



Potter Allan Kluber enjoys a cup of tea out of his own handmade cup

Just his cup of tea

Producing porcelain tableware that brings contentment to the soul and steaming drink to the lips gives Allan Kluber a rare satisfaction few artists match

WHEN ALLAN KLUBER makes himself a cup of tea, he starts with a lump of clay and builds a delicate white mug tinted with rust colors and imprinted with organic forms. The result is a cup so appealing it seems a sacrilege to discolor it with a liquid and use it for drinking.

But that's just what Kluber wants. To him, functional objects should be as artistic as they are useful.

Consequently, Kluber has developed tableware that seem more like museum fantasy pieces than an assortment of cups, bowls, vases and plates. Many examples of his work are on display at Opus 5 through April 30.

"The ideal setting for art is to put it in somebody's environment in some kind of organic way," says the 33-year-old Springfield artist. "That way the art object isn't on the shelf. It is something you use and deal with every day. It fits into your life in a natural way.

"A lovely thing about functional pottery is you (the artist) can embody your concerns in it and let them become part of somebody else's life. That way they can become really precious and really special for everybody."

That's exactly what has happened. Many people who own Kluber's porcelain ware claim it is among their most treasured possessions. Kluber says that means his struggle to balance his artistic desires with his financial concerns has been successful.

"Artists often set themselves up as, 'Here's my pure self and there's the terrible commercial world where I have to compromise my soul,'" Kluber says. "There's some truth to that but I also think there can be a collaborative relationship between an artist and his audience where he can say, 'How can we work together so I can deal with what I care about but put that in a way that you can respond to?'"

Kluber's answer to that question was developed through years of trial and error. His first contact with pottery was in an Antioch College (Yellow Springs, Ohio) class that he took to earn some credits toward an English degree. "It was terribly and totally seduced," Kluber says. "A week after the class started I knew I was through with English and all I really wanted to do was to work with clay."

Kluber became an apprentice for a year with Byron Temple, a well-known potter of thrown ware in New Hope, Penn. Interested in learning how major commercial firms operate, he worked for Haeger Potteries in Dundee, Ill., for 10 hours a day, six days a week for six months.

Then he quit and enrolled at the University of Oregon graduate school in 1969. Soon he found that whenever he made anything on a potter's wheel it looked like one of Temple's designs, so he abandoned the wheel and experimented with many techniques until he found slab forming — rolling clay into small thin slabs similar to rolling out pie dough — to his liking.

"As I was getting out of school (he received a master's of fine arts degree in 1973), I realized I didn't have a clue about how to make a living as a potter," Kluber says. "I realized that I certainly wasn't going to be able to sell things like this (he points to a small round abstract porcelain sculpture) on any grand scale. I began to think about forms and shapes and objects I could make with some speed, with some degree of repetition, that could be salable and that would still interest me day in and day out."

Kluber decided to work exclusively in porcelain because he felt he had the local field almost to himself. In addition, response to his porcelain work had been so positive he believed he could make a modest (\$5,000 annually) living by making cups and plates. He was right.

Kluber's porcelain ware is available at Maude Kerns Art Center and Opus 5 in Eugene and at Contemporary Crafts in Portland. It can be identified by his name stamped on the bottom.

Kluber uses a simple, but expressive, technique. He molds slabs of thin (less than an eighth of an inch) clay around a bisque shape to form a plate or a cup. After the clay has been fired, it is washed in iron chromate, which heightens the texture of the surface. Then parts of the object are glazed.

A trademark of Kluber's work is the striking way he etches plant patterns into the surface. The patterns are the result of real leaves or flowers that are pressed into clay and later burned away during the firing process, a technique that was as expedient as artistic.

"There are aspects of the ware I am very interested in that others don't tend to pay as much attention to," Kluber says. "In a way, having the plant impression in the piece draws somebody to the work, then to the other things they could be influenced and affected by. I don't feel bad about that."

Inherent in Kluber's work is a concern for unity. A cup, for example, needs a bottom and a handle. However, customers may



Kluber is currently experimenting with ways of incorporating bright colors into his generally stark line of porcelain ware

overlook the fact that the handle often seems to grow from the inside out.

"I'm interested in insides and outsides and the relations and transitions from one to the other. With the handle, there is no real demarcation line. The handle is a bridge from the inside to the outside," he says.

Color — or the apparent lack of it — is another of Kluber's concerns. His early work featured patterns of black and white clays. Lately, he has been experimenting with many intense hues.

"At first, I was very concerned about values, morality and ethical stances. It seemed to me that if I could have a nice white clay and a nice black one, then I could express those concerns very directly. But lately I've become more and more interested in the grays that lie in between," he says. "As you have more life in the grays you see that black and white doesn't really fit most situations very well and that there are very subtle modulations which take place which are very hard to objectify but still have unquestionably some truth or reality to them."

Kluber's studio is filled with experiments for determining which colors look best in which designs. Among the most successful of his new creations is a large gray wall mural perma-

nently installed at the new Lane County Public Service Building. The work is somewhat controversial because its colors are subtle and its design is minimal.

"I'm concerned about developing my work in a way that it will be paid attention to," he says. "When you're trying to get established, there are lots of other people who are trying to do the same. If you're a 'somebody' you can be subtle or ridiculous or outrageous or whatever and people will still come look at it, but when you are relatively obscure then it's possible to be so subtle that nobody notices you."

"Art is burdened with so many myths and prejudices that it's very hard to get clear of all social prejudices . . . to just get some very direct response."

"Art has such a mystique about it. Some people think if it's not in a museum it's not art. Some people think if you make more than one of them it's not art. Everyone has his own idea of what art is and what it isn't, but actually it is your own personal response and the quality of the response that you have."

"If you look at Rembrandt and it just looks like a picture of a guy with a hat on, then it's not being art for you. But if you pick up a coffee cup and it speaks to you, I say that's art . . ."



Kluber removes some delicate vases from a small portable kiln that he often keeps in his kitchen so its intense heat will warm the house

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