

A DIFFERENT LANGUAGE

by Donna Polseno



It was an unusually sultry day in the mountains of Liguria when I made the acquaintance of an elderly gentleman. We were eating a huge meal that the hunters of the community prepare every year. The gentleman was obviously educated and spoke beautifully in an Italian that was not the dialect of the area. After a bit of conversation, he told me that I spoke Italian quite well, which pleased me enormously. I know that my Italian is not fluent, but I love speaking and learning it so much that any encouragement is appreciated. As we were heading for the dessert course, my new friend corrected me, saying, "If you want to speak the language more perfectly, one would say ..."

This happens to me often. Studying languages (Italian and before that French) has been my passion for years. The more I study and learn, the more I am corrected. Everyone can see that I am curious and eager to get it right. As a teacher of ceramics I know that the more driven the student is, the more I push them, so I consider it a compliment when I am corrected.

My teacher, Ken Ferguson, always called me a late bloomer. I was an adequate student, but it was not until several years after I finished school that he recognized that I might actually amount to something. It has been the same with languages. I was lost as a college student, but years later I decided to try my hand at French again. I had a real incentive in French friends I had managed to keep in my life for fifteen years. To my shock, something clicked in my brain after just two months of study. When I went back to France, my simple French was understood and vice versa. I did not know it at the time, but that experience, like the viewing of a ceramics slide show that Victor Babu gave when I was a freshman, was the beginning of a lifelong commitment, a spark igniting an investigation and a real passion.

Breakthroughs in a language are similar to a feeling I get in my studio work. Often I struggle with a new idea or form, feeling it is going nowhere or is technically beyond me, when suddenly it all comes together. I experienced the same amazing feeling when, having studied French avidly for two years, I was in Paris to immerse myself in the language. I was with a friend who spoke no English. One night after many glasses of wine, Marie Annick was telling me a long story about her mother-in-law. Lying in bed in the dark, I suddenly realized that I was no longer translating; I was just understanding the conversation as a whole. It all came together. It all made sense.

I now spend each summer in Santa Maria, Liguria, with my husband, Richard Hensley. At the little family bar one night, a neighbor told a long joke—in Italian, of course, as no one up here in the mountains speaks English. I really got the joke, and everyone seemed so pleased. It brought to mind how driven I am to communicate with others. I have never traveled anywhere without learning at least some basics of the local language: how to say that the food is wonderful; how to ask how many children someone has or what kind of work they do; and especially, how to say thank you. I have learned to do this in Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, Chinese, and Thai. I work hard to express myself in words, but while my ceramic work, especially my sculpture, is very much about communicating, I am always a bit surprised when someone tells me that they experienced the work in a similar fashion to what I meant. I do not expect that people



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BACKGROUND: Donna's notebook.

RIGHT: Birds on the Barn, 2012.
Mid-range white clay, 10 x 5 x 5 in.

PRECEEDING PAGE TOP:

Donna speaking Italian.

PRECEEDING PAGE BOTTOM:

Woman on an Edge, 2008.

Earthenware, 37 x 12 x 7 in.



will understand my meaning in clay as in language, but I am equally pleased when either form of communication succeeds.

For years I have memorized verb conjugations and vocabulary. I am fascinated by idioms or ways Italians express themselves that you cannot find in a textbook (such as the use of *faccio vedere*, to make one see, instead of *mostrare*, to show). I have notebooks full of words and phrases in both French and Italian, and I read most novels in one of these languages, in order to learn more and to keep in mind what I have worked so hard to learn. My close friends in Santa Maria have just started to teach me important words in the dialect, because I have become integrated enough into the community after several years of coming here. It took me quite a while to know when they were speaking the dialect instead of textbook Italian – another wonderful breakthrough for me, as I had thought for a long time that my Italian just was not up to speed.

I take great pleasure from this pastime that I can get better at but never really perfect. Once I spent an hour in a park trying to say “psychiatrist” in French well enough to satisfy my park-bench neighbor, who had asked what my friend in Paris did for a living. I feel great when I have managed to use the imperfect subjunctive at the appropriate time, or spoken confidently enough in the *comune* office to talk them out of a late fee on my property tax. I wander my mountain valley engaging my friends and acquaintances in stories of life here: the *orto* (kitchen garden), the *cinghiale* (wild boars), the *alluvione* (big flood), and the abundance of *sussine* (plums) this year. I can now understand most of what they are saying in the little alley streets below my house, when they are speaking not to me but amongst themselves. They are always speaking about food: the first ripe tomatoes; the *funghi* (mushrooms) they found, where they found them, what they will make with them, whether they will dry them or cook them fresh; how many *fiori di zucca* (zucchini flowers) they gathered and the best recipe for frying them.

It is a fascinating world unto itself and very akin to a bunch of potters talking about cones, glaze ingredients, and oxidation and reduction. Last summer during a meal with Carlo, our closest friend here, and a friend from France, I spoke a different language with each friend and even translated between them at times. This carried the same excitement as a good kiln opening.

For me this process of learning is a journey. I will never really be fluent, as I am not a native speaker and I started too late, but the joy of going forward, the excitement of discovery, the momentary job well done, brings their own rewards. I feel the same with my ceramic work. I am always trying to go forward, to try new things and enjoy the process. There are good pieces and bad ones. The best ones or the worst ones are not the end of something, a place to stop, but merely the beginning of something else, the next stage.

My love of ceramics and my love of languages feed each other in many ways. Both have taught me to have discipline and courage. I have changed my ceramic work a lot over the years, not always receiving a very positive reaction, and I have launched into conversations in French and in Italian and completely embarrassed myself. The lessons from each of these have crossed over to the other and taught me to move forward, to work hard, and not to get too discouraged. The pleasures and setbacks of my passion for languages feel very parallel to and intertwined with my life as an artist. Both connect me strongly to the world around me.