A Life with Clay

By Sam Scott

As a high school student in Seattle, Washington, I took a pottery class and found it to be the perfect medium for me to express my creativity. In 1971, I was getting ready to transfer to a four-year university as a ceramics major. An encounter with the work of Bob Sperry at a local gallery directed me to the University of Washington. Bob was the head of the Ceramics Department, which included Professors Howard Kottler and Patti Warashina. Initially, it was the incredibly organic brushwork done by Bob that attracted me to his work. It was his instruction and example that helped define my approach to surface decoration for the next thirty-eight years.

While at the university, I worked to improve my throwing skills and knowledge of glaze chemistry. All three of my instructors were instrumental in exposing me to ceramic techniques and history, but it was Bob's influence that left the greatest mark on my approach to clay. He showed me how to make brushes from animal fur (usually buck tail) that would make a uniquely spontaneous mark. I used these one-of-a-kind utensils in combination with commercially available Hake, Sumi, and watercolor brushes to create my signature style of patterns and abstract designs. During this time I also worked with slip decoration as a surface treatment, using a porcelain slip in white, black, green, and blue on stoneware. These decorations, although not done with a brush, also included abstract patterns and designs applied to the clay surface to embellish the form.

In 1975, I graduated with my BFA in Ceramics and prepared to set up a studio of my own. I married my fiancée, Dianne, purchased a house and studio, and built a 65-cubic-foot gas kiln. I began producing work that was primarily brushwork applied over a clear glaze on porcelain. In the late 1970's, I was having gallery shows, selling work at art festivals, and doing workshops. I also began teaching at colleges around the Pacific Northwest region of the United States as an associate faculty, which I still do today at Shoreline Community College, just north of Seattle.

As I settled into the routine of studio work, I focused my stylistic identity on the overglaze brushwork that I had honed while in college. I made predominantly functional forms in porcelain. Using a collection of commercial and handmade brushes, I approached the surface of the form with marks and patterns that enhanced the shape and activated the full three-dimensional surface of the vessel. Using oxides of iron, rutile, and cobalt, my color palette included blues, browns, greens, and an orange-rust. I prefer the use of the oxides over the glaze because of the integration of the color with the glaze, giving the

decoration a watercolor effect after it is fired. The shapes I used were controlled and tight. The porcelain surface was trimmed smooth so that the decoration did not compete with a surface texture.

In the 1980's, I began to explore forms with more complex shapes that had added decorative elements such as handles. These pieces were made and bisque-fired but put away until I could come up with a new glaze to use on them. The forms were not compatible with my previous style of decoration, so I began to use a different glaze to complement the shape. I had narrowed it down to a few choices when my daughter, Hannah, asked me to paint her window blinds black with a red-and-white spatter decoration. While doing this I realized I could do a similar surface treatment on the pieces I had stockpiled. I needed to develop a flat matte glaze (that had the appearance of black spray paint) and I would use china paint for the red and white color. After some time, I formulated a glaze that was a striking black with minimal reflectivity. It was perfect! I finished the series of forms I had been working on with this technique and was quite pleased. Although I had designed the forms with the intent of having no surface decoration, I was nevertheless compelled to create patterns on their surfaces. I did not feel that these pieces could accept my brushwork, but I would soon find that they were conducive to another form of embellishment. I continued to use china paint on the black glaze for a while. After some experimentation, I discovered that putting my clear glaze on top of the black glaze produced a glossy black to emerald green color. The contrast of the matte and glossy glazes worked well for the shapes and designs that I was beginning to come up with while trailing, splattering, and pouring the glazes on the clay surface.

At the same time, in the mid-1980's, I had been using a technique with my brushwork pieces that involved pouring the clear glaze on the piece in drip-like shapes, leaving some areas unglazed. I noticed that when I applied brushwork to the piece, the color of the oxide varied depending on whether it was on the glaze or the porcelain clay surface. The effect was subtle, but it created more depth, adding to the variation in color and texture of the piece.

