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## BYRON TEMPLE: THE GIFT TO BE SIMPLE

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Byron Temple's work is self-effacing, spare, practical and somewhat aloof. It is, in other words, antithetical to the aesthetic values expressed in most American ceramic art today. These qualities have not only put Temple and his pottery outside the mainstream, but also have made him anathema to those who have been struggling to "elevate" craft by portraying it as a kind of painting or sculpture rather than as an art form in its own right. While others of his generation "outgrew" pottery and went on to make either "gallery" vessels or ceramic sculpture, Temple continued his investigations of form as a "production" potter. For 40 years he has pursued his own vision of the medium as an expressive art whose meaning, he feels, is only truly understood through the intimacy of use.

Temple grew up on a farm in Indiana where his first exposure to pottery was the crocks the family used to preserve food. It was an unexplainable fascination with these handmade crocks that led him to try coil building in his high school art classes and put him on the path he was ultimately to follow. He first learned to use the potter's wheel in 1951, at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. His ceramics teacher, Marvin Reichle, urged him to continue his studies at Alfred University, where mold-made pottery designed for industry was at the time seen as the direction for utilitarian ware in the future. Temple felt strongly that he wanted to make things by hand, however, and his encounter with Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book* reinforced his view that such an undertaking would be not only plausible but meaningful as well.

His work was briefly interrupted by a stint in the U.S. Army as an M.P. stationed in England, but by the end of the 1950s Temple had gained what he felt was an adequate proficiency. He attempted to sell his pottery while supporting himself at various times as a waiter, elevator operator and technical assistant in the ceramics studio at the Art Institute of Chicago. And he had grown confident enough to write Leach asking for an apprenticeship. At Leach's invitation he traveled with a bag of pots to the University of Michigan, where the British potter was conducting a workshop. After being interviewed by Leach, he was told to come to St. Ives, the Leach pottery in Cornwall.

While Temple was in England, he read Rose Slivka's article "The New Ceramic Presence" [*Craft Horizons*, July/ August 1961]. Slivka attempted to provide a new critical construct for pottery based on Abstract Expressionist painting by suggesting that the "classical form" of pottery with its limitations of use should be discarded so that pottery could serve the "freer expressive interests of surface." The painter-potter, she wrote, "engages in a challenge of function as a formal and objective determinant; he subjects design to the plastic dynamics of interacting form and color and even avoids immediate functional associations...a value which can impede free sensory discovery of the object just as its limitations can impede his creative act. And so, the value of use becomes a secondary or even arbitrary attribute."

To Temple, Slivka was saying that unless he gave up usefulness – the very element that attracted him to pottery in the first place – his work would never be considered art. He was being forced to choose, he felt, between being an artist or a potter – that there somehow was a gulf between the two that could not be reconciled.

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During Temple's brief stay in New York City before he went to England, his hangout had been the Museum of Modern Art, where he met friends every Sunday to look at and talk about modern painting. He remembers being deeply moved by exhibitions of Mondrian and De Kooning. He did not believe that painting and pottery were mutually exclusive; in his mind, each had its own history and way of speaking. By the time he left St. Ives in 1962, he was certain that others besides himself were equally moved by pottery. He did not think that for pottery to be modern it had to discard its history, as Slivka seemed to suggest.

Temple looks back on the two years at the Leach pottery as his graduate school. Leach, who ordinarily traveled a lot, was in St. Ives during Temple's sojourn and was a constant presence. The discipline and routine he learned there proved invaluable, but more important was the intellectual encouragement. Leach urged him to read about and look at as much pottery as he could. There were ongoing discussions about the relative merits of different styles, as well as arguments over things like handle placement, decoration and the balance of both in relation to particular forms. It was a place where he could explore his intense interest in pottery, a place where it was taken seriously and where the aim was to expand and build on pottery's particular history, not abrogate it.

At St. Ives, Temple's sensibility began to jell and surprisingly, or perhaps not, it was sometimes incompatible with Leach's. The student was more attracted than his mentor to Scandinavian design – with its minimal, angular quality that emphasized material and process. Leach was, not to put too fine a point on it, unimpressed with that aesthetic. Nevertheless, he encouraged his apprentice to make work that reflected his own interests. Temple remembers that his biggest concern during the period at St. Ives was how he was going to fit into American culture when he returned home. How was he going to make pottery, for example, that was relevant to contemporary life here in the United States? He knew he didn't want to make English country ware. The only thing he was sure of was that it must be work people would use in their homes.

After his return Temple realized that there might be only a small number of people who would want his pots and that his survival as a full-time potter would depend on his ability to reach them. At first he went to craft fairs, but he found himself unwilling to compromise his vision in order to meet the demands of a fickle and visually unsophisticated audience that prized novelty and any kind of cobalt decoration over his straightforward, unadorned forms. By the time he moved to Lambertville, New Jersey, in the mid-1960s, he knew he had to cultivate a market of his own, one that understood and wanted what he wanted.

Temple found that his work didn't fit into either of the two major camps that characterized mainstream contemporary crafts. His preference for the austere, for example, was unpopular with the crafts-buying public, while his unswerving commitment to utilitarian pottery put him out of step with those who were beginning to claim – by the conscious denial of function in their work – fine art status. He realized he had to develop a strategy whereby he could reach beyond these two groups to get his work seen. He decided to create a catalog in the form of a black-and-white poster from which individuals and shops

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across the country could order work. The problem was to develop a group of forms he felt strongly enough about to commit himself to for an extended period. These objects would synthesize his concerns about utility, aesthetics and economical production by hand. They would be the modern counterparts to the crocks he had been fascinated with as a child and would, he hoped, move people in the same way those crocks had moved him. He focused primarily on seven forms: a kitchen storage jar, gratin dishes, an unglazed clay baker, a coffee server, cup and saucer, tea jars and a square kitchen pan. All of these were designed to be repeated and were glazed with a standard tenmoku or satin matte that sometimes covered only half the form, leaving the bare clay exposed on the other half.

