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### The pot as nurturer: an approach to functional pottery

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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 POT AS NURTURER:  
AN APPROACH TO FUNCTIONAL POTTERY**

By

**MARIAN L. BAKER**

August 16, 1983



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"It is the function of craft to transform life into things  
and things into life."

Rose Slivka

## INTRODUCTION: LETTER TO KRIS

October, 1982

Dear Kris,

This is a copy of my thesis proposal:

My intention is to create functional domestic pottery that, through form and surface treatment, will convey a sense of energy, vitality, and movement. These qualities will reflect the dual function of the pot as nurturer: 1) physically, as a participant in the essential nourishment process and 2) spiritually, to provide a personal reward by improving the quality of routine moments in life.

I have purposely made it somewhat vague; actually it is specific and vague at the same time. I have no idea what these pots will come to look like in six or seven months, or in six or seven years. I know that I do not want them to scream and shout at me. But, in the spirit of exploration, I have made some that do exactly that. I have a billion things to try out to get at this goal, and it seems difficult to get to them amidst all the other junk going on around here (grad school) and I almost went into a manic-depressive state last week, but I am under a bit more control now.

My efforts to understand movement more fully include taking a painting class (working with the model), taking a dance class, and swimming. I haven't figured out how this will turn up in my pots, if it will, but we'll see. Still doing lobster platters, too. They are getting better. The claws and tail have become the handles. I'm messing around with different glaze solutions for them. We are firing up the wood kiln, and salt-glazing, next week.

Sometimes I worry that what I want to do as a potter isn't different enough. To me, my statement is surely what a million other potters want, too. It's the basic

reason I am a potter. I have a lot of belief in it, but sometimes I sit back and think, well, so what? Am I just stating the obvious? Am I going to come up with a unique approach to this basic thing? I'm trying to concentrate more on just my approach, rather than something especially unique, figuring that if it's truly my own way of dealing with functional pottery, then it will automatically be unique. Maybe. I hope so.

I just wanted to keep you aware of my thesis thoughts.

Take care,

Marian

## II. LIFE IN POTS — SOME THOUGHTS

What is meant by life in pots? Animals drawn on the sides? Arms and legs sprouting out from the clay walls? A big face on the side like those horrible mugs you see in tacky gift shops? Is it a quality in the throwing? A tiny piece of clay frozen out of place on the wall? A fat round shape that may speak of pregnancy or over-eating? Goopy slip dripping off the sides? A distorted portion: lip, foot, wall? A disoriented pot, leaning on its left foot? A drunk pot, ready to fall over? Is it none of these, but rather a quality in the color or texture? A mark left by the fire? Or a combination of all of it? Is it something more esoteric, like a spirit coming from the life of the maker through the pot and displaying itself in an indescribable way? Maybe it is all just nonsense, because we all know clay is just stuff from the earth that becomes hard after it is subjected to heat.

In former times the inspiration of traditional craftsmen-or leaders of groups of craftsmen-was simply the right way of making an article as it should be made in the service of life; not the expression of beauty for beauty's sake, but beauty for life's sake. Utility and beauty were one and the same...It is the question of the life of the object...the spirit in which it is made.<sup>1</sup>

A potter produces his forms by placing his hands and fingers in particular positions to make clay shapes. And when we are able to find these positions with our own fingers a pot can spring to life in an extraordinary fashion...No one who has had the chance to experience by touch the forms of good pots will ever forget the impression of life under his hand, or direct communication with the maker.<sup>2</sup>

Shoji Hamada, in the first quote above, refers to "the spirit in which it is made." For me, that spirit is one of attitude or approach that will manifest itself in the pot. This approach is made up of both the physical act of making and the concept behind it.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Leach, Hamada (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1975), p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Rawson, Ceramics (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 20



Physically, "the spirit in which it is made" could mean not being too pokey in the throwing. It could mean a final swift draw with a metal or wooden rib that will create a distortion: an illusion of motion, an intriguing place for the eyes and hands to discover. In the second quote above, Philip Rawson refers to this physical element: the touching of a shape that may evoke a sense of familiarity (finger positions). The tactility is vitally important in pottery. Rawson goes on to issue a warning:

Obviously, of course, it is not enough that a pot should bear a mass of tangible finger dints, dimples, and throwing striations for it to be "good"...An important expressive element in a pot which has detectable--even emphatic--striations on its surface will be the rhythm or interval-sequence to be felt between the striations. This, of course, should be alive. A good potter will automatically give such striations a metre which relates to the general proportions of the whole piece and is not pointlessly even, or merely repetitive.<sup>3</sup>

Specifically, the physical act of making includes making choices of form and design. What shape will the teapot be? What shape will the spout take? How should it be placed on the pot? How should the handle be made and attached to imply the desired feeling in the pot? I have explored a variety of solutions to these problems in an effort to encourage a visual suggestion of gesture and life in the object. Attention has been paid to the striations Rawson refers to: throwing marks left from fingers or ribs are made meaningful and expressive. I have found subtle tilts and distortions to be more successful than extremes. A slight twist in the handle implies a softness, as though the clay were still wet and is responding to the hand of the last user. A choice of fullness in the top part of the form suggests a teapot taking a deep breath; a slight tilt backwards speaks of an animated preface to take-off.

Considerations of surface decoration are also important during the physical act of making. First, the potter must decide whether to add anything such as slips,

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<sup>3</sup> Rawson, p. 82

scratches, marks, or brushwork to the form. I have experimented with both approaches, keeping in mind the goal of encouraging the impression of vitality in the work. In either case, the form must be strong to begin with.

Personally, I believe it is best to work each pot through with a basic plan in mind for its final surface treatment; for me that means choices of an unglazed or glazed wood-fired surface, salt-glaze, and/or particular glazes used in either a salted or unsalted atmosphere. (More detailed discussion of my reasons for choosing this type of firing will be presented in a following chapter.)

I have found that proper use of slips and sgraffito (carving through slip) can enhance the form and embellish it with a harmony of detailing that can bring added strength and energy to the pot. Certain combinations of slip, marks in the slip, and glaze can lend depth of color and rich vitality to the surface. Just as a mark left in a form by the twist of a rib or finger can create an area of interest and visual intrigue, so can marks made from slips, brushes, and other tools. Bernard Leach refers to the "leaping joy of creativity that has compelled potters from ages immemorial to add a coda of decoration to the sonata of a pot."<sup>4</sup> Thus, the act itself of decorating becomes nearly as important as the result, for side by side with the conscious physical choice made is the subconscious "spirit," the intuition of the potter.

