

The Integrity of Function

John Dermer defines his stance as a craftsman

The issue of integrity towards an objective can be viewed from several different aspects. There are three that are significant with respect to potters and pots.

Firstly, the code of artistic principles embodied within tradition. There were four major potters who influenced me as a student of ceramics, and they remain as positive role models and a constant source of inspiration to this day. The first of these, Bernard Leach, wrote *A Potters Book* (1940) which became my most valuable resource. I would read it and reread it in order to develop the skills necessary to produce a functional pot that had integrity. Bernard Leach was very influential in the movement to legitimise good quality handmade pots during a period in history when industrially produced ceramics were taking hold of the market. In 1971 I was privileged to spend an afternoon with this wonderful elderly gentleman. At the time I was working as a production potter for his son, Michael. Bernard Leach's flat had a large window that overlooked St Ives beach and I sat there quietly observing both him and his surroundings as he busily organised some tea and cake. He asked me to move a manuscript off a small table to accommodate the tray. Tea was poured from a simple, cut-sided teapot into St Ives cups and saucers. He gestured towards the manuscript and explained that it was a final task he had to complete. He had spent ten years interpreting and translating Soetsu Yanagi's work, only to be informed, just prior to printing, that he was seeing Yanagi's writings through western eyes. The translation was to start again the following week, this time with the help of a Japanese girl who had been raised in the west. The resultant book *The Unknown Craftsman* was published within the year.

Bernard Leach had spent many years studying the Japanese philosophy and traditions associated with their pottery. He understood their reverence for both the pots they used, each for a specific purpose, and the potters who made them. Through his pots he was able to bring his interpretation of this, to a western audience who, at the time, were becoming increasingly dependent upon mass-produced items. My afternoon with this man I so revered was full of questions, answers, admiration and apprehension. Bernard Leach sensed my earnestness and my youthful need to understand. He stood up, walked over to his desk and, from a shelf above it, selected a simple jug. It was tall and waisted, with a generous pulled handle sprung from near the neck and joined near the foot with simple but deft finger movements. The foot was a series of thumb depressions which formed a splayed skirt – even the thumbprints were still visible on the rich terracotta. A small yet functional pouring lip completed the pot. His words of advice, as he held this pot for my inspection, still resonate with me to this day. "This is 14th century. You see, it's all been done before. Just be honest to the process and be honest to the materials." Simple words from a wise and inspirational man – a treasured and pivotal experience in my early life as a potter.

Opposite page: Ceramics by **John Dermer**

Above: *Bowl*, 2014, h.19cm, w.12cm, porcelain, wheelthrown, saltglazed

Below: *Beakers*, 2014, h.10cm, w.5cm, porcelain, wheelthrown, saltglazed

Photos: artist

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The other three people who have influenced my work and my aspirations as a potter were also gentle, generous men whose work reflected their dedication, integrity and respect for traditions whilst pursuing their own directions: Harold Hughan and Reg Preston, who were treasured friends and mentors to me, and Peter Rushforth, who still is. Their contribution to Australian ceramics has been immensely significant. Peter Rushforth, especially, set the standards for education at East Sydney Tech, where skill-based training was paramount. This enabled the students to develop a strong understanding



of the making process whilst affording them the essential practice necessary to hone skills and learn from mistakes – all vitally important in order to embark upon a productive life as a potter. An equally important component of the course dealt with the history, traditions and philosophies of those who paved the way. An appreciation of the past helps to develop a respect for the present as well as a preparation for the journey ahead. It grieves me to note that very few educational institutions these days are providing students with this valuable training, often for financial reasons and counter to the wishes of the course designers. Because handmade pots are generally more expensive than their mass-produced counterparts they must attract a market through their integrity, durability, suitability and uniqueness. A coveted pot needs to have integrity of function as well as soul. A potter needs to understand the process, the discipline and the pitfalls in order to confidently produce a vessel that has such soul.

