Function and decoration; form and surface; object and image. Ceramics as a distinct art form is predicated on the coming together of these two seemingly contradictory conceptual aspects, not to be perceived in opposition or polarity but in continuity and symbiosis. This coming together of form and surface, as well as other binary aspects like interior and exterior, is particular to ceramics and nowhere is that more relevant than with the narrative esthetics. Here again, the forms are largely pottery forms, standard, stereotypical, functional or ornamental forms, coming mostly from the vast repertoire of the classical esthetics. If the forms are the expected basic shapes of the standard pottery vocabulary, bowls, plates, dishes of all kinds, vases and other containers, the surfaces on the other hand are greatly varied. The main characteristic of these images on ceramic forms is their narrative nature: a story is being told. This distinguishes the narrative esthetics from the classical esthetics and its emphasis on form alone, and from the flux esthetics with its emphasis on monochrome or simply chromatic glaze surfaces, as it distinguishes it, as we have seen, from the decorative esthetics, which focuses on abstraction and pattern, on symbolism instead of description, in surface decoration.

Note:
The reader interested in the contemporary manifestations of the narrative esthetics can skip to “On Framing”.
The narrative esthetics, like the classical esthetics to which it is closely related, finds its earliest manifestation in Greek then Roman pottery, where complex pictorial representations were first developed in ceramics and pottery; it is also found later in Islamic art, but more rarely, with its particular relation to images and representation, following the restrictive prescriptions of the Koran on image making; it is also found, most importantly, in the Renaissance maiolica of Italy, then in the rest of Europe. In pre-Columbian America, narrative ceramics are found particularly in the painted cylindrical vessels of the Mayans and the fine line painted vessels of the Moche culture of Peru and in the Mimbres and Anazazi “Pueblo” cultures of Northern Mexico and South Western USA.

On Greek pots, the narrative is usually two sided, with two distinct if at times complementary images on each side of the vessel as articulated by the usual handles on opposing sides of the form. In Mayan pottery, the narrative on cylindrical vessels is continuous, with no obvious beginning or end; this is also true of Moche ceramics but it doesn’t use cylindrical vessels to prefer instead globular and other closed shapes. Within the Mayan cylinders, the most common form for pictorial representations in their ceramics, it is bands of script or text, usually describing the scene and naming the protagonists that help in defining the sequence. These vertical bands of text divide the pictorial field and provide the sequential, chronological order of the possible reading of the image or the story. Yet, the sequence of the image depicting a clear narrative is nonetheless logical as it is read all around the pot; In Moche ceramics from Peru, the fine line drawing is at times combined with modeled elements on the top of the vessel and the graphic, linear images are organized in a circular fashion over the usually globular vessel. It is interesting to note that both these very different pottery traditions were produced for funerary purposes and that they were preserved largely intact for us due to their burial as tomb offerings (see “Death” chapter). The same is true, expectedly, for historical “Pueblo” pottery. I will not analyze specifically each of these remarkable ceramic traditions, although each deserves deeper study, but I will make here general remarks that can be applied to all of them independently of stylistic differences, since they all have surfaces that are narrative in nature.

It is more interesting and important to note here the different approaches to depiction of narrative scenes on ceramics (usually pots) in Greek art and later in Europe, where the “two” sides of the pot are stressed as distinct (if complementary) and where the
image is clearly framed, again, as distinct (if complementary) from the vessel, compared to pre-Columbian or oriental ceramics where the relation between the depicted scene and the pottery support is much more symbiotic and continuous.

The narrative esthetics, where a representation, an image is organized specifically on a pottery form, finds its own particular manifestation in Chinese and Oriental porcelains as well, in an approach to narrative and formal composition that is quite distinct from European ceramics, where it was, as a matter of fact, greatly influential in the development of 'chinoiserie" decoration in the 18th and 19th centuries. All of these diverse and yet distinct ceramic cultures from all over the world may nonetheless be analyzed and understood successfully within the narrative esthetics, since they are all organized around the coming together of surface and form, joining in symbiosis image and object, within a narrative context. It may seem at times that the distinctions I make between the various cultures using this narrative esthetics imply a hierarchy between them, as if one was superior to the other. That is not the case. Each culture expresses its own genius in combining narrative scenes on ceramic forms and each achieves impressive, if different, results.

To expand here on the depiction of figures in Greek pottery, it is sometime noticeable that the frame cuts a figure, which is then perceived as entering or exiting the scene. This conceit of incompleteness of the image is not found in oriental representation to the same degree. In oriental pictorial space, incompleteness is manifested by total absence, where a large area of the images are left empty, totally “blank”, as we will see later, and with a degree of spatial sophistication never found in the bare, empty ground of the depicted scenes on Greek Attic pottery. The sophistication of representations in Greek pottery is of a different kind than the sophistication of oriental pictorialism in ceramics, one being descriptive (the Greek), and the other evocative (the Chinese).

Another characteristic of Greek pottery (and later in Renaissance Europe) consists in the occasional interaction with the frame itself, where the frame becomes the ground with which the figure interacts, in an unexpected and not realistically logical manner. This is particularly remarkable with circular framing within the well of kylix cups and on large Italian Maiolica platters. The frame is not just there to contain the image, it is an active participant in the overall composition and in the operative workings of the image. Again, such active framing is not found in oriental ceramics.
On Framing:

In “The Classical Esthetics” chapter, we have seen how pictorial, narrative images on the surface of Greek vessels are organized, more often than not, with framing devices where the scene is composed within a stretched and deformed rectangular shape on the side of pots, with one image on each side, divided by the two opposing handles. This compositional device of restricting the picture to a framed, rectangular space is original to Greek pottery, where it originates in the Archaic period to its final development in Greek Attic pottery of the 5th Century BCE. This framing device makes its appearance there for the first time in art representation (bi-dimensional) and it will subsequently have a tremendous and continuous impact on image making, in painting, drawing, printmaking (comic books, manga), photography, advertising and billboards, even cinema, television and computer screens, where the same editing conceit is applied. Again this is a precedence first found in ceramic objects that is never acknowledged by art history. It doesn’t register on its very selective radar screen. Ceramics is the stealth practice of the art world.

Framing devices are of course found earlier than on Greek Attic pottery, notably in Egyptian art, possible elsewhere as well. But the Egyptian “frame” is a simple device to divide elements in an overall composition, one from the other. It hardly plays a compositional role establishing a direct rapport with what it contains. Its use always remains highly conventional, with the same solutions applied to the same, limited, spatial problems. The accumulation of frames within frames, like in a comic book, simply divides the narrative in its constituent elements. The Egyptian frame is packed to the edges, filled with informations, where the figure clearly predominates over the ground, which is really only there to support the image. The ground plays a very limited physical and spatial role within the frame. The Greek frame on the other hand defines the limits of a tightly considered and dynamic composition. The image composition in Egyptian art remains highly conventional even if it develops over time to include limited elements of depth perception, basic figure/ground relationships and spatial relation of figures in relation with each other. The main relation between figures remains nonetheless hierarchical more than descriptively spatial and small figures are not farther in space necessarily than larger ones, they are simply subservient to it. Representational images on Egyptian ceramics itself are used very sparingly, and they are commonly, instead, of an abstract, decorative nature, usually. An exception could be made for the charming blue Egyptian paste
hippopotamuses, painted on the skin of the animal with lotuses and other water plants, bringing together the element of water in the overall color as well as the habitat and staple food of the hippo, altogether joined with great sophistication. Although this is clearly and absolutely a ceramic object, it is not in any way a vessel form, if we make abstraction of the fact that the form is nonetheless hollow and the hippo is also a container, of course.