This brings us to focus on the conceptual aspect of "the spirit in which it is made:" having a rapport with the material, respecting it and using it, and knowing when to allow it to speak for itself. It means the ideas that back up the object: function, service, aesthetic considerations. As suggested above, it means using intuition during choice-making. It also embodies the cultural and educational background of the maker, all of his or her life experiences, and furthermore, the mood of the maker at a given moment.

Sincerity is what matters, and according to the degree in which the vital force of the potter and that of his culture

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Laird, "A Philosophy of Pottery: A Standard for Judging," New Zealand Potter, 23 (Autumn 1981), p. 30.

behind him flow through the processes of making, the resulting pot will have life in it or not.<sup>5</sup>

Bernard Leach, in the above quote, is talking about this conceptual element--the elusive thing referred to as "vital force" of the potter. English potter Michael Cardew addresses it this way:

When a potter not only knows his job but delights in it, when the technique and inspiration become identified, the glow of life will begin to appear in his pots. Nobody can say in rational terms exactly what this glowing consists of, or how the inanimate can be capable of transmitting life from the maker to the user, but it is a fact of common experience (if not describable in terms of common sense).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard Leach, A Potter's Book (London: Transatlantic Arts, 1973), p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Cardew, Pioneer Pottery (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1969), p. 250.



### III. THE DUALITY OF NURTURING

Nurture: -to supply with nourishment

-to educate

-to further the development of

Nourish: -to nurture

-to promote the growth of

-to furnish or sustain with nutriment (food)

-maintain, support

I believe a lengthy discussion on the history of pottery as instruments of food and drink preparation, storage, and service is unnecessary. Clearly, throughout time, utensils have been linked to the essential acts of eating and drinking (nurturing) by reason of their function. Specific design problems relating to function would be subject matter for another paper; however, I believe it is appropriate to this study to mention a few things concerning function.

Because I have chosen to make pots that are meant to be used, it is important to be aware of practical concerns, such as weight, size and placement of handles, pouring ability, and cleaning and storage considerations. I have tried to work within certain guidelines of function and at the same time, feel free to stretch some of the pure functional boundaries for the sake of aesthetic expression and ideas. For my pots to be a successful vehicle in the direct, physical process of food or drink consumption, then, is the first kind of nurturing with which they are involved. This means that not only do they work for the intended purpose, but also provide the physical joys that can improve the experience: tactile enjoyment, a comfortable handle, a lip of a mug that feels good to the lips of a person.

In the second kind of nurturing, the nourishment is directed not so much to the physical body but to the soul or emotion, which is enriched by aesthetic resolve. This is the area that becomes difficult to define, and in my opinion, intriguing to

the intellect. Marlene Jack discusses this duality in a related but slightly different sense:

Functional pots work in two distinct ways. First, by manipulating the relationship between the colors, shapes, and textures of the pot, the potter produces a vessel which enhances and complements the food it contains. In other words, he mobilizes the aesthetic qualities of the pot in order to enrich the serving and eating of the food. Through the use of gesture, furthermore--in a painterly as well as sculptural sense--the maker leaves the signature of his performance on the pot and thereby establishes a deeply personal and human bond with the user.<sup>7</sup>

I want to focus for a moment on this second meaning of nurturing: this touching of the soul in a deeper way. There have been many attempts to define this quality. One potter that conveys it well, I believe, is Michael Cardew:

This aspect of pottery is not always discernible to a first casual inspection, but provided it is in daily use it will gradually become visible, just as good character comes to be appreciated only through continued acquaintance. Its presence will fill the gaps between sips of tea or coffee at those moments when the mind, not yet focused on activity, is still in an open and receptive state; it will minister quietly to the background of consciousness with a friendly warmth, even perhaps on some occasions with a kind of consolation.<sup>8</sup>

I have come full circle back to the quality of life in pots discussed in the previous chapter. Some pots have it and some don't. What, concretely, makes up that difference? How do I take the giant step from creating a mediocre functional pot to one that is truly enriching, that speaks of the life and nurturing I want it to?

I am convinced the answer lies in that spirit to which Hamada refers. It comes out of the personal integrity and honesty of the maker about his or her work, and the efforts made to achieve that goal. Once all the specific decisions are made in the

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<sup>7</sup> Marlene Jack, "Functionalism/Aestheticism," NCECA Journal, Vol. 2, #1, 1981, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Cardew, p. 250.

forming of the pot (the throwing, assembly, considerations of detail), and finally the firing is complete, something in the pot transcends all those conscious decisions. Hopefully it is largely due to the choices the potter made during its creation. That vital force comes through when all conditions are right. A distinguished Japanese potter, Mr. Kawai of Kyoto, when asked how people are to recognize good work, answered simply, "with their bodies," by which he meant, "with the mind acting directly through the senses, taking in form, texture, pattern, and color, and referring the sharp immediate impressions to personal experience of use and beauty combined."<sup>9</sup>

This explanation leaves much in the hands of the user (figuratively as well as literally). Much of the appreciation is dependent on his or her own life experiences, knowledge, and intuitive response.

As we live our lives we accumulate a fund of memory-traces based on our sensory experiences. These remain in our minds charged, it seems, with vestiges of the emotions which accompanied the original experiences...It is in the realm of these submerged memory-traces that creative art moves, bringing them into the orbit of everyday life and making them available to the experience of others by formalizing and projecting them on to elements of the familiar world which can receive and transmit them. From the artist's side the projection is done by his activity in shaping and forming. From the spectator's side it must be done by active "reading" of the artist's forms.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the memory-traces that Philip Rawson is talking about in the above quote are what accounts for the wide variety of opinion concerning the existence of that elusive quality of life in pots. Analogies between experiences are intuitively recognized, and obviously differ for each individual. However, I believe that certain generalizations of common responses among peoples of a given culture can be made, as well as for those of a universal subconscious. In pushing this idea a bit further, architect Charles W. Moore defines his belief in what he calls "loose fit" as "a set of images that are extensive and vague enough to have the chance of

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<sup>9</sup> Leach, A Potter's Book, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Rawson, p. 16.

reminding someone of something...You have to have things familiar so that people will feel comfortable, and then a surprise to make familiar things seem more vivid than ever."<sup>11</sup> In pottery, I may suggest filling this prescription with a teapot (the familiar) whose slightly cocked stance is like a puppy recognizing its name (the surprise). What I can do is make what works for me, based on my thoughts, education, and experiences, and trust that a universal message will come through.

