

# CUPS: CERAMICS 2

## Goal:

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10 Cups

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5 identical (size, shape, form, volume, trimming, handles, glazing) - HANDLED  
5 in series or transformation of form - HANDLED

Options:

Small to Large

Fat to Thin

Wide Foot to Narrow Foot

Variations in size/shape of handles

\*Several ideas for each set of five in your sketchbook, as will be assigned.

Refer to the book '500 Cups' for ideas, as well as web gallery resources, other books in the studio

## Criteria

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Completion (presented for critique glazed)

Craftsmanship

Overall quality

## Due Date **Friday 2/1**

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### Checkpoints:

- Friday 1/25 – 5 Cups Completed, ideas worked out for all pieces, at least five more in-progress.
- Friday 2/1 – 10 Cups Completed

\*Please read the attached essays and be prepared for class discussion.

\*We will submit at least two cups from your set to the Café Marie Gallery!

## How a Handmade Cup Can Save the World

Chris Staley

The oldest cup was someone's hands held together to bring water to their lips. This act may have occurred as long ago as a million years, by our earliest ancestors. The wheel is just 7,000 years old. The TV is less than 50 years old. Commercials have gotten shorter and shorter, from 90 seconds down to 8 seconds. Our world is changing at an accelerating pace. From cups made by hands, to cups formed from clay, to cups vacuum-formed out of Styrofoam and plastic, the ritual of drinking has both changed and stayed the same.

As the wheel turns and a potter begins to shape a wet lump of clay, the next moments are full of endless possibilities. The final step in making pots is turning the fluid clay into hard stone with fire. There's something so elemental yet magical about this process. It takes water and earth and fire to create pots. Life comes from water; in fact our blood is mainly salt water. Plants grow out of the earth, and fire can be both the giver and taker of life. The finished pot hopefully ends up being part of someone's daily life in the ritual of eating and drinking.

Being a potter today is not like it was 200 years ago. In our technologically-oriented and cost-effective world, handmade pottery isn't necessary. Yet something compels me to continue on in this 8,000 year-old tradition.

**When I'm forming a cup on the wheel, one of the many things I'm thinking about is the rim of the cup or the lip, as it is sometimes called, and how the person's lips will feel when they drink from the cup. Just as everyone's fingerprints are different, so too are handmade cups. When making a**

**handle I want someone's finger to feel connected and caressed while they're holding the handle. Touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight are all senses that are being triggered when drinking from a cup. Yet how aware are we of them?**

Sometimes when I am making pots I listen to the latest news reports on the radio. Over time the news can become disconcerting. The world's population is projected to double in approximately 60 years. Americans comprise less than 5% of the world's population yet use over 25% of its natural resources. I hear about family values. The average 17 year-old has witnessed 30,000 homicides on TV. Gambling is epidemic and homicides and suicides are constantly on the rise. **As Saul Bellow said, "People are literally dying for something real when day is done."**

Having recently visited Helena, Montana, I noticed the newly built Wal-Mart and how it looks exactly like the Wal-Mart in State College, Pennsylvania. Yet, I was moved by how dramatically different the mountains are in each area. Nature is infinitely complex and mysterious and inspiring; on the other hand, man-made objects can become numbing in their uniformity and banality. Why are people buying stonewashed jeans? They're buying something that has an inkling of history and character, of having "lived" for a while. The cures for our emotional woes don't just lie in jobs and economic growth. Our concerns go deeper than that. Are we happier and more content than the plains Indians who hunted buffalo a mere 150 years ago? I'm not sure we are. By no means do I suggest we go back in time; we couldn't even if we wanted to.

Americans, I think, see things too simplistically. This has come about from mass marketing. The main goal of which is getting us to simply buy

something whether we need it or not. Our educational system is more concerned about getting students jobs than it is about inspiring students to think and ask questions. Education should be exhilarating and challenging and foster a life of the mind, plus a sense of civic duty.

My gosh, look at the stars at night! How can space and time go on forever? Guess who owned Arlington Cemetery before the Civil War? Or why does humidity make us uncomfortable when it is hot? Somehow that curiosity and wonder we were all born with has been almost weaned from us. We have become more concerned about who buys more Coke or Pepsi. We are drawn to a presidential candidate that might make us feel good versus one who might ask us to sacrifice in order to deal with the difficult problems we face as a nation.

