

CONTACT MAGAZINE

\$4.⁰⁰



A National Insight to Ceramic Arts
• Spring Issue • Number 88 • Alberta Potters' Association •

Ceramics: Semantics and Semiotics

by Leopold Foulem

INTRODUCTION

Leopold Foulem is an artist, critic and professor of ceramics at CEGEP du Vieux-Montreal. Leopold was an invited presenter at the silver anniversary of the NCECA meeting in April 1991 at Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona. This lecture "Semantics and Semiotics" examines the concept of ceramics as a generic group and discusses various relationships of ceramic arts. Due to the length of the lecture we have chosen to present it in two issues of CONTACT Magazine. This issue will cover the relationships of ceramics to Metaphor, Vessel as Image, and Specificity of Shape. The Summer issue of CONTACT will further examine Mr. Foulem's theories in relationship to Volume, Function, and Context as Premise. We would like to thank the NCECA board and journal for the reproduction rights.

The term "semantics" should be understood here as a precise or varied meaning of words or other symbols used expressly within the ceramic group. Semiotics pertains to the meaning of sign as language. In this case is implied ceramic signs such as cups, teapots, or vases to name but a few.

The visual documentation used or referred to in this presentation was chosen only for the intrinsic qualities of the objects, as they particularly convey my unique point of view. I have been cautious to avoid any detrimental aesthetic judgment on the works selected.

The general understanding of the notion of ceramics as concept is more often than not inaccurate. There are entire books written on this subject which only deal with pottery. When this is the case, then I ask, why not entitle such books *New Vessels* instead of *New Ceramics*?

This problem of incorrectly conceptualizing and labelling with accurate terminology which affects most of us in the

ceramic milieu must be corrected, as it points to the lack of intellectual rigor on the part of the pseudo-intelligentsia who are permitted to talk, publish and even worse, curate all kinds of ceramic exhibitions without the knowledge particular to ceramic language.

I believe that there is a dramatic discrepancy between the object and the word within the ceramic discourse, an issue which we must all address, especially as practising artists and educators.

This lecture is divided into three main conceptual parts: current assumptions, then ceramic concepts and lastly ceramics as premise for context.

In the first grouping, current assumptions, I will refer to allegations such as the vessel as metaphor, the vessel as image, and the concept of specificity of shapes, giving examples of when the terminology has been adequate and when it has not been adequate. The second part, ceramic concepts, will deal with volume as fact, volume as concept, and function as formal issue. The last section is devoted to the concept of ceramics as premise for context.

METAPHOR

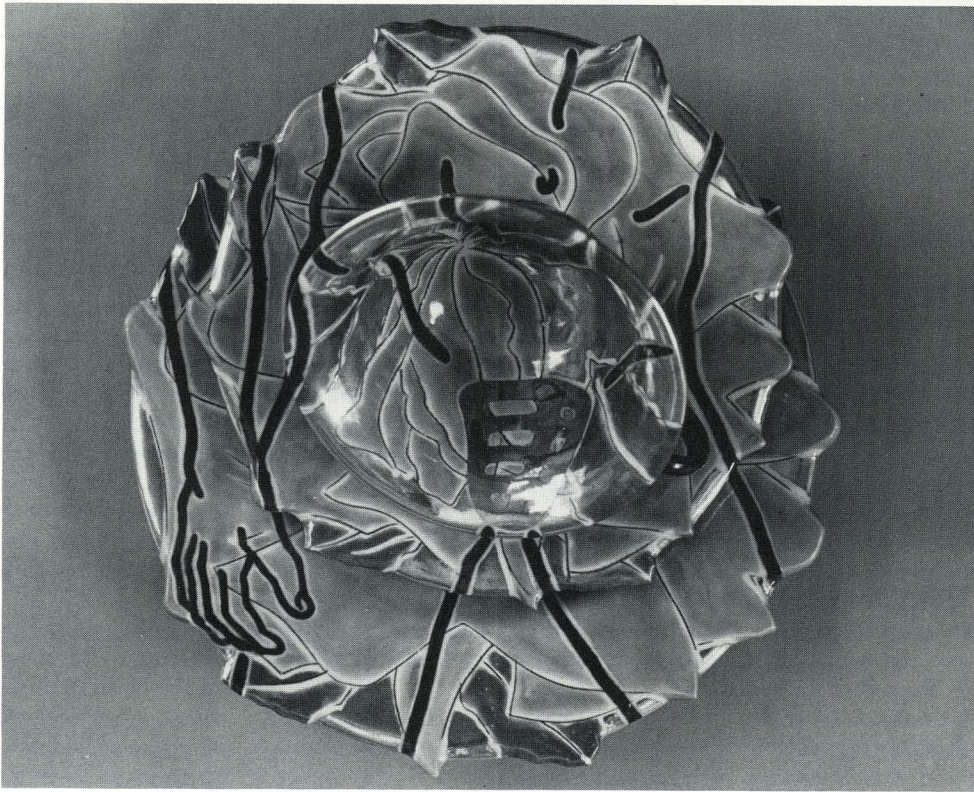
I will now begin with current assumptions and discuss metaphor.