The making of pictorial, descriptive, narrative images on clothing and other woven fabrics also happens later than it does on ceramics. Clothing as a form and weaving as a process are more suitable to patterning and abstraction than to representation and it is evident that patterning in weaving has greatly influenced patterning in ceramics, and may have preceded it in fact. More complex images on fabric require technological developments that will come later with more sophisticated looms. Of course, some of this analysis of precedence and simultaneity is speculative since, contrary to ceramics, the historical record for textiles is at best patchy, if not altogether inexistent in most cases, due to the impermanency of the material itself.

It could be argued that the framing of images on movable, domestic objects like pots, is one of the most important contributions ceramics and pottery has made to art. The frame selects and shapes within its borders, making irrelevant what is exterior to its limits. It is interesting to note that this editing, this selection operates differently in a graphic medium, like painting or drawing, whether this happens on canvas or on pots, since we do not consider what is outside the frame as relevant, since what is of meaning and relevancy in a painting or a drawing has been included within the frame; while with photography, or cinema, on the other hand, in their more direct relation to an actual, physical world of familiar, everyday experiences, what is outside the frame (the rest of the world) is in continuity with what is inside (the selected image), despite the fact that what is outside the frame remains invisible, yet not altogether irrelevant, as tends to be the case with painted images, created from scratch by a singular vision. The frame, this amazing gift of ceramics to art making, is an editing device, one could say a curatorial device, which defines what is included from what is excluded, what is considered from what is ignored. In that sense, photography, which relies so heavily on the compositional potential (and limitations) of framing, is also an editorial practice, and, basically, a curatorial practice as well (which may explain its extraordinary appeal to curators!). The “cartouche” on pots, which defines a specific space for the representation, is also an editing device, a
tool for selecting. Our present relation to reality through our continuous bombardment with mediated experiences is greatly informed by this predominance of framing in our daily lives and framing devices on pottery forms are at the origin of the “modern” and “contemporary” phenomenon. In many ways, this gift of ceramics to world culture may be somewhat poisoned...

The pot itself, the vessel, the object is also a frame, its very edges, its silhouette defines a border, a frame where things change, physically, visually and conceptually, where one perceived reality makes way for another, where an image, an illusion, a representation makes place for the actual, physical world. Thus a frame on a pot is itself framed by the silhouette of the object and these multiple frames affect each other in ways rarely seen, if ever, in other art forms. If decoration in ceramics, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, implies various layers of surfaces, often super-imposed, the Narrative Esthetics often implies frame, within frame, within frame in a complex organization of borders defining a wide variety of pictorial spaces. One frame operates within the context of images, while the other (the edge of the pot) operates within the context of objects. All over the world, one of the most constant devices used on pottery forms and ceramic objects consist in the articulation of the overall form with lines, bands and framing devices that will then contain spaces (even empty) or pictorial elements. This compulsion to divide the form into constitutive parts is even found on objects with no picture, no image of any kind. One finds bare, blank plates with a gold line at the rim, for example, which is not there to frame an image but to frame the object itself and reaffirm in the process the nature of the object itself as a frame, operating a shift between two physical spaces, two realities. For objects are not things like other things are things. An object, while in continuity with reality and the surrounding world, always remain independent and separate from it, yet not to the degree that images are independent and separate. It is this ambiguous nature of objects that constitutes their greatest potential for meaning and especially when objects are containers, with interior and exterior spaces, which renders the problem even more complex.

The frame, the cartouche on Greek pots creates a pictorial depth-box where representations, figures, objects, interior or exterior spaces, can all be organized logically and believably. This depth-box acts as if the image was breaching “through” the pot, penetrating the form and at times, the image even appears as if located “inside” the pot itself. The realism of the scene is often contrasted with decorative, abstracted devices like
floral, organic or geometric elements, at times even architectural references, positioned elsewhere on the surface of the pot, often reframing the frame for emphasis. On Greek pottery this dialectic between figuration and ornamentation is reinforced by the figure/ground dynamic of the at first black on red, then later red on black formal devices afforded by the materials, the technologies and the particular processes developed by the Greek potters, as we have seen previously. Excellent books exist on these technical aspects for the curious reader and I have analyzed further their formal/conceptual aspects in “The Classical Esthetics” chapter.

The psychological necessity for borders to define space (totally absent in Neolithic art for example) contests the emptiness of undefined spatial experience. Frames are highly reassuring by controlling our perception. Our perception craves borders, if only provided by the distance in how far the eye can see, the horizon. Borders are comforting, which may explain their success and efficiency in the two great arts of borders, painting and photography.

Since the narrative esthetics operates around the coming together of an image (narrative) and an object, it may be necessary to define what is meant by these terms, to clarify their differences as well as complementary aspects, as far as ceramics esthetics is concerned.

*What is an image, what is an object?:*

An “image”, in the limited definition I am using here, is a cultural (as opposed to natural) phenomenon experienced through sight alone, visually. On the other hand, objects, while being experienced by sight as well, are also experienced by touch, in a direct, physical, embodied experience that acts and performs upon the world. Sight is a passive experience while touch is an active one.

Objects are basically ignored by art history, which is at its core, the history of images. This situation is unfortunate and makes art history an incomplete and basically faulty “science”.

Images are experienced visually, primarily. This visual experience is one of removal, of distance, of separation. Images are always hierarchical and their mode of operation is
opposition and polarity, while objects function in duality and resonance; objects also operate in plurality, working on numerous levels (and not only as symbols and carriers of meaning, like images), simultaneously. Objects reconcile extremes (all polarities and binaries), embrace continuity and annihilate difference. The “object” aspects of images are almost totally non-existent physically and, one could say, to make a point, absolutely, at the conceptual level. While on the other hand, objects are altogether images and object, whether they transport representations within their form or not. An object, any object is at the same time not only a real, physical, tangible thing, physically and conceptually, it is also a representation of that thing. Objects operate simultaneously, conceptually, as an object and as an image (as an homotopia, a space representing itself). This dual relation gets still further complicated when the object is also the carrier of representations, of other images. Only objects operate in such a complex fashion within culture and if images need to be explained, due to their inherent narrative nature, and necessitate the formation of fictions and theories, objects instead need to be experienced directly to be understood and they largely escape the urge to fiction and theory, necessary for images to perform, so effectively. If images are COMPLICATED and necessitate elaborate verbal and literal discourses, objects are COMPLEX and this complexity resists language, to reside instead within experience, which is unique to each individual.

Objects are of two main types: tools and containers, the latter being particularly interesting and relevant here. Containers are spaces where opposites are unified, where differences are reconciled. All the binaries, polarities, opposites and dichotomies present in language (and implicitly in images as well) are reconciled within the container, within any object. Containers combine in symbiosis top and bottom, front and back, interior and exterior, surface and form, representation and presentation, image and object, material and concept, nature and culture, art and life, body and mind and all and any other binary oppositions we can conceptualize. Objects are obviously inherently material and physical, but also and importantly, inherently abstract (in the sense that they only represent themselves) and inherently conceptual. Handmade objects are the preferred domain of craft practices.

