

# CERAMICS: SEMANTICS AND SEMIOTICS

*A lecture by Leopold Foulem*

## INTRODUCTION

I would like to thank the NCECA Board for the opportunity to share with you some reflections on my exploration of the concept of ceramics as a generic group. Today I want to talk to you about a subject that has been of great interest to me for a number of years, namely the meaning of words and signs within a ceramic context. I will discuss various relationships between ceramic objects and words.

The term "semantics" should be understood here as a precise or varied meaning of words or other symbols used expressly within the ceramic group. Semiotics pertains to the meaning of sign as language. In this case is implied ceramic signs such as cups, teapots, or vases to name but a few.

The visual documentation used or referred to in this presentation was chosen only for the intrinsic qualities of the objects, as they particularly convey my unique point of view. I have been cautious to avoid any detrimental aesthetic judgment on the works selected.

The general understanding of the notion of ceramics as concept is more often than not inaccurate. There are entire books written on this subject which only deal with pottery. When this is the case, then I ask, why not entitle such books *New Vessels* instead of *New Ceramics*?

This problem of incorrectly conceptualizing and labeling with accurate terminology which affects most of us in the ceramic milieu must be corrected, as it points to the lack of intellectual rigor on the part of the pseudo-intelligentsia who are permitted to talk, publish and even worse, curate all kind of ceramics exhibitions without

the knowledge particular to ceramic language.

I believe that there is a dramatic discrepancy between the object and the word within the ceramic discourse, an issue which we must all address, especially as practicing artists and educators.

This lecture is divided into three main conceptual parts: current assumptions, then ceramic concepts and lastly ceramics as premise for context.

In the first grouping, current assumptions, I will refer to allegations such as the vessel as metaphor, the vessel as image, and the concept of specificity of shapes, giving examples of when the terminology has been adequate and when it has not been adequate. The second part, ceramic concepts, will deal with volume as fact, volume as concept, and function as formal issue. The last section is devoted to the concept of ceramics as premise for context.

## METAPHOR

I will now begin with current assumptions and discuss metaphor.

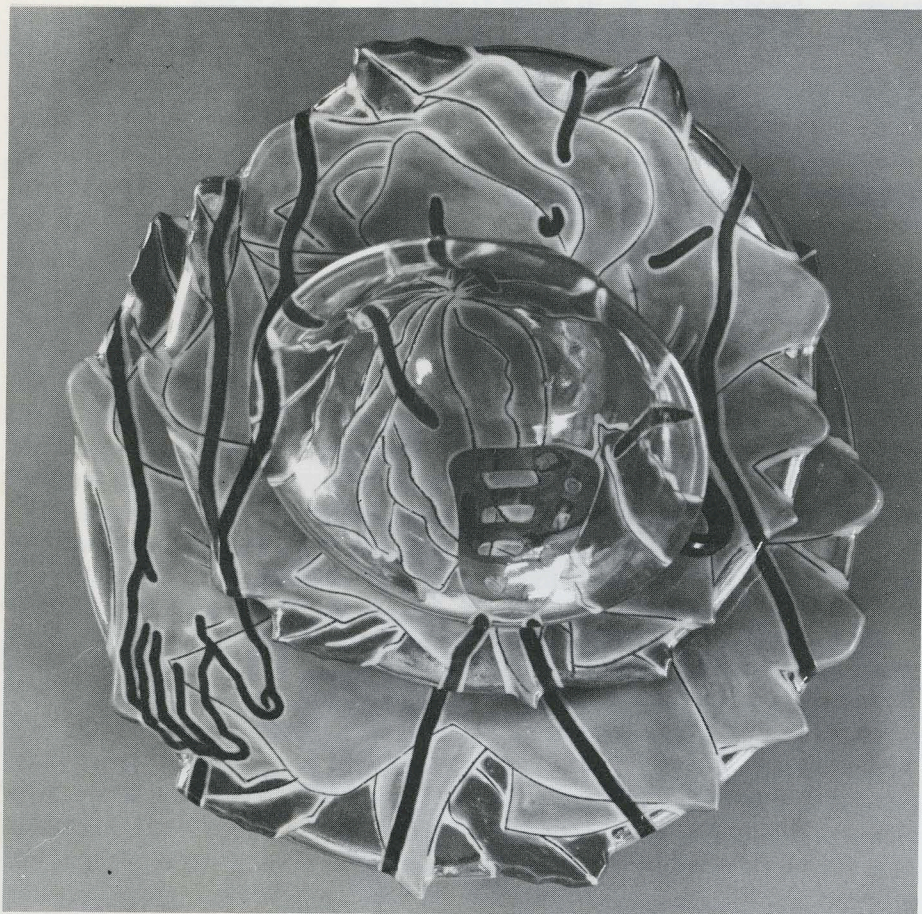
Probably the most axiomatic recurring concept in contemporary ceramics is that of the vessel as metaphor. As it erroneously stands right now, most pottery vessels are seen, without question, as metaphor. To talk or write about a pot using metaphorical language, even to describe that object, does not make that object itself a metaphor. To describe Roseline Delisle's porcelain covered jar, *Triptyque No. 6*, we could more than likely use traditional anthropomorphic terms such as shoulder, belly or foot to refer to various parts of the thrown form.

