

DAVID MACDONALD

# INFLUENCE COMMITMENT and INTEGRITY

by Andrew Buck, Ed.D.





**1** Plate, 23 in. (58 cm) in diameter, carved stoneware, 2010. Photo: John Dowling. **2** David MacDonald working in the studio developing carved surface patterns on bowls. **3** Calabash vase, 34 in. (86 cm) in height, 2009. Photo: Roger DeMuth.

Once, during a sunny outdoor concert, I was privileged to hear Sun Ra and his Jazz Arkestra perform. The notes that Sun Ra played on the keyboard seemed suspended in air. It was as if he had transcended time and could enter in and out of it at will through his music. I was held spellbound. As Sun Ra demonstrated mastery as a performer, his lifetime love of music poured over the crowd. To me, David MacDonald's life and work as a potter and teacher exudes a similar type of love and virtuosity.

#### Background

MacDonald, Professor Emeritus of Ceramics at Syracuse University, grew up in Hackensack, New Jersey, in the 1950s and '60s as the third eldest of nine children. He was captain of his high-school track and cross country teams, setting school records in the one-mile race. He obtained an athletic scholarship to Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) in Tidewater, Virginia, and graduated in 1968 as an art education major.

Joseph W. Gilliard (1914–2004) served as his undergraduate mentor in ceramics at Hampton during those socially turbulent times. President John F. Kennedy, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Senator Robert "Bobby" Kennedy were assassinated during the tension-filled years during which MacDonald was an undergraduate and graduate student.

He spent an extra year at Hampton developing his MFA application portfolio, then attended the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, for a semester before he was actively recruited by Robert "Bob" Stull (1935–1994) to attend the MFA program in ceramics at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.



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Bob Stull and his wife at the time, Georgette Zirbes, an accomplished ceramic artist in her own right, were formative influences on MacDonald's functional and exhibition work. They continued to be close friends for many years.

MacDonald graduated with his MFA in 1971 and was immediately recruited to Syracuse University where he stayed and taught for 38 years, enjoying the camaraderie and collegiality of Henry Gernhardt in the ceramics program.

#### Mentors and Influences

Both Joseph W. Gilliard and Robert "Bob" J. Stull, had a deep, lasting impact on MacDonald's life and work as a potter, teacher, and person. Not only were Gilliard and Stull role models as ceramic artists, craftsmen, and educators, but they were also black. For the young African-American MacDonald, this must have seemed like

a godsend. Gilliard was a consummate craftsman and an extraordinary teacher. As MacDonald describes it, Gilliard was like a grandfather to him. Gilliard, also a metalsmith, was continuously interested in the technical side of ceramics, successfully formulating a variety of sought-after clay bodies and glazes. Gilliard gave his students space to make work that interested them, then stood back, watching carefully, intervening only to prevent technical mistakes or blunders in the studio. He never questioned his advanced undergraduate students about the choice of content in their work. Gilliard, whose career at Hampton Institute spanned five decades, was an encouraging and reflective mentor to MacDonald, one of his most highly motivated pupils.

Robert Stull, MacDonald's mentor at the University of Michigan, was more like an older brother. MacDonald could talk to Bob easily because of their shared cultural background. He did not have to go through protracted conversations about what it was like to be or grow up black in America. Stull was a leader in the African-American cultural scene and the demonstrative Black Action Movement at Ann Arbor before he left to become chair, and later dean, of the College of the Arts at The Ohio State University.

A rustic clay teapot made by Stull appeared on the front cover of the November 1965 edition of *Ceramics Monthly*. This piece reflected Stull's personal research as a Fulbright Scholar where he studied pottery and photography in Japan. That teapot also represented a Japanese aesthetic zeitgeist that permeated much of American pottery at the time due to the pioneering work of Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada. However, as Black Pride consciousness was growing in America, Stull turned to his African heritage to inform his ceramic work and develop his individual aesthetic identity in clay. Stull's ceramic

work at Ann Arbor had a bold, powerful presence characterized by monochromatic surfaces where form dominated.

Over time, Stull became more interested in painting that involved symbolic use of color and pattern. This translated into colorful glazed designs and patterns, which animated the surfaces of his ceramic forms. MacDonald, however, followed his own path in his own time. Five or six years after earning his MFA degree, he began a deep exploration of African art which, in turn, would influence his pottery.