To Temple, the repetitive nature of producing pottery on the wheel was more than an economic necessity; it was his way of avoiding self-conscious affectation. He was looking for what Mark Rothko called the “essence of the essential,” and his rationale for repeating forms was not much different, as unusual as that might sound, from that of Rothko, who had said, “If a thing is worth doing once, it is worth doing over and over again – exploring it, probing it, demanding by this repetition that the public look at it.”<sup>1</sup> The economy of expression in Temple’s work and the desire to keep it free from displays of egotism by relying on predetermined forms has much in common with American minimalism. The critic Robert Hughes in a recent essay makes the connection between Amish quilts and minimalism with a quote from Ad Reinhardt that could equally apply to Temple’s work: “The creative process is always an academic routine and sacred procedure. Everything is prescribed and proscribed. Only in this way is there no grasping or clinging to anything. Only a standard form can be imageless, only a stereotyped image can be formless, only a formulaized [sic] art can be formulaless.”<sup>2</sup>

The cup and saucer are objects Temple has always been intrigued with, embodying, if any one set of forms can, his philosophical bent. (Temple says, in fact, that many of his other works were spin-offs of whatever cup and saucer he was working on at the moment. The cylindrical shape and the handles of the casseroles, for example, were derived from his cup form.) The crux of his interest lies in the relationship between the two parts, what each allows the other to do, the manner in which each comments on the other and how all of this affects the user. In a recent series the cups no longer have an angled base with the foot cut up into it like the one he designed for production at St. Ives. They now have a much broader base with a notched foot derived from “bonsai” containers. The result is a sense of stability without the heavy, weighted feeling of most broadbottomed pots.

He still employs the same glazes – a tenmoku and an off-white satin matte – and the same reddish-orange mottled clay body he has used for years. These at first seem common, even boring. Gradually, though, the logic of his choices becomes clear. The glazes reassure you that the cup and saucer are in fact meant to be used, while at the same time allowing the evolution of Temple’s ideas about form, balance and proportion to become the focus of the piece. Once you start using them, another thing happens. Temple’s very specific ideas lead back to the materials and process. You remember why this particular glaze, for example, was originally so likable and you start to notice the physical nuances of each piece – the tool marks and traces of the maker’s hand – a reminder of the act of creation with its own psychological appeal.

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Temple's pottery is constantly evolving. Since his move two years ago to Louisville, Kentucky, he seems to have adopted a freer and more expressive approach. His recent wood-fired casseroles and covered jars, for example, have a fluid and lyrical quality that is only hinted at in his earlier pots. He has achieved this, however, without abandoning either usefulness or the leanness that has always marked his work. Unlike much of the purely visual ceramic art now being made, Temple's pots are not symbolic and do not make grandiose claims. His cups and saucers do not attempt to portray the angst of anticipating a nuclear holocaust, but offer instead, if only for a moment, a sense that there may still be some good in the world. This realization not only comforts us but may also ease our sense of helplessness when faced with cosmic issues. The surest criterion of good pottery, as Michael Cardew has written, is that "its presence will fill the gaps between sips of tea or coffee at those moments when the mind, not yet focused on activity, is still in an open and receptive state; and it will minister quietly to the background of consciousness with a friendly warmth, even perhaps on some occasions with a kind of consolation."<sup>3</sup> This has been Temple's goal, to produce intelligent and sensitive utilitarian pottery that creates an empathetic response extending beyond mundane function.

It is ironic that as modern craft seems closer to becoming indistinguishable from painting and sculpture, the cultural, spiritual and aesthetic values of postmodern painting and sculpture are being seriously questioned. The art critic Donald Kuspit believes that "the notion of the avant-garde artist has become passe, more precisely, it has become an establishment conception of the artist," and he has called for art that can retrieve the sense of human purpose in art making and that addresses on a personal level the difficulties we have in adjusting to the vicissitudes of modern life.<sup>4</sup> Philip Rawson in his book *Ceramics* was remarkably prescient when he wrote:

But the basic elements of the potter's art will not vanish from our lives even if our "pots" are to be made of plastic. Furthermore, another revolution in art may well demand that work be addressed to the whole multisensuous man, hands and all, to awaken those important and intensely valuable regions of feeling and sensuous order which pure visual-abstract work ignores, or even affronts.<sup>5</sup>

If we look at Byron Temple's work in this light, it seems more relevant now than ever before. Even, I dare say, avant-garde.

## References:

1. Quoted in a review of "Mark Rothko: Works on Paper" at the National Gallery, *The Washington Post*, May 13, 1984.
2. Hughes, Robert, *Amish: The Art of the Quilt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf/Callaway Editions, 1990), 15.
3. Cardew, Michael, *Pioneer Pottery* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1969), 250.
4. Kuspit, Donald, "The Good Enough Artist: Beyond the Mainstream Avant-Garde Artist," talk delivered at Mountain Lake Symposium, Virginia, November 1989.
5. Rawson, Philip, *Ceramics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971 ), 206.