So when I'm thinking about a handmade cup and all its subtleties and nuances and each one being different. I'm thinking, "might the answers to some of life's meaning lie in these details?" Not necessarily in a literal sense but in a symbolic sense. **Perhaps when we slow down to look and contemplate we become more sensitive to the effects of our actions.**

Mies van der Rohe said "God is in the details." At first this statement seems almost blunt and void of relevance. Yet when I think about the meaning of life and where the human species is headed I must stop and reflect. It seems as if our most basic emotional needs are to feel loved and to be able to do something satisfying and meaningful. Simply stated: to be loved and be learning are what life is about. The abilities to learn and love are behaviors that are taught and nurtured. Each is an act of will. In order to learn you have to have an open mind. In order to love you have to have an open heart.

Finally. back to the round pot. Just as the throwing marks go round, so too does the world—life/death, night/day, sadness and joy.

The daily cycles of eating and drinking are rituals all humans take part in to continue living. yet to have our children's children continue to live we also need to be curious and caring about this planet earth. There was once a time we drew animals on pots out of fear and respect and to pay homage to their spirits. Now we have come to a time where we have the power to destroy ourselves and the earth as we know it. Now more than ever we need to look at the cup of life and hold it in reverence. drink from it and pass it on to share with others.



Cups  
Chris Staley

# The Cup

Let us drink. Why wait for the lighting of the lamps? Night is a hair's breadth away. Take down the ornate goblets from the shelf, dear friend, . . . give us wine to forget our pains, Mix two parts water, one part wine, and let us empty the dripping cup - urgently.

- Greek poet, Alcaeus

Where did the concept of the cup begin? The tradition of hammering or casting of copper into objects was known in northeastern Iran before 3000 B.C. Man-made glass objects appeared in ancient Egypt between 1580 and 1358 B.C. Glass blowing came into existence in Egypt around the 1st century B.C. The oldest presently known examples of 'ceramics' are potsherds from Paleolithic Kenya that reveal what may have been the accidental burning of a clay-lined basket. This most likely led to the remarkable discovery of vitrification: the chemical conversion of malleable clay into a durable, immutable shape and form. The use of vitrified clay transformed the preparation and serving of food and allowed clay vessels to become a valuable gift item and export.

Early clay forms may have imitated other vessels we know to have been in use, including gourds, bladders, baskets and human skulls. The potter's wheel appears to have developed in the Near East before 3000 B.C. This invention led to the mass production of uniform, hand-sized functional pieces, including the drinking cup.

Some ancient societies we know largely as a result of the cups they left behind. Greek civilization is a good example of this. We can begin our look at the social history of drinking cups at the time of the Greeks because of the decoration they chose, the prevalence of the medium, and the durability of the material.

Imagine that you are stretched out on a Greek couch after a sumptuous dinner. Suddenly dregs of wine from a two-handled cup go flying by. Insult? No. Accident? No. Just "kottobos", a game that the ancient Greeks enjoyed after dinner. You held the cup by one handle and threw the dregs at a saucer or small figurine floating in a nearby pool. The successful sinking of the object would impress your loved one.

The idea of the drinking cup for the Greeks went well beyond that of its mere utility as a vessel. The cup was a canvas for daily routines, heroic feats and celebrations of gods such as Dionysos. It was an object of real value, and Greek cup painters were respected as artists and often signed their work. There were many different kinds of cups in the Greek cabinet - covered cups with a small hole to drink from, figurative and animal cups that poured from secret places and cups shaped as male genitals. Given the variety of shapes and subject matter that have been discovered, it is now thought that viewing, holding and drinking from beautifully decorated cups was a valued experience for upper class Greek society.

Drinking vessels have also been fashioned from almost every natural material: stone, wood, bronze, iron, copper, pewter, brass, gold, silver, copper, ivory, semi-precious stones such as jasper, onyx, marble and alabaster as well as bone, skin and horn of animals. Many of these materials were chosen for or imbued with special properties that added to the value or utility of the cup. For example, an amber cup found at

Hove, England in 1857, was probably prized by its owner for its alleged ability to detect or neutralize poisons.

Around 1000 A.D. the church believed that only vessels made from rock crystal and translucent enamels on cloisonné gold possessed the purity to store some of its most precious relics. Cloisonné was prized by the medieval Christian church for the production of monstrances, reliquaries and chalices. In private collections, the virtuosity of the handwork on inlaid and enameled objects conveyed the worth and social position of the owner. Many of these hierarchical values survive and apply to materials today.

