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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

HINDSIGHTS

By

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May 19, 1984.

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I am most grateful to my wife, Jeannette, for her support and understanding through it all.

## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of my education in art, I was exposed for the first time to the routine of ceramics by a potter. He immediately introduced me to the concept of the vessel. Naturally, as any other young ceramist, I began to study old and contemporary models of vessels more closely, trying to find the ones I could respond to; vessels I could ally my ideas with. At that time I could only look at photos of Oriental porcelains and English and American stonewares.

Somehow, the visual information that I found and borrowed from these vessels merely helped to partially satisfy my demands. Due to the incompleteness in expression that I could perceive in my work, and the fact that I was entering graduate school, I felt the desire to search for a personal way of expression, a way which was specially mine, in spite of how bad it might be.<sup>1</sup>

During my first year in graduate school, I struggled to reach technical achievements that became ends in themselves. I soon realized that these technical matters were pointing at aims completely different from the ones I had in mind.

Last summer, searching for that personal way of expression, I carried my thoughts back to my roots. As a consequence, a series of images recurred to my mind, images related to the places that not only saw me grow up,

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<sup>1</sup>However, I can not neglect the importance of influence. By looking at other works, I discover new worlds and the things I find help me to define the intention and quality of my work.

but gave me some understanding about the mystic communion of man with nature. These reflections and ponderings became the focus for my thesis.



## ROOTS

I remember when I was a child . . .

I used to play on the countryside near my hometown in Puerto Rico. One of my playgrounds was a mountain, imposing and concealing, with its labyrinthine tropical vegetation, a place for dangerous ventures. There I felt curiosity for the unknown and at the same time the fear of its encounter; this is an emotion hard to forget.

Another place that I remember is the plain. I still have recorded in my memory the feeling of its spaciousness while flying a kite as a pastime. That space was not infinite, though. It was surrounded and concealed, on one side by nearby houses, on another side by the mountain, and by a line of trees and a river respectively. If I make an analogy using the "potter's space", I can say that it felt like playing inside a gigantic bowl, inclosed and protected.

But among these and other sites, the ones I remember most are the rock formations at the river-fall and on the seashore. Solemnly, they rose as altars to worship nature. These ritual-suggestive structures were able to draw my mind into a condition of profound relaxation and meditation and make me speculate about some sort of mystery lying within and at the same time extending beyond.

## RESPONSE

Perhaps one might perceive nostalgia in those mental images about time and place, but in the works that I set out to make, I had the intention to present a deeper personal exchange. I did not seek to copy the peculiarities offered by those places or the rock formations, but to penetrate the mysteries concealed in their nature. In addition, I attempted to give the vessel image that I always bore in mind a new meaning and a new proportion and the capacity to open "for our contemplation structures of form which we could not otherwise know".<sup>2</sup>

It is likely that someone could request some explanation about my feelings for those places. However, when I have tried to put these feelings under intellectual analysis, the breakdown of thoughts begins to limit and distort the whole idea, and the essence seems to slip my mind. It is then when I have found myself trapped in a logical mess, bouncing like an oddball from one idea to another with no apparent ending. There is no doubt about what D. T. Suzuki points out when he tells us that:

. . . to get the clearest and most efficient understanding of a thing . . . must be experienced personally. Especially when the thing is concerned with life itself, personal experience is an absolute necessity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Philip Rawson, Ceramics (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>D. T. Suzuki, An Introduction to Zen Buddhism (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 33.

Therefore, I will not try to explain those feelings; I believe they should explain themselves through the work I do. Instead, I will attempt to make them known analogously with some meditation on the image and associations with my claywork.

## MEDITATION ON THE IMAGE

### Clay and Function

I regard clay as primal matter, self-contained, basic as the earth itself. In response to my memories, I can transform clay into an object capable of representing and transmitting an idea, an idea which belongs to the world that gave it birth even when it no longer bears a resemblance to it.

