Paul Mathieu, The Art of the Future: 14 essays on ceramics

Chapter One

The Classical Esthetics: The Constancy of Form

I am writing this from China, where the most popular architectural conceit manifests itself in the perverse quoting of ancient Greek architecture. Taking a bus trip through suburbia and the outskirts of Chinese cities, one goes through an industrial wasteland seemingly without end, where numerous factories, head offices, warehouses and other buildings of all kinds, including private homes, are adorned with Greek columns, porticoes and pediments. These are bastardized, cheapened and over-all kitchy versions, cast in cheap materials, cement or even plastic, of one of the Greek orders, the Ionic, the Doric and the Corinthian. The last being the most popular by far, no doubt due to its florid excessiveness and closer relation to bad taste. This classical urge to ornamentation finds its way into houses as well and many new developments of public or private housing suffer from the same Greek induced malaise. One even finds skyscrapers, office towers and large condo complexes, multi- storied, crowned with Greek columns and the pretensions of faux Greek temples. To find these tired stereotypes in “communist” China at the beginning of the 21st Century is all the more strange and disquieting. What is going on here?

What is it about Greek architecture and Greek art, and particularly Greek Attic pottery that gives it such perennial power, such resilience and such widespread efficiency through time? This state of affairs has been going with hardly an interruption since

Antiquity, with the Etruscans and the Romans taking over from the Greeks, then subsequently throughout Europe, with a strong revival during the Renaissance due to the rediscovered writings on architecture of Vitruvius (1st Century BCE) and the buildings of Palladio (1508–1580) and many others. A resurgence of Greek columns and other motifs continued through the Victorian era in countless banks, museums, colleges, churches and other public and private buildings all over Europe and all over the world, with colonization and imperialism. China, in a rather dubious fashion, is succumbing to its rather spurious charms now. Why is Greek classical antiquity so popular?

The orders of Greek architecture, and the same is true for Greek Attic pottery, are instantaneous and clear signs of elegance, refinement and sophistication, in a direct lineage with an ideal, utopian age. They represent for everyone anywhere, constancy and continuity, stability and strength and they carry an overall implication of status and hierarchy. They embody power and authority, and they have this effect instantly. Their appeal has now become universal and timeless and I predict that this will probably always be the case. Quite simply, they are the most obvious signs for culture and civilization we have. They also instantly signify "ceramics'" and they have become iconic for ceramics as an art form, itself.

The eternal forms of Greek architecture and Greek pottery, probably the most successful "designs" ever, in term of dispersion and resilience, anyway, do not change much, if at all, through time and even space, since, quite simply, they do not need to change. Whatever the time and the place, the time or the place, the same archetypal forms answer the same questioning. Their shape, be they columns or vases, are perfectly performing the task for which they are destined, whether it be practical, symbolic, esthetic or quite simply iconic, as a familiar sign for stability and constancy, for status, sophistication, refinement and wealth. They are a rather rare example in the history of forms and of styles, of particular and specific shapes that remain the same, basically unchanged, over such a continuous and extensive period of time, roughly 3,000 years and counting.

Their genesis from their inception to their final resolution during the classical period is explained by the fact that works of art in Greek Antiquity were based on an ethical ideal where perfection was the goal, as exemplified by the "Golden Means" of establishing proportion in architecture or elsewhere. This ethical ideal will resurface again in ceramics

in the Neo-Classical period in late 18th Century Europe, with the development of industrial mechanization and production, as we will see in "The Industrial Esthetics" chapter.

The classical esthetics as defined here is, of course, not just specific to Greek art or European art for that matter. Some shapes of oriental ceramics, notably Chinese and Korean, pursue a similar aim, where the potter continually revisits, reworks and refines a single shape for centuries after centuries, yet, the shapes of oriental pottery are more simple (while being as complex, nonetheless), possibly even more refined, since their overall profile generally articulates a single continuous curve, while "occidental" forms usually articulate a succession of curves and/or straight lines, changing directions, sometimes unexpectedly. For this reason, oriental forms tend to be less specific and iconic, and similar shapes, if at times cruder than the oriental examples, can be found indiscriminately all over the world, irrespective of influence. By being generated around an interrupted wavy line they differ greatly from the broken, diverging outline of Greek pots where each aspect of the form is visually separate and distinct from the others. These kinds of forms are actually thrown or made in separate sections that are then subsequently assembled and joined together, while the classical esthetics of Asian ceramics usually implies the making of the form as a unique, continuous gesture. This specific method of making is mostly responsible for the overall formal esthetics of Greek pots. Despite the impression they give, Greek pots, like any hand-made pots, are not as perfect and regular as they first appear, in their stillness in books or museum showcases. If they were to be returned to the potter's wheel and spun around, they would wobble and dance as they divert, even ever slightly from the perpendicular centre point, the axis around which they spin. This imperfection of Greek pots is reassuring to me, as it releases the unbearable tension generated by the otherwise extreme control.

The classical esthetics in ceramics can be found from very early on in history, even pre-history. The esthetics itself, as it is defined and used here, in fact predates Greek and Roman "classical" Antiquity by millennia, and it is still continuing today. It is by far the most far-reaching, long lasting, prevalent and influential esthetics to be found in ceramics. Most pottery forms are classical in nature, in that they comprise a limited vocabulary of forms that hardly changes over time and even space. This is due to the fact that ceramic forms and particularly pottery forms, even more so if they are made on the potter's wheel, rely on an outline that provides an unbroken continuity, one of the major formal aspect of the ceramic esthetics, specially in oriental ceramics, but not exclusively.

This generates a limited range of possibilities and similar if not identical forms are found everywhere, in an uninterrupted continuum through millennia, independent of influence, exchange or imitation. The potters of China and Korea (in a very different sensibility, looser and more organic, as we will see later, with Japanese ceramics as well) have pushed this potential to its ultimate perfected expression. For this reason, the basic forms of oriental ceramics are equally part of the classical esthetics and they have been as influential as their Greek counterparts.

