

WALTER OSTROM
THE ADVOCACY OF POTTERY

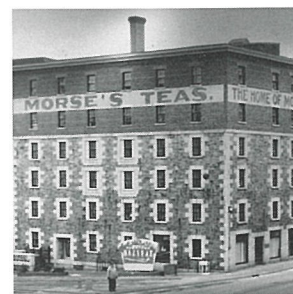
by Anne West
Providence
Winter, 1996



CYNDY LEE, CANDELABRA, 1994
MID-RANGE FAUX PORCELAIN, HAND-BUILT, COLOURED SLIPS AND
COLOURED GLAZES, 21.5 x 14.0 x 11.0 CM; 27.5 x 12.0 x 10.0
CM, COLLECTION OF IAN SYMONS

When I think of Walter Ostrom what comes to mind is a person of huge energy, vitality and above all enthusiasm for his work whether this be ceramics, teaching or gardening. I believe that he is largely responsible for the shift in emphasis from the high fire oriental aesthetics to the low fire earthenware traditions of Europe. His influence has enlarged the vision of history by pointing to the importance of other sources of inspiration. NSCAD has become over the years a vital centre for the championing of maiolica specifically and earthenware generally. He has also brought to the forefront an unapologetic re-consideration of decorative possibility. Walter was able to sustain his focus on pottery, making no confusion with sculpture, and in the early years established a department which was essentially concerned with pots. More recently he has succeeded in broadening concerns by bringing in new faculty with varied interests. His ability to network and lobby for ceramics has enhanced the credibility of the medium as a valid practice in its own right and not simply the poor cousin of the arts more fine. — *Tam Irving*

Walter Ostrom's career as a teacher began in 1969 when he was invited to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) to take up a joint teaching position as Instructor of Ceramics and Oriental Art History. During the years that have followed Ostrom has become a generative force in ceramic education in Canada. Throughout his passionate and engaged tenure as Professor, and eventually as Head of Ceramics at NSCAD, he has offered one of the clearest method-



Morse's Tea Building.
Lisa Parsons photo.

ologies for involving oneself in a craft practice. Over his long and rich career he has worked hard to define the framework in which he operates. The studio and classroom have

been laboratories where he develops, tests and refines his thinking. Always an aggressive spokesperson for ceramics, his impact as an artist-teacher can be measured in terms of a renewed awareness of the inherent strengths of craft: embracing history, the decorative, and an adventurous involvement with the utilitarian object.

A new era began for NSCAD in the late sixties with the hiring of a thirty-year old graduate student from Ohio University, Garry Neil Kennedy. The "Kennedy" era began as most of the previous faculty, having been dismissed, were replaced by a staff of young and ambitious artists and designers (many from New York). This group of young turks shared Kennedy's radical vision to create a leading-edge art school which might become a hot-bed of advanced thinking in contemporary art. Amongst this number, was a maker and thinker, comfortable experimenting at the edge of what he knew, Walter Ostrom.

THE IMPATIENCE WITH THE OBJECT

1969 was a time of enormous elation and energy as well as immense turbulence for the faculty and students. The College was undergoing a dramatic shift from a traditional art school with a European beaux-arts model of art education (emphasizing an interest in the product and technical proficiency) to a conceptual and ideological program which was inherently and aggressively American. The new, progressive learning environment was to foster initiative, energy, and facilitate the building of ideas, not just the cranking out of objects.



Walter Ostrom, Emma Lake Summer Program, Emma Lake, Saskatchewan, 1972. S.E. Dacey photo.

the anarchic possibilities of his medium. Ostrom's first years of teaching were to include a struggle with the stasis of the ceramic department which he saw as bereft of ideas and lacking a needed wide-ranging vision. He wished to expand the parameters of the department to embrace a wider concept of ceramics - a radical new way of thinking about clay.

Enter Walter Ostrom with all the shock of a young contemporary. A recent graduate of Ohio University, he came to NSCAD as a serious, energetic conceptualist who saw

At NSCAD in the late sixties and early seventies Ostrom was an instructor of considerable intensity and intelligence, with great enthusiasm for ceramics. Yet, along with his contemporaries, he was also caught up in the energy and experimentation of prevailing conceptual ideologies. Against the "artsy-crafty" handicraft movement of the time — its ruralism and reaction — he could find no justification for making pottery. There was a contempt for the commonplace and a distrust of art's seeming destiny as mere commodity. Pottery was declared anachronistic. The studio was divested of wheels. "Ideas" were embraced as paramount.

It must be kept in mind that this school, up until the arrival of Garry Kennedy, served the perceived needs of the local Maritime population, and the general temperament of the typical Canadian art student was fostered and respected.



BRUCE COCHRANE, CRUET SET, 1995
PORCELAIN, REDUCTION FIRED, THROWN,
ALTERED, RE-ASSEMBLED
22.0 x 41.5 x 16.5 CM, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

However, with the arrival of so many American instructors and students, and with the general school population shifting in favour of American students, many of the reserved Canadian students were lost in the turmoil of change.

