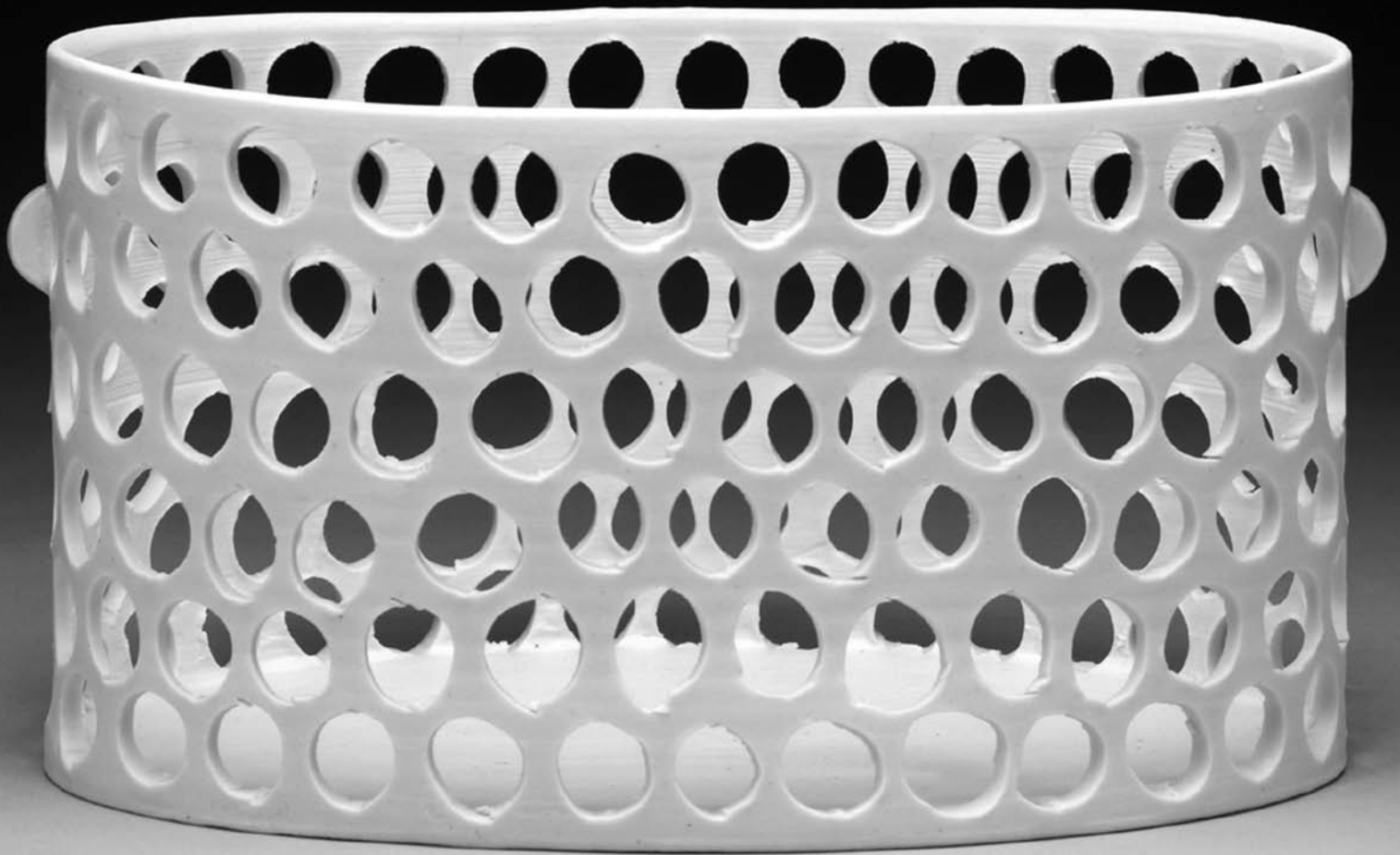


# *What's That For?*

*by Bryan Hopkins*



Teaching in an art department or an art school is the most interesting activity



This question is the one I hear most often at craft shows, and, after the hundredth time I am asked on a given day, it's the one that has me daydreaming about flogging the questioner with the pot in question. It's an annoying inquiry because it is never – ever – asked of a two-dimensional artist, sculptor, or “fine artist.” I suppose it is understood that a painting is not a placemat, nor a sculpture a doorstep. But take a little artistic license with a piece of pottery made for use...!