The classical esthetics finds a variety of expressions, irrelevant of the particular stylistic modifications one finds from culture to culture. This esthetics is mostly relevant at the level of three-dimensional form and shape, although there is also a specifically "classical surface" as well, on which more a bit later. I need to stress that in the discussion of the various esthetics as defined by the structure of this book, each esthetics always imply a "form" aspect as well as a "surface" aspect, since the coming together, the juxtaposition of a volumetric form and a distinct surface is what characterizes ceramics as an art form. The classical esthetics is the longest, oldest continuing esthetics found in ceramics and as such, it is the most important esthetics in the ceramic tradition and its influence can be found in all the other esthetics under discussion in these essays, in this book.

The central characteristic of the classical esthetics consist on an emphasis on form nonetheless, instead than on surface. That form is usually left unglazed, with the bare clay surface providing the overall visual effect, whether it is left uncovered or adorned with decoration. This surface is frequently burnished (this is true just about all over the world, except in Asia, where burnishing is rare) i.e. it has been smoothened to a sheen, an effect that is obtained by compressing the upper layer of clay with a very smooth hard tool (a polished stone usually, often agate), which realigns the flat clay particles into a continuous and now reflective surface. When a ceramic object is burnished, this doesn't really alter the form or "add" anything more to it, but it does create a new surface that greatly modifies our visual perception of the form. It changes our reading of the outline and the overall shape, an effect enhanced by the reflective surface burnishing creates, confusing somehow where exactly the surface actually stands in space as it reflects its surroundings. This form of pictorial spatiality is one of the earliest pictorial space found in ceramics, as we will explore later in 'The Narrative Esthetics" chapter. A similar effect can be obtained by covering the surface with a clay slip made with a decanted material (the Latin name is

“terra sigillata”), retaining the finer particles, which then behave in a similar fashion to burnishing after a light polish with a soft cloth, for example. The actual burnishing of the surface of a pot to a reflective shine is a technique not found in oriental ceramics, until quite recently, interestingly enough. As we will see in the next chapter “The Flux Esthetics”, oriental ceramic surfaces are more concerned with glazes and glazed surfaces and this is where oriental ceramics has made its most impressive contributions to the field. It remains nonetheless interesting and somewhat puzzling, considering its rich and diverse contributions, that burnishing a ceramic surface has never been developed as a decorative technique there. Burnishing is also done for practicality, as it closes the pores of the clay and reduces the porosity of low fired clay. Considering that pre-Columbian ceramic technology comes from oriental ceramics (we presume, since it may have developed totally independently, after the migrations from Asia to the Americas), if we are to trust historical precedence, something I personally greatly distrust, it is significant to note that after coming to the New World, potters from Asia developed their art independently and quite differently from their forebears, the Asian potter developing higher and higher firing technology and glaze surfaces while the “American” potter developed a variety of complex styles in low fired earthenware, very often burnished. Both techniques of applying refined clay slip and burnishing are often combined and found all over the world, with the best examples coming from pre-Columbian America, notably in the Moche and Nazca cultures of Peru and in the Pueblo pottery of south western USA, especially works made in the 20th Century to now. This surface can also be covered with images, patterns and symbols, yet these are applied with a very limited range of earthy colors, reds, browns, blacks, more rarely white, which provide a material, visual and esthetic continuum with the clay ground of the form itself in a symbiosis that it always very resolved. The clear contrast between form and surface, so clearly manifest in the other ceramic esthetics, as we will see eventually, is rather subtle and muted within the classical esthetics since both form and surface are made with clay materials and minerals which are largely similarly perceived.

A Few Examples:

The classical esthetics comprises a vast body of work from all over the world. I will single out only a few here, a selection that I hope is representative but nowhere near comprehensive. Included in this esthetics are the Neolithic potteries of China and Europe. At the esthetic and conceptual levels, the first pot ever made is still being made

somewhere, today. This primal “Ur” pot is a very basic form, a lump of clay with an opening in it and it is at the origin of all and any pot ever made, even now. In China, the potteries of the Yangshao, Dawenkou and Lungshan cultures (from 2000 B.C.E.) are particularly notable. The last one is of particular interest, since it produced eggshell thin, wheel thrown black pottery that is incredibly refined formally and it still feels so totally current and modern that it would be totally believable and appropriate if made now. As mentioned previously, at the level of form, all oriental ceramics (with the possible exception of some ceramics from Japan made for the tea ceremony and that will be discussed in “The Material Esthetics” chapter) are also part of this esthetics. Another contribution of China is the “garniture” format, a suite of stereotypical and often standardized forms presented as a cohesive group “en suite”, with a unifying decorative surface and which was tremendously important to European “chinoiserie” decorative arts focused on sumptuous and ostentatious display, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where it represented a sign of taste, refinement and wealth for the aristocracy, then for the bourgeoisie, remnants of which can still be found today as knick-knacks in most homes. The “garniture” format has recently seen a resurgence in the work of many contemporary ceramic artists. Included as well, are the pots coming from pre-industrial India and Africa and still produced to this day in these parts of the world; all pre-Columbian ceramics (I am speaking mostly of pots here, the figurative, sculptural works to be discussed later in “The Figure and Figurine” chapter) from the Iroquoian, Woodlands and Plains cultures of the Eastern and Central USA, to the Pueblo ceramics from South Western USA, the ceramics of Mexico, Central and South America. Although all these ceramic forms, from so many and very diverse cultures, are included since they all are unglazed pottery, made with a limited yet comprehensive vocabulary of forms repeated with little change and modification, if any, over vast expanses of time. They all nonetheless have specific characteristics and usually their own vocabulary of forms that can be quite different and distinctive. The “stir-up” funerary vessels of the Moche culture of Peru is a good example, since that pottery shape is actually specific to that part of the world and found nowhere else on Earth (yet are repeated with only slight modifications, helpful in dating them, over three thousands years). The Moche stir-up vessel is quite different formally from the vessels of their Nazca cousins a bit farther south, which has two spouts connected with a handle bridge, another version of the “stir-up” format. The stir-up vessel of Peruvian pre-Columbian ceramics is an anomaly in ceramics history as it is a specific, highly distinctive form found nowhere else on Earth, in itself a rare occurrence in the ceramics lexicon of forms, which tends to be similar, more or less,