Walter Ostrom was a part of this change. Although Walter was not aware of it at the time, he would spend much of his early years as a teacher at odds both with the demands of the school, which was rapidly on the path toward extreme conceptual art making values and beliefs, and with the one person the College would never terminate. Homer Lord, Head of Ceramics since 1948 and grandfather of ceramic education in Nova Scotia, was one of the few Nova Scotian instructors and he was a symbol, for many of the Canadian students, of



WALTER OSTROM (FIGURE 9)
HEAVEN AND EARTH, 1996
EARTHENWARE, MAIOLICA GLAZE WITH EARTHENWARE
AND PORCELAIN APPLIED DECORATION WITH
ASPARAGUS SETACEUS "PYRAMIDALIS"
60.0 X 30.0 X 10.0 CM
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

Canadianism. If there was anything the American takeover of the school did not take into consideration it was the need for locals to retain their Canadianism. This lack of understanding of the foreigners to the North would cause Walter much distress in his first years as a teacher. — *Franklyn Heisler*²

The unorthodox directives of his studio teachings followed the tenets of minimalism, conceptualism, and process art. Students were assigned projects such as building the tallest cylinder to maximum height and minimum thickness. Over a number of days, stacked coils were gathered up to the ceiling

and then outside. Extending the concept of the cylinder even further, students would be found hanging out of the president's office at the six storey level with ropes dipped in slip.

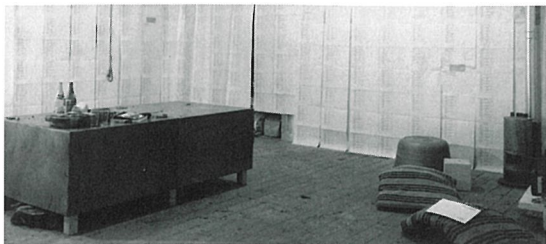
Another notable assignment was the Marine Clay Project (1969). One hundred grams of local Shubenacadie clay, along with its chemical analysis, was sent to other potters and artists, including Shoji Hamada, Joseph Kosuth, Bernard Leach, James Melchert, and Peter Voulkos. The responses, recorded and published as a bookwork, ranged from burying it, eating it, to plotting it on a map.

Originally trained as a bio-chemist, Ostrom's great interest in glaze chemistry was to give rise to AWALT - T6 (1971). A computer was programmed to print out all possible theoretical glazes from cone 8 to 12. The result was about 12,000 glazes displayed in two big volumes of printout pages. The piece was exhibited in Amsterdam with many of the print-outs pasted on the gallery walls. The idea was "to show in some kind of physicality the actual formula of the glazes out of the theories. I guess it was a gesture to make the infinite finite."³

Despite the excitement, exploration and innovations, it was only a matter of a year after his arrival at NSCAD that Ostrom discovered, as he states, "my Achilles heel to this conceptual approach."⁴ A classically trained potter with a great love of ceramic his-

tory, an impressive knowledge of ceramic technologies and glaze chemistry, Ostrom wrestled with the dominant ideology of the school, but became increasingly disillusioned. Ideas enjoyed hegemony while other more materially-based artistic practices, such as ceramics, suffered disenfranchisement. Crafts, with their emphasis on materials and process, were not seen as having intellectual currency. They were viewed as anachronistic, vastly apolitical, and therefore unconscious of social and political reality.

“After a while I realized that students couldn’t see what they were doing and didn’t realize the significance of all these conceptual projects. There was something wrong because we were editing all our ideas; trying to determine which ones were appropriate to clay. I couldn’t justify why you would make



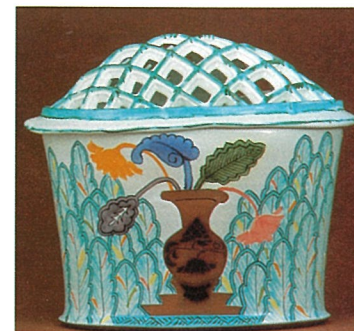
AWALT - T6 (1971). Installation in Amsterdam. Mieke H. Hille, Amsterdam, photo courtesy of NSCAD Ceramics Department.

pottery in the 1970s. The other thing was that I was dying to make pots and I was subverting this desire by buying all sorts of antique pots.... It was crazy. And then I had a talk with a painter friend of mine who pointed out to me that there is a difference between ceramics and conceptual art. In ceramics we have an allegiance to a material and in conceptual art there is no allegiance to any material at all.”⁵

A REEVALUATION OF STUDIO POTTERY

Thus began a period of reevaluation and impassioned advocacy. Ostrom saw his job as changing the perceptions of the administration. Major efforts were made to ground a purpose for ceramics in the art school, and especially to preserve the structure of the ceramic program as discrete from the overall curriculum of the studio division. His provocations led him to upend the certainties of others about craft, and to break down barriers of hierarchical aesthetic prejudices and historical ignorance. Since crafts were not supported, there was always a fight for recognition and respect, and a demand for space facilities which could be organized and made available according to the needs of the students.

Following the integrity and continuity of his aesthetics, Ostrom’s ideals and values were strong, as was his passion which sometimes far exceeded his rational discourse. Ostrom was at times a troubling catalyst for change. There were squabbles.