It is important to keep in mind that to work in craft practices today is highly subversive and a form of contestation. The current, hegemonic definition we have for “art” is really a definition for images (even 3-D images, like sculptures) and the criteria used to evaluate art are criteria that apply to images primarily. The images we produce
today are ever more impermanent and mediated. They are also ever more intrinsically institutional and only really exist and are effective inside institutions or the support of institutional, bureaucratic structures. Images are localized and operate in very specific places and they are highly contextualized. Images are also highly directional and operate clearly only when right side up. Crafts and other objects, on the other hand, are much more permanent (specifically for ceramics). They are also conceptually constant and the basic concepts of crafts (function and decoration within the dialectic between abstraction and representation) do not change significantly over time and space, since there is no need for them to change. They are only informed stylistically by context, which, as far as I am concerned, is of little importance. Craft objects are also hand made thus unique. They contest the mechanically produced design and industrial objects, which are otherwise quite similar conceptually to craft objects. In fact before mechanization and industrialization, all objects were craft objects. There was no such thing as design as there used to be no such thing as art either. Craft objects have no need of institutions (museums, for example) to exist, they belong and operate everywhere (even in museums!), in any context, including art contexts, if given the chance. They may need museums politically, since museums are the necessary transmitters of legitimacy, of relevancy and value in culture now. Craft objects are not directional either and they retain their identity and meaning even when upside down or back to front. To work in craft practices today is to subvert and contest the very nature of contemporary art. Objects reaffirm the inherent limitations of images. While in no way denying the extraordinary importance and power of images, the whole issue lies at the conceptual differences between images and objects. Images are conceptually conceived to operate solely visually, they are experienced with the eye and, interestingly as well, through language (literally). Objects on the other hand, are phenomenologically much more complex since, while also being experienced visually, they incorporate the other senses, at times ALL the other senses. An object is conceptually a thing in the world and, simultaneously, an image of that thing itself, as well. If the surface (or the form) of the object also holds other images, this complexity is even greater. And objects operate largely beyond (or before) language, which renders them inaccessible or at least difficult to access (contrary to images) by discourse and theory and by people with a mind set that is limited to the verbal, the literal, the discursive.

What then is the one concept specific to crafts? My answer is the concept of containment. Containment has to do with the relationship between an object and its environment. Containment bridges an object with its environment. Containers are about
difference as continuity not difference as rupture. This is readily obvious with ceramics and pottery, but it is also true whether containers are made of clay, glass, metal, wood, leather, cloth, paper or plastic, etc. If you think about it, all furniture is, at the conceptual level, a container (a chair, a table, a chest of drawers, etc.), as are all clothing and objects made of fabrics. Even carpets and tapestries act as coverings that define a space on the floor or the wall, another form of containment. Jewelry is also clearly tied to containment: the necklace for the neck, the ring for the finger, the bracelet for the wrist and the brooch as a setting for stones. Beyond its physical properties, jewelry metaphorically contains wealth, status, memory, etc. It is about display, a form of presentation, which is complementary with the representation of images. Actually, the physical property of containers, and specifically ceramic containers, since they are so permanent (physically and conceptually), is to contain and preserve not only goods and things, but time and memory itself.

A container is a space where opposites are unified, where differences are reconciled. Containers are diametrically opposed to experiences that need to be framed (images), yet, of course, frames, actual physical frames are themselves containers. Containers bring together the extremes in reconciliation; they cancel the dialectical impulses of language. All the binaries, polarities, opposites and dichotomies (art/craft, image/object, etc.) found anywhere and everywhere are reconciled within the container, within any craft object. Art (images) reaffirms these dichotomies and if you can have art without any craft (most contemporary art), you cannot have craft without art. The container combines in symbiosis the top and the bottom, the front and the back, the interior and the exterior, the surface and the form, representation and presentation, material and concept, image and object. All are equal and essential. In that sense, containers are non-hierarchical since you cannot have one aspect without the other; they remain equal and inseparable.

The interior space of containers is not just a space for containment, whether it is void, empty or full, literally filled or metaphorically pregnant. A container is at the same time in space and space itself, which it contains. A vase is but a shell between what is around it and what it contains, even if that is emptiness. It is a gap in space (like the physical frame) between two distinct spaces. A container is a solid space between two emptiness, one inside, one outside. This solid space defines a wall, a shell and it operates a transition. Art as a conceptual activity is concerned with space in all its manifestations and experiences. The space of containers is manifest in that thin wall between two other
empty spaces. Somewhat like framing, it is a transition but never a division. The surface of an object in ceramics is thus essentially a shell, the outer perimeter defining the volume of the pottery form. The superior aspect of pots, the rim, is also a frame, operating a transition between exterior and interior.

Contrary to containers, images are always hierarchical and their mode of operation is opposition and polarity, while objects function in duality and resonance; objects operate in plurality, working on numerous levels (and not just those of symbols and meaning) simultaneously. Objects reconcile extremes, embrace continuity and annihilate differences. An object, any object is always at the same time not only a real thing, physically and conceptually, but also a representation of that thing. It operates simultaneously as an object and as an image (what I call an homotopia, a space representing itself). This dual relation is made more complex when the object is also the carrier of representations, of other images. Only objects operate in such a complex fashion within culture and if images need to be explained, due to their complicated nature, by fictions and theories, objects in their complexity need to be experienced to be understood. If images imply knowledge, objects imply understanding, in a full engagement between body and mind. The container represents the complexity of the potential of art works, of art itself as an experience. The container is actually beyond sculpture, since the form of the container is nothing without its content (even if that contain is empty space or the idea of space). The container is also beyond the object as a thing, thus beyond design, since the container cannot be reduced to function alone. The container is potentially the more complex problem to solve as an artist, which may explain the prevalence of container forms in contemporary sculpture, a situation I find very exciting (see my essay “Vancouver Sculpture: Crafts Concepts”). If images are powerful, they remain easy in their conceptual simplicity. Within painting and other forms of image making, surface is flatness, while in sculpture, surface is mass. The interior in sculpture is never considered (these are general, broad statements that apply in general to sculpture but not to individual cases, necessarily. I am not talking about the exceptional, here). Painting only represents the presence of the thing (if only paint itself), while conventional sculpture denies or ignores any notion of interiority. The vase, the object, combines the two, the thing itself and the potential of the thing, in duality. Painting and sculpture are usually about exterior aspects, about surfaces. While the vase, the container, while it insists on the exterior, in its form and in its painted or decorated surface(s), yet it also
makes manifests the reality of the interior space, hidden, dark, mysterious, yet ordinary, quotidien, mundane and useful.

**A short narrative:**

A few years ago, I was teaching ceramics in a university program at the undergraduate level. One day I assisted at the presentation given by a British author, art critic, theoretician and curator who spoke on his researches to the graduate students in visual arts. His talk was centered on a show he had recently organized, bringing together the very diverse works of a group of “Third World” artists. His principal interest in these artists lay in his attempt to grasp and understand, at the conceptual level (of course) what were the possible links between these diverse practices, beyond issues of content like colonialism, economic disparity, cultural imperialisms and gender/racial conflicts. Well, one of these artists worked with vessels, dried gourds used in installations (of course), both within nature, presented as documentation in photographs (of course) and in the gallery space. Another used embroidery on clothing and fabrics. A performance artist pierced the human body with jewelry and metal works. Another focused on painted skin, body markings and tattoos. The last one, I recall, used the motif of oriental carpets on large billboards installed in the urban environment, also presented in the show as documentation in photographs. Has anyone noticed how, and more and more, the art experience is evermore mediated by the documentation of past events in photography? Am I the only one craving for the real, the actual, physical experience, esthetic experience of works of art? Anyway.