everywhere. This explains its resurgence in contemporary ceramics (Foulem, Velarde, others) who use it as a signifier for ceramics specificity (Foulem) or cultural and historical connection (Velarde). Archeologists and historians are still debating the function and its significance of the stir-up vessel. Was it practical and/or functional? Then how? and why? For carrying the vessel, possibly, since the shape doubles as a spout and a handle and the position of this handle suggests that they be lifted vertically, picked up from above, which implies that their user was located above them. Was the form symbolic? Then, of what exactly? They are phallic somehow, but then vaguely, considering that sexuality is major theme of Moche ceramic art. Nobody knows for sure. Yet, they are very elegant and beautiful shapes, highly unusual and puzzling and their mystery is a large part of their real appeal. The earliest examples are from Chavin de Huatar, in Peru and they are close to 3,000 years old. The same constancy is true of the ceramics and pottery of Mexico, where the pots of the Mayan culture are stylistically quite different from the Aztecs or any other Meso-American cultures, yet these stylistic differences are mostly at the level of surface and modes of representation, with similar forms, classical, found everywhere. Pre-Columbian ceramics is also notable for the large variety of incredibly inventive anthropomorphic and zoomorphic vessels, but these will be analyzed in the chapter on "The Figure and the Figurine". Also, the stylistic differences of the various surfaces will be looked at within "The Decorative Esthetics" in chapter three and "The Narrative Esthetics" in chapter four.

Greek Attic Pottery:

It is necessary here to single out for analysis and develop further the characteristics proper to Greek Attic Pottery of the classical period (roughly, sixth to fourth Century B.C.E.) since these objects were by far the most influential in subsequent developments in ceramics history, all the way to today.

The repertory of Greek pottery forms developed slowly from the Archaic period (+ or - 1000 B.C.E.) to their ultimate expression in the Classical period (fifth Century B.C.E.) to their progressive degeneration during the decadent Hellenistic period (fourth and third Century B.C.E.), through Roman times, to today. These forms progressively develop and are modified according to practical, cultural and esthetic developments, yet they remain identifiable over the whole of Greek civilization and in their influence all around the Mediterranean and subsequently, throughout the world.

The main forms, among many others, nearly two dozen, are the Amphora, a tall-necked vessel with two long handles on each side of the neck and sometimes with a pointed base so it can be stuck in the sand for stability (the amphora was used for the storage of wine and other liquids); the Hydria, for carrying and storing water, is a globular vessel with two horizontal handles on the shoulder for lifting and another vertical handle at the neck for pouring the content; the Krater, is a wide-necked vessel for the mixing of wine and water and it comes in four main types: the bell-krater, a tall bowl form with two side handles; the calix-krater, on a higher foot with two low positioned horizontal handles, which can still be found today in ornamental garden vases, the basic form being based on the corolla of a flower, perfect by association for garden display and it is also found in certain types of Champagne ice buckets were they retain some of their original connection to function, in serving wine; the column-krater with two straight vertical handles around the slightly narrowed neck and the volute-krater, with two excessive, non-functional, curved and decorative handles positioned higher than the lip of the vase. The volute-krater and the kalix-krater are the most influential Greek forms, both often found as garden ornaments to this day, while the amphora is a close second, and all these forms can be found in large number in European decorative arts (their formal influence may even have extended to China and the Orient, though commercial exchange in the Silk Road). The volute-krater was and is still used for its potential in ostentatious display due to its excessive nature and unpractical structure, which reinforces its symbolic potential of leisure and luxury, as it may have done for the Greek themselves. Another form is the cup or Kylix, a rather unusual shape for a drinking vessel(it is a rather shallow and wide dish on a high foot) and found only in Greek art, in itself a rather rare phenomenon in ceramics history (as we have seen with the “stir-up” vessel), where similar, if not identical forms, are found all over the world when they serve the same practical purpose, independently of contact or influence.

Note:

Readers more interested in contemporary applications than the historical context can skip to “On Tradition and Anonymity”, further down.

The Kylix is a flat, shallow bowl with two horizontal side handles, on a high, pedestal foot, and used for drinking wine; the flat shallow dish form of this drinking vessel provided two distinct surfaces for pictorial representations, a perfect frame for circular

depictions inside the wide bowl itself and another continuous frieze, barely interrupted by the handles, on the exterior, which became visible when the drinker lifted the vessel to drink its content. The shape provided a perfect surface for images within circular compositions, and very inventive uses of the round format can be found. The kylix offered great potential for surface decoration and for that reason, it is the commonest decorated shape in Greek pottery. Its unusual shape may actually be more informed by the necessities of graphic composition more than actual practicality. The wide flat dish was nonetheless useful for decanting and collecting the dregs of the crude wine of the time, and these dregs were then flicked at the wall while holding the kylix with a finger through one of the handles, a functional yet unusual action which probably explains as well the unusual shape for a drinking container, so specific to the Greek pottery vocabulary. The game of Kottabos was thus played by the Greeks at symposia, gatherings around food, wine and conversation. The lees of the wine collecting in the shallow dish were flipped at a target or, no doubt, at other guests, with a toast and for a prize. The targets were bronze dishes balanced on stands or floating in a basin, to be sunk. We understand the unusual shape of the kylix as a drinking vessel from its representation in libation scenes as often seen on kylix cups themselves, actually. The specific and unusual holding position with one finger holding the cup through one handle permitted to project the lees by turning the hand and flipping the wrist, all gestures clearly described on the scenes depicted. The handles on the kylix (there was really need for only one handle but there are always two, for the all important symmetry and balance in Greek esthetics) were also used for storing the cup on a peg on the wall, a storage position also depicted on pots. This form was eventually recycled in European ceramics into high footed dishes for serving and display, as compotes, a form still popular and in use today. There are also a few others I will not describe here, but for the Oinochoe, a pitcher from, as well as another important and distinctive vessel form, derived from perfume containers, the Lekythos, used for funerary purposes (see “Death” chapter). It remains important and necessary to have a knowledge and understanding of these basic Greek pottery forms as they greatly influenced the whole of the history of ceramics and they are still potent and in use now.

An interesting and important digression may be necessary here concerning Greek pottery. Ceramic and pottery forms are too often perceived by art history and the art world, as unimportant, unassuming, even irrelevant and futile. For that reason alone, Attic Greek vases are more often praised for their surface, their painted decoration, while the pot itself is usually dismissed and ignored, a situation reinforced by photographic

reproductions of these objects in books, where the painted image, the frieze or cartouche is usually singled-out and the actual pottery form remains invisible, not even shown, removed from the visual field as it is often from the field of interpretation and analysis.