Walter Ostrom
Flower Brick with tz’u-chou
Pot and Shrubs, 1988
thrown, altered and
constructed maiolica with
resist, polychrome and on-
glaze decoration
27.9 x 32.4 x 20.3 cm
Museum Purchase, Roger D.
Corsaw Collection,
The International Museum of
Ceramic Art at Alfred, 1988.5

Ostrom soon understood that a firm understanding of the foundations of one’s practice must be established before one can develop a more abstract or conceptual stance. Now he had an “excuse” for teaching pottery. “I had a rationale for showing them Chinese and Japanese work. They were the models. They were art.”⁶ Wheels were brought back into the studio. The shift from conceptualism to sculpture (the influence of Peter Voulkos and Don Rietz was strong in his formative years) and to pottery occurred in a relatively short span of time.

In the early to mid-seventies, Ostrom was still entrenched in high-fire work. He preached the Modernist dogma of stoneware which was emulative of Oriental ceramic work: truth to material; majesty, durability and clarity of form; and, if decorated at all, restraint and subtlety were the norm. He subscribed to the hierarchy of materials: porcelain was on top, followed by stoneware, with earthenware at the bottom. It was also the time to recover his other love: history, especially of Far Eastern ceramics. Believing himself part of a vital tradition, he encouraged cultural cross-fertilization and intelligent, discriminating decisions in the production of

work. Not merely a registration of the past, but a productive reclamation and interpretation in terms of one's own age, vision and intention. History, history and more history was the theoretical context in which to make work.

The ceramic studios at NSCAD have always operated as teaching studios. Instruction, consisting in an active dissemination of information and technical skill, is offered to create an open pedagogical environment encouraging experimentation and direct, visceral experience with clay. An instructor with an immense knowledge of his field, Ostrom has since the outset inspired his students with enthusiasm and the depth of intellectual and physical challenge there is in choosing to make pots. Through prescribed exercises and independent projects, students are expected to make a lot of work (a huge and sincere effort is



The First Canadian Student Ceramic Exhibition, NSCAD, 1971. Works by Gloria Dunbar, Eugene Ginsberg, Robin Ginsberg, Sandi Mahon and Betsy Metzger (Students of NSCAD). Photo courtesy of Walter Ostrom.

the ticket to his class), and to develop the capacity to understand and defend their work successfully. Emphasis is on production, innovation and critical judgment. Very high standards are set as is a strong work ethic. Ostrom has always been direct and has had strong opinions. At extreme moments his criticism could be devastating. Students have been intimidated by his severity, and his forceful personality has often brought him into conflict. But, he can also enthuse and effuse genuine excitement, abounding in anecdotes and effervescing with generosity. Over the years, he has softened, and his humour has been a healthy counterbalance to this idealism. Contagious and light-hearted, his ability to caricaturize everything has redeemed many a stressful studio situation.

He definitely animates and caricaturizes everything. Then it becomes larger than life and takes on this personality that Walter has invented for it, whether it is a person or a thing. It doesn't matter. He changed my relationship to glaze chemistry. He would act out the reaction between the molecules. He would bring the subject to life.

— Jim Smith ⁷

He would always address the formal concerns about the pot — all details were discussed. But I think what affected us most were his gut reactions; his expressive, intuitive, romantic reactions to the work. "Don't you just love the way that snotty glaze picks up the edge of the handle." "This form is so great it could be dynamite if you tried ... Make thirty more and we'll discuss it tomorrow."



Walter Ostrom. Bill Roberts photo.

He communicated his thoughts with passion, sincerity and intelligence. His combination of humour and intellect is unique.

— Bruce Cochrane ⁸

He had a problem with the formalist language. This is manifested in his peculiar style: for someone who is very articulate, smart and knowledgeable

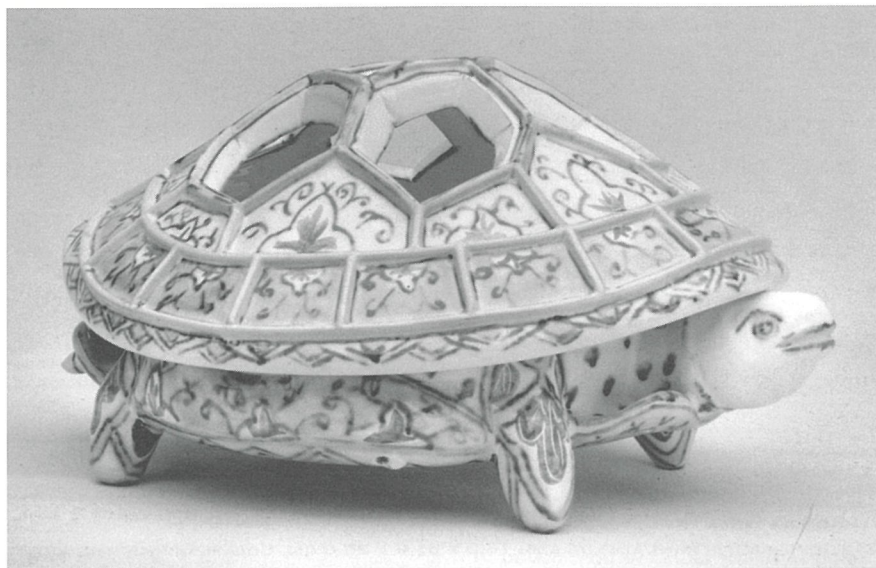
he actually used a limited vocabulary. Often he spoke as an ordinary person, and was direct in his criticism. He would commonly use words like: "loosey goosey, tight, pooppy and dynamite." This is why he is so likeable and intriguing. He is so human. Sometimes he would be really goofy and gets excited so easily. — Paul Rozman ⁹

EARTHENWARE: DECORATION AND THE USES OF HISTORY

In 1973, following a workshop given by Ostrom in the Annapolis Valley, a group of participants urged him to try Lantz clay, a formulation of earthenware indigenous to Nova Scotia. From his beginnings in high fire, he thus began an enthusiastic, but purely private inquiry of the utilitarian and decorative possibilities of low-fire clay. He started by making unglazed flower pots covered with terra sigillata, followed by more objects for domestic use (bowls and tureens). These investigations led him to research the technology for decorated earthenware.

