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| **Articles** |  |
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| **Home Cooking - A Case for Handmade Tablewareby Shannon Garson** Domestic pots have gone hand in hand with human civilization. What does hand made functional ware bring into our lives that a cheap, useful, factory-made bowl from Woolworths doesn't? This question strikes at the heart of our capitalist society where convenience and conformity have become goals and “lifestyle” has replaced life. In this world the fast food equivalent of pottery has led to a bulimic gorging where a smorgasbord (so to speak) of faddish dishes in the latest colors and “contemporary” shapes have replaced meaningful objects; functional pots made by potters bringing the concerns of the domestic world into direct contact with the concerns of the artistic world.[orcelain bowls by Shannon Garson](http://www.ceramicstoday.com/articles/images/shannon_garson1.jpg)The privilege of using handmade pots is that they contain the idea of human endeavor, a link with other people not with factories or corporations. Most people haven’t lost touch with this concept when it comes to food. A home cooked meal is still the epitome of good, nourishing food for the body and soul. But society as a whole has lost contact with the fact that pots can do the same thing. By only buying useful and fashionable pots from Ikea we lose touch with something in ourselves, in the same way as if we eat at MacDonald’s every night. We begin to feel that everything should be blatant, the main reason for eating or owning pots is immediate gratification. We forget that there is value in taking time to appreciate things and what is left is a jaded palate and a yearning to eat / buy everything with a hunger for nothing.I want to consider two aspects of functional ware in the 21st century. The first is how potting enriches the life of the maker and the second is how handmade pots enrich the life of the user. A quote from Canadian potter, Brother Thomas Bezanson illustrates this concept. Brother Thomas speaks of the artist’s experience as being a "vision quest" and the creation of art as providing a link between the world of the mundane and the world of the spirit, he says "Artist's experience opens their own hearts to a larger reality and their work opens ours." It is my contention that, although useful, cheap, factory made pots are readily available, handmade domestic ware builds on a tradition of human/pot interaction that is as relevant to the 21st century as it was to the 1st. The value that these pots bring into our lives has changed from being pure necessity, when the town potter was as essential as the baker or the farrier to handmade pots performing a spiritual function. The presence of handmade domestic ware has become a symbol of the link between artist and community, the importance of a skill that takes time to learn, a calm, individual voice amid the mass-produced. In this world of fast food, and corporate control of “good taste “ in everything from clothing to home wares the handmade pot represents an investment in individualism, an aesthetic that values patience and celebrates humanity in objects. The availability of factory made ware has led to a gradual and insidious “de-texurization” of the home. The uniformity and smoothness of factory made pots and other domestic objects is beautiful in itself and these objects of design and manufacturing processes function as doorways to ideas, but these are not the same ideas as the ideas in a handmade pot. The products of factories can bring up ideas about the design, the manufacturing process, the role of human imagination in an industrial world. Handmade pots can bring up ideas of process, the role of the artist, and human skill, and how it is transformed by creativity. The connection between the human and the object, in a handmade pot is so strong that the very word “hand-made” has come to signify a fanciful, stereotype and, as with Sara Lee “home baked” apple pies is often applied to things which are not hand-made at all. Companies that peddle lifestyle such as Country Road and Ikea are aware of the individual appeal of the hand-made and often include factory made items designed to reference the hand made. These items may include texture, or in the case of pottery (horror of horrors!!!) fake throwing lines. To engage with the many concepts objects bring into domestic life there must be balance, the industry of making beautiful things accessible through mass reproduction can exist side by side with the industry of creative individuals making pots alone in the studio.Individuals creating objects to be used in the domestic context are integral to a fully rounded society. The studio potter combining skill, intellect and spirit in their works is more than a happy artist doing what they love. Like the pots themselves this individual embodies a greater idea, the notion that there is a link between everyday life and spiritual fulfillment the possibility of a world where objects are meaningful, beyond the vagaries of fashion and commerce. I think through it's very functionality domestic ware can slip in where other examples of "art" would not be welcome. Pots can do this in a very important way, in the intimate space of the home. Walter Keeler spoke about this at a conference on “Form and Function” in London last year claiming that functional ware within the home "speaks" a language that is deeply connected to the experiential. Keeler explores the notion that pots escape from the boundaries of visual art through their use and as a consequence "the experimental language of functional ceramics can chatter away to us". The language of handmade pots within the home is a complex one. Every time we put a cup or bowl to use we are initiating a series of ideas connecting artists to the home.Unlike other forms of original art such as painting and sculpture handmade pottery has been able to enter homes regardless of socio-economic status or level of education. It is an art form that can be non-threatening and I see this as one of the most valuable aspects of handmade pots. Although many handmade pots end up in the back of the pantry gathering dust- the relics of anniversaries long gone, many others are in constant daily use. The practicality of these pots opens the possibility of connection between the world of ideas and the world of making the meals/ doing the dishes. Food symbolizes many things in our lives and Nana’s milk jug or favorite teacup becomes a part of the love and rituals of communication in these relationships. Bridges