Now, it is of course obviously possible to associate such artworks with various practices; i.e. the vessels with anthropology, the jewelry with rituals, important events and status symbols, the tattoos with minority practices and cultures, with ornamentation and decoration (more iffy...), the carpets on billboards with advertising and consumer culture. Yet, the British curator of this show felt that there must have been a deeper connection, conceptually (of course), at the level of theory, among all these works, within contemporary visual arts, one that he could not quite grasp. After his informative and articulate presentation, during the question period, I asked him if instead of looking for an answer within contemporary theory and art discourses, he had ever considered craft theory, since all the works in his show made obvious references to craft concepts and craft practices. My question surprised him so much that he remained speechless for long
seconds, stunned, with his mouth open and eyes bulging. He then categorically and assertively said: “No! No! This has nothing to do with “crafts”!” which he pronounced as if it was a dirty word, something not mentionable in public, in correct company. In his mind, there could not possibly be any connection between these works, made by real artists and obviously part of contemporary art (“conventional” contemporary art), and “crafts”. Meanwhile, the whole assembly was looking at me as if there was a crazy person in their midst. Someone even interjected loudly: “What is craft theory, anyway?” As if there could possibly be such a thing. I thought this was an excellent, highly relevant question, one that had not been answered convincingly before. It set me on my way.

On Pictorial Space(s) in Ceramics:

Images on ceramics, usually on pots, behave in a particular way, peculiar and largely unique to the art. When a “flat” image is composed over a convex or concave surface, it is distorted by the interior and/or exterior shape of the vessel, somewhat like a photographic lens distorts the photograph. In fact and as an aside, despite the strange habit of linking ceramics to sculpture, the two have precious little in common beyond tri-dimensionality. For the sake of the argument, I am willing to make the case that sculpture and ceramics actually have nothing in common at all, conceptually. Even sculptural ceramics (a formulation I prefer to “ceramic sculpture” since the qualifier is of less importance to the noun in identity), has nothing to do with other types of sculptures. Contrary to ceramics, sculptures have no distinct surface and even when painted, this surface is usually descriptive and serves to reaffirm the form, while with ceramics the pictorial surface is distinct and operates largely separately from the form, visually and conceptually. The distinct differences in the distinctiveness of the form and the surface in ceramics operates on at least three levels: formally (the form of the form is different from the form of the image, in term of shape, color, texture, composition, etc.), esthetically (form and surface are perceived, experienced and appreciated differently) and conceptually (one is volumetric and 3-D while the other is flat and 2-D). Interestingly enough, painted sculpture necessitates two different materials (say, wood and oil paint) while pictorial ceramics implies only one material, silica based clay and silica based glaze(s); while the materials are basically the same, the visual/spatial concepts are distinct. In fact, it could be argued that ceramics has more in common with photography than with any other art forms: both photography and ceramics are mechanical and chemical at the level of process; both imply series, reproduction and multiples; both are
archival in nature, one, photography, with a relation to time based in the instant, the other, ceramics, grounded in eternity; and both use the parallax distortion of space in pictorial representation. This parallax distortion of space on convex pottery surfaces is an important characteristic of Greek vase painting for example and is at times used very effectively by the Greek vase painters to accentuate spatial depth. This distortion is quite different on concave surfaces, since the single viewpoint afforded by the interior space makes it possible to flatten the space reasonably successfully. This distorted, lens like, spherical surface of pots and other ceramic forms is again rather specific to ceramics pictorial space. This convex space on the exterior of pots or the concave space on certain interiors (bowls, plates and dishes, usually) distorts the representation they hold in ways that are specific and unique to ceramics, to a large degree. It is rarely found in painting, unless it represents mirrors and other reflective surfaces. Leonardo da Vinci, in his writings, mentions his interest in the possibility of painting pictures on curved surfaces. But as far as we know, he never did and never did any ceramics either, although others made ceramics based on his graphic designs. For Vinci, these paintings on curved surfaces would have been based on the principle of a special perspective, which would remain true to its deformation and, in the process, freeing painting from its strictly illusionist goals. Maybe these images on curved surfaces remain to be made, and eventually a potter will take the challenge.

Other relationships between photography and ceramics connect the process of making photographs from a negative print to a positive image, while molds (a negative space) in ceramics are used to cast original, positive clay forms. There is also a strong domestic connection to the real life of real people, photography often acting as a repository for the memories of daily events and activities that are themselves often connected to ceramic objects, in various ways. A photograph is also a fragment of a larger whole, and ceramics in its fragility often, if not always, ends as a shard, a fragment. The photographic fragment is less violent (or is it?), certainly better behaved than the ceramic fragment. Both retain and transmit important information about knowledge and experiences we would not have otherwise. At the same time, ceramic objects in their three-dimensionality and continuous surface showing only one aspect at a time, are very difficult to actually photograph and even more difficult to experience photographically. Other art forms, based on image making, are meant meanwhile, almost by definition, to be experienced in photographs, if they are not themselves photographs to begin with. A photograph of an image looses very little from its source and a photograph of a
photograph doesn’t lose anything substantial at all, while a photograph of a vessel, or any other object, is almost completely removed from the actuality of the thing. In our evermore mediated society and culture, all images (drawings, paintings, sculptures, which are 3-D images after all) are all meant ultimately if not to be photographed, exclusively, at least to be primarily experienced in photographs, in magazines, in catalogues, in art history classes, in books, in the media, on the web..... It is interesting to note that the least an art form needs institutions to operate (photography, for example) the more institutional space it gets, while art forms that require a direct physical and spatial experience (of bodies in relation to things), like ceramics, are not given hardly any space at all in art institutions. I am speaking specifically of contemporary ceramics of course. Museums and art galleries are usually full of historical ceramics and other craft objects, yet their contemporary rooms are void of such displays, another contradiction resulting from the (censorious) politics of the art world. But then, as far as I am concerned, the world is completely upside down right now, with the results that we can see (and feel) all around us. This is true in art as well. Anyway.

Note:
Here again the reader less interested in the historical context can skip to “The overall, continuous surface”.

In Italian Renaissance maiolica, more specifically on large chargers and shallow dishes and plates, the painter tries to fight this spatial distortion by flattening the perspective lines (perspective was still a relatively new trick then), adapting and shaping them to the formal accidents of the object, notably at the transition between the large flat rim and the shallow well at the centre of the dish. This is achieved with various degrees of success, depending on the deftness and experience of the painter/decorator. On flatter forms, the concavity of the complex, painterly image on the object can be made to appear flat, from a single viewpoint, at least. This is done with great sophistication on Islamic “Minai” wares from Iran and in Mimbres pots, to the degree that when experienced in photograph, the object, a deep bowl in both cases, appears to be a shallow dish or a flat plate. Italian maiolica platters are also composed with a specific orientation, due to the realism of the narrative scene depicted. They are not to be viewed in the round, or positioned flat on a horizontal surface, but instead standing up vertically in a precise position. Images viewed in the round, from a variety of viewpoints are also rather specific to ceramics as an art form. “Istoriato” plates from Renaissance Italy were not meant to be
functional or used for practical purposes; they were objects for contemplation, for
the ostentatious display of sophistication, of wealth, of status and taste. Yet, they do not
stand for substitute for paintings, since their circular shape and concave interior space,
both used very effectively at times for visual interest in composition, creates a unique
esthetic experience that is not found anywhere else to that degree of commonality and
sophistication.

