, and to shape the form.

There are many intermediate steps that occur while throwing a form, which include the use of tools to cut the rim or alter the piece in some way, and the steps I mentioned above are only the fundamental steps of throwing. Nonetheless, I think

¹A bat is a removable plastic surface placed on the head of a pottery wheel. When a pot is finished, the entire bat can be removed from the wheel with the piece still on it, this makes freshly thrown work easier to transport.

this gives a good illustration of this small part of the whole of creating each ceramic piece. Creating these works is a true labor of love.

Conceptual Process

The pots I have created over the course of this project have changed dramatically. My initial efforts resulted in large groups of mugs and tumblers, but making them felt uninspired. These pieces featured a plain, slightly flared form and an undecorated surface (later, I used these for glaze testing). Bored with what I was currently working on, I looked back through some of my work from the previous semester and found a small stoneware jug that I'd gained a fondness for (Figure 1). I used this as a starting point and found inspiration in early American stoneware.

Several of the earliest pots I created for my Senior Independent Study project were based on old crock jugs (Figure 2). For these pots, I retained the straight edges and the defined angle of the neck, but gave them wider mouths and shorter, more rounded rims, to make them into jars instead (Figure 3). The shape that I had when I'd finished reminded me of an old metal cistern, so I began research on metal ware and American tin ware.

After diving further into the process of research however, I found myself surrounded by inspiration from multiple cultures, uses, and time frames. Initially, I tried to base my works *solely* on Early American stoneware and American tin ware, but I found myself constricted, which made me question *how* I planned to use these sources as inspiration for my own work. Expanding my research allowed me to create more diverse, more interesting pieces that reflect the web of influences that inspires my love of pottery. Additionally, by expanding my vision, it allowed me to

create hybridized wares to demonstrate a visual connection between people and cultures, which would mimic the potentially invisible connection I would like my pieces to make between owners/users over time.

The two primary subjects of my initial research, early American stoneware and American tin ware vessels from the 18th and 19th centuries, were alike in their simplicity, utility, and durability. However, they juxtaposed each other in physical form; early stoneware pottery was often round, bulky and large (Figure 4) whereas metal wares were more angular in form, lightweight and thin (Figure 5). As I further explored these wares, I realized that I didn't want to recreate these forms, but I still wanted to utilize some of their qualities in my work. I desired to make something new that reflected today's world—the world in which they were created.

As I continued to research, I began looking at contemporary pottery to see what the "pottery of today" looks like, and what amongst the wide and variant world of contemporary pottery most appealed to me. Simultaneously, I began to research glazes, glazing techniques, and other surface-oriented elements, which might act as a strong contrast to the historical forms and help me to establish a style of my own. What I found instead was a fresh look at a contemporary approach to minimalism in pottery, specifically contemporary pottery in the United Kingdom.

The first potters to catch my attention were James and Tilla Waters, a married duo, who work in rural Wales; the partnership is streamlined so that James throws pieces on the wheel, and Tilla makes design and color decisions.² Their

² "James & Tilla Waters Ceramics." James & Tilla Waters. Accessed September 13, 2015. <http://www.jamesandtillawaters.co.uk>.

functional pieces are simple, basic forms, to which they apply soft, semi-transparent glazes.

Many of their pots, like the ones shown in Figure 6, have completely straight sides and the surface is completely smooth. They are free of surface texture, with the exception of their signature stamp on the side of each jar. Even the knobs on the lids of these forms are uncomplicated, having straight sides and being somewhat flat in shape.

The warmth of their work surprised me; even though their work is exceptionally clean-lined, and such simplicity could suggest industrial manufacturing, they manage to exhibit references to the presence of the human hand. In Figure 7, which shows the interior of a small mug, it is possible to see the rings created by the potter's hand on the wheel. They are subtle, but their presence is significant and evokes an honesty, which reminds the viewer/user of human presence during its creation.

Like James and Tilla Waters, I chose to utilize straight sides for many of my pieces. This decision is reflective of both the minimal aesthetic, which the Waters use, and also of the straight sides seen in the historical metal wares I discussed previously. Many of my pieces feature straight sides, like the form in Figure 8. This bowl has flared, straight sides to follow the aesthetic of tin ware and the reference to metal wares is furthered by the inclusion of the dotted line and two notches to illustrate an artificial seam. However, it is also possible to see the lines in the clay created by the hand during its creation on the wheel, reminding the viewer of not only the medium, but also of how the piece was made.

