Sue Tirrell

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FRONTIER CERAMIC ARTIST

by Andrew Buck, Ed.D.

Historic Ceramic Imagery

The story of drawn or painted pictorial images on ceramic forms is not new. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City houses a collection of early historic ceramic pieces with hand-painted imagery dating back to 3800 BCE. Among them, we may find a ceramic storage jar with an image of an ibex (mountain goat) which originated in Iran and pieces of pre-dynastic Egyptian ware showing flamingos and horned ungulates. These examples illustrate how animal motifs were incorporated into simplified, stylized paintings that adorned vessels thousands of years ago.[1]

In today's landscape, we benefit from a tapestry of ceramic history where painted clay surfaces include, but are not limited to: Chinese blue-and-white ware, Delft ware, majolica, Native American pottery such as work from the Acoma Pueblo, and hand-painted wares of Pablo Picasso, Kurt Weiser, Grayson Perry, Dudley Vaccianna, and Roberto Lugo. To me, there are significant shifts in meaning when stylized imagery on clay vessels is used across a spectrum of decorative, symbolic, ritual, narrative, or expressive purposes. Within this range of possibility, the narrative and decorative strands stand out in the work of Sue Tirrell. Her hand-painted and carved work is thoughtful, offers compelling yet simplified designs, and is based on authentic ranch life in Montana. Consequently, there are distinct tones of Americana that reverberate throughout her contemporary functional ceramic work.

Sue Tirrell: Adventures in Contemporary Ceramic Imagery

Tirrell is a contemporary American ceramic artist living in Montana. As an accomplished ceramic artist, she is quite adept at creating images that allude to other things. While she utilizes recognizable images of farm animals commonly found on Western ranches, these depictions are not always meant to be taken literally. For example, in *Black Animal Stack Platter*, Tirrell uses sgraffito techniques resulting in a linoleum-cut style of rendering to depict a tower of animals, with each one stacked upon the other. We see a cow, a pig, a goat, and a rooster perched in a statuesque form. The cow comes complete with a contemporary ear tag, which ranchers use to catalog the cow's birthing history, lineage, and other medical records—a subtle nod to the 21st century. The vertical arrangement offers associations to a pecking order and an implied hierarchy. Memories of George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* may begin to flash in your mind. Reference to a food chain might be working on some level, especially since the platter could be used at dinner to serve a variety of dishes containing meat from any of these animals. Those who are familiar *The Bremen Town Musicians* by the Brothers Grimm might also recognize the arrangement on the platter as a reference to that specific fairytale.

Unpacking potential meanings from this one piece gives us a clue about what makes Tirrell's work interesting and worthwhile. She is skillful and talented at rendering stylized images of animals that are accurate and expressive. The two-dimensional imagery engages viewers with a variety of fine lines, bold shapes, and interesting marking patterns. While her strategy to animate the rest of the surface with plants and flower blossoms is eye-catching, it also provides a suggestion of a setting or environment for the scene. Incorporating decorative flowers provides stylistic contrast to the main figures in the work. The flowers appear fanciful, reminding us that the entire image is a product of the artist's thoughtful imagination. In the *Black Animal Stack Platter*, she has drawn upon a historical literary reference and given it a uniquely contemporary twist based on her life

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1 *Chicken and Stump* dinner plate, porcelain, drawn, carved, and underglaze surface decoration, fired to cone 6. **2** Sue Tirrell working in her studio. *Photo: June K. Doolittle.* **3** *Dazzling Beasts Adrift in the Arctic,* porcelain, drawn, carved, and underglaze surface decoration, fired to cone 6. **4** Storage jar decorated with mountain goats, ceramic, paint. Chalcolithic period. ca. 3800–3700 BCE, Central Iran. *Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1959.*

experience, knowledge, and interest in farm animals in the Western frontier of Montana.

Some people might be inclined to dismiss Tirrell's work as regional or provincial; but that would be erroneous and misguided. Also, even though her work seems to express a feminine sense of compassion and relation to the world, I wouldn't label or categorize her as a feminist artist. Some readers may disagree, especially since some of her work subtly seeks to shift perceptions about who and what is a Western frontier woman. To me, her artistic spirit seems strongly self-determined. This is in keeping with a distinctly American frontier attitude and the very strong individualistic impulses of our visual fine art culture. Tirrell is who she is. She finds herself immersed in an environment characterized by the drama of human interactions with nature and the animals that she loves. Her personal interests within this context flow directly into her art production.

