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Teascapes: The Exploration of an Object

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"Tea is a work of art and needs a master hand to bring out its noblest qualities. We have good and bad tea, as we have good and bad paintings, generally the latter. There is no single recipe for making the perfect tea, as there are no rules for producing a Titian or a Sesson. Each preparation of the leaves has its individuality, its special affinity with water and heat, its hereditary memories to recall, its own method of telling a story. The truly beautiful must always be in it. How much do we not suffer through the constant failure of society to recognize this simple and fundamental law of art and life; Lichihlai, a Sung poet, has sadly remarked that there were three most deplorable things in the world: the spoiling of fine youths through false education, the degradation of fine paintings through vulgar admiration, and the utter waste of fine tea through incompetent manipulation."

Tea dates back over two thousand years, spans five continents and throughout its known existence it has evolved into an icon of ritual and tradition. The Chinese were the first to discover tea for its medicinal purposes and later it became known as a drink that could enliven the spirit and even alter consciousness. I will discuss the discovery, evolution and history of tea, along with the invention of the modern teapot and its own evolution from the world of craft into the realm of High art. Finally I will discuss the influences that technology and modern ceramic artists have had on the creation of my own work in the field of teapots as an art form.

According to history, the discovery of tea (by chance) is attributed to Shen Nong who reigned in China nearly 2,800 years ago. It is said that while the “Divine Farmer” was classifying plants of great medicinal value to his people, he fell asleep under a tree. He awoke to find that several leaves of the tree had fallen into his pot of boiling water. Curiously he tasted the concoction and noted it as being very good and slightly bitter. He had fallen asleep under a Camellia Sinensis (fig.1), or as we know it today the tea tree.
Camellia Sinensis (fig.1)

The years to come would create a language all its own in reference to tea's cultivation and harvesting, its preparation and consumption, and a new way of thinking in terms of how we perceive all things around us. The easiest way to describe the evolution of tea is to break it down into three major periods of development. They are as follows: the Boiled tea, the Whipped tea, and the Steeped tea. An equivalent in terms of art would be the Classic, the Romantic, and the Naturalistic periods of evolution. I will try and parallel these three schools of tea with the evolution of the modern teapot in terms of its role in ceramics and its place in the world as an art object.

The first school or period is the Boiled tea. At this time tea was picked, dried and eventually ground into a powder and mixed with a number of things including salt, butter, citrus peel, and even onions. This mixture was then combined with boiling water, strained and drank as a thick mixture or soup. The second is the Whipped tea, the type of preparation most associated with the Japanese Tea Ceremony. A powdered tea is
whipped into froth in a chawan, or tea bowl, with a bamboo whisk. Originally the Japanese imported all the implements deemed necessary for producing tea, even the seeds of the Camellia. The Tea Ceremony, or Chado (literally the Way of Tea), evolved in its own way. The smooth and bright porcelain of China gave way to the Taoist and Zen movements and the idea of Wabi Sabi began to take over in governing the selection of tea wares in this ceremony. Wabi Sabi refers to the beauty and worth of the imperfect, incomplete or irregular. Its literal interpretation is “frozen, withered beauty”.

The third school of tea is the Steeped tea, the third way of preparing tea leading to the creation of the teapot and what we consider as the modern way of releasing the essence of the Camellia. The labor intensive process of picking, drying and grinding has given way to whole leaf infusion. With this new way of brewing tea came a new vessel for the official production of tea as a whole. As this new process of steeping tea began to spread around the world, many tried their hand at producing the teapot. In Europe alone there were hundreds of different teapot makers and a hundred more different types of teapots.

Archaeological study in China has shown that the teapot dates back to the sixteenth century and is thought to have been created in the Province of YiXing (EE-Shing), an area know for its abundance of clay deposits. The early teapots served a dual function not only as the brewing kettle but as the drinking vessel itself. This was ultimately the first teapot and, like all things in this world, it has undergone an evolutionary change over its lifetime.
Modern day teapot makers are still concerned with the general premises of what makes a great teapot, such as how well it pours, how well-balanced it feels when handled, and the angle of the spout. There are too many factors to list when talking about the "perfect" teapot. Ultimately, it seems that the underlying feature in all teapots is its utilitarian function. Artists such as Steven Hill (fig.2), Peter Meanly, Steve Woodhead, Warren Mackenzie, and Tom Coleman make wonderfully beautiful teapots and, for the most part, they all work in terms of utility.