Beginning with slip and glaze, his inquiry eventually focussed on *maiolica*.¹⁰

What took hold as a new aesthetic direction in his personal work, with the promptings of Robin Davis a sessional faculty member at NSCAD from 1975-77, soon became the major focus of his teaching practice. At the time he was among the first North American potters to re-examine the formal, conceptual, and functional possibilities of the earthenware tradition.¹¹ Students transferred to Halifax in order to study earthenware and low-fire decoration alongside him. By the early eighties the ceramic studios at NSCAD had become vital laboratories bringing innovation to the earthenware vessel. During this period many of his most outstanding students were working at NSCAD: Peter Bustin, Katrina Chaytor, Sarah Coote, Jane Donovan, John Gutteridge, Karin Pavey, Dale Pereira, Paul Rozman, and Ian Symons. Much investigative work resulted from the energy of his teachings at this time and many were started down the earthenware path. Later, graduate schools in the United States would call Ostrom to see if he could recommend “a really good potter making earthenware” to their programs. The quality of this work, and of others since then, stimulated the move to earthenware at schools such as Sheridan College, and ceramic programs across the country. Today Walter Ostrom is recognized as a key figure in the development of a post-war Canadian (and international) ceramics movement.



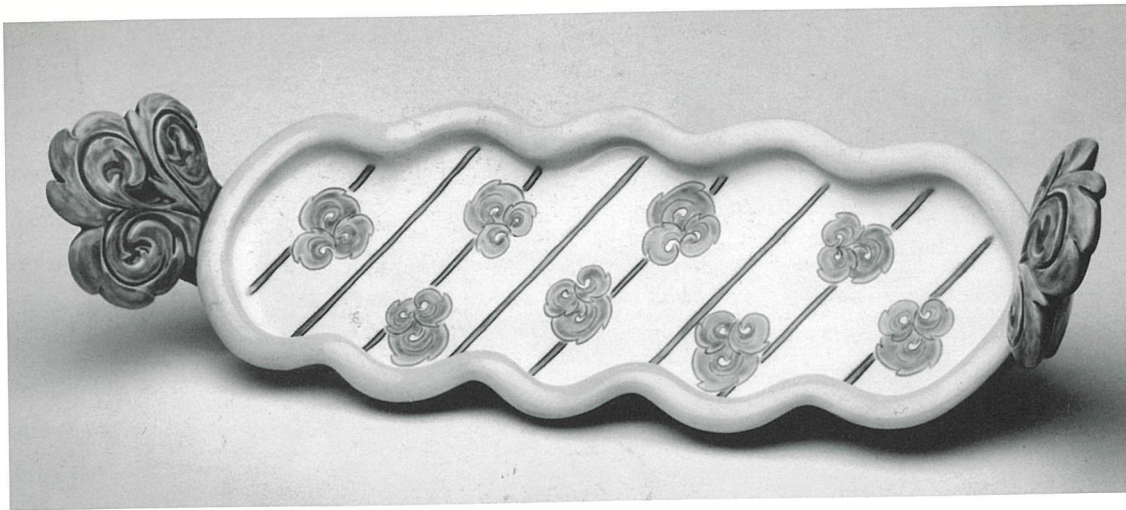
WALTER OSTROM (FIGURE 10)
FLOWER BRICK IN THE SHAPE OF A TORTOISE, 1988
WHEEL THROWN AND ALTERED,
MAIOLICA, EARTHENWARE
14.0 x 28.0 x 21.0 CM
COLLECTION OF SUSAN ELAINE OSTROM



KARIN PAVEY
TWO-SIDED TEAPOT, 1984
RED EARTHENWARE WITH UNDERGLAZE
PAINTING
17.0 x 24.0 x 11.2 CM
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



DALE PEREIRA
PLATTER, 1995
RED EARTHENWARE, WHITE SLIP, SGRAFFITO DRAWING, STAINS
AND OXIDES OVERGLAZE
4.0 x 33.0 x 17.0 CM
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



JIM SMITH, OTTOMAN SERVING TRAY, 1995
NOVA SCOTIA EARTHENWARE, SLIP, STAINS, GLAZE, 16.0 X 81.0 X 25.0 CM, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

I first met Walter in Halifax when he invited me to teach there for a few weeks in the early eighties. My first impression was that there were terra cotta chickens everywhere in the studio — lively, fat sculptures that seemed ready to fly off. He had brought in chickens to the beginning clay course and let them run through the studio. Students were wildly trying to make their first object out of clay. The image I have is the essence of Walter's gift in teaching: a crazy idea that looks spontaneous and almost silly, the process planned out so well that even a beginner is successful, and the result is that the students can hardly wait to see what will happen in the next class.