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<sup>11</sup> "The Magic Fountain," Progressive Architecture, 59 (Nov. 1978), p. 87.



#### IV. WHY "LIFE" AND "NURTURING" ARE IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF MY WORK

In order to answer this question, I must talk about myself, and things that are important in my life in general.

When I worked a nine-to-five job as a production potter, I had plenty of time to get involved in other things that were important to me. For example, I became concerned with the build-up of nuclear weapons and felt a responsibility to learn more about the issue, take a stand, and then to act on it in whatever manner seemed most appropriate. I attended a weekend conference at Princeton University that hosted a number of respected speakers. I sat through lectures, watched films, listened to panel discussions and debates. I remember feeling that what I was doing in my life seemed so insignificant in relation to certain world problems and that perhaps I needed to re-examine my priorities. I felt what many artists probably feel at one time or another: selfish.

When the initial intensity of my reaction softened, I realized that I did not really want to give up being a potter and that to be a potter was important and contributed to humanity in its own way, just as my being active in striving for a peaceful world was important. I decided I could do both. I had to remain a participant in those things that were important to me to a degree that would meet my own satisfaction and capability. I still do.

I would say my work and life as a potter cannot be entirely separated from my interest in working, in my own small way, toward a better world. I have chosen to pursue the enriching of daily life by means of providing good functional pottery. Furthermore, I want my pots to generate that feeling of life, to reach out to the user, to go beyond the utility of the object, to be a link in the communication of maker to user.

## V. A LOBSTER TALE

Sources for ideas to use in my work are numerous. I look at other pots (from ancient to contemporary), food, people, paintings, dance, bodies, coffee, animals, sculptures, trees, rocks, fish, hands, water, and lobsters.

I spent a lot of time in Maine as a child. I grew up loving those times of smelling the salty sea air, climbing on surf-smoothed rocks, or walking along a sandy beach. Annual tradition called for a lobster picnic complete with fresh boiled lobsters, drawn butter, and salt potatoes.

Then one day during summer school at RIT I was staring at a nice freshly thrown platter which was just asking for decoration, and I drew a lobster. Little did I know that that moment was the start of a whole exploration of lobster form on various pot forms. I started looking carefully at lobsters: in books, on postcards, cooked ones on restaurant plates, and living ones in restaurant tanks. That lobster appeared on platters by means of slip-trailing, carving, brushing with colored slips and scratching details through. In order to give it more life, I ended up enlarging the image until the claws and tail extended so much beyond the platter, becoming the handles, that it almost appeared to be breaking out of its own format. I liked that because it suggested movement and life. The platter was created as a portrait of a lobster, to suggest its energy and movement, and to invite use, not exclusively as a lobster server, but as a server of whatever works.

Eventually I was putting the image on large swelling pots. The lobster became more abstract as it grew and only one part of it could be seen on the pot at a time. The pot demanded that one walk around it to see the complete image. I explored various glaze solutions, aiming for the suggestion of water. It became less a portrait of a lobster and more an expression of lobsteriness. Because of its shape, the function of the pot changed from that of service (as was the platter) to the more decorative, but is no less nurturing (aesthetically) to the viewer.

## VI. PYROMANIA

Why wood-fire? One reason I have chosen to fire my pots in a wood-burning kiln is because of the sparkles of melted ash left in the bottom of cups, mugs, and bowls. They disappear when the cup is full of coffee or tea, but begin to show through the liquid as the beverage is consumed. I have found this discovery an especially enjoyable experience, worthy of repeating and passing along.

Another reason I wood-fire is the effect of the process on an unglazed surface. My stoneware clay becomes a myriad of color--from rich reds to deep browns to fleshy tans. Depending on its location in the kiln, it may have extreme differences in color (that is sometimes referred to as flashing). The unglazed porcelain I wood-fire often displays a glowing surface of a light orange or pinky sheen--amazingly skin-like in appearance and very inviting to the touch.

The wood kiln at RIT is a two-chamber kiln. I chose to salt the second chamber, thus allowing for more variety in surface effect. Some pieces were glazed, and the resulting color was often markedly changed due to the addition of salt. Other pieces were designed to take fullest advantage of the salt-glaze by use of various slips. It is interesting to note that the second chamber also received far less ash on the pots, probably due to the fact that it is so preheated during the firing of the first chamber that relatively little wood is needed to reach temperature.

The salt-glaze process also appeals to me because if used properly, it will provide a rich surface and texture that can encourage the life-giving flavor I desire. Its effect on certain glazes over slips resulted in great depth of surface and vibrant colors, which I learned to use positively to enhance the pot.

The process of wood-firing is very different from firing a gas or electric kiln. It demands constant attention and a lot of physical work. I feel much closer to and more personally involved in the process: in this final step of completing my pots. In one sense I feel I have a lot of control because how I have stacked the kiln, and



how I stoke and fire the kiln will make a big difference in the results. At the same time, there is always a degree of uncertainty. The path of the fire varies, each firing makes some of its own assertions, and there is a higher loss rate than with other types of firing. There are always some of the expected results, and always some happy (and unhappy) surprises.

I want to describe the firing for those of you who have never partaken in one. The process is cyclical. You spend several weeks making pots. You bisque them. You may or may not glaze them. You stack them carefully in the kiln, trying to use knowledge gained from past firings about where pots will get a high or low degree of ash deposit and how to arrange them for hot and cold spots in the kiln. Finally you brick up the door.

You start a very small fire and sit all night keeping it going but small. Heat can build up incredibly fast so care must be taken not to go up too quickly, or pots may crack. Sounds of the fire, smell of the wood burning, and the mesmerizing image of dancing flames are extremely important. (They're a large part of what keeps me coming back for more). By morning you start allowing the fire to grow and along with it, your excitement.

Some divine messengers appear around eight in the morning disguised as your good friends, carrying a basket of bagels, cream cheese, jam, homemade apple pie, juice, and a thermos of coffee. The day does on, the fire builds, stoking becomes nearly constant, adjustments of the damper and air intakes are made. Several hours pass with careful attention to proper continuous stoking. Your body becomes hot and weary but your adrenalin keeps you going.

Finally the cones are right, telling you the internal temperature is where you want it. You stoke the last bunch of wood, close the dampers, and allow the two-day process of natural cooling to begin. There is a huge sense of relief and satisfaction. Then there is the feeling of anticipation during the cooling before you really know how the pots come out. I don't need to talk about the excitement (and inevitable, hopefully small degree of disappointment) that makes up the unloading



process. It seems no matter how successful the firing, when it's all over, there is a funny sense of melancholy that spurs on the beginning of the cycle, as you begin to look forward to the next firing.