![Teapot by: Steven Hill (fig. 2)](imageurl)

The final evolution of the teapot, or the fourth school of tea, is what I like to call Tea art or referential sculpture. All of the aforementioned potters are just that, potters, and very good ones to say the least. But the teapots they create are representations of their ancestral past. It wasn’t until I saw the work Don Reitz, Ken Ferguson and Brad Schwieger (fig. 3) that I began to realize what was happening in the world of ceramics.
The teapot has been released from its utilitarian roots and raised to the company of fine sculpture in a way not seen before the Abstract Expressionist movement following the Second World War. I believe that a sculpture that is referencing "the teapot" is just as functional as a teapot by any other name.

My current work deals with the teapot as a form; to me the teapot is the ultimate form in ceramics. It is just as important as the still-life or landscape in painting. The teapot is the most daunting of challenges for an artist, as the various parts are assembled; the creator is faced with multitude of technical questions within the context of design. 8 "The risk of abandoning an image we hold as an absolute is never easy", 9 that is why I chose to focus solely on the teapot as a means of expression. I believe that all an object
needs is the silhouette of its former self to refer to its past, and my sculptures not only show the evidence of a handle and a long forgotten sense of utility in its closed form of a spout but they emit a feeling of release. They are showing the release of the intrinsic qualities of tea itself and, at the same time, are showing their own release from the confines of everyday utility into a world where reference to oneself is enough to prove your own existence.

Earl Grey by: Chuck Pate (fig.4)

For example, in Earl Grey, I tried to show the release of smells, steam and other properties of tea in the forms rising from the teapot and the cup. (fig.4) The swirling and undulating forms refer to the unseen qualities of what it means to partake of a hot cup of tea. The feelings that are evoked when taking in that first whiff of aroma that sends you places, places you've been and sometimes where you have not been, but it is tea that is ultimately that vehicle for reflection. I am trying to draw the same experience with the material that brought life to the teapot at the beginning of its journey.
I have taken a relatively long time to get to where I am, and it seems that throughout the years and changes that I have been faced with, the one thing that is constant is my love for the natural world that surrounds and entangles us in our journey towards the goals that we set for ourselves. I have tried to encompass those places that I hold dear in my heart in the forms and textures of my work. I present to the viewer not only the clay from which these architectonic structures are summoned but also the image of the canyons of eastern Utah and rugged terrain of the Rocky Mountains. (fig. 5) It was there in the Mountains when I evolved and was released from the shackles of my beginnings and allowed to become who I was destined to be.

Flat Iron by: Chuck Pate (fig. 5)

I am trying harder than ever to show the world where it is that the Teapot, this most humanistic of forms with its spout and life giving capabilities, is headed in the future. The everyday consumption of tea is second only to water. And furthermore, it was Tea that led to the establishment of trade routes and, without a doubt; it was
responsible for the birth of our nation. The idea that the leaves of a plant and their
taxation without representation could spark a revolution is mind-blowing.

This idea of teapots evolving may sound preposterous as teapots are inanimate
objects and it is only through their production do they start to change and grow. Many
artists have tackled the teapot, but only a select few actually step away from the idea that,
for a teapot to be functional, it has to have a physical function. I and other artists have
removed the teapot from the world of physical function and placed this form under the
microscope, if you will, and studied it to no end and have discovered that it is the idea of
tea that is most important. I want to show the teapot as an idea of philosophers and
scholars, not as a device of utility and craft.