Greek pottery remains one of the most spectacular and familiar craft of Classical Antiquity, despite the fact that in their basic materials and in their fabrication they are both common and cheap, compared to bronze or marble, for example. Only oriental ceramics can be comparably important in the culture and trade that they served. Greek pots were among the cheapest products of ancient crafts, although their price would vary depending on the complexity of their painted surface as well as the reputation of the maker(s), but they never were a luxury product as we would understand the term today. They were commonly sold and bought in markets everywhere and exported all over the sphere of influence of the Greek world. This growth in export for classical pottery was accelerated by the recent regional innovation of a money-based economy. It is this distribution, far and wide, that helped them in their transmission and preservation all the way to today.

Potter and Painter in Greek Attic Pottery:

In Greek pottery scholarship, a painted image is often attributed to a fictional painter to whom a name has been attributed, for example, the “Berlin Painter”, since his (we know from the names and signatures on a few vases that potters and painters were all male) most iconic work is found in a Berlin museum, or the “Achilles Painter” since his best work represents that hero, etc. Yet, another more perverse naming practice assigns the name of the potter, who actually signed the vase, to the painter who remains anonymous and, it is assumed, cannot possibly be the same person. We may not know who actually painted the vase, yet nineteenth century art historical scholarship, whose mindset is still very prevalent today in our still hierarchical approach to value and status in the visual arts, attributed the image to a fictional painter named after the actual, known potter who signed the pot. The “Amasis Painter” is a case in point, named for the potter Amasis who signed many of his pots. This practice is common in the attribution of images in Greek Attic pottery studies. Yet, for the Greek themselves, the prestige of the potter was greater than that of the painter and it is the potter who was celebrated. The most admired artist was the maker who potted these exquisite, complex forms, not the painter of the nonetheless similarly exquisite and complex images. I would argue that in many instances

they very possibly were the same person. On Greek vases, signatures are either painted or engraved, as “X egraphen” (X drew me) or as “X epoisen” (X made me). On some vases we find “X drew and made me” when the same person was responsible for both activities and also “X made me and Y drew me”, when two makers are clearly involved. Signatures themselves are a rare occurrence yet about 30% of vases are signed, with one maker responsible for both the making of the vessel and the painting of the image it supports. “Epoisen” (made me) could also imply a workshop owner who supervised the work of others, usually slaves, in the making of the work. But signatures on Greek vases are very rare, only about 1% of Greek vases have any signature at all. We only know of about 40 names of artists from inscribed vases while there are nearly 900 different known artists, recognizable by stylistic differences in their work. All these anonymous artists are given fictional names to define the attributions. It is important to keep in mind that most ceramic objects and pots, anywhere and at any time, are never signed and this phenomenon of signing these types of objects is specific to Greece antiquity. Even Roman pots, which were made later, are never signed. We do not know the name of a single Roman potter from their name inscribed on their actual work! (see “Text” chapter). Before the Renaissance, this was also true of all European ceramics and even then, only pots painted in major workshops or the work of just a few painters are signed. In China, no ceramic object is signed by an individual before the 19th century. If the object bears a signature it refers to the emperor, never to the maker. In Japan, the earliest signed pot is by Nonomura Ninsei, in the Momoyama period in the 17th century.

The debate over the meaning of “epoisen” (made me) is still open. Is it the signature of the potter alone, or even the painter alone, or both simultaneously doing one job? I, of course, think that when a pot bears only one signature, the maker of the pot and the painter of its surface were in many instances the very same person, irrelevant of the form (made me, drew me) of the signature. For example, Euphronios, one of the most distinguished and celebrated potter of the Classical period, who had a very long career in Athens, both signed pots as maker and as painter. Yet some of his pots were also painted by others who may or may not have signed them and he also painted pots made by others. Pottery making in Greece, or elsewhere for that matter, has always tended to be a communal activity made by a large group of people working collaboratively, where personal expression, individuality and originality played a very limited role, if any. In earlier times, during the Geometric period, potter and painter must often have been one but by the late Archaic (seventh century B.C.E.), specialization begins to set in production

lines with pots being passed from hand to hand for the making as well as the decoration, with different experts being responsible for various aspects of the work. This division of labor is found elsewhere in the world, notably very early on in Chinese history, anywhere actually where large quantities of pots are made by communities of potters working collectively. Toward the end of his life, Euphronios is known exclusively as a potter and he relies on other painters (who may have been potters as well, of course) to decorate his wares, possible due to failing health and a somewhat unsteady hand affecting his performance. He may have decided as well to concentrate on making masterful pots for which he would have received more recognition and fame than for his painting, anyway. It is recorded that Agathokles, for a while king of Syracuse, was at first a potter and when he fell on hard times, he returned to pottery, and made clay cups as fine as the gold ones he once held. The earliest Greek vase to bear a mark is the work of Sophilos, which makes him the earliest recorded potter in history. Since it is also the first work of art ever signed, this makes him the very first artist whose name is known to history.

I am aware here that I at times contradict myself, on purpose. My intent is to present information in a way that generates debate. By avoiding the imposition of a clear position, it is for the reader to decide. This discussion of the debate around names and makers may be seen as somewhat ludicrous, yet the scholarship of 19th century European art history, as well as the presentation and display of these objects in publications and institutions, has greatly affected our current perception and interpretation. In some ways we understand these artworks through the mindset and from the viewpoint of that 19th century scholarship more than we do from the perspective of the original makers and users or even through our own contemporary perspective. These objects, in a perverse way and in many ways, belong to the 19th century and are deeply Victorian, more than they do the 5th century B.C.!

Art history has this tendency to reposition objects in time, dissociating them from their original context, thus meaning. The consequences of this mindset are still with us today in our evaluation of art works and art practices.