The next development was the use of the glaze-pouring skill that I had mastered to create a body of work that

would exploit the contrast that existed between the black matte glaze and the luminous white surface of the porcelain. I took the fluid, smooth, almost classic forms that I threw on the potter's wheel and injected an organic tension created by the biomorphic shapes of the black poured glaze. The shapes that I produced when I applied the glaze could be controlled by the viscosity of the glaze, the shape of the form, and the angle at which the pot was held as the glaze dripped down. The main graphic contrast is the black and white color, but there is also a more subtle texture difference between the clay and the glaze. Through the 1990's, this technique became a signature style of my work, along with my use of the brush.

In the early 2000's, I wanted to explore the juxtaposition of the tight mechanical quality inherent in the wheel with the loose gestural aspect of hand building. I made vase forms that had crisp, wheel-thrown bodies that contrasted with the skin-like texture and folds of a loosely constructed hand-built neck. These pieces combined the mechanical with the organic. I tied the body and neck together visually by enhancing the seams, cracks, and texture of the neck with black stain and then glazing the body with my pouring technique. These drips create a graphic tension that is enhanced by orienting the directional flow of the glaze from both rim and foot of the piece. The shape of the pot informs the pouring process, creating overlapping patterns that integrate the form, surface, and decoration, unifying the overall design. These pieces were very successful and were a departure from my usual approach to form.

While pursuing these two divergent approaches to surface decoration (overglaze brushwork and black matte poured glaze), they may appear to be made by different artists. But a consistent factor in my work has been one of shape. Although the blue, brown, and green brushwork had no visual connection to the black and white stark contrast of the poured-glaze decoration, the vessels I used with each technique were similar shapes. It is while working on the potter's wheel making the forms, that I communicate the work is by a single maker. Throughout my career working with clay, my goal has been to blend technique and intuition in both form and surface treatment while working in the vessel format.

In the 1990's, I had been making rectangular (9 × 12 inch) tiles. I imprinted familiar objects into the wet slabs of clay, creating patterns and textures. I then stained the impressions black to highlight them. Unfortunately, the impres-

sions caused a very high percentage of the tiles to crack. After a while I gave up on the process. In 2006, I began to formulate some new ideas for this concept. I explored my interest in science and technology and their impact on American society. To correct the previous problems I was having, I used thrown plates instead of slabs. I had hoped the different orientation of the clay particles in a thrown plate would eliminate the cracking. It worked! I also found that a plate was a familiar object that would more easily contain the ideas I wanted to express. These plates are made on the potter's wheel from high-fired porcelain. After throwing the plate I imprint familiar objects, patterns, and scientific symbols into the clay. I utilize the material's unique quality to permanently document an object, much like a contemporary fossil. Each plate is then stained with a black underglaze and fired to cone 12, enhancing the impressions on the stark white porcelain surface. I chose the 12-inch plate format because it is a familiar object and it recalls the tradition of the "commemorative plate."

The contents of each plate are meant to "serve up" commentaries and provoke observations of the ideas, decisions, and developments that influence our actions and leave an "impression" on our planet. Our activities have altered the earth in many ways, but the major question is, can we use technology to mitigate and correct our impact? This body of work has won awards and several of the pieces have been acquired for collections, including the American Museum of Ceramic Art. Four of the plates will be shown in the 2010 National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts Show, "Earth Matters."

As a creative individual, the main focus is always the work. But a successful artist today must be concerned with more than just the object being made. Aspects of marketing and building a reputation are extremely important. Over the years it has changed from galleries to Web sites and from slides to digital images. I can remember when a slide taken on your deck could get published in a magazine, but now the standard is much higher. Digital photography has brought a lot of advantages but also a lot of headaches for artists who have decades of slides in their portfolio. These changes need to be navigated today as an artist gets their work out to the public.

Establishing a stylistic identity is paramount but it is also necessary to establish your reputation. This is achieved by gallery shows, having your work published in books and magazines, and regional, national, and international competitions. Today, having a presence on the World Wide Web is also important.

