

# pots as textbooks



**Ceramics Monthly:** Why do Introduction to Wheel-Throwing students at the University of Arkansas buy a handmade pot in lieu of a textbook?

**Mathew McConnell:** I had been bringing to my classes portions of my personal collection that were relevant to each assignment. After some time, I realized I was articulating something far beyond the technical aspects of a successful pot when talking about these distinct and well-known characters that inhabit my daily life. I was speaking in a very personal, even emotional way about them. I show my students the first real cup I bought and talk about all the phases of my life it has followed me through. I talk about the pots that I know are bad technically, but that always sit at the front of my cupboard. I also gently unwrap the shards of a piece that has been broken for years, but I can't bear to throw away. These pots don't simply serve as anecdotes for me. I truly feel connected to them, enriched by them; they have sensitized me to the world in ways I can't fully express. I desperately want my students to know those feelings, too. And, I'm not sure you can make good pots if you haven't been affected on a deeply personal level by them. So, what to do? The answer seemed pretty obvious: force them to buy great pots and live with them!

**Adam Posnak:** I instituted this practice after observing Mathew's teaching. I thought it was such a sensible thing to do, and pure genius.

**CM:** How do students react when you tell them?

**AP:** I have found students to be fairly enthusiastic. Though a minority of students have some prior pottery-making experience, they have not typically engaged in an in-depth discussion related to the experiential and visceral facets of interacting with pots. I often tell them that for most people without specialized training, knowledge of pottery would be comparable in the realm of painting to only being familiar with paintings of dogs playing cards; the lowest common denominator (not that I have anything against paintings of dogs playing cards).

**MM:** I must assume that every student thinks we are trying to lure them into a cult of some sort! And, to be fair, I guess we are. Most are happy to join—it's an unexpected and welcome departure from the well-worn pedagogical paths they are accustomed to traveling. Some have prior experience with handmade pottery, but almost no one has been asked to concentrate so fully on absorbing the intricacies of its making, handling, and aesthetics—and, in turn, how to translate those observations into language and form.

**CM:** How do experiences using the pots inform students' learning?

**AP:** Again, I think it comes down to the interactive aspect of pottery. Students are often surprised by the profundity of their feelings toward

pots, which begins to develop almost immediately upon acquiring and using their cups. They often remarked upon the manner in which a pot continually reveals itself over the course of time. Opinions and assumptions about a particular pot evolve over time and through use as well, and sometimes a student may actually come to dislike a pot in use that she/he was attracted to visually, and vice versa.

**MM:** Agreed. I also like that it gives them a standard to strive for that exists beyond what any student could accomplish in a semester. We ask them to purchase pots from vendors that only have works by highly esteemed potters, so the students have the best shot at experiencing what excellence truly means. Being able to own, hold, and live with this kind of excellence ultimately propels more sophisticated work from the students. Even when they don't achieve what they are after, they have a far better chance of understanding where they came up short. Suddenly, they're not looking to their instructor to explain why; they know why.

**CM:** What is the most unexpected outcome of this approach?

**AP:** As a teacher I am always taken aback by the intuitive way students take to pots. Sometimes I think of an appreciation for pottery as a relatively rarified, acquired taste, but in practice students naturally possess a sophisticated, instinctual bond with pots. I love the enthusiasm that ensues when they begin to use pots, and realize the potential of working with a form of expression that engages literally all of the senses. I point out in a class introduction that no matter how much you love a sculpture or a painting, the chances are relatively low they will ever touch your lips; a simple statement that seems to resound.

**MM:** What I find most rewarding is the way a student's purchased pot unfolds to them as they progress through the skills covered in the course. When they receive the work they may feel an immediate connection, and they may even be able to articulate some pretty sophisticated analyses right off the bat, but there's nothing like watching a student connect the dots between an action they have just performed and a similar action taken on the pot they have been studying. There's a real kinship developing in these moments, and an understanding between maker and maker that is wholly unique.

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Photo: Mathew McConnell and Intro to Wheel Throwing students at the University of Arkansas.