## VII. CONCLUSION

I have spent a lot of time trying to figure out why certain pots seem special and alive, and how to channel those discoveries into my work. One thing that has become clear is that there is a high degree of subjectivity involved in this issue. In other words, a pot that in my opinion suggests life and warmth, contains humility with intrigue, is functionally sound and pleasing to use, and holds firmly a powerful quality of timelessness, may not strike you the same way at all. But I am convinced those traits will hit home with some people, maybe lots of people. So I must continue with the search, trying out new ideas, and adding to the answers I have found thus far.

My study has been rewarding in other ways as well. I have gained some good technical knowledge about glaze chemistry and kilns. I have made some very close friends. I have become a better potter. Maybe most importantly, my reasons for being a potter have become clearer.

We cannot really complete anything in our lives-- that is not a reality...If one says "finished", there is no life there anymore, but if one says "unfinished", life continues, movement goes on.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hamada, p. 89.

## VIII. TECHNICAL INFORMATION

### Stoneware Clay

Gold Art	50
Pine Lake	25
Kentucky Special Ball	15
Custer Feldspar	8
Red Art	5
Silica	10
Mullite, 100 Mesh	2

White Slip--used on wet to leatherhard stoneware, especially nice salt-glazed

Grolleg	25
Kentucky Special Ball	25
XX Sagger	25
Nepheline Syenite	11
Spodumene	9
Silica	5
	<u>100</u>

Colored Slip--used on wet to leatherhard stoneware and porcelain, nice under glaze

Base:

Custer Feldspar	25
Silica	25
OM-4 Ball Clay	25
Kaolin (EPK)	25
	<u>100</u>

Bentonite 2%

Red/Brown: add 8-10% red iron oxide  
Red or Green: add 10% copper carbonate  
Tan or Grey: add 10% rutile

### Porcelain Clay

Custer Feldspar	25
Silica	25
OM-4 Ball Clay	25
Kaolin (EPK)	25
	<u>100</u>
Bentonite	2%

### Glazes (cone 9-10)

Rob's Green, especially nice salted

Cornwall Sone	64
Whiting	16
Colemanite	4
Copper Carbonate	8
Barium Carbonate	8
	<u>100</u>

### Shino

Nepheline Syenite	50
Gold Art	28
Soda Feldspar (F-4)	9
Soda Ash	9
Spodumene	4
	<u>100</u>

### Temmoku

Custer Feldspar	41
Whiting	15
Zinc Oxide	2
Kaolin (EPK)	12
Silica	21
Red Iron Oxide	9
	<u>100</u>

### Liner Glaze

Cornwall Stone	19
Spodumene	17
Grolleg	18
Silica	23
Frit 3134	5
Dolomite	18
	<u>100</u>
Yellow Ochre	2%

## IX. SOME POTTERY REFERENCES

Tsubo (narrow-necked jar)

Shigaraki, Sixteenth Century, H., 47.0 cm; D., mouth, 15.0 cm.

This jar is an example of the warmth in color and surface that comes in part from the process of wood-firing. The slightly irregular but intriguing bulbous shape suggests a deep breath, an organic form being stretched, as though pregnant; its marks reflect the influence of the maker.





### Teabowl

Shoji Hamada (1955), H., 3.25 in. (8.4 cm).

This teabowl displays a decided strength in its simplicity and economy of form. The horizontal lines created by the lip, the rib-mark, and the foot provide a lively, varied repetition. The tilt of the center line suggests motion made evident during the process of making. The teabowl is rich in color and surface and invites use.





Covered Jar

Karen Karnes (1979), 7 in. (17.8 cm) high, stoneware.

In this pot, my attention is drawn to the distinct points of transition in form. There is a clear sensitivity to proportion and an interesting tension created as the planes shift. The horizontal banding on the pot is nicely broken up with a feeling of upward movement by the irregular lines of the lid. This pot embodies a quiet and unpretentious energy which is enriched by the inviting textural effect of the salt-glaze.

