

ADRIAN KING

The Potter's Apprentice
COMES of AGE

by Andrew Buck, EdD





Opposite: Two yunomis, 5 in. (13 cm) in height, red stoneware, flashing slip, soda fired to cone 11 in a gas kiln, 2017. **1** Mugs, 6 in. (15 cm) in width, red stoneware, nuka glaze, flashing slip, white slip-trailed decorations, soda fired to cone 11 in a gas kiln, 2018. **2** Canister pitcher, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, red stoneware with ash glaze, wood-salt fired to cone 12, 2017.

We shall try to formulate more specifically our problem in pottery, in the following way: it is to create forms out of a formless and boundless multitude of clay masses, forms that have originated in the conception of the potter, that have grown out of his idea of beauty, his skill as a craftsman and his total intelligence, feeling, and belief as a human being . . . For not just any form, but expressive form, imaginative and live form is the aim of a potter. —Marguerite Wildenhain¹

Successful helicopter pilots, surgeons, and potters have something in common—they become masterful in their respective fields through experience. The margin for error is slight across the board for all three. However, happy accidents and chance events are more likely to occur and be accepted in the process of making pottery by hand. Serendipitous markings and idiosyncratic forms distinguish these as one-of-a-kind pieces of pottery. However, I am fairly certain that Adrian King, an expert production potter, doesn't rely primarily on chance events for his success. His ceramic work is measured and assured, which is a direct outcome of having created thousands of hand-thrown vessels on the potter's wheel. We can easily imagine that muscle memory takes over in his ritual of throwing clay on the wheel, transforming a spinning mass into a vessel for storing, eating, or drinking. Under his expert touch,

the clay moves in exact directions from precise openings to measured pulls that shape the clay body into finished pieces that are proportionally alike again, and again, and again. Height, width, depth, bottom thickness, wall thickness, rim shape, and subtle or straight side contours are spot on. It is a performative dance, a song of motion, as practiced hands meet moving clay. As an attuned and aware potter, King responds to each and every nuance of moving clay in a temporal act of creation. It is in this special place that we find this youthful, easy-going, and sociable yet serious production potter hard at work.

Beginnings

Adrian King grew up in Massachusetts, north of Boston. He was introduced to pottery in high school, attracted to the fun-loving atmosphere of a pottery class taught by Jennifer Rumbo. King liked throwing pots so much that he just kept making them. His interest in pottery was stoked by the collections at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston² and also those of the Pucker Gallery where he could actually hold pieces by Tatsuzo Shimaoka and his apprentices.³ As a high-school student, he began firing his functional work to cone 10 in reduction at an art center in Beverly, Massachusetts. He built a portfolio that was strong enough to gain admission into



several prestigious BFA clay programs. However, King decided to go to Maine College of Art because it was closer to home and he was impressed by their facilities. As an undergraduate student, he continued to throw pots and deepen his understanding of Japanese ceramics. His work was heavily influenced by the Japanese Mingei Folk Art movement. In particular, he admired the work of Shoji Hamada and Tatsuzo Shimaoka, as well as American practitioners such as Randy Johnston, Jan McKeachie Johnston, Warren McKenzie, and Jack Troy. At Maine College of Art, three of his professors, Marian Baker, Lucy Breslin, and Mark Johnson pushed King to think critically and deeply about his work. Through her professional practice, Marian Baker set an example of what it might be like to work as a studio potter.

Transitions

After King completed his BFA, his artistic life stalled briefly. He worked as a cook in restaurants, and was reluctant to enroll in an MFA program because of the expense and debt load associated with graduate school. His struggle to make ceramics without a studio was a source of dissatisfaction and frustration. He decided to reach out to Jeff Shapiro, a renowned wood-firing potter in New York with strong Japanese influences, to serve as an apprentice. Shapiro did not have any openings and instead referred King to another well-established wood firer, Mark Hewitt, who maintains a studio in North Carolina. Hewitt gave King a one-week opportunity in the fall of 2012 to assess his skill levels and see how they would work together. Would they get along well, day in and day out, working year round in the busy studio? At the end of the week, Hewitt offered King the job.

Apprenticeship

Training through apprenticeship is built on the notion of modeling. In this case, Mark Hewitt was a great role model for King. Hewitt is a legendary folk potter whose sprawling studio is nestled in the idyllic North Carolina countryside. Hewitt, a British-born potter, apprenticed with Michael Cardew decades ago.⁴ Hewitt's work builds on European functional traditions as well as a rustic American folk aesthetic drawn from the Carolinas. Hewitt's pottery is also wood fired using Japanese-style kilns. This matched King's interest in fusing a hybrid of American and English slipware with Japanese folk pottery. King toiled, worked, and learned from Hewitt over a three-and-a-half-year span. While the experience did not culminate in a cap-and-gown ceremony, King walked out a professional. Upon reflection, King learned to embrace the idea of, "staying close to what works." He also came to the pragmatic realization that, "you are selling yourself, not just your work." These guideposts accompanied all of the procedural skills he learned, which included how to throw pottery expertly; glaze work; stack, load, and fire the kilns; and most importantly, how to sell pottery effectively.

