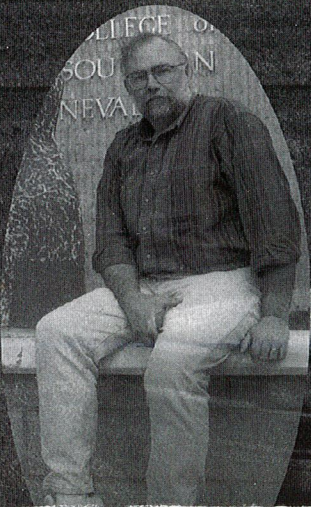


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POTTER

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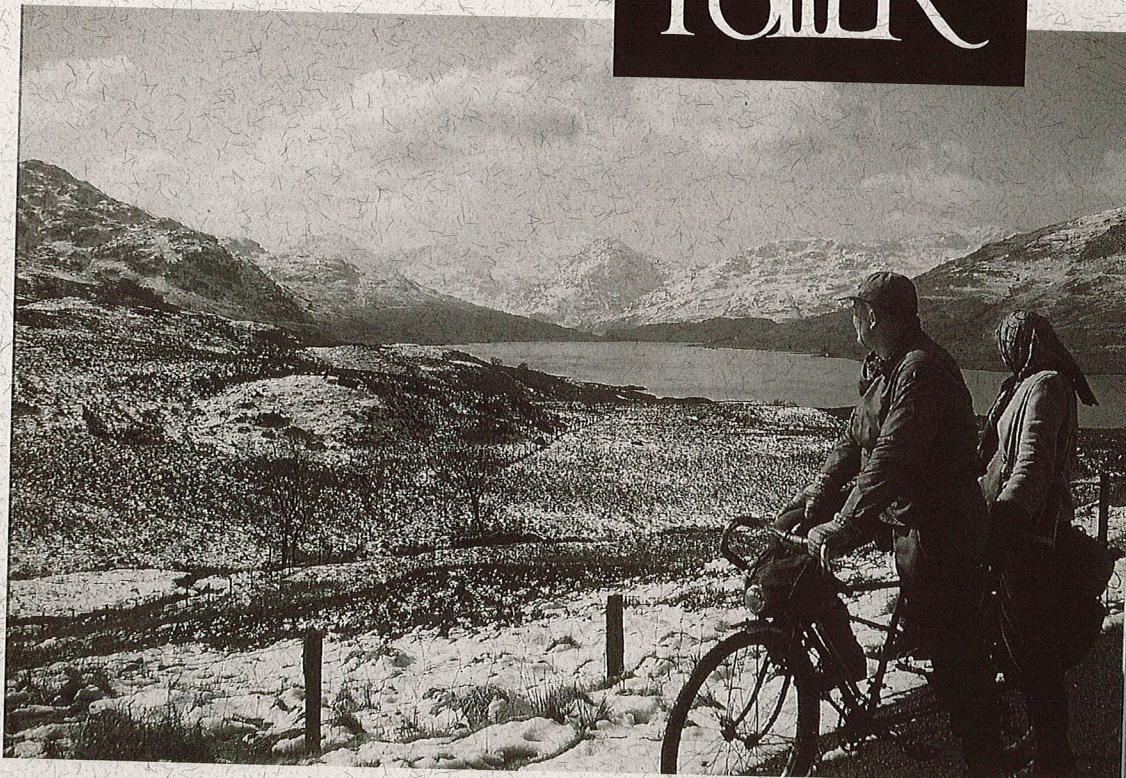
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Living Pots

by Linda Sikora

Recently I found myself in a crowd of several hundred young people. Everywhere I looked I saw platform shoes, elephant pants and halter tops, and I immediately recalled my own youth in the 70s. Nothing undergoes cycles as much as fashionable clothing; the life span of an adored pair of platform shoes cannot be much longer than a season. Renaissance or revival, such a cycle is as much revealing of the present as of the past.

The last few decades of the twentieth-century have actively revived much from the past. I see this in architecture, where a domestic gable is flown up on top of a massive corporate structure. I see this in politics, where fear and prejudice in the electorate is manipulated under the guise of bringing back "family values" (as if we had lost them).