Another contemporary potter, whose work is formally minimal but shows evidence of the human hand, is Derek Wilson. He describes himself as a “twenty-first century hybridization of studio potter and conceptual artist,” and his art exhibits influences from both Europe and Asia (Figure 9).³ His functional wares are wheel-thrown, and are also based off of clean, straight lines and smooth textures, but some of his works include alterations, such as dimples, that present the hand-made quality of his wares (Figure 10). Many of Wilson’s works are very simple in shape, created by the alterations of basic cylindrical forms.

Because of the simplicity of his work, small changes, such as dimples, have a strong impact on the final outcome of his pots. I chose to include this detail in some of my own works as well, which affects the pieces not just visually, but also tactilely. With the inclusion of dimples, the piece sits in the hand of the user differently than it otherwise would; dimples within the form of a piece changes the connection a hand makes with the work. These indentations create dips in the surface of a pot where the fingers, thumb, or other curves of the hand can rest making a piece feel more personal by emphasizing its hand-made character.

Some of my own work, such as the pitcher in Figure 11, features dimples. This form, more rounded than many of the others, was based on the forms of early American stoneware pitchers. The roundedness of the body makes for a comfortable fit in the hand, but with the addition of the indentations, the supporting hand is given a more defined placement, creating a better grip for the user.

³ "Derek Wilson Ceramics." Derek Wilson Ceramics. Accessed September 13, 2015. <http://derekwilsonceramics.com>.

Additionally, I also included dimples on pieces like the mug in Figure 12, which has straight sides. This piece, like the tumbler beside it, is based off tin ware like the bowl I mentioned before. While the stoneware-inspired pitcher featured rounded sides, and the dimples fit snugly into the front area where the pitcher would be supported, the placement of the dimples was less clear for the mug. The roundness of early American stoneware indicates the hand-to-object contact that would have been frequent, however with tin-ware that rounded belly is much less common. My adding dimples to the straight sides of the mug, it created curves in the sides of the form, which allows the piece to sit more comfortably in the hand.

Glazing

Early in the process, while I was still trying to define my concept for forms, I began my glaze testing. I knew from early in my project that I wanted to explore glazes and see how different glazes would look on my pottery. Because there are so many factors that affect glaze chemistry—from minerals in tap water to how a piece is fired in a kiln—glazing can be both challenging and exciting. In order to find glazes that I felt would complement my forms, I performed a variety of tests that included more than 150 test tiles, which included variances on the application of a few select glazes, including Geoffry Wheeler's ROB/GA Blend and Matte "B" glazes. I created different effects by trying a variety of colorants, layering glazes one over the other, and vice versa, and by firing at different heating and cooling speeds. I also tried different glaze application techniques including dipping and spraying. Additionally, these glazes were also tested by applying them over Steven Hill's

Strontium Crystal Magic: Warm and Strontium Crystal Magic: Cool, which resulted in a variety of effects as well.

Artists such as Lousia Taylor and Linda Bloomfield use glazes that are colorful, yet transparent enough to allow the viewer to see the rings from the creation of a piece on the wheel (Figure 13, Figure 14). The presence of these lines (even though some of Linda Bloomfield's work *is* mass manufactured), once again creates that interpersonal connection by reminding the viewer of the presence of the maker. When using glazes on my own work, I also hope to maintain the presence of my own hand and to use glazes that emphasize and complement the texture left over from my hand and the wheel.

Exhibit

Because my show is still a ways away, I have not made concrete decisions as to how I will set up the gallery space to display my wares. However, because the display is so crucial to how artworks are received, I think it is important to address some of the ideas behind what I hope to achieve.

To begin, my overall goal for the atmosphere of this exhibition is to find a balance between the space of the gallery and a domestic space. As I stated early in my paper, my works, while they *are* pieces of art, are also made with the intension of being used. The gallery, the physical space in which my exhibition will be set up, reflects the role of my pieces as artwork, and so my primary focus is to emphasize the domestic qualities of my wares in my display. Placement of plates on a table, for example, will help with this kind of feeling.