A technical aside on maiolica may be necessary here, as the materials, processes and
techniques inform the narrative esthetics significantly, maiolica being historically the most
common format for this esthetics within ceramics, in Europe, anyway. Maiolica decoration
refers to a low-temperature glaze, made opaque and white with tin and applied over red
earthenware clay. This glaze by itself would fire to a smooth, shiny white surface, covering
the darker, red clay body completely. Since it provides the perfect ground for images of all
kinds, it is usually painted with very complex pictures, nonetheless composed with a very
limited palette of colors, namely, brown, yellow, green, blue, purple and black, the glaze
ground providing white as well. It is important to keep in mind, as is usually the case in
ceramics, that these colors are much different before firing, when they are applied over
the unfired, dry, dusty glaze, and the potter has to create the image keeping in mind this
drastic visual transformation, after firing. This maiolica glaze is particularly stable in the
kiln and will not move or run (as we have seen with Tang glazes and other drippy, runny
glazes), and the painted image will remain fixed as it was applied. The technique
originates in Islamic medieval Spain, to simulate and emulate oriental porcelain at first but
becoming it’s own original esthetics, quickly, by taking full advantage of the potential for
the materials and processes used, so different in all possible ways from those used in
porcelain manufacturing. From Spain, it then moves to Italy, where it achieves its supreme
expression from the early Renaissance on. The most complex examples also use a simple
trick to facilitate the painting of very detailed images; after applying the glaze, the pot
would be placed in a kiln and fired to a temperature sufficient to sinter the glaze, fixing it
to the clay and hardening it, without melting or fluxing it. The colors could then be
applied over this much more stable yet still porous surface and corrections and erasure
could also be more easily made. Once the painting was completed, a light coating of clear
glaze would be applied over the whole surface and the object would then be re-fired to
melt and vitrify the glazes, trapping the colors between a white glaze providing the
ground and a shiny clear glaze intensifying the colors. Nonetheless, most maiolica
decoration is done directly over the freshly glazed ware, which provides a freshness and
directness of application, since retouching cannot really take place, adding to the spontaneity of the results. There are many other methods of applying pictorial elements to pottery forms, yet the maiolica technique was the most polyvalent and provided the potential for the most complex depiction of narrative scenes on ceramic surfaces. That remained true until the discovery of over-glaze enamels made with colored ground glass mixed with an oily medium. Over-glaze colors could be mixed together to achieve a wide variety of tones and shades and then painted over an already vitrified surface to then be themselves fused in a kiln at a rather low temperature. Over-glaze enamel colors being made with an already fired material (a form of glass, basically) remain true between application and firing and can be used, like paints, to create highly illusionist representations. Both maiolica and over-glaze decorations have been eventually largely replaced during the industrial revolution by the application of photographic and printmaking processes to ceramics, which greatly simplify technically, while making more complex visually, pictorial ceramic surfaces.

The pictorial flatness of Italian maiolica is reinforced when these objects are experienced photographically. This flattening effect of photography is even more evident with images in the interior of deep bowls. As I have mentioned before, I have in mind particularly the Mimbres/Anazazi pre-Columbian bowls with intricate abstract patterns (see chapters on “The Decorative Esthetics”, as well as the “Death” chapter), early Egyptian as well as Islamic bowls (Seljuk Minai wares), which all read as bearing flat images in photographic reproduction while in actuality, they have a deep, half-spherical interior space where the image is very skilfully composed with great graphic sophistication, an effect that can only be perceived and appreciated from real objects and that cannot be replicated or communicated photographically, something we tend to forget when we look at photographs of pots, which distorts and prevents a true appreciation. The main dynamic of these deep bowls is actually based on the contradictory aspects between the seemingly flat, visually bi-dimensional surface as it is shaped by the deeply tri-dimensional, concave interior space of the bowl. The best examples make great use of this dynamism.
The overall, continuous surface:

It is the dynamism and energy created by the tension between a two-dimensional image and a three-dimensional form that characterizes the narrative esthetics and its specific ceramic pictorial space potential. This is greatly reinforced when the 2-D image represents a 3-D illusional space and when the 3-D form of the vessel is visually flattened to read as a 2-D surface as well.

Things get equally interesting on the tri-dimensional exterior of vase forms where the image is all around the object. Depending on viewpoint, again, the expected flatness of images (we tend to always experience images in flatness, even tri-dimensional sculpture, especially now with the hegemony of photography in art experiences) is greatly contested on pottery forms. Potters have used various strategies to counteract this effect, restricting the image to one side of the vessel or again, articulating the scene within a reserved, framed, bordered area, a cartouche. This reserved area is often rectangular (in spirit, at least, since the edges of the rectangle are actually four curves meeting at the corners) or circular, oval and in Rococo Europe, a dynamic series of curved, opposite curlicues and arabesques. This rocaille frame, a very dynamic form of framing, while being very common in decorative arts since its inception, never really found its place in representational art which tends to prefer the geometry of the predictable square, and again very rarely as well the circle, also quite common in decorative arts. The European pictorial space on ceramics also tends to favor this conceit of the square frame, creating a distinct, defined, separate depth-box on the face of the pottery form, distinguishing a space for representation while the remaining surface of the vessel is usually reserved for decorative effects, for example, a flat color surface, organized patterns or floral motifs. This depth-box can then be composed more clearly around conventional figure/ground relationships with elements in the foreground, middle ground and background (more often than not, the bare ground of the glazed clay body itself). The exploration of the pictorial depth-box on the surface of ceramic objects will remain the chief aim of glaze decorators in Europe. The 3-D illusion of the depth-box combined in a dialectic with the 2-D of the overall design surrounding it constitutes the basic problem to be solved. The flatter decoration surrounding the depth-box often suggests a theatrical proscenium with arches, where the represented scene it contains seems to belong more to a literary dream space, an elaborate fiction, than to reality. This tension between the reality of the object
and the unreality of the image is another operative tension of the narrative esthetics on pottery forms.

While the main system to organize narrative scenes on pottery forms remains the use of various framing devices, either independent from the form or articulating it in various ways, they always serve to isolate the image from the object itself. Another way, less usual and rarer method consists in covering the whole surface of the form with a continuous picture, without borders, with no perceived beginning and no end (although, more often than not, there is still a preferred side, a privileged viewpoint). The only limits to the image are provided by the top and bottom of the vessel, and by the fact that the image endlessly repeats, in a loop, as we circle the object or rotate it in our hands.

