

## POTS WITH A VIEW

### The Work of Richard Hensley and Donna Polseno

by Kevin Hluch

Sometimes it is said that a thing of beauty is a joy forever. This is especially true in regard to the pottery of Donna Polseno and Richard (Rick) Hensley. For 30 years, these two artists have produced art that has met the highest standards of creative expression. Although they are self-effacing, they do acknowledge and value the beauty, grace and utility of their work. Because of these qualities, their pots give lasting and deep satisfaction to those who acquire and use them.

In contrast, it appears contemporary consumer culture overlooks the value of lasting beauty, grace and utility. This is particularly true when one considers the endless stream of inconsequential products manufactured season after season. The vast majority of these items, after a purposefully truncated existence, are rightfully deposited in the landfill. Fortunately, some artists, including Hensley and Polseno, have taken a contrasting perspective to the creation of goods.

The fixing of important humanistic values into objects is the goal of artists in general and potters in particular. Not surprisingly, the most treasured and admired historical objects found in

the world did not arise from a mechanized or automated form of mass production. Today, these intensely valued things spring from the hands of inspired, creative and skilled individuals.

Hensley and Polseno are two of those people. Each received undergraduate degrees from the Kansas City Art Institute and graduate degrees from the Rhode Island School of Art and Design. Those experiences formed the bedrock of their approach to ceramic art. But each has traveled a slightly different track toward their own unique aesthetic.

Recognizing the intrinsic value that historical art objects possess, Hensley and Polseno's vision suggests a path trod by the ancients. Unlike many artists who, by choice or necessity, seek teaching positions, these two artists immediately established a pottery and devoted their lives to creating art full time. Making good pots is an arduous process that requires years of effort, and Hensley and Polseno have only encountered a few detours along the way.

They create objects that will never decrease in value over the years. Interestingly, typical corporate ventures emphasize the short-



"Cream and Sugar Set," to 6 inches (15 centimeters) in height, mid-range porcelain, with layered glazes, with wax resist and liquid latex, by Donna Polseno.

term bottom line while artists, on the other hand, emphasize the line itself.

Undeniably, the generation of income is an important part of the artistic process for any artist—not just for potters. But the phrase “first art, then commerce,” more accurately describes the fiscal orientation of artists. Great financial gain in the arts is possible only in a minority of cases. Certainly, most historical artists were not adequately compensated for the treasures now held in museums throughout the world. And archaeologists continue to discover even more objects that manifest the most important concepts held by a given group of people.

It seems, therefore, that the role of the artist is this: to artfully freeze in material form the most important values, customs and beliefs of a culture. By doing so, the objects transcend time itself and, in the vast majority of cases, the artifacts are haltingly beautiful. Therein lies the true value of an artist's creative work.

Fortunately, Hensley and Polseno have attracted a regional and national following who understand the significance of their artistic efforts. The individuals who own these wonderful pots will likely pass them down to a cohort of future appreciative owners.

True, the present moment is too fleeting and immaterial to give us the necessary information to make an absolutely accurate con-temporary assessment of any particular art object's worth. But those artists whose works spring from the concept of beauty certainly have a much better chance for longevity than those who manifest the grotesque or, worse, the blatantly ugly.

Potters, in particular, are artists who strive to imbue useful objects with grace, a certain elegance and ease of use. The dedication of an individual's intellectual and emotional sensitivities toward the creation of this type of work is both a noble and important goal. This is what the best potters do. And the work of Hensley and Polseno certainly exists within this realm. They have engaged these sentiments in their ceramic work. There is not a fleeting charm like that of a cloud passing from horizon to horizon, but a beauty that lasts. Bearing the rich burden of ceramic history on their shoulders, these two potters are serious about their work and have little interest in fads or passing fancies.

Not surprisingly, this orientation led them to establish a pottery in one of the most gorgeous and more isolated places in the United States: the Appalachian Mountains of western Virginia.



"Cups," to 4½ inches (11 centimeters) in height, porcelain with stamped decoration, fired to Cone 10, by Richard Hensley.



The pottery is located adjacent to the Blue Ridge Parkway, a meandering asphalt ribbon snaking through a landscape filled with lush forests and expansive vistas. Having settled there 30 years ago, they have put down deep roots by establishing a pottery, gallery and a lovely home. They also have raised two children in the shadows of the mountains.

For an artist striving to create elegance and beauty, what better place to be inspired than far from the chaos, confusion and stress of the urban scene? After all, it is nature itself that sets the ultimate standard and provides the most ringing inspiration for artists.



"Tea Jar," 6 inches (15 centimeters) in height, mid-range porcelain, with layered glazes, with wax resist and liquid latex, by Donna Polseno, Floyd, Virginia.

This affinity with nature's splendor can readily be seen in Hensley's and Polseno's work. The work of both artists evokes the clear visual fragrances of the woodland that enriches their everyday rural environment. The warm and sometimes cool greens, yellows, tans, oranges and browns that reside in each spent autumn leaf light up the surfaces of their pottery.

In Polseno's work, the color seems attached to the surface of the pottery like lichen to rock. The harmony between the form and surface ensures a sincere marriage between both. This, in turn, accents the volume of each pot. The matt surface also helps diffuse the light so that soft shadows accent the three-dimensionality of the forms. The dark values that set off the principal colors are reminiscent of the thunderclouds that roll through the valleys and bump against the irregular crests of the ancient mountains that surround the studio.