The eighteenth-century Nankin porcelain with bronze mount, *Commemorative Urn*, dedicated to a historic political event of the French Revolution, namely the death of Louis XVI and his wife Marie-Antoinette, is overtly concerned with narration. The Delisle urn by contrast is essentially about the volume itself. The blue and white ornate Chinese vessel is clearly mnemonic at various levels.

Some of the occidental symbolism related to death can be clearly identified in the Nankin porcelain urn. The type of shape used for the vessel was often found as an engraved or sculptural image on a gravestone, or as urns on funerary monuments. The black image in the center of the oval medallion, a weeping willow, iconographically related to death. This mid-eighteenth century covered jar relates more closely to the standard definition of metaphor and therefore can be classified in the general group of metaphorical vessels.

Here is another example of a visual metaphor on a literal level. British artist Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Arrosoir* (or watering can) of 1984 is unquestionably meant as visual metaphor. Yves Arbrioux writes in his 1987 exhibition catalog, *Homage to Ian Hamilton Finlay*, about the *Arrosoir*, that it is... "Boldly tricolour." That it is a memorial to Robespierre whose name and dates of birth and death it bears. He says that it is an apt momento [sic] — both historically, since the Robespierriests were guillotined on the day of the Republican calendar called "Arrosoir" in Thermidor (in English it translates as Month of Heat); and he continues also semantically, in that it





Paul Mathieu, "Protection Cup (for Wayne Gretzky)"  
Porcelain (3 pieces), 12 x 12 x 6", 1987

"emblematically reminds us of the twin values of revolution: as political upheaval, certainly, but also as the natural cycle produced by the movement of the globe...." "There are two aspects to the French Revolution," writes Finlay, "the epic and the domestic." Thus Finlay's point is, and I agree, that the epic and the domestic are combined in the "Arrosoir."

A more complex illustration of a metaphor can be found in Quebec artist Paul Mathieu's 1986 *Protection Cup for Wayne Gretzky*, which is metaphorical at various levels. On the concave section of the camouflaged real cup comprising this three-piece set is drawn another semantically-identical object. Here the play on words is two-fold. The silvered image depicting a protective athletic support is supposed to enshrine hockey player Wayne Gretzky's genitalia. The device becomes a constrictive contraption for

the viewer, while a necessary protective support for the subject and an athlete.

The decision taken by Mathieu to place Gretzky's protective cup inside the well is obviously deliberate, soliciting an active response on the part of the user/voyeur. Perhaps this work might even be the male equivalent to Meret Oppenheim's shocking famous surrealist fur-covered cup of 1936, now in the collection of the New York Museum of Modern Art.

Even if the same action is implied in this 500 A.D. Peruvian Effigy Jar, in the form of a man holding an erect phallus, the vessel is not a visual metaphor. Contrary to Mathieu's homage to the maleness of the jock, there is no transfer of meaning at the overt and at the formal level. Here the genitalia is factual, not metaphorical. The action of drinking from the erect phallus can be seen as a metaphor, but the object itself is not.

I must mention that the definition of the concept of the vessel as metaphor that I use is quite different than that used and defined by Philip Rawson. In his well-known classic text, *Ceramics*, he writes: "The essence of the metaphor is that the suggestions conveyed by the pot's inflection and forms are communicated as allusion while the pot retains its existential reality, visibly and actually as what in fact it is." So, Rawson is in reality saying that most pots are metaphors. My difficulty with Rawson's definition is that I find it too general, too poetic and too restrictive. If I understand his argument correctly, it would imply that this 1777 Sèvres porcelain *Myrtle vase* is a metaphor — which it certainly is not — and concurrently that any and all traditional pottery forms for that matter are metaphors. Metaphor for what, may I ask? Not all pots are metaphor, and a metaphor is not a pot per se, but a concept.

Now I go even further and say that the exclusive use of Rawson's definition is detrimental and perhaps dated, especially in the analysis of some current, highly conceptual work, such as that of Ian Hamilton Finlay's work of 1986, loftily entitled, *Brount (Hommage à Greuze)*.

*Brount* is, in Finlay's words, a pathetic elegy, and should ideally be shown standing empty on the floor of a bare room. "*Brount*," writes Yves Abrioux, "was Robespierre's dog which accompanied him from Artois to Paris. Finlay dedicates the bowl inscribed with the dog's name to Greuze, recalling the painter's initiation of sentimental subject matter and underlining a set of values whose association with the French Revolution tends to be overlooked." The use of writing on this generic dog dish reverses and transcends the generic. The vessel now stands for both the dog and for Greuze. The statement is direct, effective and highly relevant. *Brount's* name written, on Finlay's vessel, does not deal with the issue of word and volume any more than the inscription "Souvenir of Niagara Falls, Canada" does on imported pottery goods.



