

The Remnants of Old Pots

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Recently I attended a sale featuring the work of two potters known for traditional wood-fired tableware. At the sale's end, one of the potters gave me a bottle, a jagged, fin-like object with a rounded base that allows it to rock slightly, forward and back, equal parts man-eating shark and hobby horse, incongruous and beautiful.

Since then I have examined the bottle continually, turning it this way and that, admiring its angular shape and exploring the contrasts between glassy amber glaze and roughened ash scars. The bottle's spout juts upward, unprotected and pencil thin; it will certainly be broken soon.

I often see such pots, particularly in potters' kitchens, cracked and battered, still in regular use despite having lost their handles and spouts long ago. It seems that potters use the best pots until their last gasp, until they can no longer be patched together with glue. Even then, they are rarely discarded. Instead, the remnants of the pots are placed on a nearby shelf, to be picked up frequently, passed around, and discussed in detail. There is a spirited immediacy in how potters talk about old pots.

Much of this immediacy can be traced to the fact that there has been no break between the craft of earlier times and that of today, with today's craftsmen relying on the same skills and materials, and seeking the same results, as craftsmen centuries ago. As a result, a contemporary potter – or weaver, metalsmith, boatbuilder, or glass-maker - can look at an old object and understand the thinking of the object's maker as it was made. He or she can point to evidence that the maker was working well that day or not, and why. He or she can describe the techniques used in the object's making and draw parallels between the earlier maker's methods and his or her own.

In what other disciplines are the links between old and new so strong? Certainly not in medicine, where skilled practitioners bled patients a couple of hundred years ago, nor in mathematics which, in

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the relatively recent past, provided evidence that the world was flat, nor in engineering, which leaped from horse-drawn carriages to space travel in less than a hundred years. Even disciplines that share a kinship with craft, such as painting or sculpture, have grown remote from their origins, with all but the most anachronistic of today's artists and sculptors creating works that are very different from those made by their early predecessors.

I live in a small New England town, at the far end of a quiet street. There is nothing beyond but an expanse of fields and sky. During the winter I watch as clouds loom in the distance, eventually passing overhead to cover the town with snow. At these times I sit on my porch, protected from the weather, studying the houses across the street. Like mine, they were built in the early 1920's, and look vaguely Palladian in the falling snow, boxy and symmetrical, as if La Malcontenta had been reduced in size, stripped of Renaissance details, and recreated in wood along both sides of the street. Although not particularly attractive, the houses are pleasant and comfortable, with square rooms filled with light and fresh air, stairs that climb to landings before turning, and simple, well-designed floor plans.

A mantle is built into a bedroom wall of my house, representing all that remains of an old fireplace. Although gracefully formed, and handsomely weathered by the years, a carpenter I know once regarded it dismissively. "A century ago," he said, "mantles like that were built by the thousands all over New England."

Access to the thinking of craftsmen of the past, gained through shared purposes and methods that span the centuries, places contemporary craftsmen in a world where the past is neither remote nor romanticized. Knowing how an object is made robs it of mystery, whether it was made today or hundreds of years ago. People who understand this rarely think of objects from the past as fundamentally different from those of the present, no matter how pleasantly time-worn they may be, and have no tendency to idealize objects merely on the basis of age.

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It is those items that demonstrate the growth of a tradition that engage the craftsman's imagination and earn his or her respect, regardless of when those objects were made. While one object is set aside as run-of-the-mill workmanship, another is treated with admiration because it offers a vigorous response to the tasks for which it was made. In fulfilling its function, the object remains true to its tradition. In its vigor, it shows that tradition to possess the capacity to grow by encompassing different styles and solutions.

My fin-shaped bottle, for example, fits comfortably in my hand and pours effortlessly, thus fulfilling its essential requirements. Its purpose is clear, identified immediately by its spout and flattened, flask-like shape. The bottle's form – broad at the base, and tapering quickly to a narrow, peaked top, creating a pyramid shape when seen from the side – is unusual yet rooted in common sense: the wide base compensates for the bottle's flatness by providing a generous reservoir for liquids, while the tapering shape reduces its weight and provides a natural grip. The bottle is practical and easy to use, while possessing a visual excitement quite unlike ordinary bottles. It has met its requirements energetically rather than passively.

That said, the bottle is also an odd, quirky, attention-getter, created by a potter known for work that, while traditional, is often prickly and restless. This is not to suggest that an object must be noticeably unusual or unsettling in order to advance its tradition. Vigor comes in many forms and can be quite gentle, though never complacent. To replace an expected response with something else can be a quiet gesture. To do so without compromising an object's usefulness is to provide a response that is not arbitrary. Such a response – surprising, functional, and without capriciousness – is a vigorous response, whether quiet or otherwise.