### Choosing Clay

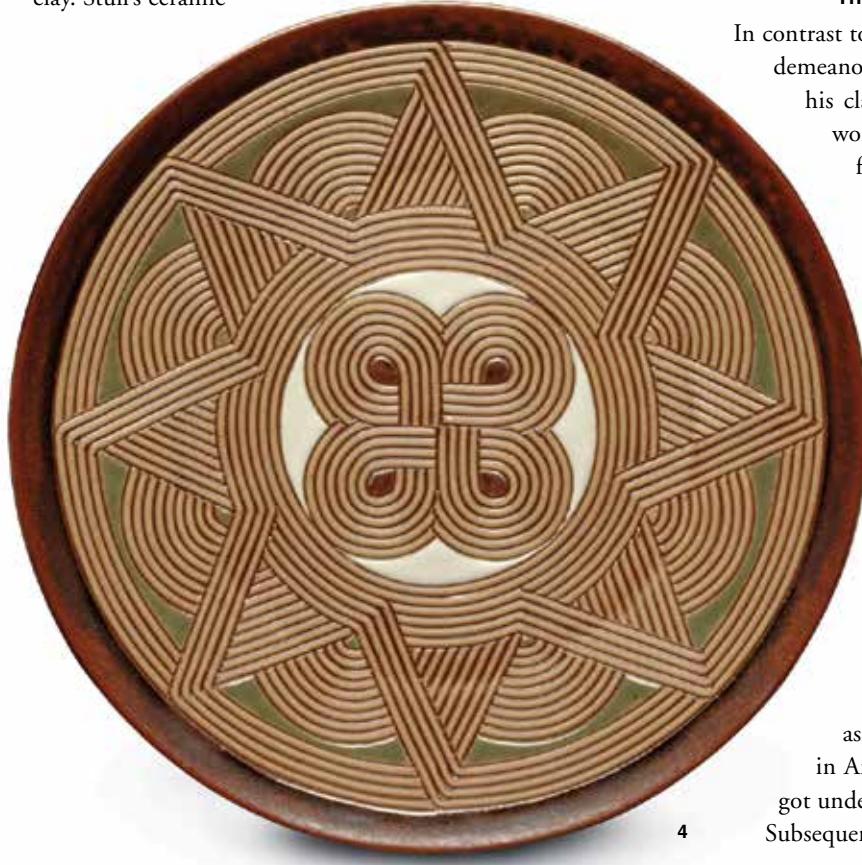
Looking back at his beginnings, MacDonald realized that pottery struck a responsive chord in his psyche when he took a ceramics class as a requirement to become an art educator. He was intrigued and skeptical about being able to make something he could actually use. It was a pivotal moment, which set the direction for the rest of his career. At Hampton, MacDonald didn't just fall in love with making pottery; he consciously decided to commit his life to working in ceramics. Thereafter, he practically lived in the clay studio day and night as an undergraduate. According to MacDonald, Gilliard would frequently say this about clay: "You can take this material that has no intrinsic value and turn it into something which is not only beautiful but also useful." As MacDonald explains, "That whole notion of utility has been a driving force in my work. When people call me a ceramist or ceramic artist, I reply that I am a potter. My work centers on the notion of the vessel and the type of human connections people develop personally and culturally around vessels."

### The Influence of One Significant Question

In contrast to the polite, courteous, respectful, and gentlemanly demeanor with which the young MacDonald interacted with his classmates and Gilliard, MacDonald's early ceramic work was fueled by indignation and outrage which arose from the plight and injustices confronting African-

Americans at the time. As MacDonald recounts, "I would look around for something to get pissed off about and that would feed into my work."

His ceramic work was confrontational and image rich, which led to an aura of him being an angry, young black artist. This image of MacDonald persisted throughout his MFA experience. MacDonald's post-MFA exhibit history grew extensively and quickly through one invitation after another. However, in the mid 1970s he had a one-person exhibit at the Community Folk Art Center in Syracuse, New York. Towards the end of the opening reception an elderly white woman asked if she could speak with him. She complimented his work as being elegant and powerful yet full of anger, then asked, "Isn't there anything positive about being black in America?" This question threw him off-guard and it got under his skin. The question haunted him for months. Subsequent to this encounter, MacDonald decided that he





**4** *Andinkra Series* plate, 23 in. (58 cm) in diameter, stoneware, 2009. Photo: Brantley Carroll. **5** Robert Stull's lidded form, 13½ in. (34 cm) in height, 1971. Photo: courtesy of Bettye J. Stull. **6** Large storage jar (figurative series), 36 in. (91 cm) in height, 2010. Photo: David Revette. **7** Storage jar, 15 in. (38 cm) in height, carved stoneware, 2004. Photo: Brantley Carroll.

could be consumed by his anger or he could look to the strengths of his cultural heritage. He began studying East- and South-African art and culture. MacDonald was fascinated by the extent to which surface decoration, mark making, and pattern making were applied to every conceivable object available (living or inanimate). It is remarkable how one significant question and MacDonald's willingness to look in a different direction for inspiration were critical in setting a new course for his iconography as a potter.