On Tradition and Anonymity:

The classical esthetics in its permanency and continuity implies the notion of tradition. “Primitive” pots, which are also profoundly grounded in tradition, are egoless

and anonymous, yet deeply connected to the culture they embody and preserve for us, into the future. Tradition is a word used indiscriminately and I would like to define it differently here. True tradition in ceramics has nothing to do with stylistic conventions, which is how tradition is often thought to operate, falsely, i.e. that a pot is of a certain tradition if it looks like other pots from that “tradition”. One of the central and real tradition of ceramics is anonymity. Another true tradition is the notion of a conceptual constancy. It is important to keep in mind that tradition, like function and decoration, are all concepts and that any object or activity using these concepts is thus inherently conceptual. The conceptual constancy of ceramics implies that the basic aspects of ceramics are universal and timeless, that they are shared by all cultures throughout time and that they never change. A bowl is always a bowl, conceptually, no matter when, where, how and by whom it is made. For that reason, all the stylistic traditions of ceramics belong to all potters and ceramists, as well as being integral to all of humanity. The familiar notion of tradition as belonging to a particular group or time exclusively is obsolete. We now have instant and universal access to the whole visual and material culture (through the dissemination of images) of humankind. It is the heritage of all of humankind and as such, all of it can be tapped as source for future works. This doesn’t mean that it is acceptable to do this disrespectfully or ignorantly. On the contrary, ignoring this source of inspiration in continuity would be disrespectful, as if the past had become obsolete, useless and irrelevant.

There may be a need to reassess the value of anonymity and return to it. There is a need to end this contemporary obsession with originality and individuality, to end the false notion that art is the expression of irreplaceable personal originality. This contemporary notion is not readily applicable to ceramics, far from it. If the maker of a work of art has a personality, any individuality, it doesn’t need to be imposed or forced on the work. It will be obviously present there, by itself, as a matter of fact. To impose a personal aspect to an artwork is the last resort of those with little personality or with no individuality strong enough to manifest itself by itself. Anonymous artworks are nonetheless the fruit of real individuals with personality, but the work transcends, if it is any good, the individual maker. Above all, a return to anonymity should be the battleground for a critique of all aspects of contemporary consumer and entertainment culture.

The Classical Surface: Black on Red and Red on Black pottery.

Besides the constancy and continuity of form, the classical esthetics (and it is important to keep in mind that this esthetics is not only specific the Greek Attic pottery but most importantly can be found throughout time and all over the world), has provided ceramics with a specific “classical surface” as well. Since the content of these surfaces, for the Greek anyway, is more often than not narrative (a story is being told), they will be dealt with more depth in the chapter four, “The Narrative Esthetics: Framing and Fiction”. Yet, the classical surface is not always narrative and can often be abstract in nature, either with a decorative or a symbolic intent, and usually, if not always, as a potent combination of the two. Again this will be looked at further in chapter three: “The Decorative Esthetics: Abstraction and Ornament”.

Greek Attic pottery specifically has a very distinct surface, which was almost as influential as the forms themselves and its analysis uncovers principles that can be applied to many other ceramic surfaces where a strong polar contrast is present between figure and ground. Basically, the surface on Greek vases can be defined into two separate historical phases: the Black Figure phase, from the Archaic to the beginning of the Classic period in the fifth century B.C.E. and the Red Figure phase from the beginning of the Classic period on, where red figure supersedes black figure. There was actually a short period where the two polar phases, one being the reversal of the other, technically, visually, stylistically, thus conceptually as well, can be found on the same vase, one side being painted in black figure (the older style), the other painted with red-figure (the newer style, which will take over very quickly). These rare vases are actually called “bilingual” vases, since they use both these visual languages on the same piece, as if the maker, while wanting to try the new style couldn’t quite give up completely on the older and wanted to test and compare their respective qualities on the same piece, while developing their skills with a new technique requiring not only new tools but an actual reversal, in a strikingly different mode of perception and representation.

These two styles of image making may be specific to Greek Antiquity yet their resonance and influence was widespread and continues to this day. In fact a clear understanding of their operative differences could be most useful to the contemporary potter wanting to work with two contrasting colors to organize images and surfaces. The

visual implication and the optical dynamism through reversal that they imply can be applied to the analysis as well as the making of other decorative conceits which operate in the opposition of light and dark contrast, something found on innumerable decorated pots worldwide since time immemorial and still valid now. An oriental example would be the Tzu-Chu wares of the Song Dynasty in China whose decoration is articulated, much more organically and freely than its Greek counterparts, around dark figures (usually stylized flowers) on a lighter ground. It still is important to keep in mind that black on red (very common) and red on black (somewhat rarer) decoration are found everywhere throughout ceramics history and that the basic figure/ground dynamic applies irrelevant of place and time.

In black figure painting, whether it is narrative, representational or on the contrary decorative and abstract, the “figure” reads as a dark silhouette against the lighter red clay background. The Greek potter, to use that example, would then scratch this flat silhouette with a pointed tool to define it further and add necessary details. The black shape against the red ground gives the dark figure a very physical, material presence, objectifying the body which, while remaining flat, gains spatial density against the lighter ground, which in its turn is perceived as lit, deep, real, tangible, with actual believability as a physical space occupied by the figures, the patterns. Nonetheless, the black figure is perceived as presence while the red ground stands for absence in an ontological polarity.

In red figure painting, this polarity between presence and absence is even more effective and it is reversed, the red figure becoming presence and the black ground being absence and void. The red figure system is actually much more realistic than with black figure painting (where the image is like a flat cut-out), and it is now appearing as volumetric, fleshy reality while the black ground is now perceived ambiguously, without real depth or reality; it is dark, mysterious, fictive, flat, shallow, empty and void. Thus black figure and red figure decorations operate in opposition to each other, yet each with its own validity and expressive potential.

In early archaic Greek pottery of the geometric style, strongly abstracted lines and patterns, mostly stylized and symbolic geometry representing simplified figures in very basic spatial environments, progressively develops into a more sinuous “orientalizing” style, more detailed, with the use of an expanded palette of white and red slips in addition to the ground color of the clay support and the predominant black paint. This progression

from abstraction to representation is found similarly in all ceramic traditions. Horizontal banding decoration is also often used by itself, either done on the wheel as the pot rotates. It is also sometimes used to define concentric circles made with a number of brushes mounted on a compass. But the most effective use of banding is meant to articulate the variations of directions of the form of the pot itself, to clearly redefine each separate component. The articulation of pottery forms by banding is probably the most common and efficient formal device used in ceramics to define and animate the constitutive parts. Another use of banding serves to create continuous bands of reserve decoration circling the vessel, bands that then receive “caravans” of animals, real or imagined, most often. The horizontal banding can also be interrupted with vertical lines that defines (distorted) square spaces and panels called “cartouches”, that will then receive ever more complex representations and scenes, usually mythological in nature, anywhere in the world this is done. Square reserved panels are not found on pre-Columbian pottery representations, where it is always the whole form of the vessel that “frames” the composition, all around the pot. In Greece, or elsewhere, these reserved panels separate, somewhat hierarchically, the ‘image” within the frame, inside its borders, from the other decorative elements outside the frame, with the two different pictorial devices operating quite separately while complementarily. The “image” describes a scene to be read as a narrative while the “decoration” may be symbolic following a standard code shared by all viewers/users or may simply have been used to beautify the vessel while acting as a visual transition between the framed representation on the pot, itself another “frame” within its limit outline (see “The Narrative Esthetics” chapter, for more on framing devices and pictorial spaces specific to ceramics).