In many cases one finds it difficult to perceive the main functional purpose of certain ceramic works. Rawson expresses this very precisely:

There are, of course, many ceramic traditions which have produced works so sophisticated that it is hard to see how they can possibly be called useful.<sup>4</sup>

Works of this kind were usually intended to have double functions, social and ritualistic. Let's take as an example the intriguing Chinese bronzes. The "fang yi" of the Shang dynasty (12-11th century B.C.) is usually described as a wine holder (see figs. 1 and 2).<sup>5</sup> This purpose is uncertain, but the high quality and rich ornament of the vessel leaves no doubt as to its important role in the ceremonies wherein they were used. Mario Bussagli looks at the vessels beyond the observer's point of view and says:

The artists who created the vast number of ritual vessels during the Shang period often saw their work

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<sup>4</sup>Rawson, Ceramics, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup>The word "fang" literally means square. It is depicted by a character composed of a symbol for metal placed on the left of that for "square". "Yi" is a term generally used for ritual vessels of all kinds.



not as containers which had to be embellished and decorated, but as complicated sculptures with a functional use. They were instinctively attracted to a total effect which merged traditional forms, various symbolic meanings, a ritual function and the aesthetic effect of the modeling. <sup>6</sup>

Rawson also examines this subject thoroughly and points out some other historical references within ceramics in which we can find these "double functions" that lead into the "exaggeration of forms corresponding visually to the ceremonious exaggeration of ritual behaviour": tomb wares of the Chinese T'ang dynasty, pre-Inca cremation jars, Jomon funeral offering vessels and the vessels for flower offerings on Buddhist altars. <sup>7</sup>

As reflected in those ancient vessels, I try to condense in my works several levels of thought and action, falling into several categories. On one hand, I present the image of a large vessel; on the other, there is an image of something outside the vessel, in this case, a doorway. I feel that this factual possibility of multiple representation (or double functions) broadens the significance and enhances the power of the image. <sup>8</sup>

### Exterior and Central Opening

When I look at my works, their exterior appears trapped as an interior. The frames act as concealing elements; they are meant to isolate an inner world.

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<sup>6</sup>Mario Bussagli, Chinese Bronzes (Italy: Fratelli Fabbri Editori, 1966), p. 22.

<sup>7</sup>Rawson, Ceramics, p. 79.

<sup>8</sup>This is a trait that I also noticed in the pre-columbian ceramics that I had the opportunity to observe at The George R. Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art in Toronto, Canada.

Furthermore, they are aimed to add complexity, stimulating some ambivalence between the two- and the three-dimensional. The frames also operate as stabilizing elements in connection with the doorway image.

Ambiguity is a quality I have been able to observe in the paintings of Catalan artist Antonio Tapies, especially in his doorway representations (see figs. 3 and 4). Inspired by this ambiguity, I try to present a doorway image that is inseparable from the place it occupies and the space which surrounds it, but offers the viewer an opportunity to penetrate endless horizons. There is always the choice to stay with the objective outlook or to move further and reach the subjective possibilities, the choice of remaining on the surface, close enough to touch it, or to move beyond the confines of visible reality.

Roland Penrose states that:

The traditional meaning of the doorway lies in its function as the entrance to a space, even a life beyond.<sup>9</sup>

In my pieces, the doorway image includes an opening. The metaphysical character of the opening can suggest interpretations of the void and introduces us to an invisible world full of potentialities and possibilities, world that has to be observed with the third eye, " . . . the eye of imagination that looks inwards and can see everything while looking at nothing".<sup>10</sup>

This metaphysical character of the opening can also evoke the Zen Buddhist concept about the middle way: "The middle way is where there is neither middle

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<sup>9</sup>Roland Penrose, Tapies (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1979), p. 60.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. p. 181.

nor two sides".<sup>11</sup> Or perhaps, one might mentally fuse this opening to the triangular profile of the vessel, creating a subjective image that could bring to mind the medieval symbol that embodies the "eye of God".

Moreover, the silhouette of my vessels reminds me of the dotaku, a Japanese ritualistic bell, symbol of religious or magical authority for some communities during the Yayoi period (200 B.C.-A.D. 300). (See fig. 5.) It seems likely that we can find its origin in the Chinese musical instrument known as taku. It is believed that this traveled via Korea to the San'in district of Japan, where it was taken over and transformed into a dotaku (the do means bronze).

