



Val M. Cushing

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Val Murat Cushing

By Linda Sikora

VAL CUSHING DEPARTED HIS HARDER HALL teaching studio and office in August of 1997 after completing his 40th year as an educator at Alfred. The office was vacated but not emptied; selectively left behind were teaching notes outlining theory and practice behind several approaches to pottery form, calculated to advance insight and skill. Also remaining was a cleverly designed rolling box that would hold and keep moist about 250 pounds of plastic clay. A quick drive from the school, up Water Wells Road at the Cushings' property, the ceramic studio was humming with the type of motivated energy the promise of consistent, daily studio work can generate. Val was excited to be headed there.

Val Cushing described himself as fortunate. He felt lucky to have found art school and ceramics at Alfred, and lucky to have discovered it the year he did – 1948. In post-war America, opportunities for artists coming of age, including those directing their inquiry towards studio pottery or industrial ceramic design, were expansive. Val lauded the brilliance of his teachers Daniel Rhodes and Charles Harder for their expertise in art, ceramic history, and materials. Marion Fosdick and Catherine Nelson were spoken of as powerful teachers and examples of committed practicing artists. Val described the discipline and physical acuity gained at a summer





job throwing hundreds of pots, and the night job he held as an undergraduate working on designs for Andover China near Alfred. Most fondly, Val told the story about Marguerite Wildenhain visiting Alfred for two weeks when he was an undergraduate. The highlights he mentioned were her purposeful entrance into the ceramic studio with all her tools in the back pocket of her jeans, and the way she lifted a freshly thrown large platter from the wheel without a bat. The platter was so thoroughly compressed by her exacting “Bauhaus based” throwing skills that it snapped back into round when she placed it upon a ware board.

It was 2011 when the Alfred Clay Collective (ACC), a student organization in the Division of Ceramic Art, invited Val Cushing to be a visiting artist. This was his first professional presentation on campus since retirement and almost exactly the amount of time Val predicted should pass before it made sense for him to return. The auditorium was standing room only. In 2013, the ACC invited Val to speak at Alfred again. In these lectures he constructed a timeline from select pieces and series representing decades of his practice where one inquiry unfolded into another. Val would present the relevant detail of each pot as if it had just been taken from the kiln and was still warm in his hands. He shared easy discoveries and hard won successes that came from glorious failures. Accompanying the pots were images of large-scale drawings that papered the walls of his studio – drawings made to explore, interrogate and dream the work.

Some of the same students who attended the 2013 lecture were still at Alfred when the *Val M. Cushing* exhibition was installed. One morning after the opening, fifteen to twenty students gathered to spend a couple hours in the museum with Cushing’s pots, some of which they had seen in images, and many they had not seen at all. Their scrutiny of meaning, material and process was exhaustive as one after another the pieces were taken from their pedestals to the curator’s table for hands-on inspection. Interiors, hollow handles, cut feet, rims of roll-top *Acorn Jars*, seams on stacked forms, physical weight and wall structure were methodically traced and measured with fingertips. The mechanics of precise fitting lids – a Cushing signature - were tested by a slight twist that sent the lid into an easy spin in its gallery. The exhibition space in Binns-Merrill Hall felt resonant with Cushing’s teachings that day and it was easy to imagine early experiences in Alfred as formative: exchanges between Bernard Leach and Charles Harder debating the finer points of handmade pottery and industrial ceramics; philosophies of “teamwork in design” left behind by Don Schreckengost; expanding ceramic art curriculum with colleagues Theodore Randall and Robert Turner.

Val Cushing’s philosophical and practical concern for the continued advancement of functional pottery within ceramic art education was unqualified. No less urgent was his concern for the advancement of the arts in general, and social justice. One need not converse with Val Cushing for long to witness how deeply he felt on these

fronts. Regardless of which concerns were left at the door of the studio and which were taken in, the ceramic work that resulted was resolute.

Most striking, in the *Val M. Cushing* exhibition, is the prodigious sense of optimism. In the studio, Val trusted the conventions of thrown functional pottery form and vessels to meet his deepest inquiries, and experienced this potential as limitless. Cushing was masterful with the potter's wheel and the formulation of ceramic materials. The rich color he cultivated from mineral, metal oxide and fire collaborated with the landscape surrounding his home. The surfaces were often matt. Hard, tight fitting glazes were intrinsic to the form. It was impossible to resist the taut, believable volumes of these pots – they held a promise. Eight covered jars placed together like gallipots sat authoritatively in the center of the exhibition. For many who had been welcomed into the Cushing household, the display conjured a long counter at the end of Elsie's kitchen. There, shoulder to shoulder and more than one row deep, Val's jars ran the full length. In fact every visible shelf in the kitchen was thus – and every

visible pot, one Val had made. Congregating in studio, kitchen or museum, the lyrical investigation of pottery form moved easily between function and vessel formats. One format advocates for the other. Each is made with commensurate curiosity.

The *Val M. Cushing* exhibition and artist lectures presented at Alfred over the past few years revealed the histories, pedagogics and humanism Val embodied. Many of us were not at Alfred during his tenure to experience this first hand. Regardless, students remain savvy about the importance of Val's work, and plenty of them pack around the legendary orange *Cushing's Handbook*. When they open it, usually it is because they are embarking on research and excited by being at the beginning of something. Clearly, this place of excitement and beginnings is one Val often embraced too.

Linda Sikora is a Professor in the Division of Ceramic Art at Alfred since 1997; her residence and studio is in Alfred Station, NY.



How can a lump of clay end up like this?

Val Cushing