In a school that has a reputation for radical thinking, Walter took the position that pottery, beautifully made and highly decorated, had significance and conceptual weight in the context of the avant-garde. Walter had found a local brick clay that was a beautiful colour and very plastic. This clay was the basis for his teaching and

his own work. I was already working in terra cotta, so the clay became an instant connection between us.

— *Andrea Gill*¹²

In the early eighties, apart from the colourful, funky sculptural works of some of his American and Canadian counterparts (Robert Arneson, Victor Cicansky and Dale Gilhooly) few ceramists were seriously exploring the decorative potentials of earthenware. Ostrom, his students, and visiting artists such as Wayne Higby, Andrea Gill, John Gill, and Betty Woodman began sorting out and developing information, sharing techniques, and processes about the language of use, colour (without lead), and the decoration of low-fire clay. Ostrom's strong glaze technology background and curiosity led him to comfortably play "what if" with his students, setting up hypotheses, reading and making formulations, and gathering knowledge through countless glaze tests.

At the beginning, the excitement was tremendous, but so was the fear that he might be hurting the cause. The attacks of one critic sensitized him to his heretical leanings: "by reverting to that kitchy, colour, earthenware trash, he may be setting the ceramics world back."¹³ But, Ostrom was quick to realize that we *look*, but we don't really *see*. Our greatest limitations are our culturally-defined pre-conceptions. This prejudice against earthenware was based on historical ignorance. "A potter without ceramic history is a potter with amnesia. ... History is one of the greatest ways to challenge assumptions and to learn what is possible," declares Ostrom.¹⁴

Decorative application is an all-encompassing activity in the handling of surface. It is about neither spectacle nor somnolence nor squiggles on the surface. Decoration requires logic, a clear sense of the organization of a pictorial or patterned space, and a responsibility to create meaning. There are cultural and historical reasons why an object is shaped, decorated and used in a certain way. To understand the decorative language Ostrom encouraged students to explore the collected knowledge of potters from around the world, especially the decorative legacies of Islam, Europe and China. In addition to formal issues, lessons from history are valued in terms of, an examination of the roots of use, a perspective of culture, and as a means to reinforce the historical continuum. One then works with the inspiration and pressure of the achievement of one's predecessors. Viewed as a

living force and a living language, this insistence on a study of historical decoration (its symbols and meaning) was and still is experienced in constant visits to the library, lively ceramic slide presentations, pots shared from Ostrom's collection, and occasional trips to major museums. Today the NSCAD curriculum includes a course in Ceramic History.¹⁵

"I have always believed in the Scandinavian ideal that good, crafted objects can edify. It is something Leach promoted. This is something I never doubted. What I and the students became aware of through decoration was the content of ceramics. Objects are full of information."¹⁶

We find so much about our information (technique, style, idea and culture) by examining the "other," which may be European, Near or Far Eastern. Ostrom dips into the vat of world ceramics to understand techniques and materials because very often what they know we need to know. That information is still relevant because the technology has largely remained the same. — Neil Forrest¹⁷

Ostrom and his students tackled some of the biggest questions in class seminars of the early eighties: What does historical earthenware look like? Where did it come from and how is it used? What is appropriate clay and decoration for a dinner plate, a gravy boat, cup, saucer, jug? Ostrom was able to promote a way of working and thinking which could lead to a deeper understanding of what one's

work means by building a vocabulary from history and the meaningfulness of the conventions. Decorative competency (a disciplined use of colour, compositional sense, and expanded relationship to the ceramic surface), is further strengthened through painting classes with one of Ostrom's most valued colleagues, Gerald Ferguson.

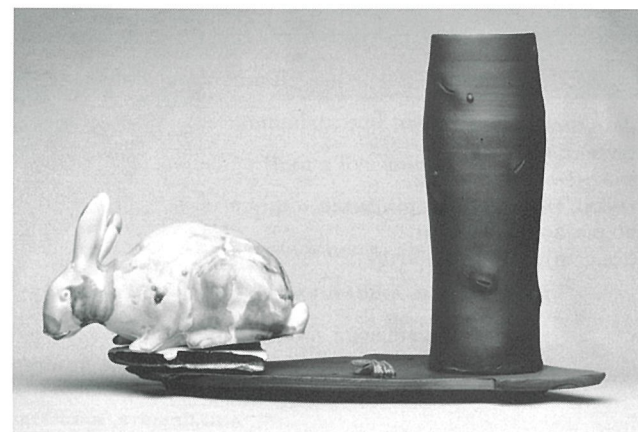
FUNCTIONAL OBJECTS AND THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE COMMONPLACE

"... change the world with the breakfast cereal bowl."¹⁸ This anarchic belief typifies the profound sense of idealism and social commitment with which Ostrom came to pottery. As Ostrom began to produce objects for personal domestic use his philosophy of craft began to shift. While always assessing his life and work he has constantly groped as an artist-teacher to see his work and the practice of ceramics more clearly. This is recapitulated in his teachings which have never been conveyed as fully matured products of mind.