Here is my opportunity to stress the point that even if the small pseudo-blue-and-white Wedgwood vase from Niagara Falls is clearly identified, it is much less specific intrinsically at the formal level than the dog dish is.

Brount's name written on the blue vase on the screen would not make that pot a dog dish. However the dog dish from Niagara Falls, Canada, or elsewhere would always be understood in our western culture as a dog dish. The words here have no formal significance other than being writing on a volumetric object.

### VESSEL AS IMAGE

As a premise for discussing the vessel as image, let me first establish that there is a definite difference between the concept of the vessel as image and the image as vessel.

The Peruvian *Fret Design Vessel* from the Nazca culture shown on the screen is the manifestation of a sign or symbol if you prefer, transcending its specific signification to become an autonomous object belonging to another generic category. However, this pre-Columbian stirrup vessel is actually a three-dimensional materialization of a pictorial convention for an architectural motif. The historic fret design used architecturally, and as pattern on ceramics appears on the surface of this pot as enlarged decorative elements actually appearing as an all-over pattern on this pot. The signifying pottery form here is an image of another sign.

In *La tireuse de thé*, the late Edouard Jasmin, a self-taught Québécois urban-folk ceramicist, uses the vessel itself as decorative image, as metaphor and as metonymy. In *La tireuse de thé*, Jasmin drew a generic cup bouncing topsy-turvy on the yellow belly of his pierced ceramic bottle. The cup is used here as a narrative decorative motif in itself; therefore, it is used, what is more, as a visual metonym for a cup. The thought association between a cup, a teapot and a tea cup reader is accelerated. There are three separate strata of interpretation and also three different time spaces. To decipher the narrative sequences of this anecdotal

vessel, we have to start with the sculptural element situated on the top of the bottle. The removable finial is clearly a teapot in itself. In this situation it represents the past, the moment when the tea was made, then served. Next are the empty cups tumbling down, floating in space. These drawn motifs represent the tea cup that has been used before, now whose tea leaves are to be interpreted by the tea cup reader, who is located inside the bottle, seated at a table, with her client. The three-dimensional vignettes of the reader and the client represent two interpretations of the future, of two notions of time. The first aspect is the procedural time, the time it takes to go from point A to point B and then the future as eventuality.

Paul Mathieu's *Le pli sur l'indifférence*, a three-piece breakfast set of 1986, is a modified appropriation of René Magritte's well-known paint-

ing, popularly referred to as "ceci n'est pas une pipe." By using such a well-known 20th-century icon, Paul Mathieu alludes to decontextualization, to the deceit of images and especially to the dual reality of pottery forms; the volume and the surface as two distinct formal entities.

The pictorial flatness of Mathieu's image, now the image as art and now art as simulacrum, is not only clearly established but also reinforced by the pseudo wood frame painted in a *trompe l'oeil* manner. Whereas Magritte's painting refers to the questioning of the reality of objects and actually the accurate title for this painting is *The Treachery of Images*, Paul Mathieu goes one step further by establishing that an image is not an object.

By successfully negating, at the pictorial level, the volumetric reality of the three vessels that make up this place setting, the artist, now residing in



Paul Mathieu, "The Fold on Indifference"  
Porcelain (3 pieces), 12 x 12 x 6", 1988





Richard Milette, "Calyx krater T.T.C.," 40,0 cm x 44,8 cm, base diameter 35,3 cm, A.D. MCMLXXXIII

Santa Monica, eloquently demonstrates the autonomy of both components of pottery forms. In so doing, Mathieu proves that there is a tangible and convincing difference between the form as such and the surface as pictorial field.

That the teapot image as painting is a metaphor for high art is both impudent and political. In *Le pli sur l'indifférence*, the artist insists on the re-examination of the meaning of ceramic objects in stereotypical art contexts and, by extension, on the signification of pottery forms as potent cultural signs.

For *Calyx krater T.T.C.* of 1983, Montreal clay artist Richard Milette utilized a classical Greek vessel. He annulled the volumetric, desynchronized the form, the surface and the context to create a highly mnemonic ceramic image.

Whereas Paul Mathieu questioned the trueness of the image, Milette affirmed the potency of the

characterized vessel image as paradigm for conceptual ceramics.

Milette's large international histrionic vessel refers to Greek pottery because of its typical shape, to Chinese pottery because of its Sancai surface, and to the intrinsic volume of the vessel as concept by the faked-wood base, which illustrates the custom of exhibiting precious ceramic vessels on wooden bases.