When an image is framed, as we have seen, the implication is that it continues, if only conceptually, beyond the borders of the frame. But when an image is depicted all over a continuous shape like it does on the exterior of a pot, the space defined by the vessel does not extend beyond its borders, provided by the constantly shifting silhouette of the object. This is a very different phenomenological experience than the representation provided by a painting or, more believably and expectedly, by a photograph. The continuous all over image on the exterior of a vessel is a self-contained space different from the self-contained space of other forms of image making. It generates a continuous, panoramic loop that requires, that necessitates a three-dimensional experience, an actual movement of the viewer a full 360 degrees around the object, or, more likely, a tactile experience where to object is rotated for 360 degrees by the hands. When one actually experiences a landscape (for example), one is located at the center of the scene, which surrounds us completely. To see the whole view, one must rotates on the axis of our body by 360 degrees, to return eventually to the point of origin. Our experience then is that of the Panopticon, the 19th Century utopian prison system where one guard, acting as a singular gaze located at the centre could survey the whole population of prisoners, positioned in cells placed in a circular architecture, all around. As analyzed by post-modernist critical theory, it implies a position of control, of surveillance, an exercise in ownership and of absolute power. The Panopticon has one (rotating) viewpoint and all the views it provides are identical and fixed. It is also the viewpoint of photography and mediated technologies. While the panorama of a continuous landscape represented on the exterior of a vessel operates as a reverse Panopticon, and implies a reversal of viewpoint, a perceptual contradiction. It provides the viewer/user with a visual,
physical experience that gives the body, the eye, the impression of looking OUT, when in fact one is looking IN, into the object and into the image, which affects the esthetic and psychological impact of the work. Your eye and your body may be looking IN, into the pot, but your mind processes the information, following preceding experiences, as looking OUT, from our body into the distant landscape. This creates a phenomenological reversal, which is, subtly yet actually disruptive. The perceptual viewpoint is reversed and the subject position is reversed. I think that this visual, esthetic experience is unique and specific to realistic, descriptive representations as presented as continuous on the exterior of vessels and pottery forms. This pictorial device that implies a reversal of the normal, usual visual experience is again specific to the particular relation between surface and form found in ceramics. When experiencing the scene on the vessel, it is as if we remained conceptually fixed when we are in actual movement around the object or the object itself is in movement in our hands. It is as if our viewpoint was constantly changing, mobile and varied, so different from the fixed viewpoint of framed images. In its lack of clearly defined borders it even expands on the pan shot of cinema. Similar to the cinematic experience, the images on the surface of the vase seems to project from the dark interior, as if projected, like a static movie (!) on a continuous, circular wall, all around us. Like in cinema, the darkness inside the vase makes possible the light and brightness, the shape and colors visible on the exterior wall of the vase, as if on a screen. Such images and visual experiences on massive objects would be unthinkable. While we remain, obviously, located outside the vase, physically, our perception operates as if we were experiencing the image while located inside the vase. It requires an imaginary displacement of viewpoint to operate effectively. This experience may remain instinctive but when it is intellectualized, it becomes disturbingly powerful. Of course and unfortunately, ceramic objects rarely, if ever, live up to this potential fully, so far, anyway. This generosity of the continuously changing surface provides different informations from different viewpoints and provides for a variety of experiences, while stressing the three-dimensionality of the object and the 360 degrees nature of the work, with no preferred side or viewpoint, no real beginning and no end. The only “rational” and “realistic” aspects retained in these types of pictorial ceramic spaces, and they most often represent landscapes and even more rarely with figures, is the expected logic of the top and the bottom, the rim and the base of the object, where the sky and the ground keep their respective place. In this respect alone, the vase is more lifelike, closer to a real lived experience, similar to the one created by the renewed vanishing point as we turn our head and body around to scan a scene. The Panopticon viewpoint of static, framed images is convincing and highly
effective, yet remains non-critical by directing experience and imposing interpretation. It is the viewpoint of framed images, of mediated technologies, as well as various literary texts like those of journalism, editorials, pamphlets and theory, all these texts that may be creative but do not require imagination. The single viewpoint implies control and dependency, authority and hierarchy. The reverse Panopticon found on ceramic vessels is ambiguous and mobile, and it leaves interpretation open ended. It remains critical. It is the domain of poetry, of imaginative literature, but also of certain types of objects, of pottery for example, and of practices grounded in the transmission of real experiences in a metaphorical manner. The mundane, familiar, ordinary, domestic context where this happens usually prevents us from this realization, most unfortunately. Yet, while lacking the efficiency one expects from “ordinary” images, it does implies agency and freedom in experience. Few unfortunately, makers or users, realize this and take advantage if it. Grayson Perry, whose work will be discussed later, is a potent example of someone who makes use of that potential fully, a potential yet not fully realized by the field of ceramics as a whole, though.

Note:
Here again, one can skip to “Contemporary Examples”

*The Oriental Pictorial Space:*

In his book “Ceramics” (p.183), Philip Rawson is particularly eloquent and perceptive on the subject of the oriental pictorial space. I quote: “The Far Eastern –specifically Chinese– sense of pictorial space is certainly the most important in the whole history of ceramics. It is based upon assumptions and intuitions, even a metaphysic, which were foreign to the entire Western humanist tradition. This sense of space is apparent whenever the subject matter of the ceramic decoration ceases to be emblematic and becomes representational in the pictorial sense...” creating “a space as an unbroken environment without defined limits. The Far–Eastern ceramic painter has always treated the pot surface as if it were crystallized out of a continuum of space, pre–existing as a kind of provisional segment of endless space in which objects may appear quite naturally. The artist thus has no obligation to define a perspective–box (depth–box), or to make his objects fit into a frame provided according to any formula save their own presence. The picture does not have to describe a complete visual field (as happens in European representation) to be
consistent. For even when there is only one feature on it, say a single figure, the picture space is already, as it were, complete and satisfactory in the pot surface”.

“In European decorative arts, one looks “through” the ceramic surface and for the scene to be convincing it must be bodily complete. In 18th Century porcelain, often, on vignettes inserted within framed cartouche, the edges of the image are blurred, giving the viewer the impression of loosing focus or fading reality where the rendering vanishes”, as if the image could not interrupt abruptly unless it meets the clear border of the framing device. “In a Chinese picture on the other hand, we are quite prepared to accept large gaps of empty space or the vanishing of rock massifs, without reading them as an interruption in the continuity of space... That this can happen has a good deal to do with the way the Chinese brush “realizes” bodies. For it guides our eye along highly varied and changing linear tracks over the surface, each of which offers what one can call a satisfying kinetic “side” to the attention...Space to the Chinese is not composed of defined enclosures as it is in Western perception. It is a real but fluid medium of space and time in which the attention encounters phenomena. And since phenomena are to the Chinese truly “appearances” rather than solid bodies whose space–context indicates an absolute substance, the Chinese artist is not obliged to define complete bodies in order to convince us of the reality of the space his phenomena occupy... An organization of fragmented parts, a flower, a segment of tree, a piece of rock for ground provides an arrangement that is believable despite its incompleteness, in a complete system of interconnected volume and void. Variation of scale to define perceptual and physical distance as well as overlap to define in front of and behind are all that is needed to create believability and completeness.” This is due to the fact that in Chinese art as in oriental philosophy, the void is not absence but an actual space that permits to access knowledge.