While it is hard to match the domestic comfort of a simple ceramic cup with its soothing glazed surface and reassuring mass, you might not expect to see an earthenware or china wine glass in a formal table setting. A glass cup or wineglass, with its qualities of light and depth add a sense of luxury to the table setting. Various additions to the surface of glass such as cutwork, etching or gravure enhance its prestigious position and worth. Finally, metal and in particular, enamelware is such a valuable and enduring material that is more likely to be passed down from generation to generation as a family heirloom. The imbued significance of such a historical metal cup suggests use in a ritual or ceremonial context, even today.

Drinking vessels have taken almost every conceivable form: Greek rhytons represented drinking horns and could not be put down if full, medieval cups engaged the viewer's attention with hidden frogs, figurative Toby jugs conveyed the spirit of the middle class, Meissen and Sèvres porcelain cups and saucers graced the tables of the nobility, and post-industrial revolution commemorative and promotional vessels filled the bars and

bric-a-brac shelves of the masses. In many cases the forms of these vessels became detached, sometimes completely, from their supposed function. Meret Oppenheim's fur-covered cup, saucer and spoon - originally called simply Tasse - was first exhibited in 1936. She said that what amused her was the disparity between the porcelain and the fur. What she did not say, perhaps because it was so wonderfully obvious, was that her cup, saucer and spoon were completely impractical. Their forms, chosen as archetypal symbols of utility, were expressed in a material that contradicted any idea of functionality, making an unforgettable statement.

**The modern drinking cup is purely functional and intimate in size, so that the hand forms around the handle, stem or the cup itself. Because the cup conveys nourishment or pleasure to our lips, it is easily associated with an emotional response to the cup itself. The cup is the only piece of china that we actually lift to our lips in Western society.** Our table manners dictate that plates and bowls stay on the table. We are taught that it is 'bad manners' to raise a cup with a teaspoon in it. Similarly among Jains and devout Hindus, pressing one's lips to the edge of a cup is considered vulgar and unclean. The cup is held up and the contents are poured into the mouth.

Commerce has also shaped and formed drinking vessels. Ceramic cups with saucers were first imported to Europe from China and mass marketed to the upper classes during the 18th century. Elegant porcelain teacups with saucers, bordering on the unusable as they could be lifted from saucer to lip with two fingers only (the 'pinkie' delicately extended), expressed prestige and refinement. European mass production of china vessels and tableware began with Meissen in Germany and Sèvres in France in the 1700's, about the same time as French law forced the

populace to melt their gold and silver tableware for coinage. Affordable ceramic pieces often mimicked the style of unattainable gold and silver pieces. The rush to replace precious metal cups and plates with local faience encouraged a wave of new potteries, and so many kiln firings that it caused a fuel shortage.

Two centuries later, it is not precious metals but ceramics themselves that are kept 'for good'. While an eighteenth-century picnic would have been on china instead of silver or gold, a twentieth-century picnic would have been on aluminum or plastic instead of china. Any child of the 1950's will remember meals served on Melmac, that ubiquitous, light as air, indestructible, pastel plastic.

We all have our favourite mug, teacup, or wine glass. We can have them etched to order, or glazed or enameled by ourselves and then fired by someone else, or even have a photo decal of a favourite person, place or pet glazed into the surface. This invests the commonplace with personality and special significance. It signals all would-be users that this vessel is yours and yours alone.

In contrast to personalized, useful cups, denial of function is now a significant part of contemporary craft practice. Form, colour and narrative content often replace utility and challenge the viewer to detach form from function. Contemporary cups may embody personal artistic vision, political and social commentary or observations on the tenuous position of the material arts within the art world. Using the materials of clay, glass and enamel, artists today express a wide spectrum of private and global statements and purposely put aside the practical considerations of holding and sipping from a cup. Today's crafts person is capable of blending current issues with the immense history of the

material itself, thereby creating contemporary craftworks that resonate within many different levels of meaning. Accordingly, this exhibition celebrates the handmade cup, in all its exhilarating forms and surfaces, in all its functional and symbolic embodiments.

#### About the Author:

Wendy Walgate is a practicing ceramic artist with a studio in the Distillery District in Toronto. She recently received a M.A. in History of Art at the University of Toronto.