The presence of vigor makes many craft objects exciting. The absence of vigor makes many craft objects dull, even when they are attractive in appearance, and when their makers are well-meaning in their attempts to provide for our needs.

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Some objects, such as stoneware fired in a wood-burning kiln, or the more massive and sturdy forms produced by blacksmiths, seem inherently vigorous, with the robust physicality of sculpture. Nevertheless, opportunities for vigor are often found in unlikely places. The complexity of a well-designed tablecloth reveals a gamesmanship that can be almost literary, playing textures, rhythms, or colors against one another in ways that recall the call-and-response devices of old folk songs, and more: a break in a recurring pattern evokes feelings of loss; narrow, densely-packed stripes suggest fleetness; and ideas first seen in one part of the fabric, before being repeated or suggested elsewhere, carry the resonance of remembered words.

Any example of craft, even if vigorous, has little value when unused. I know a weaver who grows irritable when she sees functional fabric stored carefully, preserved yet idle. "It wasn't meant for a museum," she snaps. On the other hand, she is delighted to find fabric that has been well used and studies its worn and darned textures intently. She is happy that the fabric has been useful over the years and fascinated by the way its history can be glimpsed through the damage and repair it has sustained.

The weaver's relationship with fabric transcends that of those who use cloth carelessly, oblivious to what it may represent. Craftsmen do not necessarily resent the inattention of those who use their objects thoughtlessly. Instead, they see this inattention as a manifestation of the historical role of objects that exist primarily for everyday use and feel satisfaction that that role continues. This sense of fulfillment can be seen in potters as they study the worn and broken remains of old pots, content that the skills still exist to create such things, and that people can be found who use such pots daily and well.

Grace, simplicity, and strength are hallmarks of objects that have withstood regular use for many years. While graceful objects are pretty to behold, makers have never made such shapes just to please the eye. Instead, they have known that graceful, simple, and strong objects are

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easy to use, comfortable in the hand, and will last a long time, while objects that are flimsy or awkward will soon be cast aside.

There are other ways. Some potters and glassmakers create objects that are delicate and fragile even though intended for regular use, without seeking permanence to increase their intrinsic value. Their objects are appealing partly because delicate things are chaste in a way that rugged things are not, and chasteness holds a special, wispy beauty.

Simultaneously, the appeal of their work is based on the emotions it engenders in us. The lifespan of a fragile object is often short, no matter how well designed it may be, and we regard such objects with longing and regret even before they break or wear out. Makers of fragile objects understand that longing is more complex than joy and that melancholy contains an element of pleasure that is sharper than mere happiness. They assume that their work, once lost, will linger in our thoughts in ways that are stronger than the simple delight of using the same object repeatedly for many years.

By valuing that which is temporary, a weaver who finds history in repaired textiles has interests in common with a potter who makes delicate things. Each is excited by an object's evolution from its beginning to its end, but they approach that evolution differently. The weaver is interested in the marks left by the passage of time and values fabric in part because it shows those marks readily. The maker of delicate objects is interested in the memory of things that have disappeared. While the maker of delicate objects seeks to create a situation in which the act of destruction happens quickly, thus allowing the process of remembering to begin, the weaver makes no attempt to hasten the process of wear. Instead, he or she is pleased by the effects of wear over time, knowing that those effects become more pronounced and worthwhile as more time passes.

One sometimes hears craftsmen speak of a desire to take their place among the pantheon of nameless toolmakers, silversmiths, boat-builders, and cabinetmakers who preceded them. While this modesty seems sincere, it is difficult to imagine working steadily in pursuit of

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anonymity, no matter how pleasant the work may be. Rather, I think, most craftsmen see their work as a sign of their uniqueness and want to be thought of in those terms, even when their work holds much in common with that of others who are active in the same medium. Furthermore, I think most makers believe they will remain alive, in memory at least, only so long as their work continues to be used.

Makers of delicate things follow a path that runs counter to this approach. By expecting us to remember them through the loss of that which they create, they challenge attitudes that hold permanence or anonymity to be worthwhile and virtuous. Instead of assuming that we value only objects that we can physically hold and use, they trust in our ability to cherish that which no longer exists. Their work is ambiguous, produced as functional objects that are, nevertheless, likely to be functional for a short time only. In their ambiguity such objects seem self-effacing while, paradoxically, their fragility demands greater awareness and attention. It is an approach recalling that of the storyteller who speaks in a near whisper, as if shy, yet all the while forcing us to draw close and to listen more intently. This approach creates an immediacy but of a different kind: not the immediacy of a potter's admiration for a fine old pot, but the immediacy of alertness and uncertainty, of walking over just-frozen ice, happy to be walking, and hopeful to be able to change direction at an instant.