The figures or patterns, whether in black on red or red on black are rarely represented frontally in Greek pottery (or in other pottery traditions as well, at least not since the Ming dynasty in China and the Renaissance in Europe, contemporary of each other, actually. I am of course speaking of graphic representation here and this does not apply to three-dimensional modeling). This lack of frontal representation is unusual considering how important frontal images of the human body were in Greek art. On pots, this is mainly due to the difficulty of representing the human form as seen from the front, since the profile view creates an easier silhouette to describe, more believable too. Interestingly enough, eyes are on the other hand represented frontally even on figures seen in profile! It is only by the classical period of the fifth century B.C.E. that synchronicity of representation between eyes and body appears (with the eye seen in

profile, realistically, on figures seen in profile, frontal representation still being exceedingly rare, at least for the face, which remains in profile, usually. Yet, the nude in action on Greek pots remains the earliest representation of dynamic movement in art, especially on Panathenaic amphoras depicting athletes engaged in various sports, and this realism of active movement predates any such depiction in other art forms, in sculpture, notably.

Note:

Again here the reader more interested in contemporary ceramics could skip to "Contemporary examples" further down.

Greek Attic pottery technique: a theory

In black figure painting, the image is first painted, with a brush, as a silhouette shape which is then defined with linear details scratched with a sharp tool through the figure to reveal the lighter ground underneath. In red figure painting, the outline of the figure, as well as the interior details, are "drawn" so that all the figurative information is given by a graphic process. It is the background that is painted, to fill that negative space with the paint material, which will develop into a black color in the firing. It is important to keep in mind here that when the image was painted the paint itself was not black but probably of a reddish color not too dissimilar from the ground itself, unless another pigment, say ground carbon, was added to the paint to establish the contrast between figure and ground. The black color we see on Greek pots only develops as black during the particular firing process used by the Greeks. It is still debated by archeologists whether the linear system of graphic representation in red figure pottery is actually done with a fine brush or with a "syringe" that traces a continuous, slightly raised deposit of the painting material (as it appears to us visually, if we closely examine the pots), over a rough sketch lightly scratched into the clay, as is also often slightly visible. It is obvious that the background is painted with brushes, since brushstrokes are often visible in that part of the design. One can also easily admit that some short or repeated lines may have been painted with a fine brush loaded with paint, yet, it remains that a marked characteristic of red figure pottery is a very flowing, continuous, sometime quite long and very fine line which is very even in thickness and density, something that would be very difficult to impossible to achieve with a brush, no matter how fine and how loaded with paint it is. I suspect that, despite the fact that no actual "syringe" tool was ever found in excavations in

the potter's quarters of Attic Greece, such a tool must have been used to permit the squeezing of the paint into such fluid, uninterrupted, sinuous and elegant lines. A simple test which I would very much like to conduct could answer this ongoing debate. If such a tool was actually used, it would have left a slight groove in the clay underneath the painted line since Greek pots were painted directly over barely dried, still unfired clay. When that painted line would dry, the groove underneath would create a slight depression along the middle of the slightly raised line of material deposited by the process. A close look at a broken shard seen in cross-section would reveal if such a line behaves in such a fashion and it would test my theory, to finally close the debate on whether a brush or a syringe was actually used.

Historical examples:

The influence of these pots made a dramatic resurgence at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century in Europe, a period of renewed classicism in all the arts. Following the discoveries of Pompei and Herculaneum, the first serious investigations of scientific archeology and the publication in printed form of the collection of Greek vases collected by British ambassador at the Italian (actually the Spanish Bourbons) court in Naples, Sir William Hamilton, Greek art and most importantly here, Greek pottery becomes once again immensely popular and influential. When the passionate and gifted amateur Sir William Hamilton, as well as more serious archeologists, discover these vases in the Etruscan tombs of central Italy, they are first thought to be Etruscan in origin, most logically, and it took a while for scholarship to realize that they actually were Greek and had been acquired, collected and imported by the Etruscans who were great admirers of all things Greek, to serve as offerings in their funerary rituals (see chapter 'Death: The Fragmentation of Time"). If it were not for the Etruscans, the whole History of Ceramics and Decorative Arts would have been much different, since they buried these pots with their dead, and very few would have survived relatively intact otherwise. The Greek themselves were much more careless with these objects! In Greek funerary practices, specific types of pots were used, and these were placed on the tombs and exhibited in the open as tomb markers to be subsequently thrown in ditches, were they were found, broken and heavily damaged, by archeologists. The Etruscans, on the other hand, buried their dead with the funerary offerings, inside stone burial chambers, which protected and preserved the content. These newly discovered pots will influence early industrial ceramics in England, notably the exemplary work of Josiah Wedgwood and

his black Basalt ware, made with a dense, smooth, unglazed body often shaped in the classical repertory of forms. Wedgwood actually named his factory "Etruria" in honor of the land of the Etruscans whom he believed had made the original shapes he was using as models. Wedgwood also operates a reversal in his neo-classical wares. While the Greeks used a red clay that is then painted with a material that will be black subsequently, Wedgwood uses a black clay painted with a red material, another example of an operative reversal, something quite often seen in ceramics. Wedgwood's wares are not only inspired by Antiquity. The unglazed, dense, vitrified and colored stoneware clays he devised are actually inspired by the purple clay wares of Hi-Xing China, very popular in Europe at the time. Others have followed suit. American light artist James Turrell designed and produced a series of black basalt wares a few years ago that continue this esthetics now. Others followed suit all over Europe, in Russia, in the USA as well, and notably in Copenhagen. Later in the nineteenth century in France, at Sevres, examples of Greek pots are translated in a bizarre fashion into polychrome, overly decorated porcelain! At the end of the nineteenth century in England, the Martin brothers fashion Greek inspired vases in their own quirky sensibility, as do countless others during the Victorian era.