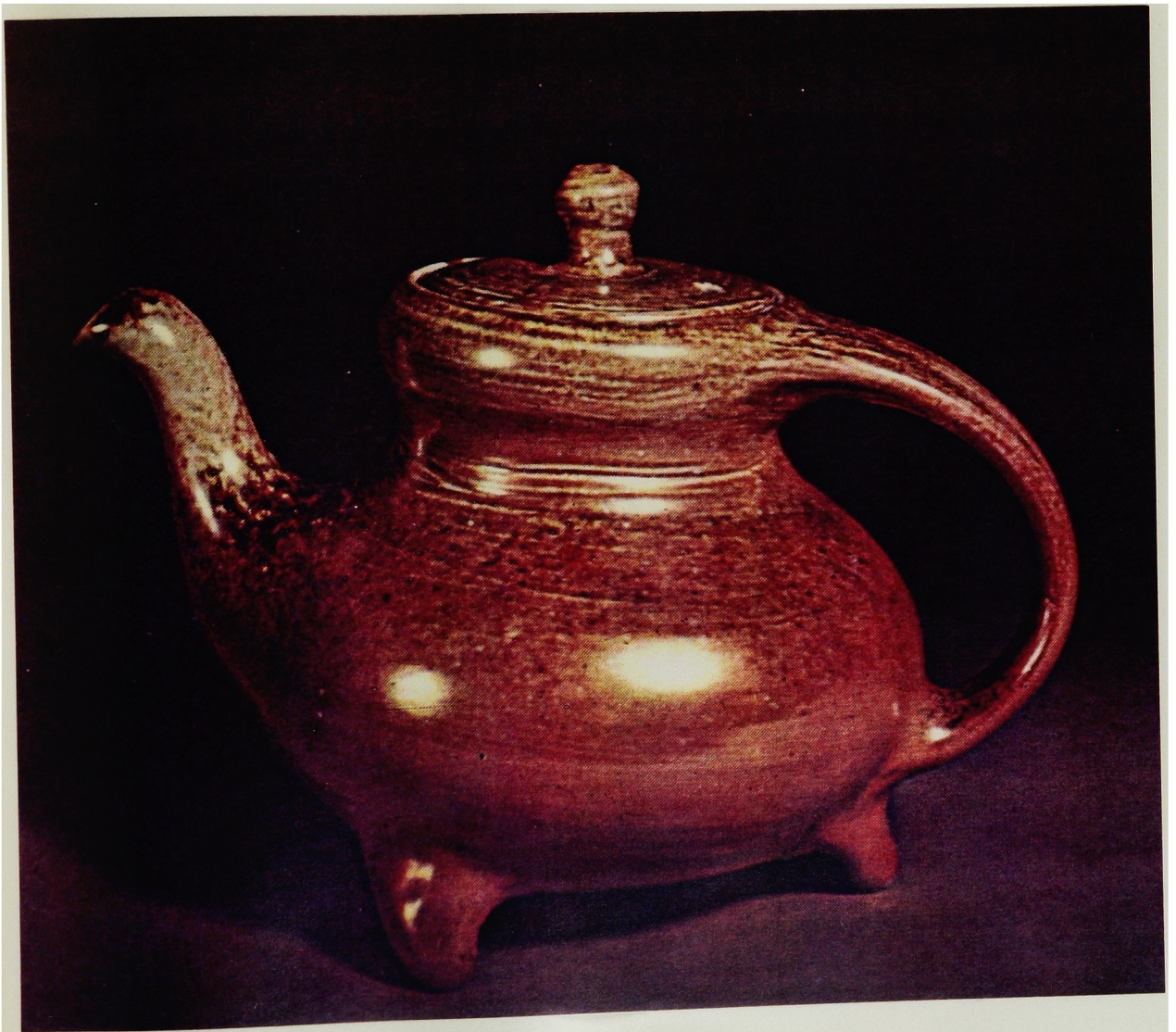




Teapot

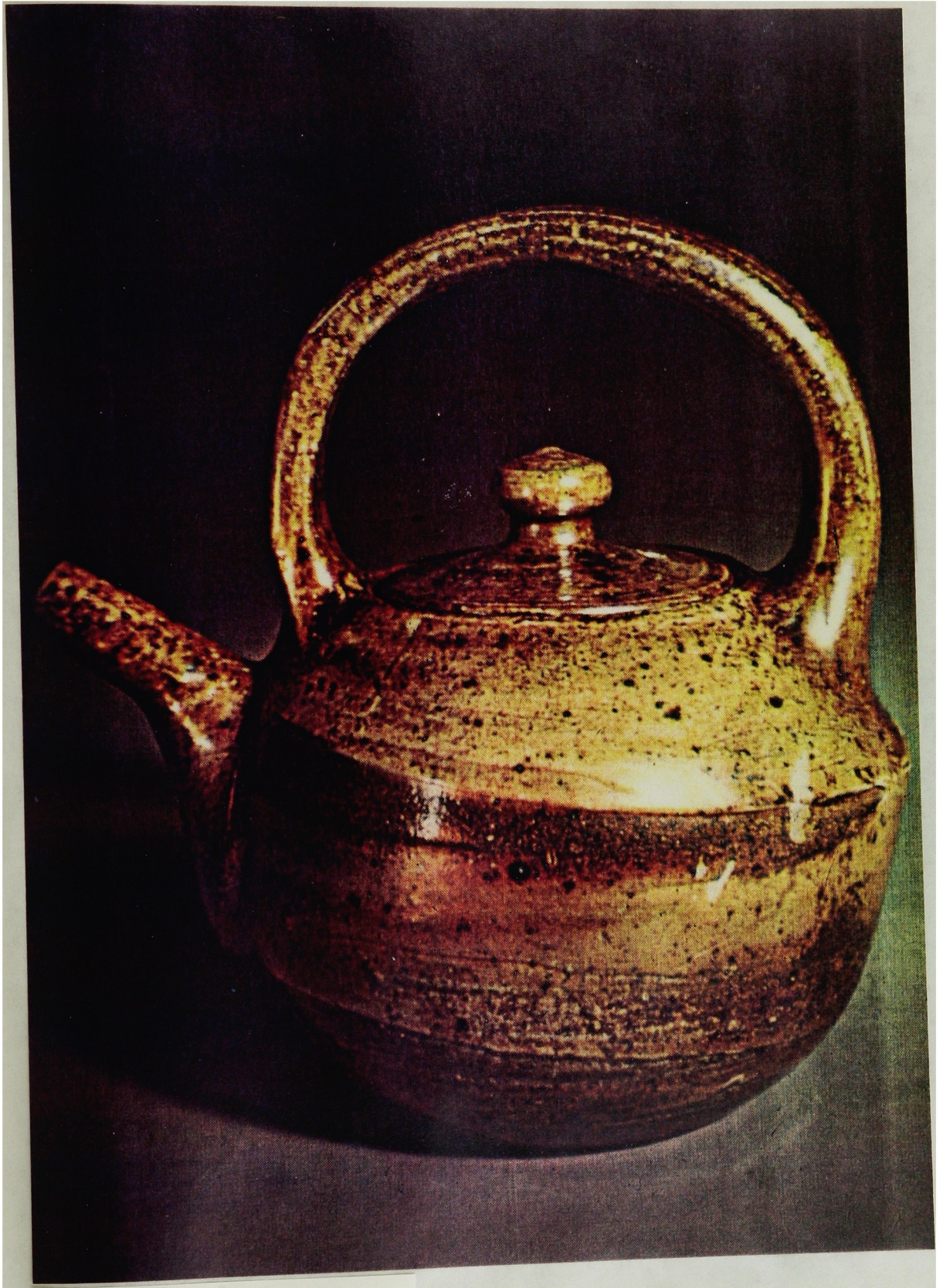
Kris Nelson (1982), H., 6 in. (15.3 cm).

This pot clearly conveys a sense of gestural movement: an animation made evident by the slight tilt of form, fullness of belly, and expressive, almost whimsical feet. The smooth and curvy shape, the comfortable flow of line in the spout and handle invite use. The warm glow and orange-pink color of the pot, enhanced by the salt-glaze process, lend a human-like skin characteristic to the surface.



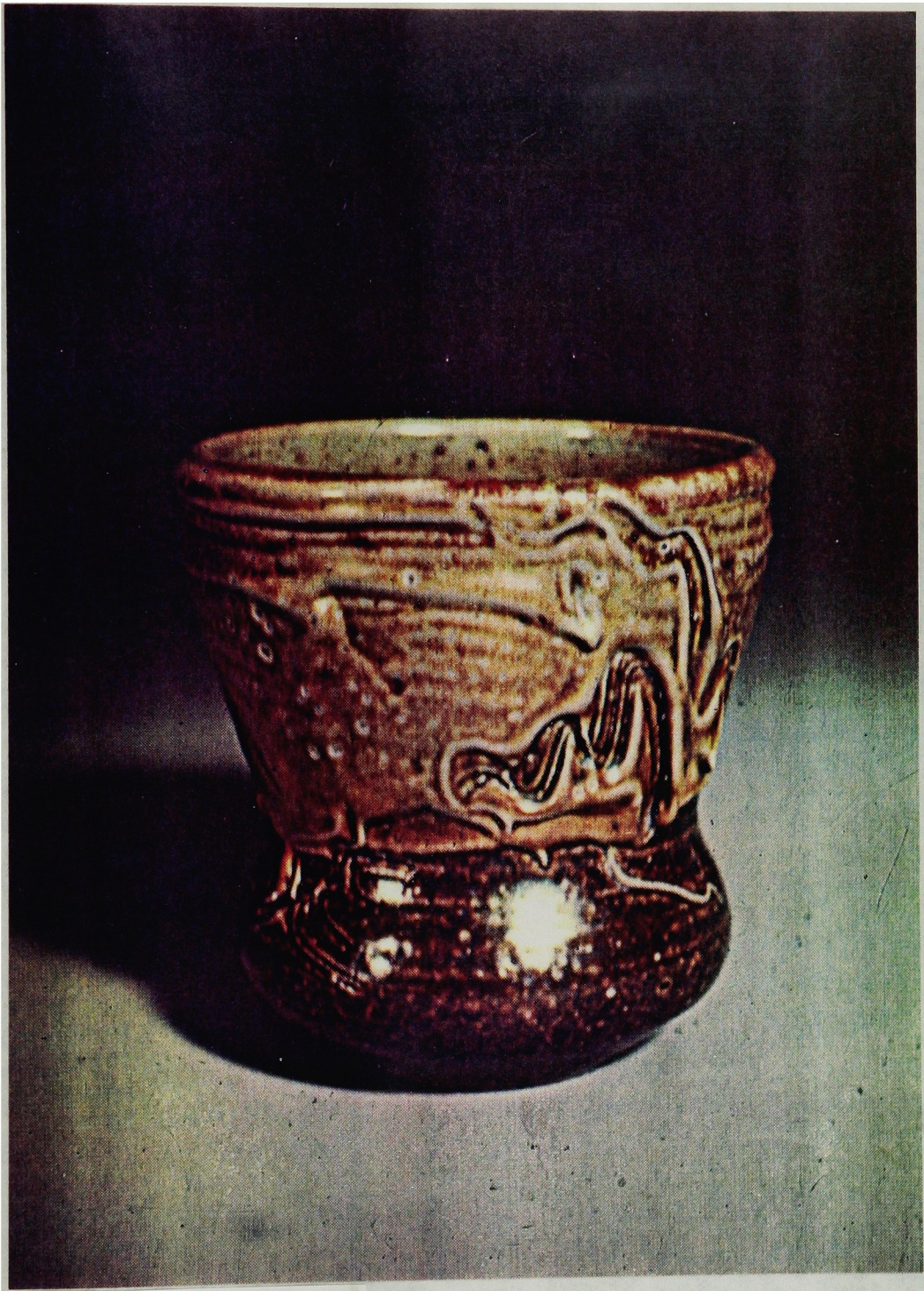


## **X. PHOTOS OF MY WORK**



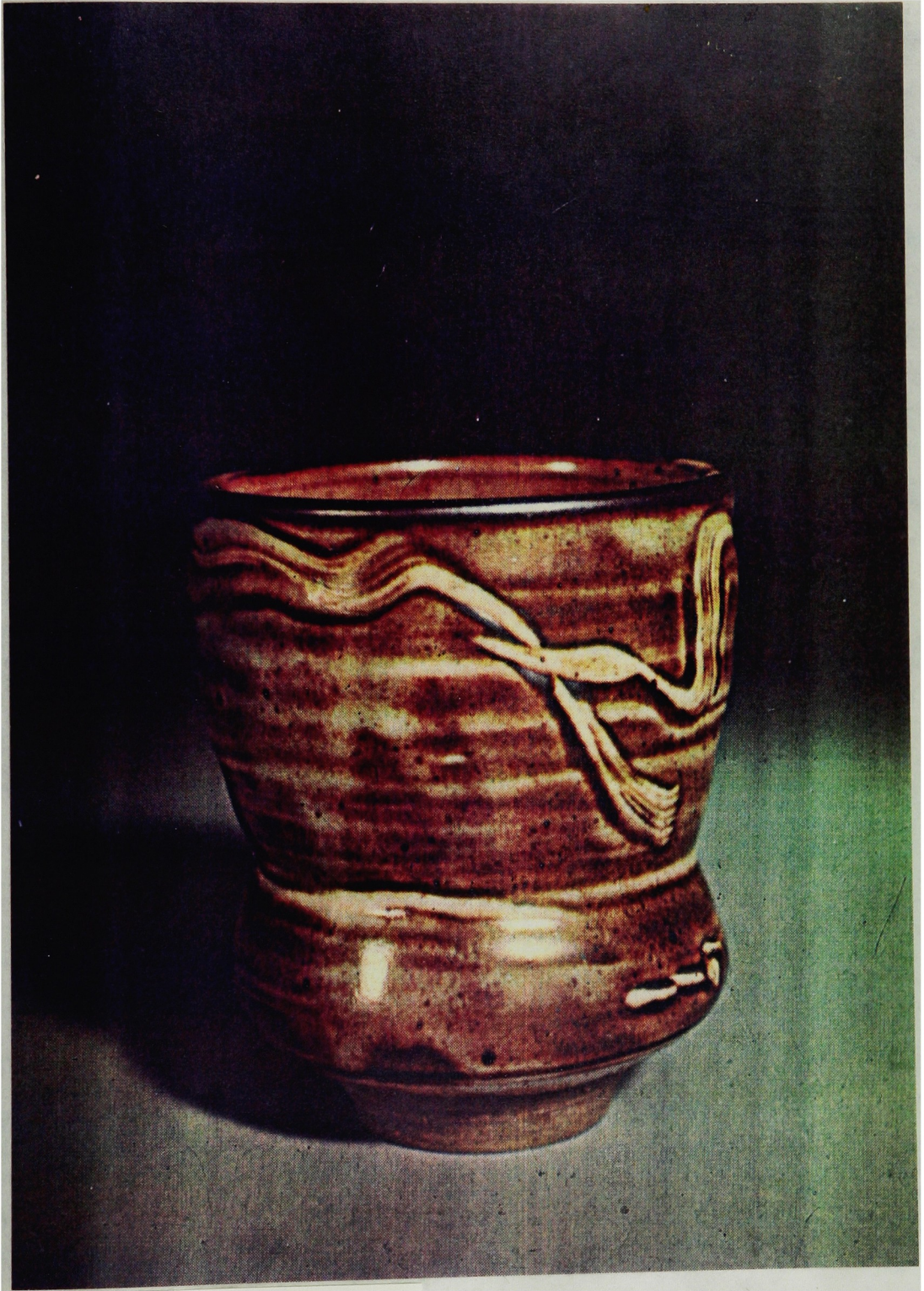
Teapot, H., 8 in.





Cup, H., 5 in.





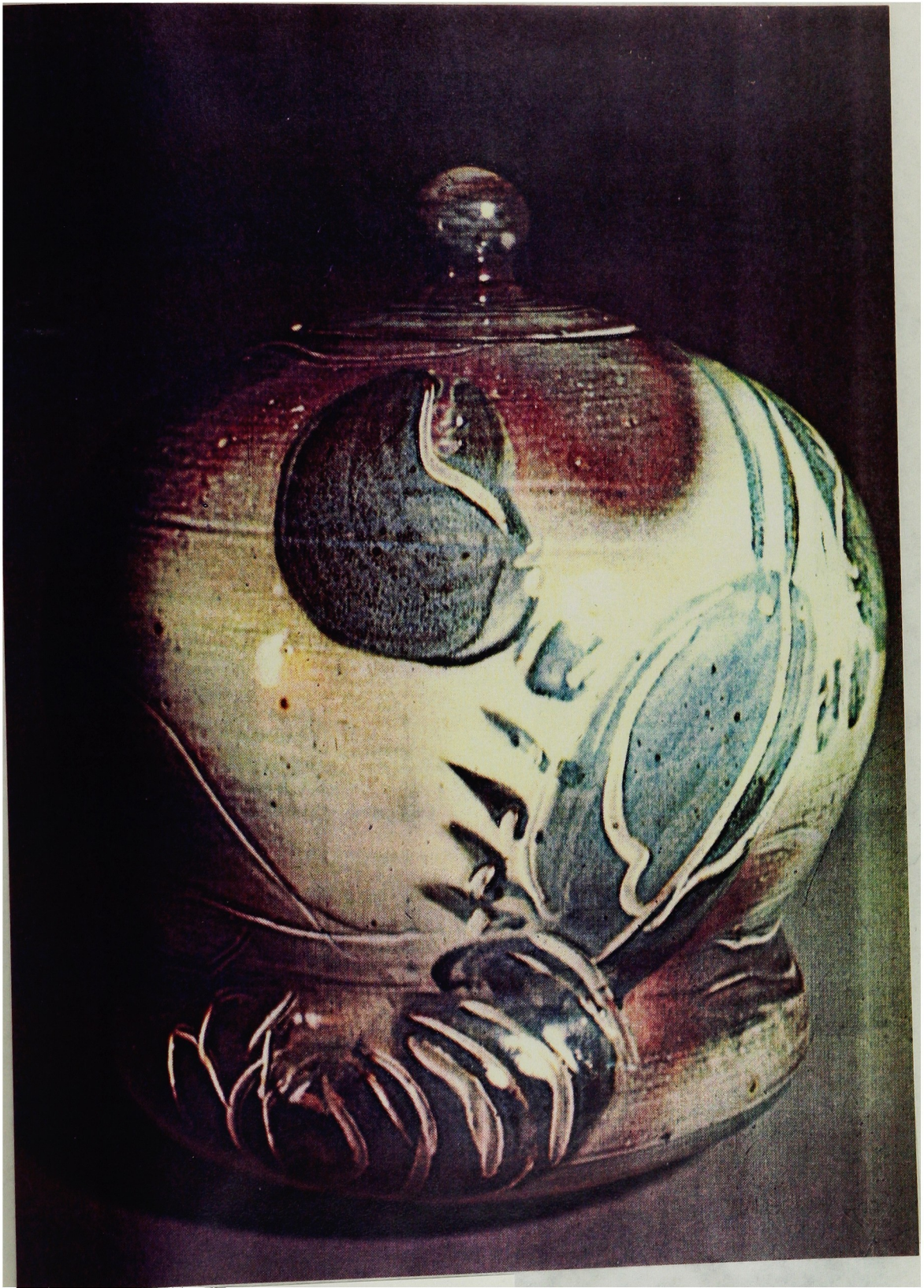
Cup, H., 5 in.





Ocean Pot, H., 12 in.





Lobster Jar, H., 15 in.