I have employed my knowledge of clay and glaze to the best of my abilities, and
have tried to show the qualities of the clay as well as showcase some of the intrinsic
properties of tea itself. In the research of tea I discovered things that I already knew, but
was astounded to find out all of the things that tea has to offer its recipient. The ideas
behind my works in clay are rooted in the long history that accompanies tea and travel
into the future to allow the teapot to stand alone against the test of time as the ultimate
form in ceramics. The work of artists such as Don Reitz (fig.6) has inspired me to think
outside the rules and beyond the boundaries of everyday utility. It has stretched my
imagination to create something that is new and fresh.
That is to say that I am not reinventing the teapot, but simply, and without hesitation, redefining the idea of the teapot. The forms and scale of these works allow the sculptures to stand alone in a place where the teapot is destined to be, the gallery. The simple idea that a teapot is more than a vessel is the basis for all of my research. I want to reveal the feelings and memories that are associated with this most historical of revolutionary substances and reference the teapot as the vehicle of change that has altered the face of the world as we know it. The want and need for me to explore the teapot is so engrained in the history of ceramics it seems almost ridiculous not to. I have chosen it for a multitude of reasons and I could list them all, but that would be redundant. I want the work to release a sense of evolution and transformation. It is extremely important to me that the works show this evolution into the realm of fine art and still hold onto the values and standards that have been established by the many years of fine tuning and tweaking that has brought the teapot to the forefront of modern ceramic art.
I have chosen to use a stoneware clay body that is rich in texture. The rough surfaces that I am creating are not only representational of the natural world around me and the raw nature of the clay but, in some aspects, they are referencing the dried teas themselves. The appearances of the dried teas are just as important as the aromas and the flavors that they possess. The dried teas have also influenced the designs and forms that I am using to express the essences of the tea that are rising up from the teapot. (fig. 7) I am essentially trying to represent the aromas and flavor qualities escaping from the tea leaves as they are steeped.

Darjeeling by: Chuck Pate (fig.7)

By doing such a thing, I am taking a step forward from my contemporaries and showing more than a representation of the teapot and referring to the qualities of tea that are unlocked when added to water. Just like clay itself is transformed to a plastic
material when hydrated and allows the artist to manipulate and alter its shape and forms to release its inner beauty, the leaves of the Camellia Sinensis act in essentially the same manner, releasing their qualities into water contained in the clay vessel. At first the idea of trying to represent the essence and steam escaping seemed a daunting task, but as I began to assemble the first sculptures my imagination took over and I found myself creating these new forms that I had never made before. I have never in my eleven years of creating ceramic art felt so energized by the forming and shaping of clay. The work that I am presenting to you is the best work that I have made to date and, without question, I feel that it is a turning point in my life as an artist and as a man.

I have chosen to name my sculptures after different types of teas and that have given me direction in terms of finishing the works. I am using a variety of firing processes and techniques to accentuate the forms to help solidify their importance. I am firing the work to Cone 10 (or roughly 2380 degrees Fahrenheit) in a gas fired Salt-Kiln with various slips and glazes to highlight certain areas of the form. The salt-firing process involves introducing rock salt into the kiln at a high temperature. What this does is add sodium to the atmosphere, which at that temperature works as a flux and attacks the silica in the clay body. It in turn, causes the silica to melt and form a glass or a glaze on its surface. Essentially the work glazes itself, but I am using the added flux to loosen the applied glazes and slips causing them to flow and run a little more than they would in a clean atmosphere.