#### The Emergence of Pattern

Those who are familiar with MacDonald's work know that surface pattern defines his pottery. The use of carved patterns emerged from a confluence of MacDonald's incessant work ethic, his research of African culture, and the direct and indirect influence of his earlier teachers. For example, Bob and Bettye J. Stull were on their way to the East Coast for a holiday break, so they stopped to visit the MacDonald family for a couple of days. While hanging out in the studio, Bob noticed a small wooden tool that MacDonald used to smooth out edges on his pots. He said to MacDonald, "You made an interesting tool there. You could probably do some very nice carving with it on your pots." MacDonald resisted but in time gave it a try. He was pleasantly surprised to find that this small, hand-fashioned piece of ebony worked perfectly to make his now-famous carved patterns on his leather-hard pots, one line at a time. Bob Stull, always the leader and teacher, saw the potential sitting right in front of him.

Having gotten to know MacDonald, his friends, and a few of his students, I am struck by the work ethic and commitment which he continues to demonstrate day in and day out. His involve-

ment with clay mirrors a responsiveness to others around him. His wife's interests as a quilter inspired his *Quilt* series. Echoes of large-scale platters made by Zirbes and Stull's journey into an African-American ceramic aesthetic linger in MacDonald's repertoire. His current work is more confident than ever; his pottery speaks for itself. To me, his vessels speak to an elegant simplicity and complexity which is distinctive of his style. My advice to fans and collectors is to buy, and buy now. However, I am most deeply touched by David MacDonald's generosity as a humanitarian and teacher as he shares his love and passion for clay with others, working within a space of mutual dignity and respect. I am sure that his teachers could not be more proud of him.

**Author's Note:** This article is dedicated to the memories of Joseph W. Gilliard and Robert "Bob" J. Stull, whose legacies live on in the life and work of David MacDonald.

*David MacDonald and his wife, Dorcas, have been married for 49 years. They raised three children: Joseph, Jennifer, and Jeffrey. He continues to make pottery, exhibit, and lead workshops across the country. In 2016, he was featured in A Craftsman's Legacy, a video documentary hosted by Eric Gorges.*

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Subscribers can see CM's 1965 coverage of Bob Stull's work on our website: <http://ceramicartsdaily.org/ceramics-monthly/subscriber-extras>.

## INSCRIBING AND CARVING A PATTERN

Once MacDonald has developed his idea and has the design worked out in advance, it is time to realize the finished surface of the vessel, in this case a plate. He uses two main technical processes: inscribing the pattern then carving the pattern.

Before beginning the decorative process, he turns the leather-hard plate over and creates two holes in the outer foot ring so that it may be hung on the wall. Turning the plate back over to begin the design, he establishes a circular border with inscribed lines. This demarcates the central and perimeter areas of the plate where the patterns will appear. Then, using simple but precise geometry, he divides the plate in half, measuring equal distances in opposite directions. Using a similar method, the plate is then divided into quarters (1), followed by eighths, and finally sixteenths (2) using marks and inscribed lines.

Once the plate's surface has been divided into subsections, MacDonald carves the circular border between the central and perimeter areas of the plate. He recommends selecting a tool that best achieves the result you desire for carving

leather-hard clay. MacDonald uses a strip of ebony wood, which he fashioned specifically for this carving technique (3, 4).

He then uses a flexible straight edge to inscribe the dominant motif with greater detail in the central area of the plate. Following that step, he typically inscribes the pattern on the perimeter sections of the plate using the divider and a flexible straight edge (5). Then, going back to the center of the plate, he carves the pattern of the main motif one line at a time (6, 7).

After the central area is complete, he proceeds to carve the pattern in each section of the perimeter area on the plate, again one line at a time. Water is applied as a lubricant to facilitate the carving (8, 9).

The plate is sprayed periodically with water to keep the surface from drying out too much. Once the carving is finished, the plate is allowed to dry completely and the carved areas are cleaned up (10). As a final step, MacDonald scrubs the surface with fine steel wool to get rid of ragged, rough edges, leaving the carved plate ready for glazing.

*Photos: Courtesy of the artist.*