Exploration of Useful and Expressive Form

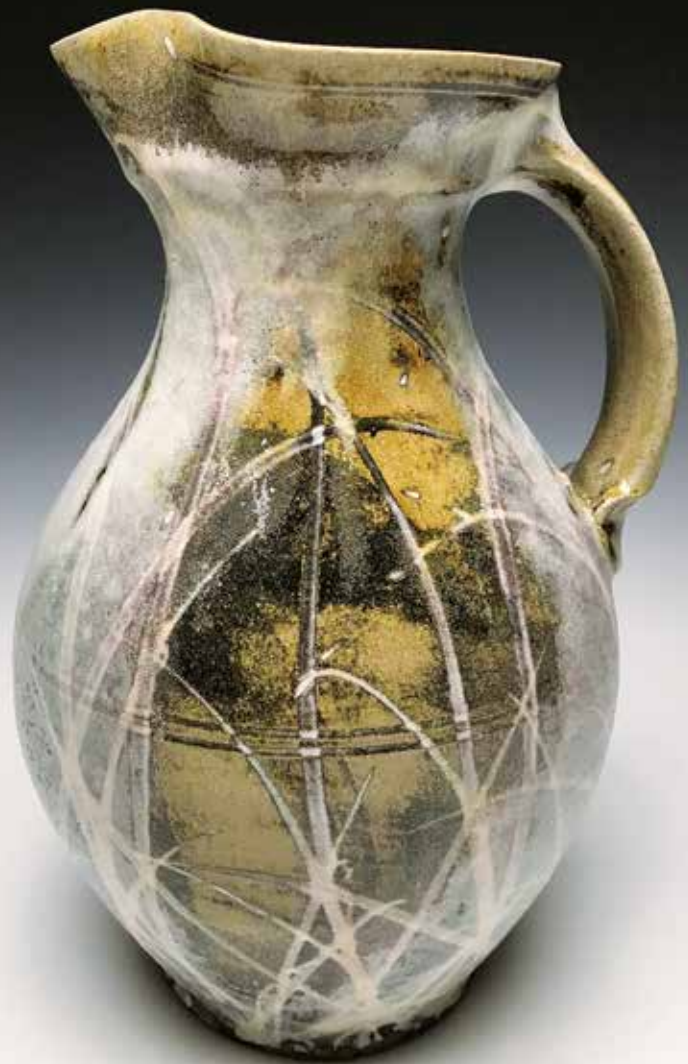
King currently lives in Portland, Maine, where he produces and sells useful pottery. He also works part time as a ceramics technician and instructor for Maine College of Art. Studio production is a satisfying part of his life.

His pottery business grows through new and repeat customers. His two-prong strategy is simple and low key. First, be present in the neighborhood (like being visible at crafts fairs, farmer's markets, and holiday sales events); and secondly, be pleasant. He has found that if people like you and your work, they are likely to become repeat customers. For now,





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3 Yunomi, 4½ in. (11 cm) in height, stoneware, white slip, shino glaze, wood fired to cone 12, side fired on shells, 2017. 4 Box, 4½ in. (11 cm) in height, unglazed red stoneware, wood fired to cone 12, 2018. 5 Dinner plate, 11 in. (28 cm) in diameter, red stoneware, white slip-trailed decoration, tenmoku glaze, soda fired to cone 11 in a gas kiln, 2017. 6 Ginger jar, 13 in. (33 cm) in height, red stoneware with white slip, titanium white glaze, soda fired to cone 11 in a gas kiln, 2017. 7 Canister pitcher, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, red stoneware, nuka glaze, white slip-trailed decoration, soda fired to cone 11 in a gas kiln, 2018.

he prefers direct sales over gallery representation or the Internet, though he uses Instagram to feature new work.

