

ceramics

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Clay Culture: Artists as Collectors

Technical: Ian Currie's Grid Method

why collect pottery?

by Julia Galloway

The fact that pottery is enjoyable to look at is one reason ceramic artists are also collectors. Every collection and every piece within it has a story to tell.



Why do I collect pottery? Why not something easy to store, like stamps or rocks? Why not something's that not breakable, like irons or spoons? Why not something that doesn't need dusting, like coins? Or something that is easy to display? Why? I simply love to look at pottery; 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 celadon, from cups with big handles, to pitchers with spouts that pour into the next room, from raw DIY cut-and-paste cups to slip-cast 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 about the person who made it, what they were influenced by, what culture they are working in, what they value, and in many ways, who they are.

I am not alone in this collecting habit. Just about everyone I know who is involved with clay in some way, as a maker, a teacher, or a collector, has a lot of cups. On row after row or grids of shelves on the kitchen wall, we display these personal gems. Many evenings at friends' houses I have gotten stuck in their kitchens, going through their cupboards and shelves discussing pieces, examining each handle, lip, foot, glaze, form, idea, and technique. We learn about ourselves and our friends through seeing what kinds of pottery they have collected over the years.

The Beginning

I have collected pottery since the early 1980s. At first I started because I wanted to have pottery around me, and it seemed way cooler in my

dorm room than a poster of James Dean. Handmade pots were unusual in my freshman dorm and signified to my peers that I was unique. I had a small teapot that 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 gleeful moments as 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 quietly, and their meaning grew as time passed.

Sharing with Students

When I started teaching college-level ceramics, with each pottery project, I would show the students images of other artists' work for inspiration. Somehow looking only at images lead to the student making pots with beautiful profiles, but often with stale form, 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 at 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 lend 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 hands and a more sensitive sense of touch with clay.

After teaching a few years I had paid off my student loans and had a steady income and for the first time, could purchase what I saw as quintessential pottery in our field. I wanted the specific pieces from bodies of work that I thought were influential to contemporary ceramics. I wanted to invest back into the community that had supported me and support this excellence. It is the nature of pottery to be accessible, and owning show-quality pieces changed the tenor of my collection, it also became a record of my time and a catalogue of contemporary ceramics today.

My students do a lot of research on line; ArtAxis, Ceramic Arts Daily, accessCeramics, and they are very familiar with images of contemporary pottery. Often that work seems very distant through the formality of the computer screen. 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 holding 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, sizes, and traditions. This was a library of cups. I made a website and each cup had a brief paragraph about what the concepts 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, glazes, 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 to it. Pottery that is full of wonder and not burdened with the often tightness of high production. This pottery has a little bit of spastic and unknowing adventure in it, is usually made by someone who is just finishing school and has a sense of their own voice, but not a strong 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 ten hours to wash and dust. Last time I moved, 60 percent of the



1 Shelves holding some of Julia Galloway's collection beside the entryway to her kitchen. Photo: Lucy Capeheart. 2 Cup shelves located within easy 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.

moving truck was pottery. Part of my kitchen and living room walls are full from the floor to the ceiling with pottery, arranged mostly by color or technique. The pots often journey from the shelves to the dining room table and back. Generally very affordable, it is easy to collect pottery, each pot has a story, or idea, demonstrating practice and dedication. Each one, finding its home in a home.

the author Julia Galloway is an artist, professor of ceramics, and director of the school of art in the college of the visual and performing arts at the University of Montana, Missoula.