The question, however, is a valid one, and a very important one for the potter to respect in order to answer it in a coherent and concise manner. The person asking is interested and genuinely looking for an answer, and this is where teaching can occur in the marketplace. At a retail craft show, a potter is dealing directly with the public. He or she must appreciate and take full advantage of that context, not only with words, but by allowing and sometimes forcing the object in question into the person's hands, thus engaging as many senses as possible in the discussion. (I have gone so far as to pour water into a cup so the customer could feel the balance when filled and the smoothness of the piece on her lips). The craft show is where most people encounter handmade utilitarian ceramics, and where most money is spent on ceramic work (unless we count university and college salaries – the true patrons of the arts). It is my (our) job to talk intelligently and confidently about “what

that's for,” in order to ensure an audience and a future for functional ceramics.

Part of my explanation involves a discussion about all art, as all art has a function, though it may be intellectual, not utilitarian. And all good art contains good craft and good design, just like a well-made cup or bowl. The great part about pots is you can touch! Texture and surface are elements that can and must be physically encountered, not just observed. Because a piece of art is made for use does not exclude it from being contemplated in the same way a painting would be. There is and should be something in any piece of pottery that goes beyond function, a level of personal expression – content – evident in the simple cup or mug or bowl. It may not be noticeable immediately, but will reveal itself over the days and years of use.

The “what” (product) of ceramics is usually more obvious than the “why” (content) of the work. For me, the weekend craft show goes much more quickly if I can talk about content in the same breath as process. People at my booth – sometimes complete strangers – often talk to each other about their admiration of the utilitarian and/or artistic qualities of a given pot. These discussions can be valuable, and the education and grooming of an appreciating public take place almost by osmosis – a contact education. At a craft show the public does not know my background or the collections I am in, and they shouldn't care. What matters is an admira-

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*ABOVE: Olive Boat with Toothpick Holder Appendage, 2007. Grolleg porcelain.*

*OPPOSITE PAGE: Basket, 2007. Grolleg porcelain, 9.5 in. wide.*

*OVERLEAF: Cup Assortment, 2007. Grolleg porcelain, to 9 in.*

tion of the work, a love of the pot for pot's sake. In this way the craft show is the most pure of contexts in which to look at and purchase utilitarian pottery.

When customers talk of function at a craft show they are referring to use, utility. They want to know if the pot will pour well, what it was designed to dispense, or "could it be used for tea and coffee?" I have learned a lot by listening to customer comments over the years. My coffee pots pour better, sugar and cream sets are appropriately sized, and mugs have better handles due to conversations at craft shows. Learning outside the academic institution is essential if you want to make a living at making pots. Effective booth display, marketing, and publicity are not typically taught in school. But one conversation with a booth full of customers at a craft fair will yield dozens of ideas.

Some people who buy my pots purchase from me regularly, and each time we meet the relationship deepens. They are more likely to want to begin a collection of my work after direct conversation with me. Once taken into their homes, the conversation between them and the pots continues. They are learning more about the pots by living with them than I could ever teach them through words, and that is key. The cup on display is a visual experience, but

the act of drinking from a cup is a physical, visceral one. This performative aspect of the work is revealed in the most intimate of places – the home. The best customers or collectors have learned from my work in the same way I have learned from my best teachers – by learning without actually being taught.

So when you are asked the question "What's that for?" understand that it usually comes from an honest place, and take the opportunity to educate someone about your work. Just be happy you are not listening to the statement in the painter's booth next door: "My kid could do that."



short of psychosis. Even though I have written this entire book on the as-