

REVISITING FUNCTION

From time to time *STUDIO POTTER* has devoted an issue to functional ceramics (see Vol. 13 No. 2 and Vol. 18 No. 1). The last one was in 1989, and changes in the field and society since then have shifted and altered the discussion. While function once seemed like the embarrassing birthmark of modern ceramics, new thinking has examined the relationship between people and objects from fresh perspectives. Any object in human use, we now know, functions in multiple ways, including as a medium of communication between people. It seems timely to revisit what functional pots can say and why we still make them.

For modern potters, function is both a strong historical framework and a perennially open question. Society at large has not needed handmade pots to be utilitarian for over a century, yet successive waves of makers and thinkers have found new meanings in this old and, some might say, defunct activity. Function refuses to go away – or to be settled once and for all. Engaging with it touches upon our beliefs, behaviors, and dreams. It allows us to converse both with history and with the ways people now live. Whether we make everyday pots or elaborately formal ones, we are choosing (and choice is an important and significantly modern factor in this) to state that food and drink, human interaction, and domestic space are vital subjects of inquiry in art.

Missing from this issue's collection of articles are the voices of users. This speaks of the growth and progress of our field, which can now furnish many more opportunities for us to talk and argue amongst ourselves. But the enlargement of that internal conversation may mean that we are more occupied with the maker's perspective than with whether and how function matters to those on the far side of the objects. Whether we acknowledge it or not, the needs and desires of users have been an engine of ceramic change for thousands of years, and should continue to engage us.

In 1978 Michael Cardew asked, "Why make pots in the last quarter of the twentieth century?" and then went on to forge an answer out of his own passionate conviction and well-stocked mind. For modern people engaged in an anachronistic and marginalized practice, constructing a framework that holds is a necessary task – one that each new potter, encountering the disconnect between twenty-first century economic realities and time-based practices (whether raising children, producing food, or making pottery) must work out all over again. Indeed, the point may not be to seek an answer, but to be energized by the questions and to welcome the contradictions. It is a piece of ground in constant need of re-mapping, and one always worth revisiting.