### Surface and Mystery

Sometimes, I can feel an intimate dialogue between the confined image and the rectangles revealed under the surface of my pieces. Each of these rectangles has been instinctively assigned to a precise place in the permanent balance of the whole. Some of them, when suggested at one place called for similar forms in other specific places requesting balance. The aftereffect is that these forms seem to emanate from behind a facade of a rude appearance providing an insight into the subject's personality.

Also, there are cracks that appear spontaneously on the surface of the pieces. They express the potential energy within the clay--as lightning expresses the energy within the clouds--the crack is energy that expresses itself visually.

The apparition of the rectangles and cracks

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<sup>11</sup>Suzuki, An Introduction to Zen Buddhism, p. 50.



through the textured surface looks intriguing to me. As a consequence, unconscious revelations begin to appear on another plane; yet I prefer to keep these private. As Octavio Paz expressed it, when he made reference to the meaning of art for Duchamp:

Art . . . is a secret and should be shared and passed on like messages between conspirators.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, I will discuss other ideas and feelings that pertain to my work.

I think that when an imprint is left by an object, it remains as evidence of a past event. I have a feeling that sometimes the uncertainty about the origin of these imprints greatly enhances their significance. The mystery that surrounds the assemblage of megaliths known as "Stonehenge" in England probably amounts to half of their greatness. I keep the memory of a childhood experience that I relate to this topic:

One day, while immersed in my usual playful pastimes, I found an old rusty nail on my mountain playground. I looked around trying to find something I could associate that nail with. All I was able to see around me were rocks, grass, bare soil, bushes and trees, but there was nothing that could give me a clue about how that nail got to the mountain top. There was no sign of, perhaps, an old wooden house or any other human trace, except me at that specific moment with an old rusty nail in my hand and a mystery in my thoughts. I began to wonder what story could be behind that insignificant nail. I do not remember how many different explanations I thought of, but the certain thing is that I never got to any conclusion.

Now I am grateful I never found out because, at this moment, I feel that the mystery itself is more sublime and farther-reaching than the true story about how the nail got to the top of the mountain.

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<sup>12</sup>Octavio Paz, Marcel Duchamp or the Castle of Purity (London: Cape Goliard Press, 1970), p. 38.



## Color

The color on the works is limited and intentionally subordinated to the form. Its sufficiency and power arise from its symbolic references. The glossy colors have a purpose. The associations that Rawson makes about the glossy glazes in the European aristocratic wares and in the Chinese Imperial wares from the eighteenth-century correlate with some of my intentions:

The sheen . . . isolates the significance of its colour . . . It is as though we are informed that the brilliant surface colours, and their significance, are to be enjoyed in the imagination only, that they are not meant to 'come forward' into an immediate involvement with the beholder's life, perhaps that the content of their symbolism is to be contemplated virtually as out of this world.<sup>13</sup>

The unglazed areas and matt colors allude to the solidity of the rocks, but the glossy areas allude to some form of liquefaction.

Finally, to elaborate more about the importance and meaning of color, I will point out some historical references about the allusion of color within ceramics:

In Islam, [green] is the central colour, symbolic of the spiritual. A turquoise blue or green may suggest a watery coolness . . .

[To the Chinese, the bluish greens were] . . . 'the colour of distant mountains'. They belong, moreover, to an unequivocally organic non-ideal conception of nature.

. . . yellow was to the Chinese the colour of morning and the grave . . .

In the conscious aesthetics of China and Japan, black enjoyed a special role as a symbol for the neutral, undefined quality of physical presence which gave 'reality' to phenomena, the 'root' of all colour.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Rawson, Ceramics, p. 133.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

## FINAL STATEMENTS

It is amazing what has come out of pottery, just from pottery.

John Gill

I have no doubts about the relation of my works with the vessel. They have the quality of containing, but the only thing they are meant to contain is space. Their function is evidently visual and mental.