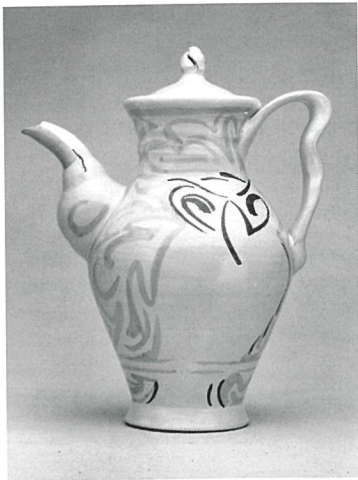
"Art is not just weekly epiphanies in the art gallery. Craft can help you face the banality of daily life and make it special. There is no purpose to life, we have to create it through our daily choices and desires. Whereas previously I had a grander view of craft producing a material and aesthetic revolution in society, now I think more in terms of the nature of our commonplace world — the transformation of the simple

domestic setting. Functional pots can have other levels of meaning other than just utilitarian. Craft can help people have a happier and richer life."¹⁹

A trip to China in 1976, and subsequent trips in 1978 and 1995, fundamentally shifted this relationship to making pottery. China made him aware that he was coming to the practice with a romantic notion of utility. No longer interested in making a great political or aesthetic statement, what he came to understand in China was that pottery is not just about making art, but is also about daily survival. He struggled with this and the seeming decadence of his own work. That is, whether it is futile if not decadent to produce only luxury commodities, superfluous things?



FRANKLYN HEISLER, RABBIT AND VASE, 1986
COMMERCIALY CAST WHITE CLAY,
COMMERCIAL GLAZES (RABBIT), TERRA SIGILLATA WITH GLAZE
(VASE AND STAND), KILN SHELF, 25.0 x 52.0 x 18.5 CM,
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



PAUL ROZMAN
COFFEE POT, 1996
 EARTHENWARE, CONE 2,
 WHEEL THROWN MAIOLICA GLAZE
 30.0 X 24.0 X 16.0 CM
 COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



FRIEDERIKE RAHN, SOUP TUREEN, 1995
 EARTHENWARE, PRESS-MOLDED AND SLAB BUILT, UNDERGLAZE DECORATION,
 BRUSHED POLYCHROME GLAZES, TERRA SIGILLATA
 28.0 X 40.0 X 24.0 CM, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



LINDA SIKORA, TEAPOT, 1995
 PORCELAIN, THROWN, ALTERED AND CONSTRUCTED, GLAZES
 AND RESISTS, SALT FIRED WITH OIL AND WOOD
 16.0 X 26.0 X 15.0 CM
 COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

Over time it became clear that the cultural configurations that objects bring to the daily and special events in our lives must be considered. While the imperative of necessity is no longer a determinant in our North American democratic, post-industrial society, practical vessel forms do bring integrity to domestic life and function as important cultural signifiers. Pottery may not affect our ability to survive but it does affect the quality of that survival. Pottery carries social, political, economic and aesthetic information, exemplifying a certain aspect of culture—high or low, fine or folk, or of daily or ritual use. Objects are a fact of a meaningful life. The object, both in terms of its function and decorative presence, has value as a communal transaction, inseparable from the matrix of life. Not just a mere contributor to the bourgeois ethos, filling the needs of consumers for more objects. Pottery is a gift and symbol of civilization.

“Our daily lives are guided by the need to have something to bake in or drink from. I found that I could make a dish and use it and it worked well in our house. Since our situation was not unique, I figured others would probably want to use it. Craft can take those things that we have to do and make them exciting. It can make life liveable. It helps us to face the banality of daily life and make it special. The act of eating or drinking can be special.”²⁰

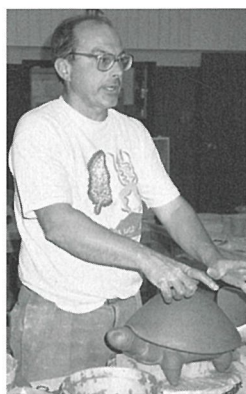


Trip to China, 1978. Photo courtesy of Ian Symons

Periods of ongoing re-evaluation have formed what is now the core of Ostrom's philosophy of craft. Ostrom presents the practice of making pottery as a vehicle to explore the world and as a mean to affect the grammar of our living space — our practical, emotional, and sensual life. Pottery is not remote from the business of life and will not reduce daily life to a passive exchange. In fact, it is so fundamental that it will increase the integrity of that relationship — a respect for life. As Ostrom says, "it is the only thing that the human makes and cognates in terms of his or her own physical self (foot, belly, neck, lip). Pots are metaphors for use, offering a vehicle for coming to understand the world; a meeting place."²¹ Pottery erases the difference between art and life. Or, in other words, pots are the means by which our experience of and commitment to daily life can be augmented. In this way life is not rejected as prosaic. Functional ceramics, both as utilitarian and decorative objects, can meet the conditions of human dwelling and our desire for plenitude. The craft exchange is an emanation of *eros*.