Probably the most axiomatic recurring concept, in contemporary ceramics is that of the vessel as metaphor. As it erroneously stands right now, most pottery vessels are seen, without question, as metaphor. To talk or write about a pot using metaphorical language, even to describe that object, does not make that object itself a metaphor. To describe Roseline Delisle's porcelain covered jar, *Triptyque No. 6*, we could more than likely use traditional anthropomorphic terms such as shoulder, belly or foot to refer to various parts of the thrown form.

The eighteenth-century Nankin porcelain with bronze mount, *Commemorative Urn*, dedicated to a historic political event of the French Revolution, namely the death of Louis XVI and his wife Marie-Antoinette, is overtly concerned with narration. The Delisle urn by contrast is essentially about the volume itself. The blue and white ornate Chinese vessel is clearly mnemonic at various levels.

Some of the occidental symbolism related to death can be clearly identified in the Nankin porcelain urn. The type of shape used for the vessel was often found as an engraved or sculptural image on a gravestone, or as urns on funerary monuments. The black image in the center of the oval medallion, a weeping willow, iconographically related to death. This mid-eighteenth century covered jar relates more closely to the standard definition of metaphor and therefore can be classified in the general group of metaphorical vessels.

Here is another example of a visual metaphor on a literal level. British artist Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Arrosoir* (or watering can) of 1984 is unquestionably meant as visual metaphor. Yves Arbrioux writes in his 1987 exhibition catalogue, *Homage to Ian Hamilton Finlay*, about the *Arrosoir*, that it is ... "Boldly tricolour." That it is a memorial to Robespierre whose name and dates of birth and death it bears. He says that it is an apt memento [sic] — both historically, since the Robespierrists were guillotined on the day of the Republican calendar called "Arrosoir" in Thermidor (in English it translates as Month of Heat); and he continues also semantically, in that it "emblematically reminds us of the twin values of revolution: as political upheaval, certainly, but also as the natural cycle produced by the movement of the globe...." "There are two aspects to the French Revolution," writes Finlay, "the epic and the domestic." Thus Finlay's point is, and I agree, that the epic and the domestic are combined in the "Arrosoir."



Paul Mathieu — “Protection cup (for Wayne Gretzky)” - 1987

12' x 12" x 6"

A more complex illustration of a metaphor can be found in Quebec artist Paul Mathieu's 1986 *Protection Cup for Wayne Gretzky*, which is metaphorical at various levels. On the concave section of the camouflaged real cup comprising this three-piece set is drawn another semantically-identical object. Here the play on words is two-fold. The silvered image depicting a protective athletic support is supposed to enshrine hockey player Wayne Gretzky's genitalia. The device becomes a constrictive contraption for the viewer, while a necessary protective support for the subject and an athlete.

The decision taken by Mathieu to place Gretzky's protective cup inside the well is obviously deliberate, soliciting an active response on the part of the user/voyeur. Perhaps this work might even be the male equivalent to Meret Oppenheim's shocking famous surrealist fur-covered cup of 1936, now in the collection of the New York Museum of Modern Art.

Even if the same action is implied in this 500 A.D. Peruvian Effigy Jar, in the form of a man holding an erect phallus, the vessel is not a visual metaphor. Contrary to Mathieu's homage to the maleness of the jock, there is no transfer of

meaning at the overt and at the formal level. Here the genitalia is factual, not metaphorical. The action of drinking from the erect phallus can be seen as a metaphor, but the object itself is not.

I must mention that the definition of the concept of the vessel as metaphor that I use is quite different than that used and defined by Philip Rawson. In his well-known classic text, *Ceramics*, he writes: "The essence of the metaphor is that the suggestions conveyed by the pot's inflection and forms are communicated as allusion while the pot retains its existential reality, visibly and actually as what in fact it is." So, Rawson is in reality saying that most pots are metaphors. My difficulty with Rawson's definition is that I find it too general, too poetic and too restrictive. If I understand his argument correctly, it would imply that this 1777 Sèvres porcelain *Myrtle vase* is a metaphor — which it certainly is not — and concurrently that any and all traditional pottery forms for that matter are metaphors. Metaphor for what, may I ask? Not all pots are metaphor, and a metaphor is not a pot per se, but a concept.

Now I go even further and say that the exclusive use of Rawson's definition is

detrimental and perhaps dated, especially in the analysis of some current, highly conceptual work, such as that of Ian Hamilton Finlay's work of 1986, loftily entitled, *Brount (Hommage à Greuze)*.