Contemporary examples:

In the twentieth century, if we make abstraction of "The Industrial Esthetics", the most influential ceramic esthetics is generated around the writings and the works of Bernard Leach (who despised not only industrial wares by also Greek pottery and its influence on European ceramics). Leach type pottery combines rather seamlessly aspects of Oriental and European ceramics. Yet what came to be known as the "Leach Aesthetics" is actually part of the classical esthetics as defined here. The pottery of Bernard Leach, his students, his apprentices and his imitators or followers is absolutely classical in spirit. A limited number of forms are reproduced with little variety or variation and these can be found worldwide now, mostly where English culture and civilization has left its deepest mark, in Canada and the USA, in Australia and New Zealand as well as in Japan, where it has had a rather pernicious effect, luckily rather limited, on what is otherwise one of the best and most creative functional pottery tradition to be found anywhere. If I define the classical esthetics as mostly based on unglazed forms, it is then important to clarify that although "Leach" type pottery is usually glazed, these glazes are very earthy and often made with natural materials which makes the glaze simultaneous and consecutive with the form, which is primary. If decorated, these pots are so in an understated, quiet and

discreet manner, which never competes with the form. The most interesting practitioners are Michael Cardew in the UK, Mick Henry, Bruce Cochrane, Tam Irving and Robert Archambault in Canada, and in the USA, Warren Mackenzie, Clary Illian, Jeff Oestreich and the Minnesota ("mingeisota") school, Joseph Bennion and even Chris Staley who at times surfaces his pots with black and white abstract patterns that articulate the forms following the precepts and the lessons of Greek Attic pottery surfaces in the polar dynamic of black and white. Moving away from Leach, others follow nonetheless a very classical approach to form, with more idiosyncrasy and at times with the very best of them, originality. I think specifically of Lucie Rie and Hans Cooper in England as well as Roseline Delisle in the USA.

Magdalene Odundo is an interesting case study. Her very stylized work, in a dialogue with her origins and ancestry, refers to the extraordinary ceramics traditions of Africa, repositioned within expression and contemplation alone, beyond function, in a highly stylized and refined reworking of historical models now totally transformed and completely contemporary. The exquisite and absolutely perfect burnishing on her vessels exaggerates the taut, tight, bloated expanse of the equally perfect forms, which energizes the implied volume of the interior space. The reflectivity of the surface adds to this energy of the forms by contrast with the precise contours. The anthropomorphism of the shapes is also stressed by this burnishing, which conveys the soft, tactile sensuality of flesh and skin, both implied by the warm orange and dark, black tones of the clay.

In contemporary art of the last decades, one artist working in ceramics particularly stands out in his exploration of classical forms (Greek, Chinese) to comment on contemporary culture and society. Michael Frimkess from Los Angeles, was one of the first, possibly the very first in the 1960's, with Robert Arneson, to introduce obvious political commentary in his work (this will be discussed further in "The Narrative Esthetics" chapter). He is also the first, to my knowledge, to appropriate and quote classical shapes (both oriental and occidental), and thus, to expand on the repertory of shapes available to the contemporary potter (for more on his seminal and influential work, see my article "Michael Frimkess: a Reappraisal", published in Ceramics: Art and Perception magazine). His use of historical forms, directly quoted and copied, with often political images on their surface, creates a reference to the history, the universality and timelessness of ceramics and it remains probably his most important contribution to the field. His example was very influential and many contemporary ceramic artists works operate on similar principles.

Grayson Perry, Cindy Kolodjiewski, Leopold L. Foulem, myself, all come to mind, as well as many others. All owe him a great and significant debt, since he showed to way towards the use of a system of familiar forms that nonetheless permit the freedom to create within iconic archetypes, to paraphrase Grayson Perry, whose work is very closely connected, conceptually, to Michael Frimkess seminal work.

Suzanne Wolfe from Hawaii, in a symbiosis much different from Leach, since it is not based on styles but on concepts, has also combined the classical aspects of both Oriental and Greek ceramics in a series of very intelligent and very clever (not the same thing!), and very original vessels. Their primary intent is to put on display (maybe even “reify”) the idea of the decorative, by combining various framing devices, one pot being framed by the other by being inserted, form within form, one inside the other. Each slab of clay, alternatively constituting each vase, also acts as a frame, holding and separating one form from the other. This combination of a Western (classical) form with an Eastern (equally classical) form is intended to deliberately reference the debt of Western ceramics to its Asian antecedents. It is interesting to note that for Asian artists to be accepted in the Fine Arts, they had to produce works according to “Western” styles and methods while in ceramics, the reverse was true. This conceptual, yet highly material exploration of the problem of having two distinct yet familiar forms occupy the very same space provides a very potent commentary on ceramics relation to history within a very contemporary context. If each vase in the ensemble could have been made at different times in different places, their unification here could only have happened now. Nothing is new about these vases, yet their recombination in such an unusual yet efficient (conceptually and visually) format is groundbreaking.

The last artist I will now address is Montrealer Richard Milette, who has investigated the semantic potential of Greek vases (and Chinese models too, often as reinterpreted by European porcelain) with focused intensity and efficiency, in a large body of work over the last 25 years. The most common “Greek” form he uses is the Hydria, although he will uses other antique vase forms for their stereotypical potential as well. They are sometimes presented whole, intact, at other times with holes in their wall, as if they had been broken, with shards missing and then repaired, by museum restorers, a process called “anastylosis” in museology. All this of course is “faked” and serves as semantic devices to comment on art history as a practice and on institutional display as a strategy and as the preferred context for art experience now, with all the limitations and problems that