On the other hand, the European artists depict all aspects of space in order to define a believable context for the figures, by “looking through their ceramic surface”; they need to provide a detailed, complete image in order for it to be convincing. While the oriental artist uses the emptiness of space surrounding figures to define another spatial context that is nonetheless believable, by considering this empty space within the overall composition and the relationship among various parts, these often large areas of emptiness, gaps of void where “emptiness and whiteness are active ingredients of the image”. These “empty” spaces surrounding figures in Oriental art are nonetheless perceived as real space, while the same formal use of empty space in Western art imitating
Oriental art is never believable as actual space but reads as void, empty ground. This is a crucial distinction between two very different and contrasting modes of pictorial space and must be clearly understood, since oriental ceramics has had such a profound influence on European (and world) ceramic traditions as well as other decorative arts. When the sophisticated, very abstract, one could say conceptual, atmospheric space of the Oriental (Chinese, specifically) potter is copied by Europeans, familiar with perspective depiction and a tendency to fill the frame with as much information as possible, with no understanding of the formal characteristics of the Oriental model, we get a rather bastardized version where space feels void and bare, inactive. One can always tell a European copy of a Chinese ceramic picture by this simple shift in the depiction of empty ground, the Oriental feeling full and resonant, the Occidental, empty and silent. Of course, a similar cultural misreading happens when Oriental potters copy Occidental models, usually provided in drawing or printed form for reproduction, so that the painter was not working from an original anyway. Each time, the changes provide clear clues as to the origins of the object. In Japan, this particular oriental pictorial space is evident in the elegant, sparse and beautifully sophisticated Kakiemon porcelains of the 17th Century, and still continuing today. Kakiemon is one of the earliest types of porcelain developed in Japan and the beautiful, creamy white clay body is particularly suited to minimal painted decoration, leaving large area of white ground visible; thus the visual quality of the clay material itself is used to great effect, while the painted decoration makes great use of the contemporary discovery of iron red enamels, which gives to Kakiemon wares a very distinctive style, greatly influential in early European porcelain development, notably at Meissen in Germany and Chelsea in England.

In stark contrast, in 1960’s China, during the Cultural Revolution, a large number of ceramic objects were produced for propaganda principles. Interestingly enough, these political images on pots have none of the sophistication we would expect to find on Oriental porcelain. Following the rigid principles of Socialist Realism, a Western style coming from European Academism of the worst kind, these Chinese pots are actually stylistically European at the level of surface treatment and their pictorial space, specifically the relationship of the highly defined figures to the bare, empty ground, is totally unconvincing and non oriental. These bastard objects are nonetheless important cultural archives of a specific time in Chinese history and they probably are the most important ceramic objects, historically, produced in China in the 20th Century, despite their stylistic crudeness and kitschyness. This constant, unending dialogue between diverse ceramic
cultures, notably along the East/West axis, provides for the endless influences where painters in Europe emulate potters in China and potters in China do the same with European works, usually misreading, misquoting and misappropriating from each other to create hybrids that are at times somewhat monstrous but never boring.

*Contemporary Examples:*

Philip Rawson, again, makes another very perceptive observation about ceramics pictorial space. I quote: “One interesting incidental point about pictorial decoration in ceramics is that human figures which actually seem to be looking “out of” the pot and addressing themselves to the spectator, are very rare...It seems to have been almost always necessary to avoid any sense of direct human address, so as to preserve, no doubt, the existential identity of the pot body from too gross an encroachment by the illusionist impact of its pictures. For the pot as a whole object to address itself to the beholder with an organic presence represents a radical further step in a transformation process”.

Rawson of course is writing this in 1971, way before contemporary ceramics would develop to challenge so many of the principles and criteria he establishes in his book to evaluate “quality” in ceramics and pottery forms. Before someone like Grayson Perry could challenge this very principle of direct human address by an image on a pot, the principal operative characteristic of Perry’s work. In this work, we are directly confronted by the disturbing scene on his vessels, to challenge our relationship with these figures and create a direct, personal identification with them. Many other such prescriptions for good pottery form found in Rawson’s book have already been contested and challenged by much recent, contemporary ceramics. Perry’s work uses the particular spatial nature of ceramic surfaces in a variety of very interesting ways; the overall organization of the picture (s) all around the vase (and they are almost always vases); the use of layering, sometimes leading to deliberate visual chaos, which positions the images ambiguously in relation to the surface by locating them visually at various perceived distances within the form itself. He also succeeds in disintegrating the very surface of the pot completely at times, by making that surface appear as a ground on which the figures stands, locating their presence “within” the vase form itself in illusionary transparency of the surface, which dematerializes. This was achieved historically by the use of the “depth-box”, in which the image was perceived as penetrating the form. Perry does this, unusually, without recourse to the depth-box, by positioning his figures on an ambiguous dark ground where they
“float”. This is somewhat similar to the vase painting of the “Berlin Painter” in 5th Century BCE in Athens, who also, characteristically, used this method of disembodiment, of decontextualization to ambiguously connect his (single) figures with their surroundings, which are, altogether, the surface of the vase and the physical space which the figure itself inhabits. Thus, the ground where the figured stands represents simultaneously two realities, one the pottery surface, the other the physical space around a figure. This visual disintegration of the pottery surface is particular to ceramics pictorial space and interestingly, very rarely used totally effectively. The best example I know, using the depth-box, is a Staffordshire porcelain vase of the 1850’s, where a representation of the Crystal Palace in London appears to penetrate the belly of the vase, due to the strong, deep, one point perspective at play in the image. It is a sophisticated use of the potential for ceramic form and surface to engage dynamically and more potters should take advantage of the possibilities it offers. Another effective and unusual example can be found in American Art Pottery (Rookwood, 1885), where portraits (usually of Native American Indians) are realistically, almost photographically painted with under glaze colored clay slips on a very dark brown clay ground, which is then covered with a very shiny, brilliant, clear glaze, giving the illusion that the figure is located “within” the pot and we are looking at it through a lens, as if prisoner behind a window, where they nonetheless project great dignity.

Perry usually dispenses with the use of framing devices that would imprison his images. He instead makes magisterial use of multiple layers and uses the overall, continuous surface of the form to great efficiency. When he does frame an image, it is due to the fact that the reference is photographic and framing becomes essential for the reference to operate.

Another excellent example of a ceramic artist who has exploited the pictorial space of ceramics with particular efficiency would be Michael Frimkess, from Los Angeles. He is, in my opinion, one of the most important and influential artists working in ceramics in the second half on the 20th Century, along with Pablo Picasso, and his influence, at times unaware for the very people who are following in his footsteps, is continuing into the present. He was one of the first in the 1960’s, with Robert Arneson in sculptural ceramics, to introduce obvious political commentary in his work and the very first as well to use a vocabulary of stereotypical pottery forms from the history of ceramics, which so many others have been doing since, Grayson Perry being a prime example. This use of historical
forms, instead of inventing new ones, creates a reference to the history of ceramics, obviously, but also to its universality and timelessness, and it remains, probably, Frimkess’s most important contribution to the field. His work operates around the concepts of excess and reversal. The iconography of his vessels combines cultural icons, like Santa Claus as Hitler, Uncle Sam chasing four naked women, representing the four races, white, yellow, red and black, and Buddha as a Jazz musician, etc., within contemporary scenes related to ecology, racial relations and music, among others. By appropriating forms and surfaces and reorganizing them in a challenging, yet effective new combination, Frimkess shows us the irrelevancy of authorship and the necessity of a personal style (the obsession with creating new forms, etc.), the unimportance of materials, of techniques and processes as end in themselves (see “The Material Esthetics” chapter), as well as the uselessness of dates and facts in assessing works of art, by putting instead the emphasis where it needs to be, on concepts and contexts, on experiences and meanings. I have developed these ideas further in an essay of the artist published in Ceramics: Art and Perception magazine, “Michael Frimkess, A Reappraisal”.

