

Comment

Two Reflections on Apprenticeship

Allan Kluber

During the last term of an English undergraduate degree, I took a beginning ceramics course. Within a week it was clear that I would work with clay; I was seduced. Saturated with school, I sought out an apprenticeship with a studio potter and spent the next year with Byron Temple in Lambertville, New Jersey. Looking back now with 14 years experience in the field—including an M.F.A., a variety of teaching situations and the ongoing process of making a living from ceramics—that apprenticeship is still vital and of continuing value.

When Byron took me on, I had studied ceramics only three months; but I also had some carpentry skills and he had a studio that needed work. In the beginning, I was paid minimum wage for carpentry jobs around the studio. At the same time, Byron began teaching me how to mix clay and glaze, apply glazes and stack the kiln. When these skills were learned, they too earned minimum wage. Each day I practiced throwing. Board after board of 1-pound cylinders were cut apart, analyzed and thrown again. In a few months, they began to be consistent and I was taught how to pull handles. When it all goes together right, a 1-pound cylinder with a handle is a Byron Temple mug, and soon I was getting paid piece-rate for those. When the mugs became really fluent, Byron began teaching me the production line, one shape at a time. I was amazed at how quickly they came. After months of struggling with cylinders, the basic skill was thoroughly absorbed and transferred quickly to new forms.

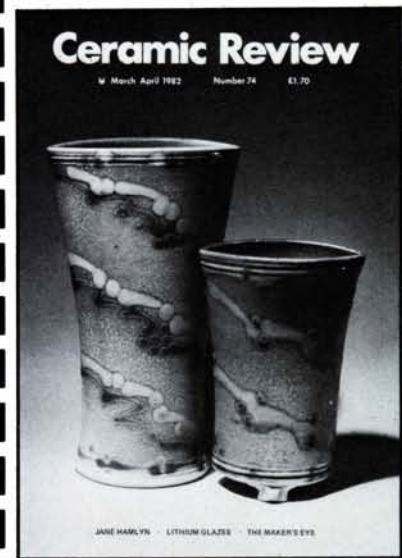
While gaining experience in production processes, I was also exposed to other essential aspects of the pottery business—among them packing, shipping, ordering materials and supplies, plus development of catalogs and other promotional publications. Byron regularly updated and mailed a catalog to interested customers, shops and galleries. Additional print material was produced at various times; during my apprenticeship, a large multipicture poster of the pottery and its ware was produced and sent to the regular mailing list.

I came to recognize that surrounding me was the craft political structure and its gossip network. I learned about shops and galleries, their reputations and eccentricities. I learned about agents; Byron had tried one but found that he could represent himself better. Many of Byron's friends are potters and in getting to know them I could see different successful approaches. Byron wholesaled only; other potters did various mixes that included consignment. Some felt a catalog was too confining. (Byron was interested in the slow evolution of designs; others moved through ideas more quickly.) It became clear how these alternative approaches suited each potter's nature. There wasn't one right way; it was a matter of developing the right fit.

No potter can know how to solve all difficulties as they arise—be they with glazes, a flaky kiln or a deadbeat account. Byron has a wide circle of friends with whom he can consult and who in turn consult him. I came to see that friends and contacts are essential both for technical support and the development of exhibition, publication and workshop opportunities. For example, one day Byron received a call from an old advertising friend in New York, who needed a potter for a cigarette commercial. This was a real windfall and Byron invested it in a trip to the World Crafts Council conference in Peru that summer. He flew on an American Craft Council charter and came back with some wonderful pre-Columbian objects, as well as half a dozen new contacts and many old friendships renewed.

After a year with Byron, I worked a few months in a large pottery factory and then in the construction industry to make tuition money. That fall I enrolled in an M.F.A. program at the University of Oregon. I felt insecure—my transcript showed only one term of beginning ceramics. Other graduate students had undergraduate ceramics degrees and at least four years of experience. It was a pleasant surprise then to find that my work was filling the shop. In basic skills there was no hesitation. On the other hand, the pots did look a lot like Byron

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Temple's. He had encouraged me to do my own work and I had, but within the broad outlines of Byron's style. I really hadn't begun to develop my own voice. This then became the focus of graduate school.

Thorough grounding in the basics and fluency in throwing seemed at first to be the main advantages of apprenticeship, but time has revealed other significant advantages. Since ultimately what I wanted to do was make a living from pots, the day-to-day experience of an on-going pottery was invaluable. After leaving school, with an uncertain future ahead, I was able to refer to previously encountered situations, knowing first-hand how Byron did things and how other potters organized their studios. I knew it was possible. I'd done it, and that gave important confidence.

Other benefits have been even more subtle. While working within the strict confines of Byron's style, I came to appreciate the power of nuances in form. From a hundred mugs there would be one that was just right, where everything fit. It would have qualities that would usually be overlooked in a "one-of-kind" pot. I came to value the slow evolution of design—its continual refinement and perfection like a well-worn river rock. I came also to appreciate how form and function can merge, and how the practical necessities of production pottery can take on aesthetic significance. The rigor of Byron's production afforded a beautiful leanness in the work, a stripping away of the nonessentials and a revelation of the core.

An apprenticeship, if it succeeds at all, is a powerful experience. It is intense, one to one and all the time. Study in school can provide necessary breadth—one can do many things with different teachers and the possibilities for exploration are vast. In comparison, an apprenticeship is focused; the experience is indelible. As my work has developed, I have seen again and again the underpinnings of that one-year apprenticeship.

Byron Temple

My own apprenticeship at the Leach Pottery in Saint Ives, England, gave me a great deal of insight into the workings of a production pottery, as well as some of the technical expertise such an operation requires. Given that a working

pottery producing utilitarian ware is a small manufacturing operation in which those involved perform every job from mixing clay to shipping finished pots, the basic requirements for any prospective apprentice are adaptability, cooperation and willingness to learn. Although this might seem restrictive at first—in contrast to the criteria of educational institutions where students are pressured to establish individual excellence—the apprenticeship system has several advantages for someone who aims to establish a pottery at a later date.

Not only does the apprentice get a good idea of the organization of the pottery as a business, but the repetition of shapes and processes within the purposeful framework helps sharpen skills which otherwise might not be developed. Furthermore, having to make pottery to someone else's standards and designs encourages self-discipline when doing one's own work.

Credentials are not always necessary for an aspiring apprentice. I've taken on novices ranging from age 14 to 50, and most have stayed two years or more. I have set little store by the stacks of color slides and letters of recommendation from teachers; more important is the person's attitude toward clay and reaction to the pottery produced. There would be little point in hiring someone who disliked my standard mug from the outset; a few weeks of producing 100 mugs a day would doubtlessly serve to compound that dislike.

The benefits of the apprenticeship system are not totally one-sided, nor are they totally economical. While some established potters may be tempted to exploit the apprentice for menial tasks to the exclusion of training in all aspects of running a pottery, I have found this particularly intimate teacher/pupil relationship invaluable to my own work. The best possible compliment for me is when an apprentice has developed accounts while working with me, reaching a point where he or she is ready to sustain an individual business. There may be no diploma, but it is a significant graduation.

The authors *Byron Temple maintains a studio pottery in Lambertville, New Jersey; see his profile article in the January 1979 issue. Allan Kluber maintains a porcelain studio in Springfield, Oregon; see "Allan Kluber: Progressions in Color" in the November 1981 CM.*

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