

## The Language of Ceramic Art

### What are pottery and ceramics? Is there a difference? Is everything that is made out of clay pottery? Are all ceramics made out of clay?

Pottery and ceramics have been an important part of human culture for thousands of years. From prehistoric storage jars to tiles on the space shuttles, pottery and ceramics have played a key role in innumerable human endeavors. But how do we define them?

#### What Are Ceramics?

Technically, ceramics are some of the things made from materials which are permanently changed when heated. For example, clay has chemically-bonded water in it which will cause it to disintegrate when a dried clay object is put in water. Once fired (heated) to between 660° and 1470°F (350° and 800°C), the clay is converted to ceramic and will never dissolve again.

All clay is a ceramic material, but there are other ceramic materials, as well. Glazes are also ceramic materials, because they permanently change during firing. Industrial ceramics include a range of materials such as silica carbide and zirconium oxide.

#### What Is Pottery?

Pottery is generally considered to be containers made from clay. "Pot" is a term used for any number of container forms. Both words derive from the Old English *potian*, "to push". When we consider how the potter pushes as they throw the clay on the wheel, it is easy to see how the process got its name. The term "pottery" may also be used as an adjective with some objects, such as small figurines.

In industrialized countries, modern pottery can be classified two ways. There is **commercial pottery** or ceramics which are produced in factories, and there is **studio pottery** which is produced by individual craftsmen. You may also hear of "art pottery," which may be either produced commercially or by an individual craftsman.

Studio pottery (studio ceramics) can be quite diverse. Production potters are most active in making large quantities of ceramic wares such as plates, platters, dishes, bowls, and so on. Production potters can sit down with a hundred pounds of clay and throw the same form all day. The technique of throwing off the mound is often employed by production potters because it reduces time spent centering the clay and moving bats on and off the wheel head.

Studio potters are more concerned with creating forms for their uniqueness and beauty. These "art" pieces might still retain full functionality, or they may move toward being more sculptural. Many of these are "one-off" pieces, meaning they are one-of-a-kind.

## Potter, Ceramic Artist, or What?

There is not a singular term for those who work with clay. Rather the opposite is true. Some of the most common terms are:

- potter: a general term for an individual craftsman working in clay
- production potter: these folk make large numbers of functional pots as their main employment
- studio potters: often those who create one-off pieces but may also do production pottery
- ceramic artists: those who create clay artwork
- clay artist: same as a ceramic artist, but may not fire their pieces (i.e. they are working as a designer for a commercial pottery)
- ceramist: anyone who works with ceramic materials either industrially or as an individual, and
- ceramic engineer: those who work (often in industry) with the chemistry and physics of ceramic materials

## A Historical Perspective of Pottery Aesthetic

Throughout the ages, even before history began, pottery has been used as a medium for expression. The earliest pottery and clay objects we have found show a true sense of artistry and aesthetic. Pottery has been used to tell stories or emphasize them. Clay has been used to supplicate gods and kings. It has been used to express social and religious ideals.

Beginning in the late 19th century, the Arts and Crafts movement changed the concept of pottery and ceramics. What had been often seen as purely utilitarian became infused with an understanding of and focus on the interaction between the potter and the clay. Art Pottery, which emphasized pottery to be valued for its own artistic sake, was born. During the 1950's, ceramic art took an even further digression from the utilitarian, as studio potters reacted to and explored the ideas presented by artists working in the abstract expressionist movement.

Ceramicists today, have the understanding that clay can be either art, or craft, or (ultimately) the marriage of both. Artistic merit and technical expertise meld in the current world of studio pottery. Many production potters (those who make hundreds and thousands of matching dishes for utilitarian usage) are also engaged in making one-of-a-kind pieces that are primarily artistic and aesthetic expression.

## Clay as a Sculpting Medium

From prehistoric times to the present, clay has not only been used to create utilitarian items like bowls and storage jars, but also rich works of three-dimensional art. Clay artists may work as designers for commercial potteries, they may do sculptural work as part of their studio pottery, or they may work exclusively as sculptors in clay.

## What is three-dimensional artwork?

Three-dimensional (3-D) objects have a height, width, and depth. Such works may be carved, modeled, cast or otherwise constructed or assembled using a variety of materials. Creating ceramics is creating three-dimensional forms. Even tiles have height, width and depth. Beyond the actual measurements of

these three dimensions, however, there are even more elements which make up the three dimensional form. For 3-D objects, there are three elements which raised them into art, and upon which all 3-D art is built. These foundations are **subject matter, content, and form.**

### **Subject Matter**

Subject matter is the starting point for art. What will the artist "talk" about in the piece? Subject matter is the broad theme or topic of a piece.

### **Content**

Content is very closely related to the subject matter, and often we slide from one to the other without being aware of it. Content can be seen as a refinement of subject matter. Once an artist has determined the subject matter, now it is time to define what they want to say on that topic.

Content is the element of art in which an artist clearly defines what it is they are attempting to communicate about the subject matter. What concept or set of interrelated concepts will an artist be working to impart?

### **Form**

Form is the culminating element in 3-D art. Without form, there is no expression of subject or of content. Form is the physical manifestation of an artistic vision, expression, and communication. For 3-D artists, form is much more involved than for 2-D artists, such as painters. In this context, form allows us as viewers to mentally capture the work and understand it.

Unlike a 2-D artwork, the 3-D artwork must serve the subject matter and the content from a multiplicity of viewpoints. No matter how the audience moves around the form, the artwork needs to continue to do its job of speaking to that audience.

Form is an element of art. At its most basic, a form is a geometrical figure (i.e.: sphere, cube, cylinder, cone, etc.) or naturalistic (meaning found in nature i.e. leaf, whale, apple, etc). Form has the ability to become an even richer medium for the artist and experience for the audience. Not only do we as potters and ceramists work with the 3-D form, but also the 2-D possibilities that exist in decorating or enhancing the work's surface. When developing the piece, the surface is an integral part of the overall piece. Surface treatments need to mirror all the details in order to present a unified, complete three dimensional artwork, including functional ceramic work.