Another interpretation of the vessel as image is to be found in Howard Kottler's *Soup Tureen* of 1976. Kottler's object is about image, volume and process. The tureen is presented as a straight-forward manifestation of the vessel as image. Even if there is no real volumetric tureen present, the viewer still sees an actual tureen. Howard Kottler's monochromatic object can be understood either as the negative form from which other identical mass-produced specimens could be made or as a volumetric imprint left by a vanished

vessel. Howard Kottler's tureen can then be seen either as an image or as a conceptual piece of pottery. The latter consideration depends, however, on the orientation of the visual presentation, the positive or the negative being offered up for viewing.

The situation of the vessel as image and the image as vessel is tackled magisterially in another set of piled dishes by Paul Mathieu. In *The Arrows of Time for S.W.H.* of 1989, a seven-piece breakfast set for one person, the visual complexity is astounding. The new concept in this work, if we compare it to the earlier examples, is that here the true vessel actually becomes the image of itself.

To clarify the intricate pictorial composition and to explain the layering of images, I have included a slide showing the partially-completed assemblage of the work. If you refer to the previous slide, you can see that the pouring teapot and the white cup are real pots with drawn on highlights. The stereotypical drawing and shading become the two-dimensional illusionistic surfaces of the real volumetric pots.

In pop artist Roy Lichtenstein's black and white stacked cups called *Sculpture*, the surface is decorative, while Mathieu's surfaces are descriptive and narrative. The vessels in Lichtenstein's 1965 sculpture are found objects, the term here used in a sculptural sense. This work is made up of what appears to be literally stacked cups. The vessels are not self-referential as they are in Paul Mathieu's functional and fictional porcelain set. Lichtenstein's stacked cups are not ostensibly about cups, nor about ceramics, even as equestrian sculpture is not about horses or chivalry.

In Picasso's *Pitcher* made in 1954, the dialectic of the image versus the object was exploited by the artist in many arresting ways. Picasso, contrary to many artists turned-potters, understood quite accurately the language of pottery and the metaphors particular to the practice. On the belly of the massive matte black pitcher a smaller white pitcher is depicted which is decorated with incised yellow flowers and





Paul Mathieu, "The Arrows of Time (for S.W.H.)"  
Porcelain (7 pieces), 18 x 18 x 12", 1990



pastel blue lines. The larger form becomes the shadow of the smaller pitcher. Thus, one is an image and the other is a shape. Both, however, are pitchers.

### SPECIFICITY OF SHAPE

The concept of specificity of shape is not only an intrinsic part of ceramics but also an essential component of pottery and even of language. A teapot, before functioning as vessel to store and serve tea, is first and foremost a specific shape and a cultural sign.

This anonymous *White Wall Teapot Plaque* is conceptualized initially at the prototypical level. It is a teapot. We can establish this truth or fact based on culturally accepted paradigms. Even if the primary functional aspect of the original object has been modified, that does not imply that the generic shape has lost its formal identity.

This visual dilemma, further brought forth in Richard Milette's *Théière à fleurs no. 4*, repeats the dialectic of the white wall flower pocket. Milette's combines two stereotypical prototypes belonging to two different concepts — one which is that of the teapot, and another, the drainage tray, of the ubiquitous planter/drainage-tray combination. The Montréal artist achieved this troubling formal dichotomy in his 1984 work.

Not only has Milette deleted the teapot lid to ascertain the pseudo-function, but he also has materialized the void by coloring the suggested negative space black — an ancient pictorial color code for nothingness, thus negating all functional pretension of the new form. The viewer is now placed in an existential limbo similar to Pavlov's unfortunate dog.

Richard Shaw's *Soup Tureen* of 1976, shaped as an ocean liner, is less a soup tureen than Milette's teapot was a planter. Of course, this covered vessel is unquestionably more seductive and more decorative, for that matter, than the intentionally gauche teapot-planter. However, art is not always about seduction. Shaw's covered container lacks the specific generically accepted attributes of a soup tureen.





Richard Milette, "Théière à fleurs no. 4, Height 14,3 cm, 1984 (Photo by R. Milette)

Might it not be a wonderful cookie jar because it fits the generic type? It is not at all a soup tureen because it lacks descriptive adequacy.

In the western world, a soup tureen is usually accompanied by a large platter on which it rests. This duo can be seen in a *Hochst Mid-18th-Century German Tureen*. The platter is especially pertinent when the vessel is atypical of the category. The platter here typifies the zoomorphic container as a soup tureen. The soup tureen can become even more specific if it has a cut-out area in the cover to insert a ladle.

## VOLUME

Volume is the essence of pottery, without which there simply would not be a ceramic vessel at all. Volume is the space enclosed within or occupied by an object. Three-dimensional volumetric space does not exist without confinement. This notion of space can be used in many ways within a ceramic group, as for instance in the following slides.

