

What We Teach

by Lisa Buck



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I grew up in a household that used its hands. My mom always used to say, "I can make something out of nothing!" and it was true. She made clothes and curtains, refinished furniture, gardened and cooked with zeal. My father ran a road construction crew and dabbled in painting, macramé, and tying

flies, as well as trimming our juniper trees in "interesting" bonsai shapes. But I didn't know anyone who was an artist, and as much as making things was natural for me, I wasn't sure how it would be a part of my working life. I was the first in my family to complete a college degree, and since an art





OVERLEAF SPREAD:

LEFT PAGE TOP: Salt Pot, 2007.
Earthenware, Ht. 4 in.

BOTTOM: Serving Bowl with Tiger Stripes, 2007. *Earthenware, Dia. 10 in.*

RIGHT PAGE TOP: Baking dish, 2007. *Earthenware, 8 x 11 x 4 in.*

BOTTOM: Family of tumblers, 2007. *Earthenware, Ht. 3.5 to 4.5 in.*

degree was not seen as particularly practical, I added education to the mix. I learned good techniques and studio practices, art history and educational theory. I banded together with other like minds, making the ceramics studio the hub of my existence. I was hungry for information and experience. Yet as those years ended, I had a growing desire to go beyond technique and find a purpose.

In 1981, I moved to Stillwater, Minnesota, to begin teaching art. Home of Warren MacKenzie, a beautiful river valley, and an intimidating prison facility (I was scared to move there), this small town opened up the world to me. I knew only a little bit about Warren and the potters of this area at the time, and many were at early stages of their careers. My degree in art education drew me to the junior high students awaiting my newfound knowledge of art, while my love of making pots drew me to Food Tools – a

pottery and kitchen store that Warren, Wayne Branum, and Mark Pharis shared in a refurbished brick building downtown.

These potters had created a venue to sell their work and other objects

for the kitchen that were both beautiful and utilitarian. The shop had periodic shows by other potters including Linda Christianson, Tim Crane, Randy Johnston, and Sandy Simon, and served Starbucks coffee long before it was a national phenomenon. Cooking demonstrations were given some weekends, and shoppers came from all over to buy pots. Food Tools seemed like another world. Artists were using their hands but following their hearts, and trying to make a living making pots. I was enamored of those pots and the life that appeared to go with them. During the week, I taught, and on the weekend got a job at the shop. I took great pleas-

ure in arranging the pots and setting tables, and savored any slight compliment Mark would give about how it looked. I loved being able to handle the work, as the tactile experience only added to the visual.

While college gave me technical knowledge about ceramics, a different kind of learning began here. Seeing and handling these pots spoke to me on a visceral level that I had certainly not experienced before. It is the work of these potters, encountered at a formative time in my life, that I have held as a standard ever since. Warm of heart, generous with knowledge, and strong of opinion, Mark, Wayne, and Warren talked seriously about pottery. While they were not trying to teach me in any formal sense, they did so just by being who they are. They provided a glimpse into their lives, and I saw a passion that I too wanted to have. Their aesthetic sensibilities and vision offered me a way of seeing the world that began where my formal education left off. I saw a larger purpose for making pots, something that connected me to both a big world and a small moment. It was something I could feel, but not put my finger on, until recently.

In her poem "The Summer Day," poet Mary Oliver asks ...*what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?* It's a line I think about often. Making pots and teaching is a combination that suits me. I have been doing that now for over twenty-five years. As each new school year starts, I wonder what it will be that makes a connection in my students' lives. What will help them see the purpose of learning the skills and techniques of making pots? Whether we try to or not, I believe we teach who we are, and that's the best we have to offer. It's not a wealth of technical knowledge that makes a difference; it's the person. So I share my thoughts and my life with students, tell goofy stories of my family, and ask about their thoughts and lives, hoping that perhaps, for a few, it will make a difference. I know that through my students' eyes I get to see more possibilities. And it is these possibilities that engage me, while my history grounds me.



*Food Tools, Stillwater, MN.
Photograph by Mark Pharis.*

wrong reasons. There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening