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### The Image and Its Pot

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Fine and Applied Arts  
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

THE IMAGE AND ITS POT

By

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May 18, 1985



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## INTRODUCTION

Prior to graduate school my experience with clay was mainly the production of utilitarian pottery. The shape of each pot, the relationship of its parts and its surface was determined by each pot's intended use. This meant taking into account such things as the vulnerability of a spout, the ease with which a spoon or fork could remove food from an inside corner, or the relationship of a handle to a hand. To have first made a pot and then figured out how to use it, would have seemed ludicrous. To have realized a new activity in the routine of life and then develop a pot for that reason, seemed to fill the pot with meaning and personal expression.

The thesis project provided an opportunity to focus upon ways in which form, imagery, texture and color could be used to heighten the meaning and personal expression of a pot. Pictorial imagery was especially appealing. In addition to being new and refreshing, pictorial imagery was a way to bring together my interests in narrative subject matter, drawing and pottery. The problem was that all of the extra elements necessary to develop

a particular image interfered with my approach to functional pottery. Carved lines, distorted surfaces and expressive textures got in the way of the domestic activities such as cooking, serving, eating and drinking that I generally associated with utilitarian pottery. And yet it was important to retain the vessel format because of its accessibility - its long standing place in the home. As my thinking along these lines evolved, I became less concerned with the connections between pottery and food and decided to explore the use of pottery forms to express other interests and experiences.

Those experiences which have come from time spent in natural settings have been the primary source of inspiration for the work in this thesis. Using clay to allude to something beyond my expectation of utilitarian pottery has been very helpful. During this attempt to translate some trace of memory or feeling into a clay object, my understanding of the expressive potential of clay and the firing process, and of my experiences, has increased several times over.

### THREE SHORT STORIES

My first trip to the forest river was made on a sweaty summer day. Walking through the undergrowth of ferns and ivys filled the air with moisture and the bittersweet smell of broken vegetation. Except for the faint sound of flying insects, everything was quiet and still. At the edge of the river there was a sudden transition from the dim, heavy air of the woods to the bright, dry air above the river.

The water was clear and, until stepping in, had the illusion of being still. Sore muscles, sticky skin and mosquito bites were instantly forgotten in the cold water. Dark shadows of trout flashed across the colored stones and disappeared beneath the glare of sunlight all around me. Not far from where I was standing there was something golden in the midst of an iridescent shimmer. The iridescence was caused by the silvery-blue sheen of a colony of fresh water clams. The golden sparkle turned out to be a wristwatch with a slimy half rotted leather band still connected to one side. So I wound it up and it worked fine for several years until I lost it somewhere. Of course it was a Timex.

The trout never returned and so I packed up my fishing pole and some clams and continued with the hike. Not far from the river there was an area where the ground began to be soft. Eventually this turned into a narrow band of mud and then a small, still brook no more than eighteen inches wide and a foot deep. For some reason I decided to fish. As there was no place to cast a line, I put a worm onto the hook and dangled it over the water. Just as the worm touched the water a fish bit at it and got itself hooked. The fish was a small brook trout with bright pinkish-orange blushes on its sides and belly. Brilliant speckles of red, green and yellow were scattered everywhere except its dark green back. These little fish continued to leap out of the water and bite at the worm whenever it was lowered to within about two inches of the water. Eventually, I walked on.

After following the path of this waterway for a quarter mile or so, it began to turn into mud again and then soft ground. Apparently, it was either a tiny ribbon of surfaced ground water, or a stream that had had a direct connection to the forest river during some past springtime.

The story about the wild rabbits and the tame apple trees led to the rabbit platters included in the



illustrations at the end of these words. This story developed over a period of several years and had to do with my hobby of growing apples and the biggest obstacle I had to overcome.

While inspecting several recently planted trees one summer morning, I discovered that most of the branches had been bitten off near the trunk. So, in order to keep out whatever had attacked them, I positioned a little fence around each tree. A few days later I drove up the driveway at night and caught a glimpse of one rabbit trying to reach through a fence to the apple tree within. Several other rabbits went scurrying away in the light of the headlamps. It was very satisfying to have found out and outsmarted these rabbits in just a few days. The trees grew well the rest of that first summer, but the rabbits had not made their final effort.

During the course of the following winter, six or eight weeks passed without a thaw. The accumulation of snow was four to five feet deep. As a result, the cottontails could not reach any of the vegetation they were accustomed to eating during the winter months. In their desperation, they decided to try my apple trees once again. The snow had raised the ground level (for a light footed rabbit) to the same height as the tops of the protective fences around the trees. Now

they were able to walk up and eat the tender tops of the trees very comfortably. They ate the entire summer's growth and then some. There is a sense in which I kept the rabbits from eating the trees during the summer months, when they really didn't need them, so that they could eat them in the winter to keep from starving. And so it has gone for the past several years: some summers the trees put on two feet of new growth, and some summers they regain what was eaten by the rabbits during the winter. Some of the weaker trees die in the process.

The one about the two crows and the hawk is very sad. I have long felt that crows are the most obnoxious of all birds. One day an especially hideous cawing by two of them lured me outside to investigate. They were on a high branch taking turns pecking at a large hawk that was standing between them. I wondered why this great bird was tolerating such abuse, when it suddenly left the branch. The crows followed immediately. As the hawk flew away recklessly, I could see a bloody leg dangling several inches lower than the hawk's other leg. I walked after them, but they had soon flown out of view. The hawk was exhausted and the crows would not let it rest. It was too bad that crows scavenge dead hawks because hawks prey upon live rabbits.

There are many other stories which, like these, have left me vivid and accessible memories. These experiences are more than just easy to recall; they continually fill my mind with their sights and sounds and feelings. As the memories and new experiences overlap and run together, they cause a deeper awareness and appreciation of nature. Out of this fullness comes a desire to share what I have learned. Hopefully, the images generated are as accessible and meaningful to others as the memories are to myself.

## ON IMAGE AND FORM

The first attempt at telling one of these stories was a simple line drawing through a thin white slip to a dark clay pot below. Every image that was part of the story was included. The shape of the pot was irrelevant. It was probably naive to think that I could take a stick and make a drawing in wet clay that expressed my feelings about nature. And it was just as unlikely that similar feelings might be felt by someone else if they considered the drawing. Still, it was a place to begin.

One important realization was that an experience such a wading through a forest river has as much to do with the other senses as it has with seeing. Another was that taking someone to the forest river itself could not arouse the feelings that I had felt. In fact, returning there myself has never reproduced feelings like the ones I recall. It was a different day: the air tasted differently, my motive was different.

Eventually, I came to realize that the story was not as important as the images and forms the story inspired. Distilling an experience to its most

important image or images allowed for a work that was less confusing and more engaging. The pots are still narrative, but the curiosity of a single image prompts each person to use their own imagination and interject their own experiences. Substituting carefully selected lines, colors and textures for an abundance of imagery (whether real or imagined), resulted in a more interesting story.

This is not to suggest that by "carefully selected" I am referring to a forming process that was slow and meticulous. Once a specific shape and image had been settled upon, a series of ten to twenty pieces were thrown on the potter's wheel, altered and decorated in a day or two. All of the forming, drawing and coloring (except for the color imparted by the fire) was done while the pieces were still malleable. Out of this relatively rapid process, I was able to further develop a vocabulary of drawing and shaping possibilities. For me, this helps to keep the work fresh and alive. It allows me to work intuitively and be surprised once in awhile. The unforgiving act of engraving a deep line in wet clay thrives on spontaneity and intuition.

The thick and thin quality of the lines was a function of the depth of the lines into the clay and the angle to which the tool had been sharpened. Depth was controlled by varying the pressure on the drawing

tool. By inscribing a deeper line, a darker shadow would be contrasted with the adjacent surfaces and a wider path was established. The dimension of the line was always a response to that segment of the image which the line was producing. The contour line drawings of many artists have been inspirational because their lines suggest three-dimensional form across the flat shapes they create. As the nature of my own lines became more complex, fewer of them were used to develop a particular image. As color, texture and the shape of the pot itself contributed to the image, the quantity of lines necessary was reduced further still. Sometimes the edges of an area of poured or trailed slip created lines which were as visually active as the incised lines. Lines which could suggest movement were also created by finger painting into a thick application of slip.

Finger painting in slip was also a means of achieving textures which could be used to suggest rippling water, trees or rabbit fur. A rich texture which suggested fur could also be obtained by drawing a comb or coarse brush through the wet slip. Building up two or more layers of different colored slips with cut paper stencils over an undercoating of slip produced a subtle texture and the illusion of transparent layers and depth. The texture caused by the salt-glazing process has a tendency to minimize surface variety.

But the salt could be used to add to the variety of textures and colors by juxtaposing areas of slip that resisted salt with ones that did not.

Most of the color was achieved through the use of these colored clay slips. Color consisted primarily of earthy shades of blue, gray, green, brown, white and black. For the most part, color was used literally. Blue was used for water and sky, green for a frog or vegetation, white or brown for a rabbit and so forth. On the most recent pieces, black was used to convey death. The salt-glazing process brightened these colors somewhat and the ash from the wood-fire process dulled them somewhat. Manipulations of the fire and the way pots were loaded into the kiln produced flashes of orange, pink or red. It was much easier to produce these atmospheric colors on the vertical forms such as vases and jars than it was on the platters.

Platters were chosen because of the large, flat areas they provided for drawing. Historically, platters have often been used for commemorative and narrative purposes, and intended for hanging or some other means of display. The platters in this body of thesis work were also intended for hanging on a wall, inside a home.

In some cases, the rim of the platter was used as



a frame to contain and even constrict the central image. By preserving the roundness of the rim, a certain distance was created between the viewer and the piece. When the inside boundary of the rim was interrupted by the drawing, this distance was lessened. And when the entire rim had been altered to emphasize the shape of the image, there was no distance and the sense of containment and constriction was lacking.

After these altered platters, came altered vases and jars. I began with drawings of frogs in various positions on paper, and then cut them out. By considering their silhouettes, it was possible to identify a pottery shape that seemed appropriate or would emphasize the image of the frog. In this manner, a very formal relationship between the image and its pot was established. One shape was made for a frog diving through the water, one for a squatting frog and another for a dead, floating frog. The connection between the image and the pot was furthered by pressing bulges out of the pot which corresponded with the eyes, abdomen and legs of the frog image.

Almost every culture with a ceramic history has a tradition of pottery forms and images on pots which are about nature. Zuni Pueblo Indians used a variety of motifs and images which symbolized and depicted water, frogs, tadpoles and deer. While these ceremonial pots



were used primarily for prayer and thanksgiving, they reflect their users' direct dependence upon nature for survival and inspiration.

Another important source for me has been the many Korean wares which suggest a more contemplative and appreciative attitude towards nature. The soft celadon glazes over wine ewers in the form of bamboo shoots were more about their attitudes toward life and nature than they were about bamboo. These pots enabled their users to bring a fragment of their natural surroundings into their indoor living spaces. They provided the romantic function of enriching the sterility of an interior space and the occasion of their use.

This desire to bring the outdoors indoors can also be observed in eighteenth and nineteenth century Japanese architecture. These architects perfected a gradual transition from a natural space to a manicured garden to open porches and, finally to interior spaces enclosed with translucent panels. Frank Lloyd Wright was inspired by this romantic/organic ideal, and developed the prairie style dwellings that provide this same kind of outdoor indoor presence.

The attitudes of these people towards their environments, and how they responded with what they made, has been helpful in the development of my own response.

I have also been stimulated by the paintings of

Milton Avery. In his work he manages to express his joy of nature and capture the mood of a particular day, or hour of day. At the same time, the work is general enough to allow me immediate, personal participation. This is accomplished through his ability to simplify what he has seen, and order these simple shapes within a key of harmonious color. In her book about Avery, Barbara Haskell said:

... Avery's work reveals his deep response to nature. His landscapes convey the grandeur of nature - but a nature whose character is arcadian rather than alien and threatening. One feels looking at an Avery landscape that the highest human experience is being alone and at peace with the land.

Trying to strike a meaningful balance between the complex grandeur of nature and the simple experience of a moment has been my own challenge as well.

## CONCLUSION

As the intentions behind the pots I was making gradually shifted from utility to story telling, I felt less and less restricted by functional necessity. A long time passed before I was comfortable with the excessive weight caused by a pot that was thick enough to accomodate a deeply engraved line. But, towards the end, making an expressive drawing on the surface of a pot became more important than the pot itself. I was interested in manipulating the shape, color and texture of the pots in any way that might enhance the narrative content of their drawings. In the process, a more meaningful relationship between art and life has been established for myself.

Pottery, whether utilitarian or not, is associated with the concerns of life.<sup>2</sup> This direct connection to life is an important reason for me to work within a pottery format. The message around which the pots have been structured was a further attempt to strengthen and clarify this connection. I feel that the pot is an appropriate vehicle for my work. When it is no longer appropriate or hinders the message, it will be time to abandon the idea of the pot altogether.

At this point, I feel a need to take the concerns

of my work a step further. Many of the beautiful sights which Milton Avery wrote and painted about during the first half of this century are destroyed today. The environment has suffered more during the last seventy-five years than it did during all previous recorded history. A statement made by Aldo Leopold parallels my own observation:

One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well<sup>3</sup> and does not want to be told otherwise.

As long as art is about itself or the trivialities of life, it can afford to be so general that it becomes universal and eternal. This attitude about art, which was so influentially promoted by Clement Greenberg and other theorists of modernism,<sup>4</sup> contributed much to the present impotency of art. Modernism weakened art by taking the concerns of art beyond the concerns of life. This is not to deny the tremendous contributions which the seige of modernism has brought to art and artists. But important issues that effect everyone need to be brought before everyone in a way that can be assimilated by everyone.

The deluge of political art which has sprung up around the issue of nuclear arms in the past several years falls into this type of clear and accessible

category. Robert Arneson has taken the risks of being this specific and clear with some of his recent ceramic work.

Within this same context, I feel a need to attempt a body of work that would raise questions concerning the lack of environmental responsibility so prevalent today. When I talk about using artwork to explore these concerns, I am usually admonished to consider the beauty around me instead. Yet, that is exactly what I hope to do.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Barbara Haskell, Milton Avery (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>Wayne Higby, The Vessel: Overcoming the Tyranny of Modern Art (NCECA Journal, Volume 3, Number 1, 1982), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>Aldo Leopold, The Mother Earth News (Number 85, January 1984), p.6.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Hertz, Theories of Contemporary Art (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1985), p. xi.