The visual images have power, but there is more in them than first meets the eye. They are not an end by themselves; they are intended to reveal the substance of inner, subjective, personal experiences. "Hindsights" are the subject-matters in my work. They originate from the association of significative ideas, which at the same time are the product of a time and place. In one sense I can say that my intentions for these images are to reveal secrets of a world beyond.

The ideas in my work are expressed through a symbolic-expressionist language, even though sometimes they might appear somewhat abstract. To understand these ideas we have to observe with our heads and our hearts. It all begins with a contemplative quest, but it is only by searching within ourselves that we shall be able to understand. Rawson explains;

If we are to understand the true significance of the formal units making up a pot, we must try to discover in ourselves appropriate memory-traces of our own chains of vivid concrete experiences, to which, as we have seen, feelings may be the only key.<sup>15</sup>

My intentions have not been to make representa-

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<sup>15</sup>Rawson, Ceramics, p. 110.

tions, but embodiments of attributes and qualities. It is possible for the textures of the materials to coincide with experiences of the outside world, but the qualities and textures should be seen as links between distant and present conditions.

Each work is a psychic impression transferred to a symbolic world of structure, mass, volume, space and color. Clay, the basic building material, is intended to remind us of our genesis, that the essence of all things has its origin on a natural phenomenon, even though these things might contain man-made transformations.

I wish to end these statements with a thought from Antonio Tapies about the true significance of his work:

. . . the truth we seek will never be found in a picture; it will only appear behind the last door that the viewer succeeds in opening by his own efforts. <sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Penrose, Tapies, p. 195.





Fig. 1. Chinese bronze, "fang yi" (Shang dynasty, 12-11th century B.C.)





Fig. 2. Chinese bronze, "fang yi" (Shang dynasty, 12-11th century B.C.)



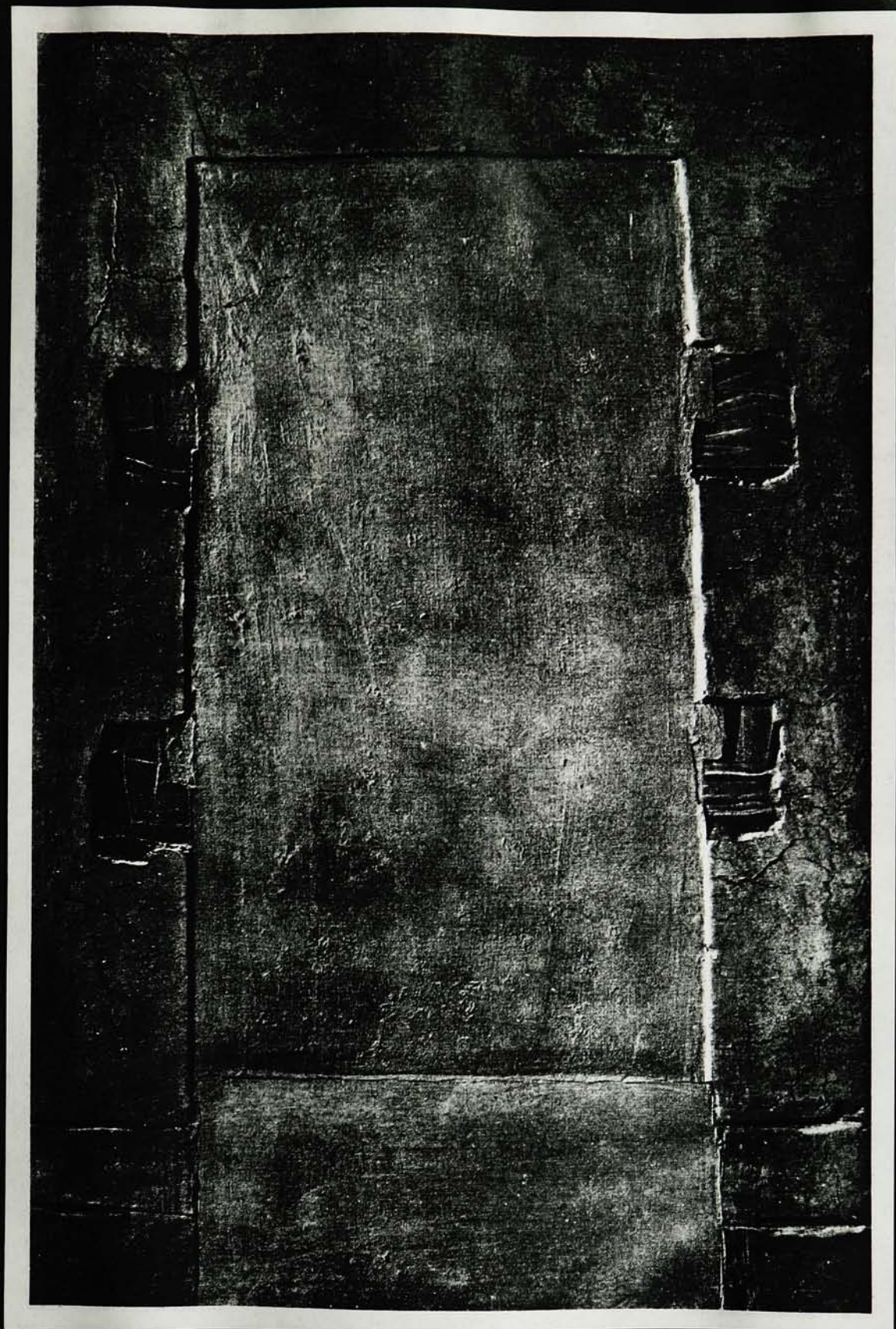


Fig. 3. Grey Door, 1958 (by Antonio Tapies)



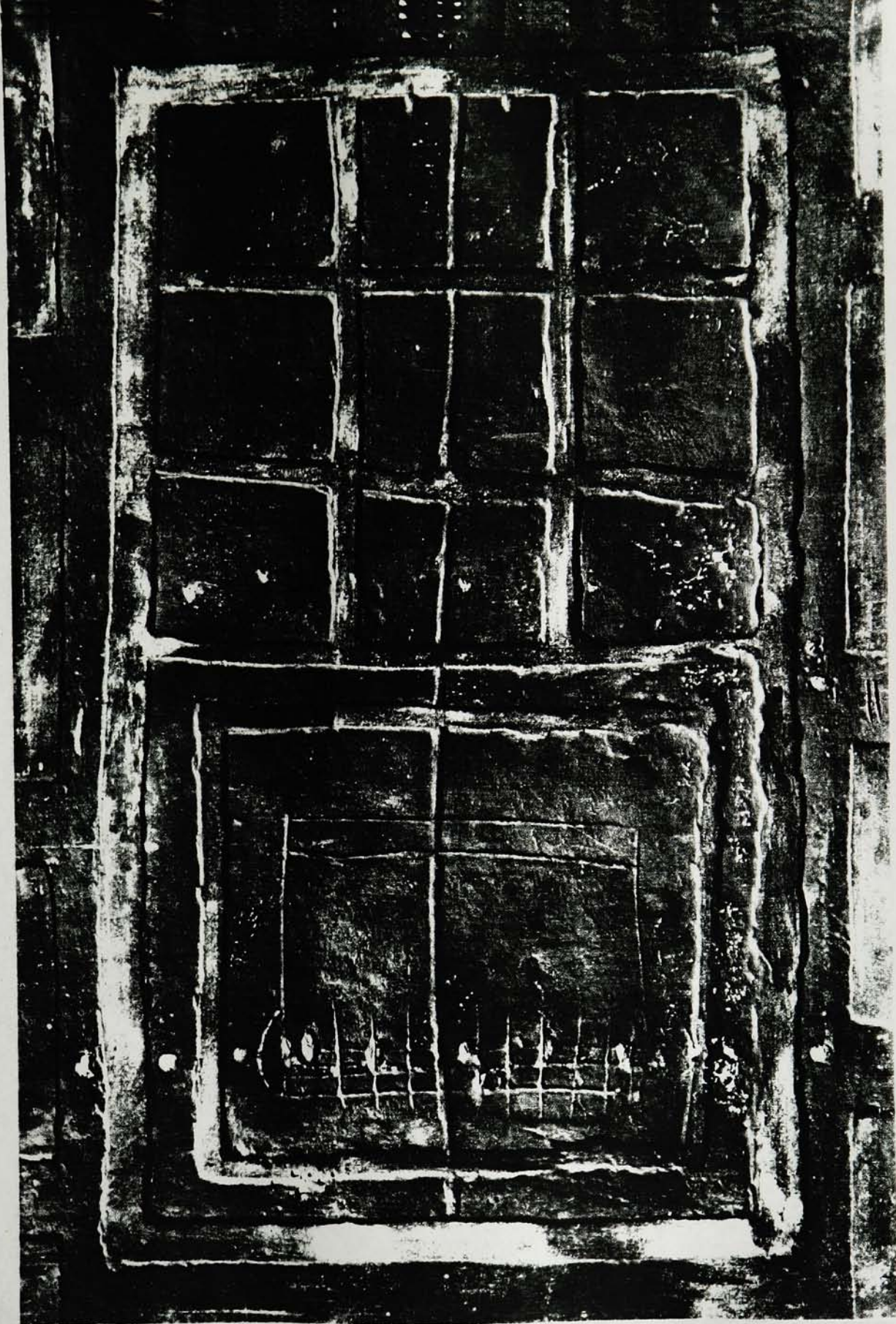


Fig. 4. Spanish Door, 1959 (by Antonio Tapies)



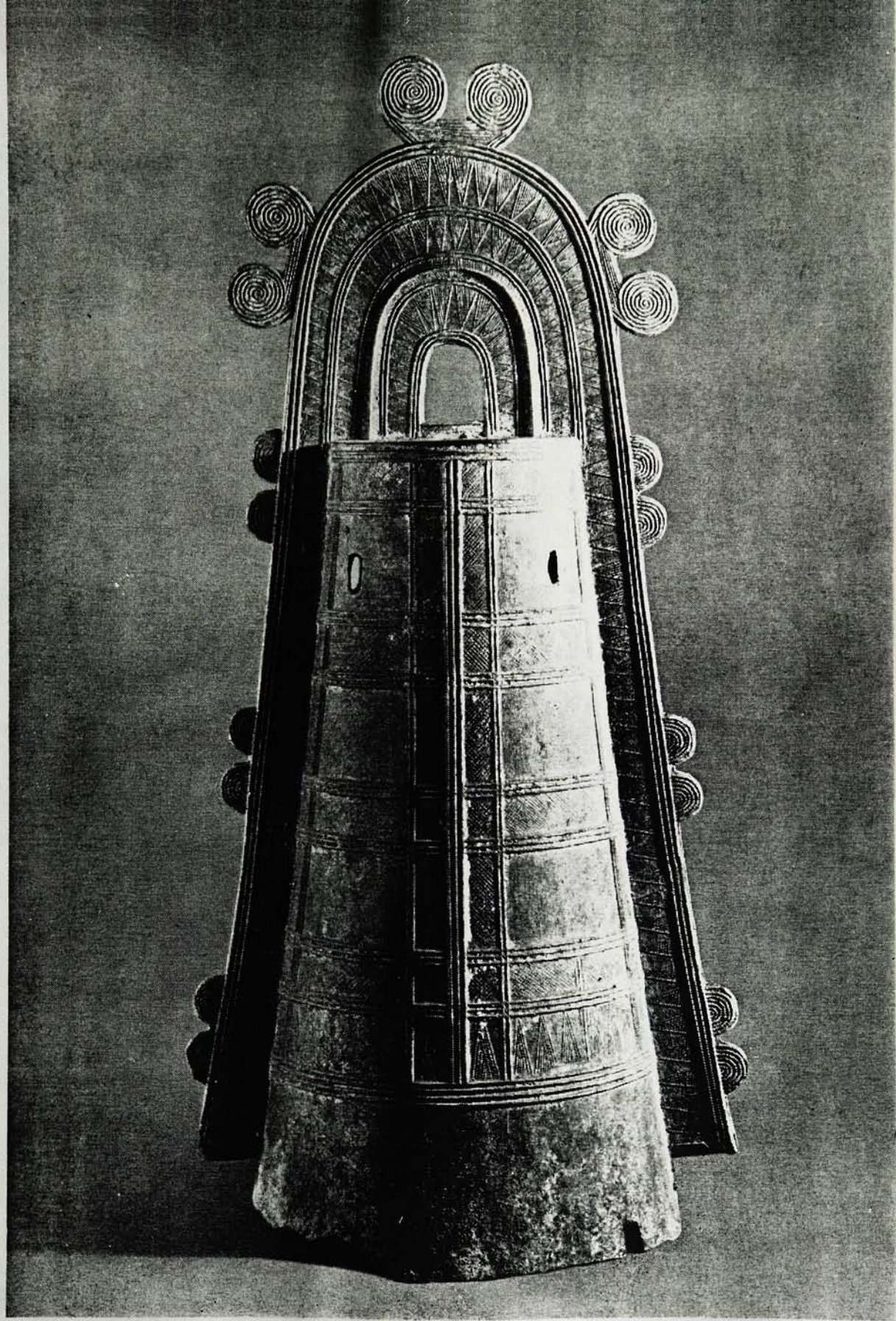


Fig. 5. Japanese bronze, "dotaku" (Yayoi period, 200 B.C.-A.D. 300)





Fig. 6. Porta Coeli: First Form



Fig. 7. Porta Coeli: Third Form





Fig. 8. Porta Coeli: Fifth Form



Fig. 9. Porta Coeli: Sixth Form





Fig. 10. Porta Coeli: Seventh Form

## APPENDIX A

### CLAY BODY

#### Batch Formula

(Cone 04)

C. H. goldart	20 lbs.
Ball clay	25 "
Red art	45 "
Ocmulgee	45 "
Talc	10 "
Fine grog	30 "
Barium carbonate	(2 handfuls)

I began to work with the above basic formula, suitable for throwing and handbuilding. In order to reduce shrinkage and improve its dry strength, I later introduced 5 lbs. (approx. 3%) of fibrous wallastonite and 1 handful (approx. .1%) of nylon fibers. It resulted in a good clay body for handbuilding, especially with slabs.

## APPENDIX B

### GLAZE FORMULAS (Cone 04)

#### Alkaline Green

Kona F-4	35.0	Best at a cold 04.
Whiting	7.0	
Kaolin	4.0	Apply thinly.
Flint	4.0	
Borax	<u>50.0</u>	
	100.0	
Copper carbonate	10.0 %	

#### Rox Water Blue

P-25	36.4	Tends to craze.
F-3134	22.7	Best when applied thickly.
Lithium carbonate	9.1	
Kaolin	13.6	
Flint	<u>18.2</u>	
	100.0	
Red copper oxide	8.0 %	
Zinc oxide	4.0 %	

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NOTE: The best results are obtained when the glazes are applied over a white slip.

#### White Slip

Kaolin	23.8
Ball clay OM4	23.8
F-3124	14.3
Talc	9.5
Flint	19.0
Zircopax	4.8
Borax	<u>4.8</u>
	100.0

Turquoise

Gerstly borate	19.4
Cryolite	2.0
Whiting	5.9
Custer feldspar	20.7
Talc	2.5
Kaolin	6.1
Flint	34.4
White lead	<u>9.0</u>
	100.0
Copper carbonate	1.0 %

Warm Gray

F-3134	72.4	Best at a cold 04.
Kaolin	8.8	
Tin oxide	4.6	
Dolomite	<u>12.4</u>	
	100.0	
Manganese carbonate	2.5 %	
Cobalt carbonate	.5 %	

Juicy Gloss Green

F-3304	94.0	Best when thickly applied.
Kaolin	<u>6.0</u>	
	100.0	
Copper carbonate	3.0 %	

Water Blue

F-3110	76.0	Tends to craze.
Gerstly borate	6.0	
Kaolin	8.0	
Flint	<u>10.0</u>	
	100.0	
Copper carbonate	4.0 %	
Bentonite	2.0 %	



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