entails. It also brings to the fore notions of authenticity and quality, since value in the market place is largely predicated on provenance and condition, very often more than on esthetics, per se. These forms carry various images from a broad range of sources and references. Contemporary icons from art history (Picasso, Magritte, Warhol, and other pop artists) replace the narrative panels found on the Greek original, within the square cartouche area reserved for that purpose, and so specific to the formal strategies of the Greek potters. This framing device, a conceit then totally new in art-making from the time of the Archaic period in Greece and on, when this device first appears, will have a continuous influence on the subsequent developments of image making, in drawing, printmaking, painting, even photography, television or computer screens, which are all practices and spaces where images are presented on a flat surface in a square format, like it was first experienced on Greek vases! This is another example of the usurpation of precedence in art history, where this seminal development in art making and art experience is never singled out since it happens within ceramics, the most neglected and misunderstood art form in art history. It is important here to establish such a seminal precedence in art history, when such an important and subsequently influential and ubiquitous format was first devised on a ceramic pot, and not elsewhere as one would expect, erroneously. Another strategy for Milette has been to replace the pictorial space and fill it instead with a single word, positioned on a faux marble ground (reinforcing the antique, historical reference): Torture, Incest, Seduction, etc., which permits a direct reference to the narrative panels found on the Greek originals, replaced semantically with a simple and single word. This is all we have been provided to reconstruct the possible narrative content, the depicted scene expected in its place. Another series depicts four letter words, FUCK, LOVE, HOMO, etc., in very florid and ornamented lettering, bordering on illegibility, again to make manifest the power of words in assigning identity and meaning, often in a dismissive or prejudicial manner. On other works, a collage of a fragment of text, senseless and illogical, plays the same function. The theatrical arena, the territory where the “real narrative” based on recognizable representations was originally located, has now been invaded by a discontinuous text. By cutting text and words randomly, both loose their veritable meaning, thus annulling the narrative. Actually, this arbitrary fragment of “text” illustrates the negativity of narration, by making it impossible to define in a fictional manner, descriptively, the representative and metaphorical contents of the object. This work denies and negates narration, and frustrates our usual obsession with words and texts in interpretation and in our reliance on the operative power of images for meaning to the detriment of other forms of experience, particularly in our

relationship to history, in art or elsewhere. My favorite pieces show an abstract jumbling of shapes in black and red, where the figure/ground dynamic of Greek pottery, as discussed above, is now un-operational, both visually, in the optical shifting between figure and ground and as a readable sign implying a narrative. Despite the obvious non-representational nature of the abstract pattern, our minds struggle to make logical sense of the image, as it tried to make sense of the resistant text on the previous work. Milette's ceramic work questions and contest art history as a science, which validates the dominant discourse based on the narrative aspect of images. By reestablishing a balance between image and object, by reworking familiar historical stereotypes and by disassociating style from personality, he effectively demonstrates the inefficiency of conventional art historical discourses to generate meaning around certain art forms and practices, if not finally around all of them.

Implicitly or explicitly, his works are critical. They challenge the accepted conventions, still largely operative, prescribed and prevalent in art practices, in their making and their appreciation and experience. This inherent fetishism of art objects, as exemplified with our continuing obsession with Greek art, for example, is denounced and politicized. He does this as well in his "Chinese" inspired work, by replacing porcelain with earthenware (thus contesting the hierarchies of materials in ceramics itself, as well as in other art forms) and by incorporating faux leather with studs elements as well as faux historical fragments to signify desire and the commodification of the past by history, and specifically here, art history. This use of shards, broken fragments of historical vessels from different periods, styles and countries (thus subverting all these categories simultaneously by denying our obsession with order and taxonomic classification) is the equivalent of the synecdoche in literature, using a portion to stand for the whole. Despite the occasional presence of lids and spouts on these vessels, function is always clearly denied by sealing all openings or by piercing and opening the base, making the object non-functional in a practical way, yet not useless, on the contrary very efficient for its intended purpose.

All these strategies and references stress the intended conceptual (what it is about), phenomenological (how it is perceived and experienced) and most importantly here, epistemological (how we know and understand) contestation and opposition of the original icons, using material, physical, actual stereotypes to reveal, contest and challenge all the mental, cultural stereotypes that affect our evaluation, appreciation and

understanding of ceramics as an art form. Milette deconstructs the potential for ceramic objects to be simultaneously surface and form, history and living culture combined. Contrary to most ceramics, the work is not about clay as a material, or plasticity as an esthetic property (as we will see in the chapter on “The Material Esthetics: The Obsession with Clay”), or about the inherent beauty and sensuality of materials and processes. It is not about technique, or glaze recipe, or firing process, or even function, use or content, all of which are irrelevant here. This work is not about the expression of a personality, or about biography, since the work, in its anonymous quality remains largely silent about the artist himself. It is simply an investigation of the nature of ceramics, within the larger context of art and its histories, by way of a sophisticated use and analysis of concepts specific to ceramics. These hybrids of different periods, different styles, different material references, challenge the accepted hierarchies and orthodoxies around materials, images and objects; they contest and critique conventions of interpretation imposed on us by the still operating hierarchies of art history, art theory and connoisseurship as well as those imposed by “tradition”. Their radical example forces us to question everything else we may have learned before. This reconciliation of extremes and juxtaposition of opposites and contradictory aspects is characteristic of many contemporary art and craft practices, and finds an exemplary realization in the seminal work of Richard Milette. As this work demonstrates and as I will repeatedly argue in this book, reversal is basically intrinsic to ceramics as an art form and an integral part of its specificity. This is not work meant simply to seduce, or even work to be “liked”. Its intent is to make you think.

Conclusion:

In a series of golf events, part of the PGA tour, some of the trophies given to the winner are actually ceramic vases, in itself a rare occurrence, since ceramics is so fragile and trophies are usually made of metal, actually precious or faking preciousness. I am aware of three examples of these ceramic trophies: the first example is European, for the Deutsche Bank Championship. It is a large footed cup with a Wedgwood type pale blue ground, with white sprigged leaves and cursive, delicate, fragile white handles. You can see the fear on the face of Tiger Wood as he handles this precious yet so breakable object. Another ceramic trophy for a golf tournament is given at the Bridgestone Invitational in Akron, Ohio. It is made of white bisque stoneware, again in the Wedgwood style, with dark blue sprigs of a group of golfers and gold bands articulating the form. This footed bowl is lidded, and its overall form carry golf references coming from the indentations in the golf

ball, in the spherical base of the bowl and in the lid finial representing a golfer in action. The third example is on the other hand Asian, from Korea. It is a round, globular bottle form covered with painted peony blossoms on an arabesque leafy ground. It is the prize given at the LPGA Kolon Championship in Incheon, South Korea.

It comes as no surprise that all of them are “classical” in style, carrying within their form notions of hierarchical status, of superiority and excellence.