Brount is, in Finlay's words, a pathetic elegy, and should ideally be shown standing empty on the floor of a bare room. "*Brount*," writes Yves Abrioux, "was Robespierre's dog which accompanied him from Artois to Paris. Finlay dedicates the bowl inscribed with the dog's name to Greuze, recalling the painter's initiation of sentimental subject matter and underlining a set of values whose association with the French Revolution tends to be overlooked." The use of writing on this generic dog dish reverses and transcends the generic. The vessel now stands for both the dog and for Greuze. The statement is direct, effective and highly relevant. Brount's name written, on Finlay's vessel, does not deal with the issue of word and volume any more than the inscription "Souvenir of Niagara Falls, Canada" does on imported pottery goods.

Here is my opportunity to stress the point that even if the small pseudo-blue-and-white Wedgwood vase from Niagara



Richard Milette — "Calyx Krater T.T.C." 40 x 44.8 cm diameter, base 253 cm



Paul Mathieu — "The Arrows of Time (for S.W.H.)" - 1990 18" x 18" x 12"

Falls is clearly identified, it is much less specific intrinsically at the formal level than the dog dish is.

Bront's name written on the blue vase on the screen would not make that pot a dog dish. However the dog dish from Niagara Falls, Canada, or elsewhere would always be understood in our western culture as a dog dish. The words here have no formal significance other than being writing on a volumetric object.

VESSEL AS IMAGE

As a premise for discussing the vessel as image, let me first establish that there is a definite difference between the concept of the vessel as image and the image as vessel.

The Peruvian *Fret Design Vessel* from the Nazca culture is the manifestation of a sign or symbol if you prefer, transcending its specific signification to become an autonomous object belonging to another generic category. However, this pre-Columbian stirrup vessel is actually a three-dimensional materialization of a pictorial convention for an architectural motif. The historic fret design used architecturally, and as pattern on ceramics appears on the surface of this pot as enlarged decorative elements actually appearing as an all-over pattern on this pot. The signifying pottery form here is an image of another sign.

In *La tireuse de thé*, the late Edouard Jasmin, a self-taught Québécois urban-folk ceramicist, uses the vessel itself as decorative image, as metaphor and as metonymy. In *La tireuse de thé*, Jasmin drew a generic cup bouncing topsy-turvy on the yellow belly of his pierced ceramic bottle. The cup is used here as a narrative decorative motif in itself; therefore, it is used, what is more, as a visual metonym for a cup. The thought association between a cup, a teapot and a tea cup reader is accelerated. There are three separate strata of interpretation and also three different time spaces. To decipher the narrative sequences of this anecdotal vessel, we have to start with the sculptural element situated on the top of the bottle. The removable finial is clearly a teapot in itself. In this situation it represents the past, the moment when the tea was made,

then served. Next are the empty cups tumbling down, floating in space. These drawn motifs represent the tea cup that has been used before, now whose tea leaves are to be interpreted by the tea cup reader, who is located inside the bottle, seated at a table, with her client. The three-dimensional vignettes of the reader and the client represent two interpretations of the future, of two notions of time. The first aspect is the procedural time, the time it takes to go from point A to point B and then the future as eventuality.

Paul Mathieu's *Le pli sur l'indifférence*, a three-piece breakfast set of 1986, is a modified appropriation of René Magritte's well-known painting, popularly referred to as "ceci n'est pas une pipe." By using such a well-known 20th-century icon, Paul Mathieu alludes to decontextualization, to the deceit of images and especially to the dual reality of pottery forms; the volume and the surface as two distinct formal entities.

The pictorial flatness of Mathieu's image, now the image as art and now art as simulacrum, is not only clearly established but also reinforced by the pseudo-wood frame painted in a *trompe l'oeil* manner. Whereas Magritte's painting refers to the questioning of the reality of objects and actually the accurate title for this painting is *The Treachery of Images*, Paul Mathieu goes one step further by establishing that an image is not an object.

By successfully negating, at the pictorial level, the volumetric reality of the three vessels that make up this place setting, the artist, now residing in Santa Monica, eloquently demonstrates the autonomy of both components of pottery forms. In so doing, Mathieu proves that there is a tangible and convincing difference between the form as such and the surface as pictorial field.

That the teapot image as painting is a metaphor for high art is both impudent and political. In *Le pli sur l'indifférence*, the artist insists on the re-examination of the meaning of ceramic objects in stereotypical art contexts and, by extension,

on the signification of pottery forms as potent cultural signs.

For *Calyx krater T.T.C.* of 1983, Montreal clay artist Richard Milette utilized a classical Greek vessel. He annulled the volumetric, desynchronized the form, the surface and the context to create a highly mnemonic ceramic image.