A PEDAGOGY OF GENEROSITY

It is however not just earthenware that Walter is about — otherwise a maker of porcelain would not have met him. He actually is very interested in all aspects of ceramics, and his staff and students know that. He has had all of the major names in the contemporary ceramics scene to Halifax for workshops with NSCAD students. He has also travelled to most major places in America to tell



Walter Ostrom Workshop. Since 1972 Walter has given over 100 workshops and lectures across Canada, the United States and Europe. Photo courtesy of Walter Ostrom.

people about what is happening in Halifax. A nice exchange I'd say. I have said of Walter, and have been quoted, that he is to earthenware what sun or rain is to a gardener. I believe that. ... What is grown needs a vase, the tortoise needs a way of being immortalized, etc. It is all one life and art is life. — Harlan House²²

While Ostrom is recognized as a functional potter and is associated with a revival of interest in the earthenware tradition at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, the largesse of his ideas and person permit him the more general title of "Professor of Ceramics." It is true that most of his time is spent with low temperature work and with potters in an attempt to battle misconceptions, for instance: "pots do not have content." Nevertheless,

he equally enjoys working with students whose concerns are not dominated by issues of function. He loves tiles, and supports exploration in sculptural and architectural ceramics. Eventually he wishes to establish a course in geology as a means to strengthen a foundation for research in glaze chemistry.

One of his favorite classes is the *Introduction to Ceramics* due to the continual appearance in the classroom of relative beginners to woo. Nowhere is Ostrom's ability for creative reinvention and dramatic involvement more in evidence as an educator. This class offers a broad foundation for general students who may wish to explore clay and perhaps further their studies leading to a professional life as a ceramist. Students are introduced to a wide palette of possibilities, from throwing, handbuilding, to figurative work, as well as to production methods, processes and techniques. A range of projects are given, including the creation of a functional dinner piece to accommodate and celebrate a favorite food, modelling from a live animal, self portrait plates, and sculpting something as pedestrian as one's shoes. These assignments are given to undermine stereotypes about ceramics and to enable beginners to make connections logically and begin to feel their productive potency as makers.

Ostrom is a community builder. His infectious enthusiasm, idealism, optimism, and crusading spirit have led him, along with his colleagues, to orga-



First Anagama weekend, 1987. Photo courtesy of NSCAD Ceramics Department.



First Annual Hungry Bowls, December 1994. Presentation of cheque to the volunteers of Lamb's Lunch. William Ashbles, Photo courtesy of NSCAD Ceramics Department.

This essay has been shaped through lengthy interviews with Walter Ostrom, his wife Elaine, as well as through many conversations with Ostrom's colleagues. In particular, I wish to thank Dr Heather Dawkins, Dr Marie Elwood, Gerald Ferguson, Neil Forrest, Andrea Gill, Steve Heinemann, Harlan House, Tam Irving, and Betty Woodman for the hours spent discussing this project and for the generosity of their commentaries. I also wish to acknowledge the contributions of the "former students" who have cooperated willingly and enthusiastically as I endeavoured to gather a sense of the NSCAD years.

Two sources have also been useful in assembling this narrative:

- 100 BOOK The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Student Publication in Celebration of the College's Centennial 1887 to 1987. NSCAD Heidelberg Press, 1989.
- Donald Soucy and Harold Pearce. *The First Hundred Years: A History of The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design*. University of New Brunswick Faculty of Education and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1993.

¹ Quoted from correspondence with Tam Irving, Professor of Ceramics, Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, Vancouver, December 1995.

² Quoted from correspondence with Franklyn Heisler, January 1996.

³ In conversation with the artist. Quoted in Ross, Allen, and Czagledy-Nagy, *Down to Earth*. Nelson Canada, 1980. p. 157.

⁴ In conversation with the Artist, October 1995.

⁵ Op. cit., p. 157, 160.

nize ongoing panels, lectures, seminars and events, such as "Craft in the Marketplace" to encourage a platform for constructive discussion about craft; visiting artists workshops to strengthen a wider sense of the meaning and use of ceramics; departmental fêtes and potlucks to enforce the experience that functional ceramics are about eating, sharing and using; an October weekend retreat at Anagama²³ to build solidarity among creative peers; and exhibitions, a staggering roster of public workshops, and community projects (for example, Hungry Bowls and the G7 Summit Collection) to broaden public education and support for the crafts.

Over his 27 years at NSCAD Ostrom has given much emphasis to teaching, often to the point of diverting attention from his own work. Yet the artistic, pedagogic, and political dimensions of his career must be viewed as interconnected; each has developed logically from the other and reinforces his overall commitment to the field.

Ostrom's interest in community and in his students — his love for them, one might say — is almost totally inseparable from his love for ceramics and its vital history. His passion is fertilized by ceramics and through this medium is given full voice.

There is no question that culture has valued certain of the visual arts at the expense of others and that art education predisposes students toward a fine art orientation rather than a so-called craft orientation. Since his arrival at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design over two decades ago, Ostrom has fought hard to offer, through the department of ceramics, another venue for students of art. When students leave NSCAD they have been exposed to this less advocated piece of history and are able to gather esteem as potters. There is an understanding that craft is an integral part of the visual art family. — Neil Forrest²⁴

⁶ In conversation with the Artist, October 1995.

⁷ Excerpt from interview with Jim Smith, October 1995.

⁸ Excerpt from interview with Bruce Cochrane, August 1995.

⁹ Excerpt from interview with Paul Rozman, November 1995.