Let us establish, for dialectical purpose at least, that there are two clearly distinct manifestations of formal space in ceramics. This notion translates either as facts or concepts. By concept, I mean an abstract reality,

a literal use of the void as concrete space. An example to illustrate this conceptual space is found in a *Mochica Vessel* dating between A.D. 450-700. Here, the intrinsic void of this Peruvian pre-Columbian bowl is used as a metaphor for a body of water on which two men pole a reed raft. Admittedly, there is no actual water in the bowl. However, by placing the figurative elements at a higher level than at the bottom of the bowl, the floating association can now be implied. The contour of the vessel becomes the horizon, the void a conceptual mass of water. Even though the space within this vessel is narrative, the volume is still treated as a conceptual negative space. In David Gilhooly's tureen of 1976, *The Great Race*, the narrative is similarly treated. Here, however, Gilhooly uses the inside space as a concrete visual element. The water where two grey whales swim is visually real this time, not just implied. Nevertheless, the notion of void is still present. An even more abstract and conceptual use of the void is found in Picasso's *Corrida Bowl* of 1957, where the volume becomes two-dimensional and the pictorial becomes volumetric.

Picasso's pottery form should be seen as an arena where bullfights or

other sporting events are held. The wide rim of the terra-cotta vessel becomes the outside of the architectural structure, where we can distinguish pictorial markings through and on the white slip indicating both entrances and spectators. The inside of the vessel now becomes the interior stalls of the Coliseum, where the crowd stands to watch the corrida taking place. In the center of the ring we have pictorial actors, whereas we had sculptural figures in the Mochica vessel. I must add, and you surely can appreciate, that the complexity of Picasso's object makes it highly intellectual and exciting.

Edouard Jasmin used the void in *Théâtre du Grand Monde* as architectural space. Actually, he really saw the inside volume of his polychromatic murals as theatrical space, literally and conceptually. In his *Théâtre du Grand Monde* we see two musicians performing on a stage in front of an audience. As viewers, we are part of the crowd attending the concert, because the artist has included the front row attendants as part of the narrative space, thus extending that space indefinitely.

I have chosen William Daley as an example of a ceramist who utilizes the volume of the vessel in a more formal manner, in a dynamic inside/outside relationship. In *Axel's Castle*, the physical space of the open vessel is used in a classical sculptural way without losing the pottery specificity. Formal prototypes for this type of volumetric relationships can be found in medieval English pottery, as demonstrated in the anonymous cup on the screen, or even in Japanese Oribe ware.

At times the volume of the vessel can be both descriptive and narrative, as demonstrated in this anthropomorphic 12th century coiled pot from South America. In this case, the volume is an active space. The nature of the void in Montreal ceramist Jeannot Blackburn's *Lady Vase* is of secondary importance. Here it is a passive space, more a result than a basic formal component. The object is more a shape than a volume. The inside void is acknowledged by the opening at the top of the figure. By piercing the hat of the





Paul Mathieu, "Still-Life With Teapot," Porcelain (3 pieces), 12 x 12 x 6", 1988

lady, Blackburn affirms the specificity of the object as being a container and thus alludes to function. The flowers that may eventually be inserted in the opening will no doubt provide this stylish Madame with a flowered hat.

The volume of the pre-Columbian anthropomorphic pot is an anecdotal space. It is not so, however, in the case of Hans Coper's *Structure*, which is closer to sculpture formalism than to pottery prototypes. The British artist deals essentially with form and mass, traditionally academic sculptural problems. His three-dimensional structure becomes a vessel only because of the opening at the top as was also the case for Blackburn's figural object.

With its broken surface, Richard Milette's *Lekythos 12-6418* enables the viewer to experience the plenitude of the void as a pictorial concept. The potter's space, as it is called by Philip Rawson, has been materialized as an

abstract component of the contemporary lekythos. The nothingness of the void can be seen through the numerous holes created by the missing shards. By accentuating the true nature of the clay vessel, by actually showing the thickness of the terra-cotta wall, Milette figuratively clarifies his intention.

Paradoxically, Milette's vessel is closer to what we usually comprehend as sculpture than is Coper's geometric formal puzzle, because no void is manifest. However, because of the specificity of lekythoi as historical Greek pottery forms, and also because of the unquestionable ceramicness of the object, there is never any doubt that it is indeed a vessel. A highly conceptual use of notional space is found in the quite remarkable work of Tom Bohnert, whose vessels are not abstract volumes but conceptual volumes. By describing and confining the shape of the vessel, with metal wire, the Michigan ceramist creates a true conceptual

piece of pottery. The broken pottery section at the base of the fictional bowl confirms its material existence, affirming the ceramicness of the object, and eloquently defines that notion called "potter's space."