During the first decade as an artist I entered shows and had Gallery exhibitions regularly in the Pacific Northwest. I did workshops and taught at various institutions. I had built a reputation and was actively involved in the ceramics community in my area. As the 1980s came, my three children, Jeremiah, Hannah, and Jacob, arrived and I began to focus mainly on producing the work and less on promotional activities. It was very time-consuming to prepare work for exhibitions, enter competitions, and seek publishing opportunities. I could sell all the work I could produce, and as the primary source of my family's income, it was important to focus on doing that. I also needed to give the appropriate time to my family. During the 1980s and early 1990s, I had fewer exhibitions but I still stayed involved in the art scene and presented work in group shows. Although I did not actively pursue many opportunities, I was invited to contribute work to the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery. I also had work published in Ceramics Monthly and Bon Appetite magazines.

In the late 1990's, as my children became adults and my wife's income grew, I began to commit more effort to building my reputation and raising the profile of my work. I entered national exhibitions and competitions and I sent out images to be published. I have found that the amount of work it takes for these activities is even more than I had imagined, but I have had great success with my submissions. In the 2000's, I created a Web site, www.samscottpottery.com. I have also had work shown in important national exhibitions and have won various awards. A few of the exhibitions include: NCECA Invitational 2010, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Objects of Virtue 2009, Walnut Creek, California; Craft Forms 2008, Wayne, Pennsylvania; 2007 Biennial Exhibition of North American Functional Clay, Guilford, Connecticut; 2007 NCECA Clay National Biennial Exhibition, Louisville, Kentucky; 14th Annual Strictly Functional Pottery National 2006, Lancaster, Pennsylvania; and Looking Forward Glancing Back, Bellevue Arts Museum, Bellevue, Washington.

I have had work published in magazines including Ceramics Monthly and Clay Times. And I am mentioned or my work is included in various books, such as: Robert Sperry Bright Abyss by Matthew Kangas, Making Marks by Robin Hopper, China Paint and Overglaze by Paul Lewing, 500 Cups: Ceramic Exploration of Utility and Grace (Lark Books), 500 Pitchers: Contemporary Expressions of a Classic Form (Lark Books), and 500 Plates and Chargers (Lark Books).

My work is also included in corporate and public permanent collections. These include: The International Museum of Contemporary Ceramics, Buenos Aires, Argentina; The Dee Roy and Mary M. Jones Permanent Collection at Cal Poly, Pomona, California; The American Museum of Ceramic Art, Pomona, California; The Nidec-Shimpo Tradition of Excellence Corporate Collection, Itasca, Illinois; The Harborview Northwest Collection of Contemporary Ceramic Art, Seattle, Washington; and The Edmonds Collection to Hekinan, Hekinan, Japan.

Selected awards include: Objects of Virtue Guild Award, California (2009); 4th International Biennial of Contemporary Ceramics Special Jury Award, Buenos Aires (2009); Ink and Clay 35 Honorable Mention, California (2009); Clay on the Wall First Place, Texas (2007); 2007 Vasefinder Nationals First Place, Nevada (2007); and 14th Strictly Functional Pottery National Founders Award, Pennsylvania (2006).

Over the last forty years it has not been easy being a ceramic artist from an economic perspective. It has allowed a philosophical autonomy but not necessarily a financial one. It is a physical activity with a uniquely creative medium. Working with the material, glazing the forms, firing the pieces, packing and shipping, and photographing and marketing the work is a labor-intensive and time-consuming activity. But, it has also enabled me to have a lifestyle immersed in creativity. I have had a studio at home and have always been near my family. It has allowed me to collect art that enhances my life and to create art that enhances the lives of others. While at the university, I learned from Bob Sperry that making honest work with integrity would lead to success. I have come to realize that pursuing my craft with passion and searching for discoveries would generate a synthesis of clay, artist, and individual.

cheerspots@yahoo.com
www.samscottpottery.com

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