Additionally, I would like to create a very small desk space for a guest book, above which my artist statement will be hung in a picture frame. On the surface of the desk, I would also like to include a couple of my pieces, one to hold pens or pencils for signing the guestbook, and one for something decorative, such as flowers.

Another potential element to my display would be the inclusion of a bookshelf. Shelves are a standard way of displaying ceramic pieces against a wall, but by using the set up of a bookshelf, it will further the domestic atmosphere, rather than a more formal space. Also, the bookshelf would allow me to display objects at a greater variety of heights, which will give me more control over the angle at which the viewer sees each piece.

Also, for wares such as plates and deep bowls. I would like to set up a small table. Not only will this show the objects in a setting of use, as opposed to shelves, which indicate storage, but it will also allow for individual pieces to be viewed as a unit, which creates the idea of a larger singular work, a set, out of smaller individual pieces.

Similarly, to emphasize the work I have done with glazing and glaze experimentation, I would like to display the large quantity of cups and mugs from early in my project. On one wall, I would like to arrange a series of hooks for the mugs to hang on. To make this more interesting, and to emphasize the mugs as sets, I would like to arrange them so that they are in lines according to their glaze color. Important to note is that the sets are not all of the same number, I have groups ranging from 7 cups to 2 cups, so I would like to arrange them in columns of declining numbers, creating an overall triangular shape.

For the final set of displays, which was inspired by Katharine Morling and Edmund de Waal, I intend to create shadow box shelves (Figure 15, Figure 16). Because I want to create a domesticated space, shelves seem like an obvious choice. However, in order to bridge the gallery-domestic gap, shadow boxes are different because, while they *do* provide storage space like you would in a home, they also feature the outer lining of the box, creating a frame that references the formal gallery setting.

Conclusion

Overall, throughout the process of my Senior Independent Study, I have learned a vast amount about the formal qualities of clay —everything from glazing materials and techniques, to throwing plates, to new ways of altering pots. But most of all, I have really developed a new understanding of the relationship between objects and the interaction with people and with other objects.

All of my influences, varied as they might be, are still related. Nothing is truly original and concepts overlap or reemerge. Just like objects can be passed from person to person, concepts can be passed from object to object; how we interact with those objects may be the same, or it may be different, but the connection is still there.

Overall, by including influences from different sources, I hoped to create a hybridized aesthetic that will reflect the coming together of different lifestyles that might occur over the lifetime of an object. It is my hope that these objects I make will go on to be used by many and to become part of the daily life of different people. Their original intention, a mug as a drinking vessel, for example, is not the most

important part —instead, the aspect most important to me is just that these wares are used. However, and wherever, and whenever someone needs them. I want them to live a life as rich in diversity as the influences that came together to make them.

Appendix



Figure 1.

White stoneware jug I made in the spring of 2015.



Figure 2.

Common stoneware jug.
Minnesota, late 1800s - early 1900s.

Appendix



Figure 3

Three small jars, brown stoneware



Figure 4.

Jefferson S. Nash Pottery
Alkaline-glazes stoneware, 1856
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Appendix



Figure 5.

Example of American copper ware made for the kitchen



Figure 6,

James and Tilla Waters
lidded jars
grey with orange and black details

Appendix



Figure 7.

James and Tilla Waters
Small mug with lilac glaze and black foot ring.
Thrown porcelain.



Figure 8.

Bowl, grolleg porcelain, before glazing

Appendix



Figure 9

Derek Wilson
Thrown Porcelain, celadon glaze



Figure 10
Derek Wilson
Thrown Porcelain, celadon glaze
Appendix



Figure 11.

Dimpled pitcher, grolleg porcelain, before glazing



Figure 12.

Tumbler and dimpled mug, grolleg porcelain, before glazing

Appendix



Figure 13.

Louisa Taylor
Oriole Supper Set, Thrown and Assembled Porcelain



Figure 14

Linda Bloomfield
Bowls, 2010.

Appendix



Figure 15.

Katharine Morling, *Nature Box*, 2013
 Antique box, porcelain and black stain



Figure 16.

Edmund de Waal, *fifteen stones*, 2014.
 15 porcelain vessels in a lead and wood cabinet

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