From high school onward, Tirrell has used art as a vehicle to understand and explore the complex world of human interactions with animals. Her artwork frequently alludes to interactions between animals where issues like dominance, predation, threats, protection, survival, and death are immediate and real. She follows the advice of John Gill, her teacher at Alfred University, who said, "Everything that you do or experience in your life goes into your artwork. Put whatever you are interested in and most passionate about into your work."

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Image and Narrative

If, in the development of new work, she doesn't know how to draw an animal to her satisfaction, she searches images online for visual references to get the right shape of the head of an animal, or the proportion of the legs. She asks herself questions to generate ideas for new work. The back story to the *Green Goose and Snake Platter* is an interesting example. It just so happened that one day Tirrell received an invitation to submit work for an exhibit entitled "Killer Pots," which left the interpretation open to the artists. She thought about how chickens eat grasshoppers, but that didn't stir her imagination. Then she remembered a very nasty old goose she came face to face with while farm-sitting. Her feelings toward this particular goose ranged from dislike to fear because this bird was so aggressive. She had never seen anything like it and was happy when the owners of the small farm returned so she wouldn't have to worry about it anymore.

She asked the family why they kept this very unpleasant goose amidst all of the other relatively peaceful farm animals. Their answer surprised her. It turned out that the goose would attack and eat rattlesnakes. The goose was protecting the chickens, guinea fowl, and all of the other farm animals. With this insight, Tirrell's perceptions of the goose changed from an aggressive trouble-maker to hero-guardian. She commemorated her new understanding in a series of plates and a platter, achieving a very powerful design, recasting the goose in a heroic, protective role.

Viewers may be struck by the simultaneously playful yet serious tone of Tirrell's work. In *Chicken and Stump Dinner Plate*, there is an emboldened rooster who stares majestically and defiantly, standing on a stump awaiting what might be his last breath. The scene is set but the story hasn't been told. The worn axe and axe handle are at the ready. It is anyone's guess how the story ends. It is easy to imagine that the rooster will not simply stand there and be still while his butchering takes place. Who knows? He might be able to outrun his executioner. Alternatively, he might put up a real fight and leave a few scratches and gashes as a reminder of his sacrifice. The open-ended story invites us to imagine a variety of possible outcomes. The starkness of slaughter also reminds those sitting down to dinner to consider where their meal comes from.

Image and Allegory

Transforming and shifting perceptions is an important role of artists in society. In *Allegory of Fois Gras*, Tirrell creates a new image of a controversial farming practice—the making of foie gras, a delicacy made of fatty livers of geese that have eaten overabundantly. In natural seasonal rhythms, geese overeat extensively before the winter months. Since ancient Egyptian times, geese have been force-fed to provide year-round availability of foie gras. Quite recently, a Spanish farmer who used only natural feeding practices won a coveted international prize for the best foie gras, stirring up a remarkable and lengthy controversy.[2] Foie gras was banned by California for several years based on inhumane treatment of animals (force feeding by tube), but the law was later overturned by federal courts. Tirrell tackles a politically charged and socially relevant farm-to-table food issue that transcends place and gender, and gently disarms it though her artwork by asking, "What if?"

5 *Black Animal Stack Platter*. **6** *Green Goose and Snake Platter*. **7** *Allegory of Foie Gras*. **5–7** Porcelain, drawn, carved, and underglazed surface decoration, fired to cone 6.

Tirrell re-imagines the act of feeding and fattening a goose as a very intimate and caring gesture, akin to how one would nurse an abandoned pup or kitten. The young woman wearing a flowered shirt with the red circles on her rosy cheeks, seems to be in harmony with the natural order of which she is a part as she feeds the goose. As an allegory, Tirrell is inviting viewers to think about human beings and their relationship with their sources of food. What kind of care goes into an animal that becomes food? How close is human touch in that process? At the end of the day, why might that be important?

Image and Celebration

Animals, food, and farming go hand in hand. In Tirrell's world, horses that are trained to work on a farm are particularly close to her heart. To raise a horse, to train a horse, and to really know a horse over a long span of time is an intimate experience.