Another type of conceptualized ceramic form can be found in Paul Mathieu's *Still Life with Teapot*. By using the nomenclature "Still Life" for these stacked dishes made in 1986, the artist insists on the pictoriality of this object. The volume of each pottery form within the group is entirely obliterated by the highly polychromatic narrative surfaces. At first glance, the startled viewer distinguishes a linear teapot and a cup and saucer on a patterned floral ground. Yet, these suggested vessels are but images of pottery forms. There is no real teapot in this particular pile of dishes. This three-piece place setting is made up of a cup, a saucer, and a large breakfast plate. The drawn cup is only a pictorial representation. The contour of the real cup is used as confinement for the body of the brown teapot, which appears to us to be completely volumetric. The concave section of the drinking vessel becomes a dynamic fictional space, thus creating an exciting conceptual teapot.

## FUNCTION

Function in itself in ceramics can become either a dynamic conceptual concern for clay artists or a mechanical component of a utilitarian pot. This anonymous polychromatic *Japanese Teapot* is straight forward indeed. It was made to be used in a domestic setting. The shape is unobtrusive, the size of the teapot is most generous and the surface is indeed decorative. It is such a proletarian vessel.

The history of pottery is known by its bipolar focus. From time immemorial (the prehistoric period, actually) there has been at least two conceptually distinctive groups of pots. They are the domestic and the non-domestic, both of which can be seen as utilitarian. As we know, some pots were made to be used on a daily basis, and others were made for special functions, be



they either ritualistic or secular. We know, for example, that in some cultures there were two autonomous groups of potters, each producing a different type of ware. This separation of labor and mission is not only a late 20th century phenomenon.

Take note that this historical division does not denote superiority or hierarchy in vessels. In either group, sublime, exciting and significant work could be and were produced.

By using the domestic as premise, John Gill, with his magnificent *Stoneware Ewer*, brings forth an entirely different set of values such as that which informed the hand-painted Japanese teapot. Gill's seductive ewer is formally sophisticated, the surface being more intellectual, the vessel being more aristocratic. Nevertheless, both of these pottery forms respect their historical heritage. Yet John Gill's ewer transcends function without negating it.

In *Plate with Peas*, Fred Bauer emphasizes the utilitarian aspect of the vessel while satirizing the ritual of eating. The vessel is obviously about function. On one hand, it is normally impossible to stack small green peas as one would lay bricks. On the other hand, the resolutely flat silvered *trompe l'oeil* knife makes the narrative doubly ridiculous and absurdly utopic. Can you picture yourself eating stacked peas with an imaginary knife?

Whereas Bauer's approach to function is metaphoric, passive and formal in an artistic sense, in Richard Milette's *Philippos*, an S. & M. cup and saucer of 1986, the ceramicist alludes to the innate function of the drinking vessel and insinuates, and elicits, an active physical response on the part of the user. Regardless of the fact that the act of drinking and handling is hindered by a row of silvered studs situated around the rim of the cup, Milette never negates the utilitarian aspect of the pot. Function is seen here as erotic ritual.

Dick Hay's *Form Over Function* object of 1970 is one in a series of traps shown at New York's Museum of American Crafts in 1971, one exhibit in an invitational exhibition called *Clayworks 20 Americans*. Dick Hay sees

function as a restrictive social value imposed upon the potter — a trap in itself. The actual destruction of the hand-made, hand-thrown pottery mug, by a rather slick contemporary mechanical device, can be interpreted as an iconoclastic gesture.

By juggling and juxtaposing various stereotypes, Dick Hay achieves a visual clarity whereby the unity of the title, the concept and the work itself is now coherent. In accentuating the dichotomy between the artistic hand-made, the thrown stoneware craft-fair mug and the hobbyist, hand-made-greenware type, in this case the art of China painting, not only is he questioning the concept of functional macho pottery and the two distinct notions of decoration and the decorative, but also the critical value or artistic expression in utilitarian pottery.

Robert Arneson's *Cups with Holes and Balls* of 1971 is also about form and function. Even if the utilitarian vessels here have lost their normal role, they have not been destroyed as icons. Arneson takes the cup and saucer as symbols and thwarts the user by piercing holes through both components of each pair. This Californian artist is not referring to the creative activity related to the making of ceramic forms as Dick Hay perhaps was implying in his sculpture, but refers instead simply to functional pottery form as concept. By negating the utilitarian aspect of the cup and by giving the object a new function, Arneson articulates that a cup is not necessarily related to function.

Canadian potter Bruce Cochrane's nested stoneware *Batter Bowls* are pots that are meant to be used as the title implies. His vigorous containers have no formal and/or conceptual ambiguities. Their utilitarian program is most obvious. Cochrane's bowls are about function, about pottery and about the intimate ritual of preparing food. Whereas the bright red Japanese flowered teapot had been proletarian and decorative, Bruce Cochrane's bowls are not. His nested bowls are domestic and rational. Here the utilitarian agenda is his concept, and his approach is bonafide.

The early 19th-century English Rococo *Covered Cup and Saucer* from the Coalport/Coalbrook factory is an appropriate example to establish a paradigm to describe graphically the utterly decorative pseudo-functional pot. In this category could be included the largest group of contemporary gallery vessels today. The beautiful but dumb pot.