¹⁰ The strong influence of Italian *malolica* on contemporary work has led to the adoption of *malolica* as a generic term to describe all work of this nature. There is no one *malolica* glaze, however; artists mix their own recipes using various low-fire glazes. The common technical feature linking their work is the opaque white base glaze. Historically the earthenware tradition is known as *malolica* in Italy, *faience* in France and Germany, and *delftware* in England and the Netherlands. The term *majolica* refers to works produced in Victorian England.

¹¹ Parallel investigations into the uses of earthenware were also evident in the works of Birdsall and Worthington. In 1974 Birdsall began using Lantz clay in her studio work for slip decoration. In the summer of 1975 Worthington shifted his focus from stoneware to earthenware. "Pam and Tim's Clear," one of the glaze formulations developed by Birdsall and Worthington for earthenware during this period, is still used at NSCAD and in other ceramic departments. Unlike Ostrom who has gathered knowledge and inspiration from the tradition of tin-glazed earthenware, their works reflect the influence of medieval British redware.

¹² Quoted from correspondence with Andrea Gill, Professor of Ceramics, New York State College of Ceramics, Alfred University, Alfred, New York, January 1996.

¹³ In conversation with the Artist, October 1995.

¹⁴ In conversation with the Artist, October 1995.

¹⁵ In conversation with the Artist, October 1995.

¹⁶ The first appointment of a craft specialist to teach a craft history survey was Dr Jean Weir in 1978. Others who have taught craft history include Mary MacLachlan (1990-1994) and Dr Alexandra Palmer (1995-1996).

¹⁷ Excerpt from interview with Neil Forrest, Professor of Ceramics, NSCAD, October 1995.

¹⁸ In conversation with the Artist, October 1995.

¹⁹ In conversation with the Artist, October 1995.

²⁰ In conversation with the Artist, October 1995.

²¹ In conversation with the Artist, October 1995.

²² Quoted from correspondence with Canadian potter, Harlan House. January 1996.

²³ Since 1987 NSCAD ceramic students have visited Anagama, a property in Grand Pré, Nova Scotia with a Japanese *anagama* tunnel-shaped wood burning kiln built by Don Morrill. When the property was sold by the owner Ed Goodstein to the Richards family (originally their ancestral home), it was written in the deed that upon his death NSCAD and the Université de Moncton could use this property for three years. It has been mutually advantageous for the Richards family to rent the facility to the Ceramics Department for a weekend autumn retreat.

²⁴ Excerpt from interview with Neil Forrest, October 1995.

²⁵ Quoted from correspondence with Andrea Gill, January 1996.

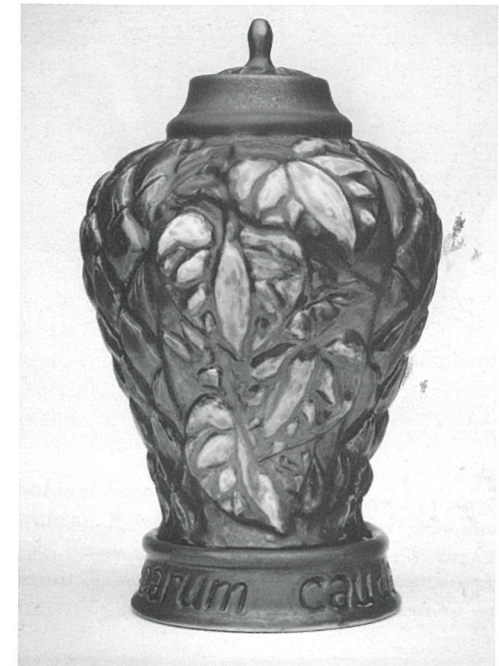
²⁶ In conversation with the Artist, October 1995.



WALTER OSTROM (FIGURE 11)
VASE IN THE SHAPE OF A BASKET, 1981
 WHEEL THROWN, ALTERED, SLIP, UNDERGLAZE,
 SGRAFFITO, POLYCHROME GLAZE, OVERGLAZE
 ENAMEL, EARTHENWARE
 16.0 X 14.0 X 7.0 CM
 COLLECTION OF JOHN AND ANDREA GILL

WALTER OSTROM (FIGURE 11)
VASE IN THE SHAPE OF A BASKET, 1981
 WHEEL THROWN AND ALTERED, WHITE SLIP
 UNDERGLAZE, SGRAFFITO, POLYCHROME GLAZE,
 OVERGLAZE ENAMEL EARTHENWARE
 19.0 X 18.5 X 9.0 CM
 COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

PETER BUSTIN
**CHE COSA CORCA? (WHAT ARE YOU
 LOOKING FOR?), 1993**
 TIN-GLAZED EARTHENWARE, CERAMIC
 STAINS, PRESS-MOLDED CERAMIC
 EARTHENWARE GLAZED WITH MAIOLICA
 GLAZE HANDPAINTED WITH CERAMIC
 STAINS FIRED TO 1060_C
 6.0 X 43.0 X 43.5 CM
 COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



DIANE SULLIVAN
PEDESTAL JAR: ASARUM CAUDATUM, 1996
 WHEEL THROWN, GLAZED STONWARE, CONE 6
 REDUCTION
 27.0 X 18.0 X 16.5 CM
 COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