can be mended (or broken!) over a cup of tea, asking someone over for a meal or up for a cup of coffee is an entrenched part of the courting ritual. Later down the track there is nothing like the satisfying crash of a piece of china smashing against a wall to illustrate your point. What other form of art is so intimately involved in the minutiae of life? The connection between the maker and the user is one of the most valuable, and joyful aspects of my work as a potter. Creating work that enters daily life and has the possibility of comforting someone when they feel sad or lonely, being part of their morning daydreams or nightly ritual, is a great honor not shared by all artists. The very fact that handmade pots are not quite the stuff of “cutting edge” exhibitions is their greatest strength. It has been said that making handmade functional pots represents the conservative side of ceramic art but what could be more radical than entering the home, and affecting the inhabitants on a regular basis?orcelain bowls by Shannon GarsonWhere handmade pots come into their full strength is in the fact that intimate relationships are joined by a third, more nebulous party. Where handmade pots are invited to tea the artist or rather the idea of the artist is also invited. The knowledge that the bowl or jug you are using has been crafted by another human being brings individuals into contact with one another. This creates a community of potters/artists and users. Where in the past the pot would most likely have been made by a local person using local materials and working within the immediate geographic locale, handmade pots now travel far and wide disseminating their strange mixture of signs and symbols miles from where the clay was first mined. Since the first wondrous porcelain made its way out of China handmade pots have carried with them portents and echoes of other lives. If we were to “read” a handmade domestic pot as scholars read texts we would find that this useful object symbolizes much more than what its function might suggest. In this reading the knowledge that the pot is indeed handmade and not the clever product of some machine is the most important concept. It is implicit in this pot that it is the product of meaningful work, the outcome of a series of creative decisions bounded by the functional form and the limits of the clay. We are all products of our environment and every thumbprint on a blob of clay is a record of that. The line of a thrown bowl says as clearly as our handwriting who we are and what we are about. Handmade pots also encompass the idea of beauty. While most potters would deny that their work ever reaches that perfect balance of form and function where the glaze, function and spirit of the pot appears effortless and seamlessly combined, most potters eagerly and fearfully open the kiln, mentally crossing their fingers and praying that there will be just one magnificent pot. Handmade pots, ranging from the first, imperfect wobbly efforts through to the work of accomplished craftspeople strive for beauty and it is in their striving that they connect us to one another. Joan Chittister in her wonderful essay “Thirst For Beauty Thirst For Soul” speaks about the role of the artist in bringing beauty into our lives;“Beauty, in other words, lifts life out of the anaesthetizing effects of the pedestrian and gives us reason for going on, for being, for ranging beyond our boundaries, for endeavoring always to be more than we are. It enables us to pause in time long enough to remember that some things are worth striving for, that some things are worth doing over and over again until they become their breathless selves... Beauty is a moment in time that must be captured so that the human heart can, in the midst of pain and despair, cling to the notion that that which is capable of bearing beauty is capable of bringing new life, is capable of pervading the world, is able by penetrating our own souls to penetrate the ugliness of a world awash in the cheap, the tawdry, the imitative, the excessive and the cruel.” (pp.11-12 Creation Out of Clay, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1999) Chittister believes that the artist can bring this element into our lives and this essay was written about a potter- Brother Thomas. If, as Chittister writes our lives are awash in cheap, tawdry imitations then it is our homes and immediate surroundings that are affected. While the beautiful, thought-provoking contents of art galleries may provide illumination and inspiration; in the midst of domestic isolation and over-work one is more likely to come across the cup of tea or bowl of salad.The work of being a potter, learning skills, translating them into objects of beauty and utility, focuses our minds. The repetition in the studio and rhythm of the firing schedule all form a solid background to the unpredictability disastrous and beautiful of the finished product. Work is an individual thing and I can only speak of what working as a potter has given me, and my hopes for work in the future. The most important thing I learnt in my early years of potting was patience. Not waiting for pots to dry was the cause of many an early failure, trying to unpack, glaze and pack a kiln all on the same day another one. Unlike drawing and painting, my previous areas of study, where the materials were torn, and manipulated in various violent ways for immediate effect here was clay, a material that bossed me around. And glaze a mysterious wet substance that I crossed my fingers and hoped like hell would do what it was supposed to. These materials rewarded me not with obedience but with unpredictability, and gradually I learnt to relax and respect the natural rhythms and I grew to love being bossed by my materials and working with them rather than trying to subdue them. Potters throughout the ages have worked in the same way and after years of the rhythm of the work sometimes, the work is elevated into something more than itself, what used to just be a serviceable salad bowl now functions as a sculpture. How can we define this quality that turns work from mundane into transcendental? We can’t define it, it is like beauty, the secret spice of life that brings other flavors into balance, we don’t know what it is but we know when we see it.Article courtesy Shannon Garson ©. Shannon is a studio potter living and working in Brisbane, Australia. She was the winner of an Award of Excellence at the 2003 Gold Coast International Ceramic Art Award and was granted a Churchill Fellowship in 2004  |  |
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