Looking backward, however, can be more than just a simple effort to assemble elements from the past, or even a malicious attempt to gain political or financial advantage. The history of an individual or culture is not static but dynamic, continually being reconstructed. Just as a functional pot represents a particular aspect of utility, so it also holds within itself the framework for an infinite number of permutations, and the discovery of an artifact or record of event is an invitation to immeasurable interpretation.

Making pots in contemporary society, I am drawn into the history of our culture and its materials. On more than one occasion I have found myself drawn toward eighteenth-century porcelain. Imagine a Sèvres tureen from the service of Louis XVI. The table is set by a servant in white gloves, the china, silver and linen just so. The tureen—a single piece in a service of 445 pieces—serves only one of many courses. The ornamentation of the tureen reflects the values of the Court, the guests, the occasion and the period, and was made by the efforts of many people—chemists who formulated the materials into paste and decoration; specialists who made the forms and molds; workers who applied the finials and handles; painters and gilders, for decoration; masters for firing the kilns; and, of course, the aesthetic director. Sèvres was an industry that produced the most elaborate of dinner services for the most privileged of people. A French newspaper, *La Feuillie Necessaire*, reported in May of 1759: "...Sèvres porcelains were so expensive that people can only hope to look...without paying such a high price."¹

My grandfather Guilbault, connected through generations to the French colonizing of Canada, had no such dinner service. Needless to say, very few citizens of France at the time did, or Louis XVI might have kept his head. Nevertheless, my mother did grow up with her mother's china cabinet and then had one of her own. I still keep my mother's copy of *Glamour and the Hostess: A Guide to Canadian Table Setting*. Last year my mother named me executor of her estate and bequeathed me her china.



One of a Pair of Tureens with Platters. Sèvres, France, 1757. Soft-paste porcelain, 34.3 x 40.6 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severence Fund, 1953.25.

Experience and memory shape my interpretation of this aristocratic tureen. I am not the gilding type (yet), but I do love a dinner party. A tureen I make is less ornamental, more stripped down, than the other tureen. Is it my working class background? Still, the tureen I make is a little bit fancy, fancy enough to celebrate and draw attention to itself. It is also elemental in the way it reveals the marks of its making, and democratic in its politics of affordability. As did the

courtiers of Louis XVI, I will serve my victuals festively and provide an occasion for pleasure.

I am informed and inspired as much by the tureen and pots of other cultures as I am by the pots in my home. I live with vases and cups and plates and bowls and teapots and ewers and jars of various sorts. The pots fill my shelves. Some were made by contemporary potters working consciously along their path of inquiry. Other pots were made before my lifetime by shared labor and through the voice of tradition. How often or if, why or for what occasion they are used has as much to do with the choices in my domestic life as with choices made by those who fashioned each pot. The pots themselves influence the order and function of my living space as I press them into use. Was it a vase just for sweet-peas, an ewer rarely used or a cup in service each morning? On special occasions, I take my prized cake mold gingerly from the highest shelf. While I know it is up to the service, its age commands respect. I am less likely to use the oldest pots. I ponder their history and spin tales of their past.

As the history of the pots in my home unfolds, a symbiotic relationship of unexplainable worth is revealed between the user and the pot. The aristocratic tureen, on the other hand, is a work I may never know in such a carnal way. That is a courtship beyond the consummation of use. While many pots capture my attention for a moment at least, certain ones hold it fast. These are the pots visited over and over in museums, looked up constantly in books, pulled daily off the shelf or fondled covetously over tea at a friend's. These are the pots I am grateful to have found. To travel along history's path and to explore humanity through ceramics is a seemingly endless journey. The deepest impressions are as likely to come from discoveries unconsciously made as from intentional research.

FOOTNOTE. 1. *La Feuillie Necessaire*, quoted in Morley Fletcher (editor), *Techniques of the World's Great Masters of Pottery and Ceramics*. New Jersey: Chartmed Book Inc, 1984, p. 54.

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