

From Medicine to Pottery

by Tim Saunders

“Camellias don’t grow in chalky ground. Good luck.” A short note the potter Mike Dodd received from his father responding to the news that his son did not wish to pursue medicine at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Dodd was a student there between 1962 and 1965. Instead, his passion was for clay, something that had been brewing since his teenage years at Bryanston School in Dorset, England.

“If I’d known the difficulties involved with becoming a potter I probably wouldn’t have gone through with it,” he admits. “At that time there were no books apart from *A Potter’s Book* by Bernard Leach.” He had seen inspirational exhibitions by Leach and Shoji Hamada and he was excited at the prospect of becoming a potter.





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1 Jugs, to xx in. (xx cm) in height, porcelain, ash glaze, 202X. 2 Portrait of Mike Dodd in the studio. 3 One handled flattened bottle, 5 in. (13 cm) in height, peat clay, ash glaze with river iron, 202X.

Dodd found a small, derelict cottage in Sussex, which he rented for £2.10s (\$2.58) a week. He had a small Morris 1000 pick-up, purchased for £60 (\$74). Clay was cheap and he managed to get 4,000 bricks to build a kiln from the old power station at Shoreham, which was closing down. He was in business.

“I’ve been at it ever since,” he says, adding, “I only considered stopping early on to become a woodman, to help a wonderful character called Charley Wooha Fish.”

Donald Potter

At Bryanston the aptly named Donald Potter, taught pottery, sculpture, and metalwork. “Don had a wonderful eye, a sense of beauty that was unfussy, unpretentious and honest,” Dodd recalls. “Primarily his approach was perceptual not conceptual, felt not thought. He used to put Bernard Leach pots about the place—he let them speak for themselves. This was the beginning of my visual education through feeling. For the first time in my life, I felt deeply drawn to something; something I knew I understood. I was enjoying myself learning.”

A retrospective of Don’s life’s work was held at Dorset County Museum, England, in September 2002.

Kiln Building and Bernard Leach

During his time at Bryanston, Dodd made friends with Peter Schofield, whose mother was the painter Peter Lanyon’s sister. She knew many influential people in the artistic community around St Ives including Bernard Leach. In the summer holidays, Dodd and Schofield built kilns including a wood fired one from a plan. This valuable early experience became a great skill, especially when considering the cost of an off-the-shelf version.

“In Cornwall, Peter’s kiln building was less successful and on one long memorable day we dripped oil onto a staggered metal plate (with added water to atomize the oil into a fine spray for efficient combustion) and roasted the firebox until the firebricks themselves were melting and dripping onto the floor,” smiles Dodd. “The excessive heat however was not moving from the firebox to the chamber. We were cooking air to about 2642°F (1450°C). Looking into the chamber, we could both see a fine network of cobweb-like filaments, linking the pots. We had no idea what they were. However, since then it has occurred to me that we may have inadvertently and innocently created carbon fiber!” Schofield’s mother phoned Bernard Leach to see if he could help. “He arrived and was tall with a tobacco stained mustache. He pointed out that



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4 Waisted vase, xx in. (xx cm) in height, porcelain, ash glaze, 202X. 5 Waisted vase, 10½ in. (27 cm) in height, Nuka over river iron, 202X.

the chimney was too narrow to effectively take out the volume of gases hence there was insufficient draw to suck the flames through the kiln.” This proved a very useful lesson for Dodd. “The following day we were both invited to view Bernard’s selection of exhibition pots, which were about to be shipped to Japan. It was a generous, educative gesture, which I have not forgotten. Thank you Mr. Leach.”

Kiln building has stayed with Dodd throughout his career and has seen him build other creations in England and Peru.