Of course, Tirrell loves drawing horses too. She has been doing it most of her life. She never rode for show; however, as a youngster, she was mesmerized and fascinated by rodeo queens—cowgirls who dressed in loud, flashy attire, led town parades, and ushered cattle and horses out of the arena at the end of each event during rodeos. Singer Patsy Cline helped popularized the dressy cowgirl look during the 1950s. Contemporary rodeo queens sport ornamented cowboy hats, embellished chaps, sparkling belts, embroidered jackets, and custom boots as they participate in annual state and national competitions. Tirrell was moved by an impulse to commemorate the idea of the rodeo queen and went all out in terms of providing a highly ornamented surface on *Trick-Roping Cowgirl*, a busy and showy platter—exactly what being a rodeo queen is all about. Tirrell didn't get to become a rodeo queen in real life, but her image of one is enshrined in the public imagination, full of vim, vigor, and vitality. The piece is rendered with a caring hand, an eye for detail, and a firm grasp of compositional design that works on a ceramic form. Tirrell serves up a plateful and then some.

Future Prospects

While Tirrell makes her living as a full-time potter, she also has a deep passion for sculpture. Her sculptural works are not as visible in the public spotlight, nor is she as prolific in that area. She aspires to have more time to spend in the studio working on handbuilt sculpture, which is very time consuming. Since the intrinsic rewards of making sculpture outweigh the extrinsic ones, she has to prioritize her functional work for now. I hope that she has more time and opportunity to devote to her sculpture going forward. Her intimately scaled handbuilt sculptures cast images of American frontier women in new perspectives. I am sure many collectors would appreciate this three-dimensional work. For now, we will have to wait and see what new stories emerge in Tirrell's ongoing conversation between clay and image.

1 http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/324917
2 TED Talk by Dan Barber https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_barber_s_surprising_foie_gras_parable

To see more of Sue Tirrell's work, visit https://suetirrellceramics.com.

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Drawing, Underglazing, and Carving

Before launching into a how-to session, it is helpful to keep in mind that creative work takes place in a cultural and personal context and history. For example, Tirrell inherited an interest in Rosemåling from her grandmother. Rosemåling is an 18th- and 19th-century Norwegian decorative folk art that involves hand painting wood and furniture with embellished designs and patterns. Old Norwegian coins and her grandmother's drawings, which were passed down in the family, fueled Tirrell's aesthetic sensibility. Tirrell was also heavily influenced by a high-school art teacher who encouraged her to draw all the time. Drawing became second nature to her as a teenager. This proved helpful when she studied later with Cameron Crawford, a contemporary ceramic artist whose portfolio includes a tract of visual narrative work.

Tirrell has mastered a visual vocabulary for composition, so she seldom relies on preliminary drawings. She approaches a leather-hard platter or plate with an idea in mind and begins sketching directly onto the clay body. If she is dissatisfied with the details or elements of the drawing, she rubs it out and re-works the basic design, which blocks out the

Lightly sketching the design and composition.

Blocking in large areas of color with underglaze.

Blocking in additional areas of the figure on leather-hard clay. The color chosen depends on the final design of the figure's clothing.

Carving through the underglaze to add linear details to the figure, horse, and flowers prior to applying smaller areas of color.

large areas of color. Her extensive experience with pre-formulated underglazes, designed for brush application, enables her to apply underglazes confidently with a fresh sense of immediacy. The secret to her success is to work patiently and steadfastly as she fills the clay canvas with color. The photo sequence simplifies her process but captures her overall process in developing an image on clay. In the photograph of the *Trick-Roping Cowgirl* platter (9), there is a subtle silver sheen on the hindquarters of the horse. That is not an error of photography. It is making reference to the healthy hair of well-fed, well-groomed horses which can glisten radiantly in the sun.

All of Tirrell's work is fired in oxidation and produced using a mid-range porcelain clay body. She bisque fires to cone 04 and glaze fires her ware to cone 6 in an electric kiln. Tirrell throws her bowls, mugs, and pitchers on the wheel. She handbuilds her plates and platters using slabs and coils on top of an unfinished drywall work surface. After the underglazed greenware is bisque fired, the pieces are dipped in a food-safe clear glaze in preparation for the final firing.

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Embellishing the figure with small areas of added underglaze color and pattern to reinforce the idea of a rodeo queen's showy appearance.

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Adding detail colors with underglazes using smaller brushes.

PROCESS PHOTOS: JUNIE K. DOOLITTLE.

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Layering underglaze colors to create the mottled coat of a dappled horse.

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Finalizing the underglaze details on the horse prior to allowing the piece to dry and bisque firing it.

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Trick-Roping Cowgirl, porcelain, drawn, carved, and underglazed surface decoration.