Admittedly, this Rococo covered vessel is a typical functional pottery form. However the utilitarian concept of the container is minimal. Whereas Fred Bauer's approach to function was metaphorical and ironic, and Milette's sadomasochistic cup referred to the literal use of the vessel as a conceptual premise for expanding and questioning the category, this bone porcelain covered vessel seems rather incongruous when it is placed within the functional vessel category.

The Coalport/Coalbrook Rococo antique container is not about function. It is about decoration and ostentation.

## CONTEXT AS PREMISE

The last item on our list is the concept of ceramics as premise for context. As we have just seen, function can become a dynamic conceptual concern for ceramicists, and function can also become a formal issue depending upon the intention of the artist and the context in which the work was intended to be seen.

Can we not agree that context as premise is the essential component establishing the validity and pertinence of an object. The best example I can use to clarify such a statement is Duchamp's notorious urinal. However, what I intend to do in this section of my presentation is to demonstrate that the concept of ceramics as a precise for formal context is an open option for clay artists and to show how some enlightened contemporary clay artists have used this concept as formal paradigm.

Whereas Duchamp's decision was to expand the category of sculpture by adding in a urinal to the group, some ceramic artists have opted instead to exploit the generic group consciously





Paul Mathieu, "Garniture," Porcelain (5 pieces), 50 x 12 x 15", 1990

to confirm and address their allegiance to the field of ceramics per se, as context, and therefore to affirm and reconfirm and honor the existence of the generic group.

In the following examples I have focused on some formal concepts that have not been discussed earlier. It must be evident by now that all the categories that have been formulated have been on the fundamental assumption that ceramics is a precise context in itself.

Wayne Higby's *Landscape Boxes* can easily be seen as a canister set if they were to be placed in a row on top of a kitchen counter, as they usually are placed in our homes, especially since we all know that Higby makes art for use. Of course, there is a minor generic factor missing, which is graduated size, to establish these raku vessels a canister set for tea, sugar and flour. However, the paradigm to which they refer is close enough for these row boxes to be at least considered to fit the type. In

this case, the suggested context is probably not how and where the artist intended his work to be seen. However, we have no formal or conceptual indications telling us that it is not so either. In fact, we have no guidelines at all.

Another sort of standard serial arrangement of pottery forms as well as the canister set model is the *Garniture de cheminée*. A garniture, as shown in this group of early 18th century German Anspach porcelain, is a cluster of vessels made as a set and decorated "en suite" to fit on the mantelpiece. The number of components varies from three, to five or seven pieces arranged systematically as pairs on each side of a central covered vessel. Unequivocally, Wayne Higby's colorful Raku boxes do not fit this characteristic ceramic installation.

Paul Mathieu's *Garniture* of 1990 is also a row of independent vessels, bowls, flower vases and a large covered tureen. Nonetheless, his assortment of five vessels is plainly intended to fit the

definition. Not only is Mathieu's aim to situate his formal dialectic within the decorative arts tradition made obvious, but also the use of this format stresses the "decorative" as context for artistic discourse itself.

By using a familiar, homey domestic surface as background for each artistic framed vignette, Paul Mathieu once again questions the notion of high art and low art and particularly the traditional place of ceramic vessels within the so called "Minor Arts."

The multicolored flowered surfaces of each vessel can be perceived as wall paper on which a series of independently framed images becomes a larger panoramic still-life on a wall. Each individual painting is part of a sequential image of a narrative, similar to a film cell. Implied and suggested here is the rotative notion of the movie frame and a time sequence. If one rotates each vessel in a systematic manner, the vignettes will become darker and darker,



passing from daylight to darkness. When each vessel comprising this Garniture has been turned completely around, a nocturnal scene will appear, as you can see with the next slide.

An important iconographical detail to notice here is the window situated on top of the central vessel into which one can see inside a room where a nude male lies. One window looks out to a bright sunny sky. The other depicts a moonlit night. The reclining male nude is no longer the nubile youth of much earlier works by this artist, nor is he the idealized adonis of later works, such as the one shown previously in Protection Cup for Wayne Gretzky.

The male figure in Garniture represents a physical, carnal man who is either resting before an affair or after having accomplished his sexual mission. On the table beside him are to be found the omnipresent fruits in a still-life.

Now Betty Woodman also uses the garniture as prototype for her *Italian Shelves II*; contrary to Mathieu's vessels, hers are static, more formal than decorative, even as she uses the "decorative" as premise and context. Betty Woodman's *Italian Shelves II* is actually a pictorial object. Here the whole object becomes a two-dimensional image of itself, a fact emphasized by the black section located under the turquoise blue shelf. Because there is no apparent distortion within the contour, this black area cannot be interpreted as shadows of what is displayed on the top shelf. Betty Woodman's wall piece can perhaps be understood as a two-part image with a positive and negative component. Woodman exploits in this object the notion of back and front as two different pictorial entities.