Making Pots

For Dodd, throwing pots is “a real combination of feeling and intellect” and he doesn’t venture into the technical side too much. “I know enough about chemistry and the composition of minerals to make an informed guess about what’s going to happen,” he says. “The rest I do empirically. Science can’t be used to predict quality so I guess melts and for glazes use just a few local materials such as granites, hornfels, andesites, and wood ashes. Initially, there was an emulative side to my potting: I couldn’t think of a better shape than a Leach jug or a Hamada dish. But, you gradually find your own voice. You might have a vision of something in your head, but when you make it, the gap between that vision and your ability to execute it is enormous. That’s what keeps me going. You can’t produce good work all the time, but if that gap disappears you can become bored or stuck.”

During the early part of his career, Dodd was concerned with decoration, finding inspiration in nature. “My decision was to use marks that I understood,” he says. *The Downs Bowl* was an early attempt to represent his surroundings.

Establishing Potteries is Second Nature

After Sussex, Dodd went to Cornwall to join his friend Peter Schofield in setting up a pottery on his parents’ estate. There he met Svend Bayer, who had established his pottery at Sheepwash, Devon, following an extensive trip to Korea, Thailand, and Japan. “He had returned with copious notes and drawings of kilns,” says Dodd. “Svend suggested I build a small Thai kiln similar to one he’d seen being used to fire modern examples of earlier celadons for the export trade.”

A lucky discovery came when Dodd and Schofield found that there was a free supply of clay nearby. China clay was first discovered by Whitfield back in the 18th century and it so happened that one of the first extraction sites was just behind Godolphin Hill, a stone’s throw from where the pottery was based. “Pete and I checked it out on a map, borrowed a tractor and trailer and visited—exploratory digging exposed a rootbound white clay. A couple of trailer loads were collected and mixed with mica waste from a chinaworks near St Just, sawdust and some binding ball clay. This foot trodden slop mix was placed on sheets of asbestolux, heated from underneath, and when stiffened, cut into various brick sizes.”

Peru

An opportunity arose when a young New Zealand potter stayed and helped Dodd with a firing. “He was traveling back home via Peru to help Connie Talbot set up a pottery for a community of Amuesha Indians at Oxapampa. Connie had heard about my kiln in Cornwall and during her trip to Oxfam and Survival International to finalize funding, she visited me.” She asked Dodd to build a kiln, in Peru. So from 1979 to 1980 Dodd was there doing just that. “As the pottery came together the kiln I was there to finish was the final touch, giving it an economic viability of its own. This kiln was very similar to Svend Bayer’s first kiln. It was built of 10,000 unfired handmade



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bricks, with eight sidestoking holes and a large firebox. We fired it raw with 2,000 pots, several hundred bricks, and saggars.”

Teaching

Back home, Dodd was offered a professorship at Zaria University, Nigeria in 1981, which he rejected, having also been offered a job at Carlisle College of Art, which he accepted. So from 1981 to 1986, Dodd was teaching studio pottery at Cumbria College of Art. From 1986 to 1994, he established and ran Wellrash Pottery in Cumbria while writing articles for Pottery Quarterly/Real Pottery.

Form and Function

Simple practicality lies at the heart of Dodd’s making; there’s nothing fancy or high-faluting in his repertoire: simple bowls, colanders, pots, and serving dishes—made to be used, not just to be admired. “I envy the peasant potter who made things which were wanted and needed,” he wrote in Artists Newsletter in 1982. “He directly participated in the lives and survival of his community. Over the last few decades many new forms have arrived and are still arriving. The majority in my view are badly assimilated, half-understood, carelessly considered products of an age trying to find its feet in this new freedom. Paradoxically, most are less free because of it. They are, instead, contrived. The ideas and forms are expressions of suspect motivation i.e. to be different, to impress, to sell, to shock, to be fashionable, etc. They lack wholesomeness—they are a clear and precise expression of the disintegrity within us and around us. The fact that this is so for me in no way implies criticism.”

Dodd’s work is available through Goldmark Gallery, Rutland, England.

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6 Dish, 11¼ in. (30 cm) in width, peat clay, ash glaze with river iron, 202X. 7 Cup, xx in. (xx cm) in height, materials, 202X. 8 Vase, xx in. (xx cm) in height, porcelain, cobalt glaze, iron decoration, 202X.