His current work fuses a Japanese folk-pottery aesthetic with an American folk-pottery tradition. King's pottery is confident and unpretentious as well as tactilely and visually pleasing. His portfolio includes plates, bowls, canisters, jars, vases, pitchers, and Japanese teabowls. His steins and plates are robust, combining solidity with simplicity. His yunomi wares offer patrons the pleasures of drinking from a contemporary, though informal, tea cup. The sculptural leanings and slip decoration of his canisters effortlessly capture the viewer's attention. It is a good thing that King persevered in following his vocation. Individually and collectively, King's pottery expresses his sensitive, disciplined touch and his awareness of historical antecedents. His pottery also expresses a sense of joy, strength, durability, and completeness. It is satisfy-

ing to know that King has found a path to happiness by creating genuinely useful pottery for which there is a growing, appreciative audience. Ultimately, King's pottery expresses as much about its owner as it does the maker.

Learn more about Adrian King's process on page 40. To see more of his work, visit www.adriankingceramics.com.

the author *Andrew Buck, EdD is an artist and arts writer who enjoys contributing to Ceramics Monthly. To learn more, please visit <http://andrew-buck.net>.*

1 Marguerite Wildenhain. *Pottery: Form and Expression*. Photo Story by Otto Hagel. Enlarged Edition. American Craftsmen's Council. Reinhold Publishing Corporation, NY. 1965. p. 30-31.

2 www.mfa.org

3 www.puckergallery.com

4 <https://hewittpottery.com/about-mark>

Warm Throwing: Large Work on the Potter's Wheel

by Andrew Buck, EdD

Artists get ideas from everything around them. Sometimes ideas lie dormant and take a while to take hold; but then they spring to light and action follows quickly. In this case, King felt the impulse to try something new and make large-scale vases. He was inspired by work he had seen his mentor create several years ago.

Four Sections Thrown and Warmed

To construct work of this height, he threw the pot in four sections, used calipers to measure the fit carefully, created interlocking grooves at the top of the sections (to nest them together when joined), moistened the work-in-progress at precise locations, and most importantly used a propane torch

kit to dry the lower sections enough that they could support the weight of added sections.¹ This literally kept the clay body warm throughout the entire wheel-throwing process.

King began by throwing the first segment (1). He developed the thickness of the rim and cut a groove into it with a sharp metal tool (2) before completing the final shape of segment one. After drying the first segment with the blow torch to stiffen the walls (3), he then measured the rim (4) and threw the second segment.

While the second segment was still attached to the bat, he inverted it and attached it to the first piece (5). When those two were joined (6) and dried with a blow torch to achieve needed rigidity, he moved onto the third and fourth segments (7). He



1 Throw the initial cylinder and smooth the surface using a large metal rib. **2** Use the edge of the rib to establish a grooved rim for the second cylinder to rest inside. **3** Firm up the thrown form using a blow torch so that it can support the weight of added sections. **4** Measure and check the diameter of the second cylinder with calipers. Do not cut the form off or remove it from the bat. **5** With both cylinders created and dried to a sufficient rigidity, attach the second cylinder to the first. **6** Now stacked, smooth out where the two cylinders are joined together.



replicated the same process (8) without distorting the true roundness of the form, which is much easier said than done.

Focus on Consistency

Each segment tapered slightly outward or inward depending on the final contour he wished to realize for the finished vase (9). This particular piece was tall and slender and, in his quest for consistency, was modeled on one built a few weeks previously.

At the top of the fourth segment, King pushed the clay wall inward (10) to create a base for the finishing collar, which was thrown separately (11). In contrast to a wide-open, bell-shaped flare, this collar extended straight upward to maintain a sense of visual vertical motion. He joined and smoothed the pieces

together (12), making any final adjustments to the lip of the rim of the rim while the piece spun within his hands (13).

After running a wire tool under the base (14), with pluck, and experience, he lifted the large vase off the wheel head and set it aside for slip decoration. Later, he applied slip to the entire piece and embellished it with a simplified design of lupine, a lovely flowering plant that grows from Maine to New Zealand.²

¹ Weed-burner style propane torch such as Lincoln Electric's Inferno Propane Torch Kit or Flame Engineering's Weed Dragon Torch Kit. While these products are available in most hardware stores, use at your own risk.

² Australia is known for cultivating a sweet variety of edible lupine. However, most varieties have seeds (lupin) that may cause severe allergic reactions. This makes sense since lupine is a legume, a member of the bean and pea family that also includes peanuts. Interestingly, in terms of its connotations for renewal and rebirth, the lupine plant is also associated with robust increases in soil fertility through its nitrogen fixing abilities.



7 Begin to throw the third cylinder. **8** With the third cylinder attached, begin to shape this section to the form and its rim. **9** Attach the fourth cylinder. **10** With the final cylinder attached, begin to bring in the walls of the top cylinder. **11** While making the finishing collar, measure the inset needed to fit into the top of the cylinder. **12** Attach the collar to the form, then smooth the join and refine the transition. **13** Now that the collar is attached, the final shaping can be done. **14** The finished vase can be cut from the bat with a wire.