Whereas Paul Mathieu questioned the trueness of the image, Milette affirmed the potency of the characterized vessel image as paradigm for conceptual ceramics.

Milette's large international histrionic vessel refers to Greek pottery because of its typical shape, to Chinese pottery because of its Sancai surface, and to the intrinsic volume of the vessel as concept by the faked-wood base, which illustrates the custom of exhibiting precious ceramic vessels on wooden bases.

Another interpretation of the vessel as image is to be found in Howard Kottler's *Soup Tureen* of 1976. Kottler's object is about image, volume and process. The tureen is presented as a straight-forward manifestation of the vessel as image. Even if there is no real volumetric tureen present, the viewer still sees an actual tureen. Howard Kottler's monochromatic object can be understood either as the negative form from which other identical mass-produced specimens could be made or as a volumetric imprint left by a vanished vessel. Howard Kottler's tureen can then be seen either as an image or as a conceptual piece of pottery. The latter consideration depends, however, on the orientation of the visual presentation, the positive or the negative being offered up for viewing.

The situation of the vessel as image and the image as vessel is tackled magisterially in another set of piled dishes by Paul Mathieu. In *The Arrows of Time for S.W.H.* of 1989, a seven-piece breakfast set for one person, the visual complexity is astounding. The new concept in this work, if we compare it to the earlier examples, is that here the true vessel actually becomes the image of itself.

To clarify the intricate pictorial composition and to explain the layering of images, I have included a slide showing the partially-completed assemblage of the work. If you refer to the previous slide, you can see that the pouring teapot and the white cup are real pots with drawn on highlights. The stereotypical drawing and shading becomes the two-dimensional illusionistic surfaces of the real volumetric pots.

In pop artist Roy Lichtenstein's black and white stacked cups called *Sculpture*, the surface is decorative, while Mathieu's surfaces are descriptive and narrative. The vessels in Lichtenstein's 1965 sculpture are found objects, the term here used in a sculptural sense. This work is made up of what appears to be literally stacked cups. The vessels are not self-referential as they are in Paul Mathieu's functional and fictional porcelain set. Lichtenstein's stacked cups are not ostensibly about cups, nor about ceramics, even as equestrian sculpture is not about horses or chivalry.

In Picasso's *Pitcher* made in 1954, the dialectic of the image versus the object was exploited by the artist in many arresting ways. Picasso, contrary to many artists turned-potters, understood quite accurately the language of pottery and the metaphors particular to the practice. On the belly of the massive matte black pitcher a smaller white pitcher is depicted which is decorated with incised yellow flowers and pastel blue lines. The larger form becomes the shadow of the smaller pitcher. Thus, one is an image and the other is a shape. Both, however, are pitchers.

SPECIFICITY OF SHAPE

The concept of specificity of shape is not only an intrinsic part of ceramics but also an essential component of pottery and even of language. A teapot, before functioning as vessel to store and serve tea, is first and foremost a specific shape and a cultural sign.

This anonymous *White Wall Teapot Plaque* is conceptualized initially at the prototypical level. It is a teapot. We can establish this truth or fact based on cul-

turally accepted paradigms. Even if the primary functional aspect of the original object has been modified, that does not imply that the generic shape has lost its formal identity.

This visual dilemma, further brought forth in Richard Milette's *Théière à fleurs no. 4*, repeats the dialectic of the white wall flower pocket. Milette's combines two stereotypical prototypes belonging to two different concepts — one which is that of the teapot, and another, the drainage tray, of the ubiquitous planter/drainage-tray combination. The Montréal artist achieved this troubling formal dichotomy in his 1984 work.

Not only has Milette deleted the teapot lid to ascertain the pseudo-function,

but he also has materialized the void by colouring the suggested negative space black — an ancient pictorial colour code for nothingness, thus negating all functional pretension of the new form. The viewer is now placed in an existential limbo similar to Pavlov's unfortunate dog.

Richard Shaw's *Soup Tureen* of 1976, shaped as an ocean liner, is less a soup tureen than Milette's teapot was a planter. Of course, this covered vessel is unquestionably more seductive and more decorative, for that matter, than the intentionally gauche teapot-planter. However, art is not always about seduction. Shaw's covered container lacks the specific generically accepted attributes of a soup tureen. Might it not be a wonderful cookie jar because it fits the generic type? It is

not at all a soup tureen because it lacks descriptive adequacy.

In the western world, a soup tureen is usually accompanied by a large platter on which it rests. This duo can be seen in a *Hochst Mid-18th-Century German Tureen*. The platter is especially pertinent when the vessel is atypical of the category. The platter here typifies the zoomorphic container as a soup tureen. The soup tureen can become even more specific if it has a cut-out area in the cover to insert a ladle.



Richard Milette — "Theire à Fleurs #4"

14.3 cm height