The second aspect of integrity deals with the basic soundness of the item. This involves all facets of production from the suitability of materials used to the construction techniques employed, the design of



Ceramics by John Dermer

Above: *Plates*, 2014, each diam.22cm
porcelain thrown, altered, cone 12 glaze
Left: *Ginger Jar*, 2014, detail, porcelain
wheelthrown, faceted, saltglazed

Opposite page:

1 Teapot cross section, 2014, h.17.5cm
w.14.5cm, porcelain wheelthrown, faceted
saltglazed, terra sigillata, cut after firing
2 *Teapot*, 2014, h.17cm, w.14.5cm, porcelain
wheelthrown, faceted, saltglazed, terra sigillata
English cane handle
3 *Lidded Jar*, 2014, h.32cm, w.19cm
porcelain, wheelthrown, saltglazed
4 *Bowl*, 2014, h.19cm, w.12cm
porcelain, wheelthrown, saltglazed
Photos: artist

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the item and the appropriateness of the firing process. Each link in the chain is of equal importance if the pot is to be both durable and functional. I choose to use porcelain for my oven/tableware because of its strength and glaze fit. I am able to salt glaze this porcelain as well, so workshop production is not complicated with various clays. Many years ago I developed a tableware glaze with a wonderful satin surface which has proved to be craze free, doesn't scratch with cutlery and doesn't chip. It is reassuring to hear from people who have been using my pots on a daily basis, sometimes up to 40 years, that they are still performing perfectly and bringing enjoyment at the same time. It is also particularly delightful to receive similar comments from subsequent generations as the pots are passed down through families.

The third aspect regarding integrity of function involves the design aspect itself. There needs to be a perfect fit between the vessel and its designated use. If a teapot is to be made, it should perform its function of brewing and serving tea seamlessly. The lid should not fall off when pouring, and when emptying, leaves should not get caught under the lid gallery. Jugs should have a balanced and generous



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John Dermer in his studio at
Kirby's Flat Pottery
Yackandandah, Victoria

form, a well balanced handle should facilitate an easy pour, and foot rims should be round, not square cut. Rounded feet provide less friction in the kiln from shrinkage, a smaller unglazed area is possible and they are easier to smooth off prior to use. (See article on p118–119 Nov 2013 *The Journal of Australian Ceramics*) Consideration must be given to the design's stacking suitability. Will it take up too much space in cupboards or dishwashers? Many customers may see that this is important, others may not.

Recently I made some large, slightly curved plates for a local restaurant. There were several things that had to be considered when making this order. Foremost for me was how the plates would perform in a busy commercial kitchen balanced with the aesthetics of presentation. Handmade pots are relatively heavy when compared with factory produced commercial ware so this also needed to be addressed. Delivery day arrived and no sooner had I placed the last of the plates onto the restaurant workbench when they were unceremoniously whisked, one by one, into the commercial dishwasher. Within seconds the plates were blasted with high pressure boiling water and detergent. After the five minute cycle was complete, the rack was removed and the plates dried within a minute from the residual heat in the porcelain. My order was to replace items which had been supplied by another potter. His pots had succumbed to scuffing, chipping, crazing and staining within a relatively short period of usage. This is unacceptable for an upmarket establishment.

Over the years I have seen vessels by many potters that present food beautifully and do, indeed, add to the enjoyment of a special meal. However, if they have to be treated with kid gloves in order to preserve them for a time, their usefulness is limited. If we want our product to be a serious contender in the current throwaway society, it must have integrity of function. But it also needs to go that one step further and become an object of desire. In order to fulfill that purpose each piece must reflect the passion, the discipline and the skilled experience of a maker's integrity. Therein lies the soul of both the maker and the made – a perfect fusion from the head, the heart and the hands.

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Opposite page:

John Dermer, *Jug*, 2013, h.23cm, w.11cm, porcelain, wheelthrown faceted, saltglazed, terra sigillata; photo: artist