Robert Arneson is one major American artist who has remarkably exploited, respected and expanded upon the ceramic context in itself as valid premise for art. This fact is underscored in his highly political and ironic *Soup Tureen* of 1976. In this self-portrait as utilitarian vessel, Arneson decontextualized and satirized figurative sculpture and fine art. By placing a recognizable sculptural style on a recognizable platter and submitting this

hybrid in an exhibition of soup tureens as a tureen, Robert Arneson is not only stressing the dichotomy which exists between high art as a generic type and ceramics as a category, but he also refers to the contextuality of objects.

I must point out that Robert Arneson's conceptual argumentation, although reversed, is similar to that of Jeff Koons. Whereas Koons decontextualizes popular objects, including ceramic objects, Arneson instead uses real art objects and decontextualizes them within the ceramic group. To clarify this point, let us juxtapose Arneson's soup tureen with Jacob Epstein's *Portrait of Albert Einstein* of 1933. Although personal and contemporary, Epstein's bronze head obviously fits within the sculptural portrait tradition. This is an easily identifiable genre which Arneson uses as symbol for high art. Here the particular becomes the generic. It is not only the portrait head that Arneson is placing on his large platter but indeed sculpture as an art and a practice itself.

By decontextualizing two generic types — portrait sculpture as art, and a soup tureen as a utilitarian vessel — Arneson affirms the specificity of the ceramic sign as paradigm and the concept of ceramics as context.

Robert Arneson's understanding of ceramics as context for formal discourse is profound. I believe that this is his greatest conceptual contribution to the field of ceramics.

The adhesion of Michael and Magdalena Frimkess to the perception of ceramics as premise for concept is evident in *Ecology Krater* of 1976. In this caustic and political vessel, the Californian couple satirize the technique and style of Greek vase painting and also the serious mythological content of the narrative depicted on classical Greek pottery forms by substituting on the imitative black stoneware surface of the crater a contemporary ludicrous anecdotal caricature of four red figure cyclists pedaling a four-seat bicycle.

When we take into account that the importance and value given to authentic Greek vases is based not on the vessel itself but on the notoriety of the

painter who decorated the antique pot, the statement is especially devilish.

*Ecology Krater* is not a pot about a pot but a pot about ceramics and context. Richard Milette also uses classical Greek vessels as format for some of his aesthetic interventions. In *Hydria 13-9581 with Three Flags* of 1990, the artist desynchronizes the antique, the modern and the contemporary and also the painting, the image and the object to formulate a highly intense dialogue between extremes.

The major artistic dialectic which concerns art and politics and phobia is to be found in the appropriation of Jasper Johns' painting called *Three Flags* to fill the pictorial field where the "art" is usually found on Greek vases.

The image transported onto the flank of this hydria is not vying for decontextualization of the authentic art work — Jasper Johns' painting in this case — but for recontextualization. This is accomplished by surrogating a painted image for another one or simply one painting for another.

Whereas the Frimkesses were ridiculing the meaning of the painted image itself and its importance to art historians, Milette is stressing and questioning the decisive "major" role and significance the painted vignette on Greek pottery has within the fine art context.

To emphasize the pertinence of his argument, Milette employs a broken, now useless ceramic container as paradigm to demonstrate clearly that the significant part of the Greek vase is its painted surface.

In Richard Milette's *Hydria*, we can easily acknowledge three levels of formal intervention that relate precisely to the idea of ceramics as premise for concept.

First of all, we have the intrinsic format of the object — a typical historic Greek shape; then we have the substituted image, and lastly, is the accentuated intrinsic materiality of the vessel, namely the broken pottery vase.

The holes in Richard Milette's *Hydria* are metaphoric and narrative. They are explicit gaps caused by missing shards; they refer to historical time, place, function and volume.





Richard Milette, "Hydria 13-9581 with Three Flags," ceramics and plaster, 44 cm high, 1990 (photo by Huno)

However, the holes in Peter Voulkos' *Plate* are more process-oriented than conceptual. In Voulkos' vessel, the holes are gestural and romantic because they are the result of the artist's own psyche.

The shards composing Rick Dillingham's *Untitled Vessel* on the screen are a series of decorative surfaces. The pot here is obviously made up of autonomous parts similar to that

of a collage. Whereas the shards in *Hydria 13-9581 with Three Flags* have lost their "craft" identity and independence, in Dillingham's vessel, this aspect is highlighted.

Whereas the point of view of Rick Dillingham and Peter Voulkos are that of the maker, Milette's point of view is that of the viewer and the critic. All of these points of view converge, however, in confirming ceramics per se as

an exciting and necessary context for contemporary artists to work within.

I hope that my lecture, **CERAMICS: SEMANTICS AND SEMIOTICS**, has brought forth some new thoughts that can be of benefit to those of us in the field.

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