Fig. 1. Zuni Water Jar, C. 1880





Fig. 2. Zuni Ceremonial Jar, C. 1890





Fig. 3. Korean Ewer, Koryo Dynasty, c. 1200





Fig. 4. Iranian Bowl, c. 1300



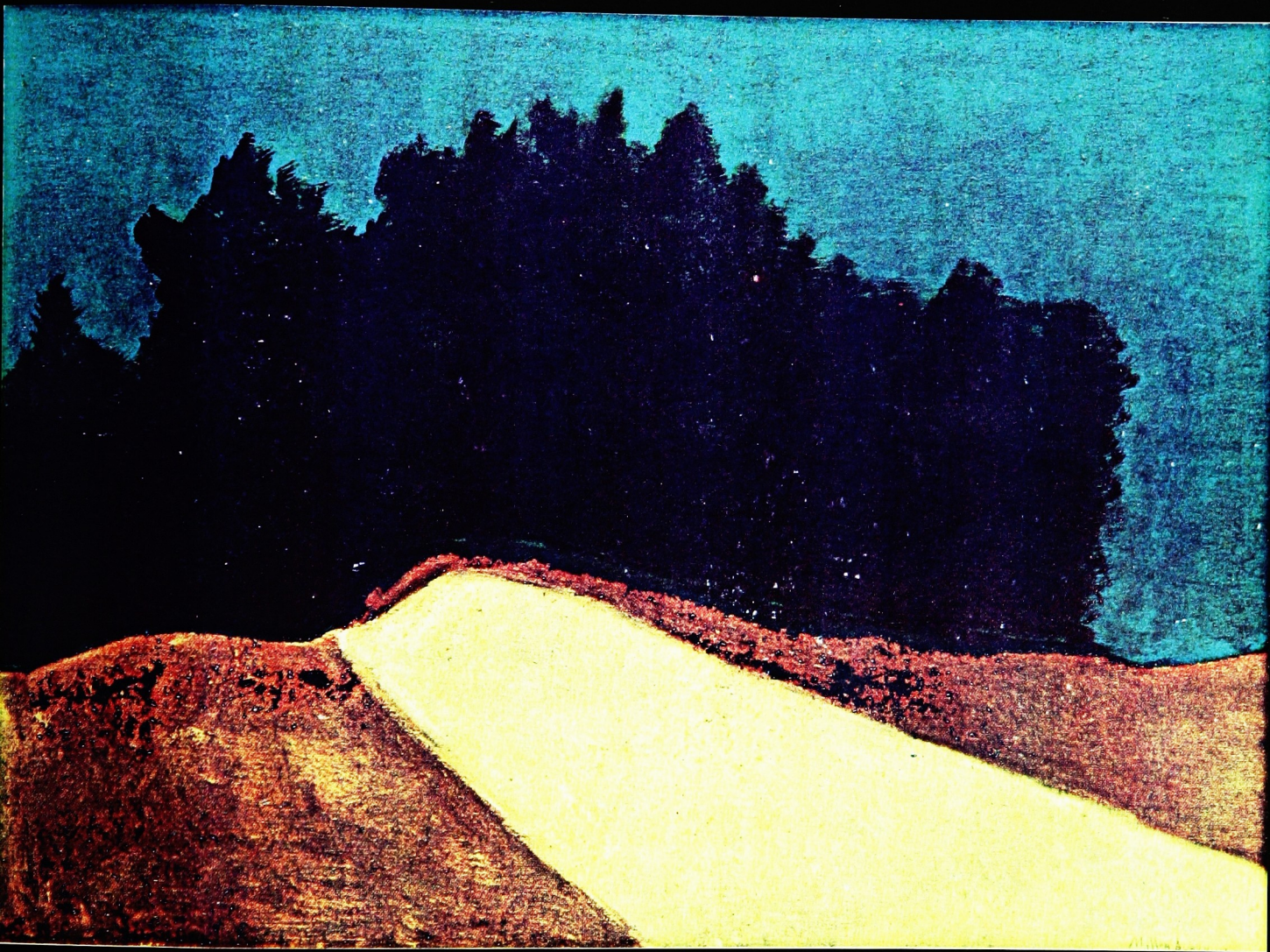


Fig. 5. Dark Forest, 1958 ( Milton Avery)