More again on Grayson Perry, whose debt to Michael Frimkess is clear and obvious. Perry sees himself as a traditionalist and talks of himself as an “old-fashioned reactionary”. His choice of ceramics and pottery as a vehicle for his ideas is a conscious and informed strategy to “buck the trend” of much contemporary art which is often mediated, using impermanent, evanescent material, obsessed with newness and new technologies (ceramics as a technology has not fundamentally changed in a thousand years and is itself thousands of years older, even…). He is attracted by the sensuality of ceramic objects themselves, in a fetishistic manner, but he doesn’t consider the sensuality of clay itself as important, of the material itself as particularly meaningful. Ceramics provides him with a system of forms that permits nonetheless “the freedom to create within iconic stereotypes”, the stereotype of the classical pottery shapes he uses, is one example. Like Michael Frimkess, by combining classical, conventional, familiar pottery shapes with disturbing, challenging, confrontational images on their surface, an effective contradiction takes place between the expectations created by the innocent form and the shock created by the difficulty of the images on the surfaces. If these very images were simply drawn on paper or painted on canvas instead of on pottery forms, their efficiency to challenge and confront us would be greatly diminished and the work would not be nearly as interesting or have received such wide critical (and commercial) reception, despite the fact that the pots themselves (as meaningful forms) are usually, if not always,
ignored by the art criticism analyzing and contextualizing this work, the same way pottery forms are largely absent from the scholarship on Greek Attic pottery. Nonetheless, it is the pottery forms that create the proper context for the work to operate so efficiently. His avowed interest with this work is to express “what is never said, what is not being said”, since he sees it as a responsibility to be a witness and a mirror to our times, to create an archive of specific events reflecting contemporary culture, mores and habits. He particularly values the irony and contradiction in using domestic, banal objects to comment on the censorship imposed by the public sphere and the other censorship at work, in the art world, toward certain art forms, notably ceramics and, particularly, pottery. An assemblage of words, texts and a collage in layers of images, drawings and transfer decals with other modeled and carved forms, all create a highly psychological world, contesting the domestic familiarity of the pottery forms. This conceptual, visual and formal complexity combined with the lush, seductive, sensually rich surfaces unfolding allover the continuous circular format, makes them difficult if not impossible to appreciate and understand fully in photographic reproduction and this reinforces the necessity for the real experience of real objects, often tactile, in ceramics appreciation. His work brings together the imaginative reality of the painted and graphic figures with the actual reality of the world, which the pots inhabit as objects.

In German artist Daniel Kruger’s ceramics, the use of photography is also very interesting. Most if not all of the images he uses come from newspapers and magazines. Some of them are painted directly on pieces, usually within the conventional, historical space for representation on pots (themselves classical in spirit, yet loosely, crudely fashioned, deliberately), a space defined by a border, a frame, a cartouche. At times, the frame is actually the outline of the vessel itself, notably with plates and dishes, a form of framing images specific to vessels and to pottery. On other pieces however, the image is a digitally printed transfer decal combining photography with ceramic materials and processes, giving the image permanency—something not present in the original image, photography being a most fleeting and impermanent medium. These images then become frozen in time, to be transmitted to a hypothetical future, one that will reinterpret them much differently than we do now. His efficient use of media references (photography and printmaking as well as newspapers and magazines) combined with the medium specificity of ceramics and pottery forms, all come together in a subtle yet effective critique of mediation, and the seductions of mediation, in contemporary culture. The progressive transfer from flesh to photograph, from photograph to print in a magazine, from paper
print to ceramic print, all these passages from soft, living, warm flesh to hard, cold, fragile clay, all serve to immortalize these image of human fleetingness.

Montreal ceramist Richard Milette, whose work has been analyzed with some depth in the classical esthetics, needs to be reassessed here as well. If the narrative esthetics is largely defined as a pictorial approach to narrative in ceramics and pottery surfaces, Milette's work operates around a contestation of narrative in art understanding and appreciation. He has explored this negativity of narratives and our obsession with narratives, in a wide variety of works, as seen already in "The Classical Esthetics" chapter. Here, I want to single out a series of Hydria shapes, exact copies of the Greek originals, on which Milette has copied and painted, within the rectangular cartouche found at the expected, familiar location on the vase, a cropped fragment from an European history painting, implying a specific, necessary narrative content. By quoting from existing works and by choosing a small fragment from a much larger work while keeping enough iconic information to permit a possible reading of the image (a finger, a piece of clothing, a detail of an object, etc.), he challenges our incessant need to originality and to create meaning through a logical narrative, the narrative of story telling or the more pernicious narratives of history, particularly here, art history. These pots present us with a new model for appreciation and understanding, beyond the necessity of conventional discourses around art and art objects. They provide us with a potent example that ceramics has its own specificity and requires to be understood using standards and methodologies that are its very own.

**In conclusion:**

The narrative esthetics looks more closely at the dynamics found between the pictorial surface in its relation to the form that stands separate from it. This relation form/surface, when it engages with representation, implies specific "ceramic pictorial spaces" which manifests themselves quite differently from culture to culture yet remains specific to ceramics as an autonomous art form. While I have looked more specifically here at the "painterly" surface where the preferred tool remains the brush, there are other aspects of these "ceramic pictorial spaces" that relate to a more graphic surface, or again to the printed surface. Those actually will be looked at more closely in "The Industrial Esthetics" chapter. The specific case of commemorative wares, which is again largely the exclusive domain of ceramics (just think of the recent Obama inaugural and the Kate and
Will wedding, with their thousands of ceramic plates and ceramic cups, printed with computer generated photographic transfers and ceramic decals, could also be included here yet, by introducing the necessary use of text in captions, it is best analyzed in the “Text” chapter, later.

Another interesting, fascinating category would be that of images of pots on pots, and pots as images in still-life compositions, when their performative, practical reality is subjugated to their function as image, as representation of themselves, where they become more imaginary than tangible. As we have previously seen, the pot itself in its exterior surface acts as a frame, and when a pot is represented on a pot, two distinct frames come together, the flat frame of the depicted pot on the volumetric frame of the actual pot. This volume to flat, flat to volume dichotomy is what makes pots on pots (a conceit found all over the world) so effective, and their repeated use so fascinating.

I will close with an example from the vast and very important (and not just in sheer, impressive quantity), body of ceramic works made by Pablo Picasso in the 1950’s, mostly. I will single out here his oval or circular plates, dishes, platters and bowls depicting corridas, as exemplary of the complexity and intelligence of his work, as would one expect. The overall shape of the vessel is used as a space to depict a tauromachy, a particularly Spanish spectacle. In his use of the edge of the object as the edge of the image, he combines the small, familiar, ordinary object with the extraordinary, exceptional, immense arena, in the process reversing the intimate and domestic setting to the expansive and public sphere. By using a very slightly concave form (the plate) and making it appear as deeply concave (the arena), he reaffirms the interior space of pottery forms as very specific and particular spaces for representation. As one would expect from the inventor of Cubism, he finds yet a new way to conceptualize the representation of space by conflicting two contradicting spaces as one, in a manner not seen before. In the process, he makes us aware, in a new, direct (obvious…) way of the operative power of simple, unassuming and dismissible things.

When an image, a narrative scene is placed on a pottery form, the image is created in ways that are specific to ceramics, at the level of materials and processes and techniques, but it also behaves differently, in its relation to the form it modifies, than it would in any other context. It is also experienced differently, visually but most importantly conceptually and it engages with signification and meaning in a particular, specific way as
well. A descriptive image on a ceramic object has its own logic, its own esthetics and its own relation to reality and representation, different from the operative workings of images in other contexts.

The artists presented here and their works remind us as well that in order for art to be meaningful it must by necessity be critical as well. It is not sufficient anymore to make pretty pictures or beautiful pots, whatever stories they may be telling.