Why do I collect pottery? Why not something easy to store, like stamps or rocks? Why not something that is not breakable, like iron or spoons? Why not something that doesn’t need dusting, like cloth? Or something that is easy to display? Why? I simply love to look at pottery—again and again and again. I am intrigued by these wonderful small objects of use and beauty. I am interested in all kinds of pottery, from soft, low-fire majolica, to tight, hard icy Cadillac, from cups with big handles, to pitchers with spouts that pour into the next room, from raw DIY cast and glazed cups to drop-in clay bowls that were developed using computer-aided design, from Japanese teabowls to Wedgewood. I love them all. I love how each piece of pottery has a story to tell.

The Beginning

I have collected pottery since the early 1980s. At first I started because my high-school teacher brought me from Japan and a few white crackle raku vases that I made in high school. Later, I continued my collecting at the end of undergraduate school in a great frenzy of trading mug for mug, as graduation approached. We had glorious moments at these early works exchanged hands, sure that we got the better of the trade. Gathering up these pots and displaying them in my living room and kitchen was a way of thinking of these friends over the years. This pottery kept us in touch quickly, and their incoming grew as time passed.

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Sharing with Students

When I started teaching college-level ceramics, with each pottery project, I would show the students images of other artist’s works for inspiration. Somehow looking only at images lead the student making pots with beautiful glazes, but often with large flat surfaces, out of balance, a weight that was not in relation to the form and little consideration to the interior. Often these student pots were much better to look at than to actually use. This would never do! First, I brought in a selection of mugs and the students would choose one and take it home for a month—they had to use it in every meal, and even carry the cups in their knapsacks. The students fell in love with these cups and often ended up making their own version to keep. Then I started bringing in lots of pots, and now, on average, about ten pots a week to display in my office window, and lent out from time to time. The physicality of students learning through touch, researching pottery using their hands as well as their eyes brought depth to their pots. I think that it helps my students have smarter, deeper, more understanding ideas about the world and the way they interpret the world, with what we are exposing them to and how we’re teaching them. When I bring in a cup made by one of their current favorite potters, it brings the students closer to the work and it encourages them to make work; it shifts them from being passive observers to active participants in the field of ceramics. They feel closer to their heroes when looking cups made artists they admire.

A Library of Cups

Two years ago, in lieu of our annual faculty exhibition, the curator for the Gallery of Visual Arts at the University of Montana, Cathryn Mallory, requested that the faculty exhibit something that we collect, instead of our own work. This was perfect for me. On simple wooden shelves I displayed 100 cups of all different ideas, techniques, styles, and traditions. This was a library of cups. I made a website and each cup had a brief paragraph about what the conception were in the cup and why it was important. These few words were a touchstone for the viewer of the exhibition to think about the vast ideas and techniques in pottery.

Aesthetics, History, Exploration

I don’t think of myself as an art collector— somehow that term seems foreign and distant. Rather, over the years I have slowly and carefully accumulated a large group of pottery that shows as many aspects of the field of ceramics as possible. There are three specific areas that I am interested in. First, the huge variety of aesthetics, ideas, making techniques, clay bodies, glasses, and firing methods in pottery today. Second, pottery that has a clear visual lineage or influence; this is usually historical. From old Asian pottery to pre Columbian or pre Industrial Revolution Europe. Pottery is built on tradition, and I love finding these historical roots. I also look for pottery that has a clear influence from other, non-ceramic artists, from Henri Matisse to Eva Hesse to Agnes Martin to Judy Pfaff. And third, I am often drawn to pottery that still has a strong sense of exploration in it. Pottery that is full of wonder and not burdened with the often stifling of high production. This pottery has a little bit of spastic and unknowing adventure in it, it is usually made by someone who is just finishing school, and has a love of their work, but not a style. The work by these emerging artists have long surpassed the energy of a novice and shows that they are still finding themselves in their daily practice.

My collection now stands at over 1000 pots, and takes almost two hours to wash and dry. Last time I moved, 60 percent of the moving truck was pottery. Parts of my kitchen and living room walls are covered with pottery, mostly by one of their current favorite potters, my students closer to the work and it encourages them to make pottery; it shifts them from being passive observers to active participants in the field of ceramics. They feel closer to their heroes when looking cups made artists they admire.

Clay Culture

1 Shelves holding some of Julia Galloway’s collection beside the embroidery to her kitchen. Photo: Lucky Chipmunk. 2 Cup shelf located within every reach and pots in use on the kitchen table. 3 A detail of some of the vessels in Galloway’s collection. 2-3 Photos: Sarah Moore.