Another acquired technique that I am using in my repertoire is Reduction Firing. This again is gas fired at a Cone 10 firing in the range of 2380 degrees Fahrenheit, but unlike the salt-firing no additional substances are added to the kiln. The term reduction
refers to the reduced amount of oxygen in the atmosphere and the overabundance of free carbon. The idea is that, during the early stages of the firing while the kiln is heating up the atmosphere is kept relatively clean in terms of oxygen saturation. As the temperature passes through quartz inversion, when the clay becomes more stone-like and impossible to re-hydrate, the atmosphere is gradually placed into a reduced state by changing the ratio of gas to air. This, in turn, alters the clay body’s color itself by drawing out oxygen from the clay body to be combined with the free carbon. The result of the chemical change is a variation of color in the clay body depending on how hard the atmosphere is reduced and how many impurities are in the body. Along with the changing of clay body color something else more magical happens. In a reduced oxygen atmosphere the actual chemistry of the molecules undergoes a change. For example, Red Iron Oxide has a chemical formula of Fe₂O₃; when fired in a highly reduced atmosphere the free carbons are looking for Oxygen molecules to bond with to become more stable either in the form of Carbon Monoxide or Carbon Dioxide. At high temperatures the molecular form oxygen is drawn out from the clay and glazes and the resulting compound is Fe₂O₂, or Black Iron Oxide. So as you can see a saturated iron glaze can produce a range of colors from deep reds to blacks, depending on the amount of reduction and the amount of iron in the glaze. Another prime example of color changing is Copper. When used as a colorant, copper can range anywhere from that well-known Statue of Liberty Oxidized Green to a deep Oxblood Red when fired in a reduction atmosphere. This is truly where Physics and Chemistry meet in conjunction with creativity and imagination. The whole process of glaze formulation, calculation and production is a journey all its own.
Along with Salt-firing and Reduction firing, I also have included a few low-fire techniques to further enhance and highlight the surfaces and forms of my sculptures. I have employed the use of underglazes, which are ultimately color saturated slips that are stable at most firing temperatures. These brightly colored slips contrast greatly with the raw nature of my constructions and with the overall feel of atmospheric firing techniques. Along with the underglazes, I have used a white pebble glaze that is designed to be applied in conjunction with either the underglazes or on its own to create an effect unattainable in any of my other techniques. This glaze, along with other low-fire glazes such as a brilliant red glaze, is applied over previously fired surfaces and returned to an electric kiln for a lower temperature firing in the Cone 04 or 1850 degree range. I am trying to stretch my limits as an artist, and with the use of multiple glaze and firing techniques, I am able to focus the viewer by drawing attention to smaller areas contained within the vessel. (fig.8)

Hibiscus by: Chuck Pate (fig.8)
It was nearly 60,000 years ago when our ancestors first discovered clay and began the long journey of understanding its limits and possibilities. It is from these humble beginnings that the teapot has evolved. And it is also the place where art began. As more and more vessels were created new ways of thinking were employed which led to decoration and adornment of the surfaces. These ancient relatives of ours were aware of individualism and expressed themselves in ways not seen before. As exploration grew and cultures were intertwined, the world evolved again. With the discovery of tea, a more spiritual and enlightened culture began to take shape, and it wasn’t until many years later that it came to be traded worldwide. When one thinks of teapots, there are many different things that come to mind. I have chosen to evolve in the sense that teapots need only reference their past. In my sculptures I reference my own past; in essence I am the tea that is being released from the forms. Just as the Camellia Sinensis releases its hidden attributes when steeped, I am releasing my gifts in the sense of an enchanter breathing life into an inanimate substance and creating something that can stand on its own as valid.

Camellia by: Chuck Pate (fig.9)
As the artist Hans Haacke stated, an artist has to be interactive with the world around him on an almost constant basis, and one’s findings are vital to his survival as an artist. I related this idea with my time spent in the natural world, the windswept topography of the desert and the craggy rock faces of the Rockies with their subtle color. Those eroded surfaces and colors, more than anything about my assorted tenures here and there, stand out as the defining moments that altered my consciousness. It is the teapot I present to you, altered and evolved from its roots to a place along side the finest art.

Teascapes (fig. 10)
Endnotes


Photo Credits

Figure 1. Camellia Sinensis Illustration, courtesy of www.aromed.com/en/tea.html

Figure 2. Teapot by: Steven Hill, courtesy of www.redstarstudios.org/gallery

Figure 3. Teapot by: Brad Schwieger, courtesy of www.ceramicsmonthly.org/images/covers/1998-2.jpg

Figure 4. Earl Grey by: Chuck Pate, courtesy of author

Figure 5. Flat Iron by: Chuck Pate, courtesy of author

Figure 6. Tea Stack by: Don Reitz, courtesy of http://jsauergallery.com/sagemoon/artistpages/drtz/lg.html

Figure 7. Darjeeling by: Chuck Pate, courtesy of author

Figure 8. Hibiscus by: Chuck Pate, courtesy of author

Figure 9. Camellia by: Chuck Pate, courtesy of author

Figure 10. Teascapes by: Chuck Pate, courtesy of author
Research Sources