The forms that characterize the volumes of their pottery also are softly rounded. It is as if they too have borne the brunt of the ages. Squares curved, circles broken and ovals stretched out speak to the underlying natural structures pervading the artists' environment. The harsh, angular geometry of mountains has been softened by time and that very same languidness is present in their work.

Within the details of these forms lay qualities tuned to the quiet brilliance of nature. Tendril-like handles sway, twist and undulate like vines wending their way through the tree's branches to the sky's life-giving light. These characteristics are particularly true of Hensley's work. Spouts and handles appear fixed to the body of the pot as if their lives depended upon it. Attachments and protuberances meld themselves to the primary form like the cap of the tiny rotund acorn.

This vision of how the parts connect with the whole is part and parcel of good design in pottery. Without this insight, the pot simply becomes an accumulation of unrelated elements that serve neither utilitarian nor aesthetic purposes. It is the cumulative sum of these parts that suggests more than the isolated individual elements.

Polseno's pottery in particular embodies forms that are associated with the coolness of partially melted, cubed water. Generally, these forms depict a chilly stillness found in the duller, colder days of winter when the light is lean and the air constricts the breath. But the shapes also portray an affirming and confident solidness of form reminiscent to the muscular haunches of a well-bred animal. Her work springs from plaster molds that help to enhance that solid feeling of strength, control and robustness. Her pottery forms wrested from the plaster emerge strong, sturdy and ready to stand up and take notice.

The surfaces of her work are layered and complex, and benefit from the co-mingling of molten glazes. Her glazes gain a rich but subtle complexity via the slow-motion volatility found when the glazes are deep in the melt.

On the other hand, Hensley's work is more aggressively fluid, both in form and surface decoration. He imparts a looser, more spontaneous feeling to the work by manipulating the clay while it is soft, pliable and susceptible to collapse. The clay is stretched, pressed and prodded with unique stamps, each a shimmering memory of a wooded ramble, a detail captured here or there by the subconscious enquiring mind.

His work is more tied to the watery side of ceramic expression, especially in the use of glazes. The rivulets of the ashlike glaze flow over the forms as the streams flow through the blue ridges of the Appalachian chain. The forms, strategically stamped with a wisp of pattern, catch and play with this flow, adding richness to the surface as the glaze tumbles down the miniature landscape of impressed ridges and depressions. Likewise, his plates and platters

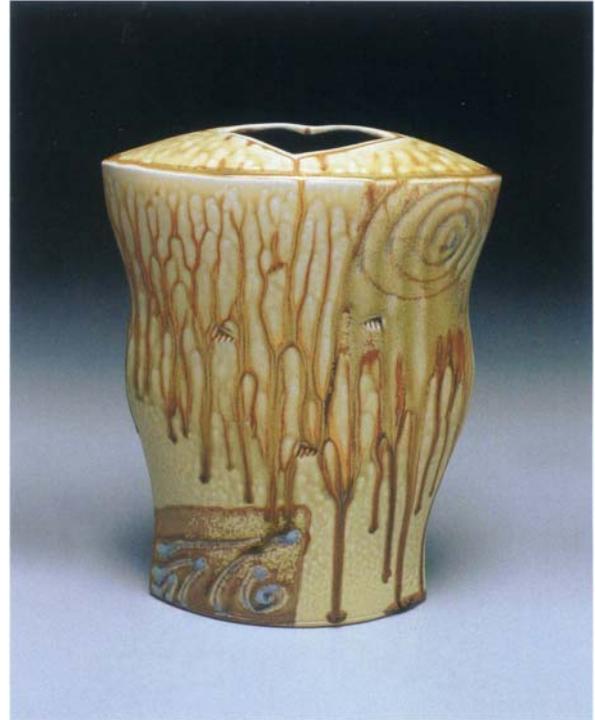
reflect shimmering light much like the rays of the sun that glance off the swimming pond nestled in a hollow near their home.

Perhaps it's Hensley's love of viticulture, which brings some of these formal elements to his work. His rows of grape vines that require meticulous tending directly reflect the kind attention he devotes to his pottery. The constant work with these vines—trimming and tethering those long whispery strands—most certainly influences his decoration and handle making.

Hensley's palette of colors is subdued, but on the lighter side of the value spectrum. His work almost seems to emanate a soft glow as if lit from the inside. The translucency of his glazes allows the porcelain clay's voice to speak in a muted but important tone. The rich, buttery texture of the glaze also adds another level of sensuousness as a pitcher, mug or bowl meets the hand.

In the work of each of these artists, a sense of refinement resulting from 30 years skill in craftsmanship comes to the fore. In fact, it is the love of this work that becomes a fundamental part of the expression.

This view of art making reflects in a microcosm the richness that surrounds them and is one that they impart in the work. It is a struggle to make good pots. And, yes, it also is a struggle to make a living making pots. But they are not simply making pots. They are sharing, with all those who are capable, a love of life, of nature and of pottery.



"Vase," 18 inches (46 centimeters) in height, porcelain with stamped decoration, fired to Cone 10, by Richard Hensley, Floyd, Virginia.



"Teapot," 5 inches (13 centimeters) in height, porcelain with stamped decoration, fired to Cone 10, by Richard Hensley.