Fig. 6. Rabbit Platter





Fig. 7. Frog Platter





Fig. 8. Frog Platter





Fig. 9. Frog Vase





Fig. 10. Black and Orange Frog Vase



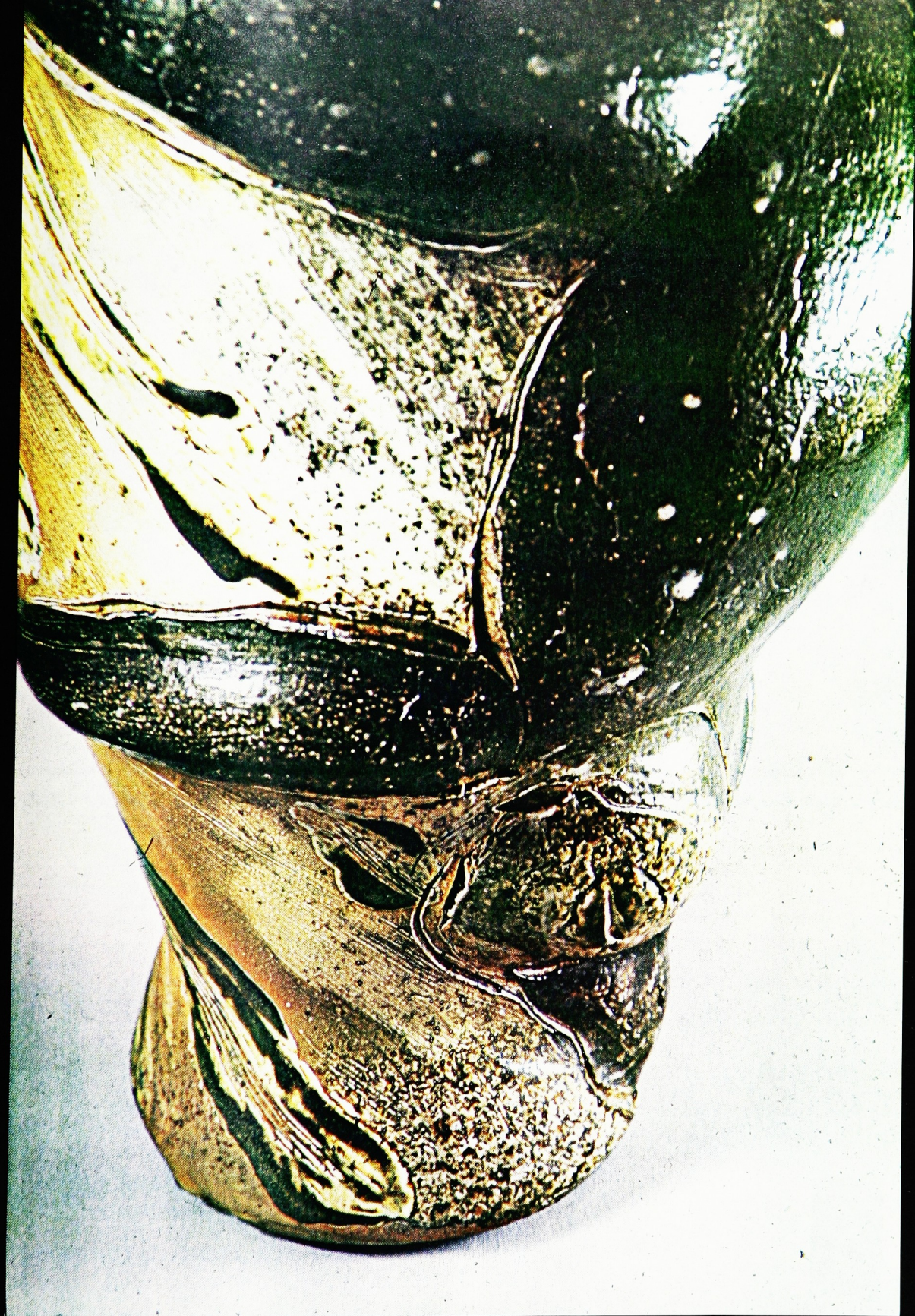


Fig. 11. Detail of black and orange vase





Fig. 12. Dead Frog Container



## APPENDIX A

### CLAY BODY

#### Batch Formula (Cone 10)

Grolleg kaolin .....	25 pounds
Ball Clay .....	25 pounds
Fireclay .....	25 pounds
Red art .....	5 pounds
Avery kaolin .....	5 pounds
Custer feldspar .....	10 pounds
Flint .....	10 pounds

This clay body was very well suited for thrown and altered forms. It dried quickly, without cracking, and did not slump at cone 12. The body endures once-firing and responds favorably to the wood-fired, salt-glazed process.

APPENDIX B  
SLIP FORMULAS  
(Cone 10)

White slip

EPK .....	35
Ball clay .....	25
Custer feldspar .....	15
Flint .....	15

For blue add 4% cobalt carbonate and 1% iron.  
For brown add 4% iron.  
For yellow add 5% rutile.  
For black add 10% black Mason stain.

Flashing orange slip

Grolleg .....	55
Avery kaolin .....	50
Nepheline syenite .....	15

This slip worked best for me when it was subjected to mild body reduction between cone 012 and 06. The sides of the pots facing away from the direct path of flame, ash and salt seemed to develop the nicest shades of orange.

Green slip

Some very nice green slips and slip glazes were obtained from straight local clays that were mixed with water and poured through a 100 mesh screen.

All of the above slips were applied to pots that were still malleable. They adhered to the clay body I used at any thickness they were used.

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