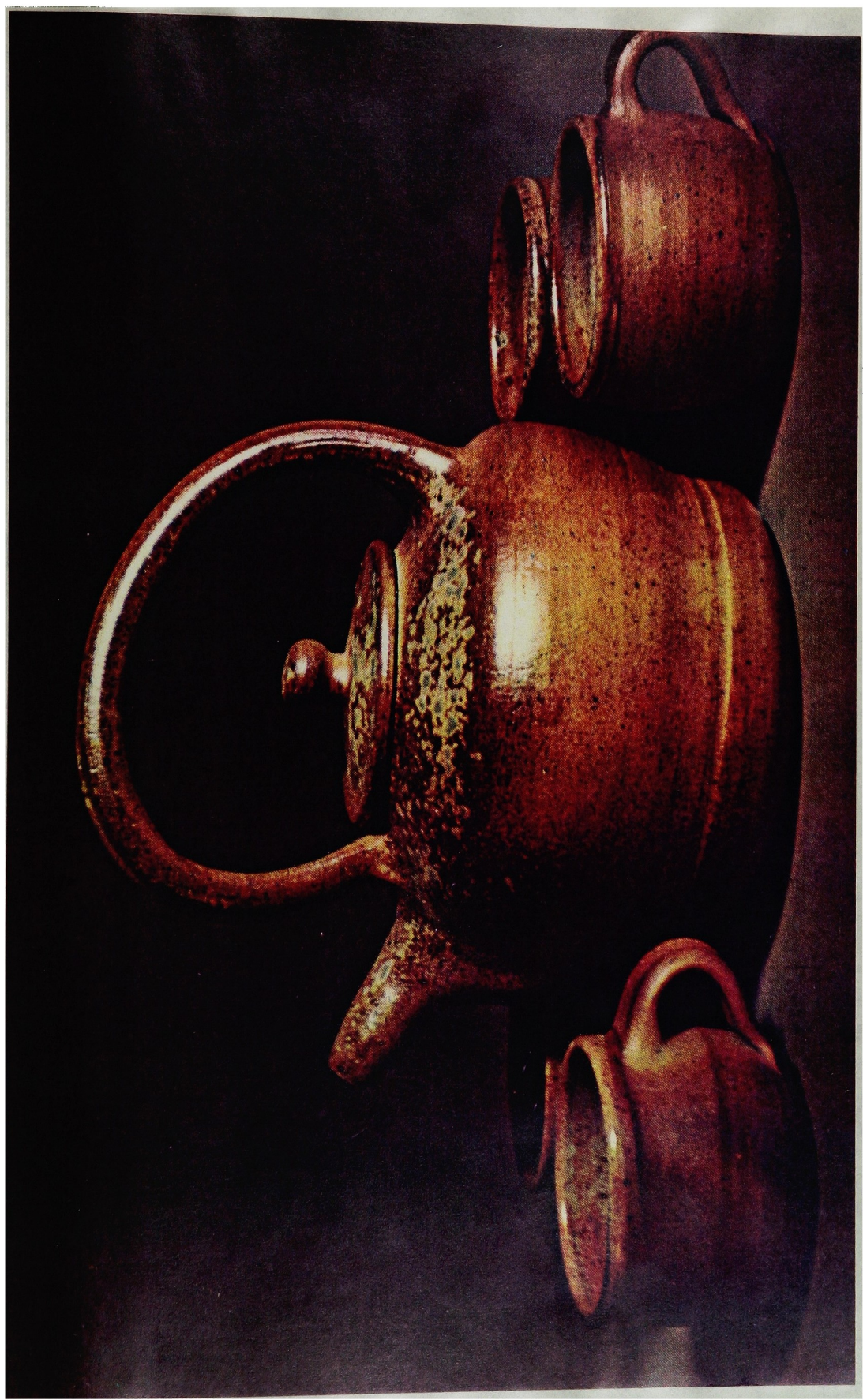
Teapot and Cups, H., 7 in.





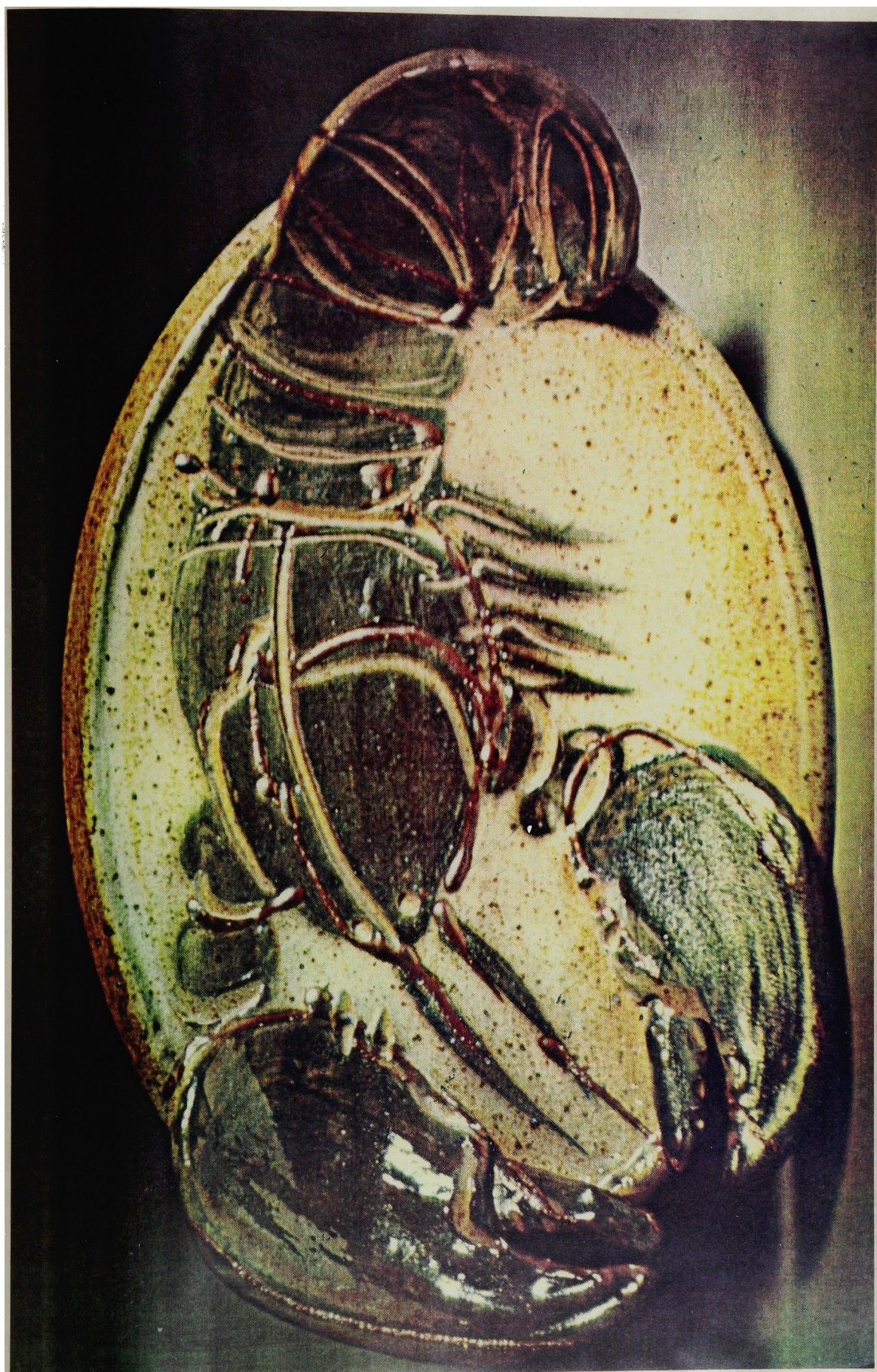
Teapot and Cups, H., 8 in.





Teapot and Cups, H., 8 in.





Lobster Platter, L., 14 in.





Soup Tureen, H., 7 in.







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APPROVALS

Advisor: Robert W. Delaney

Date: 12.20.83

Associate Advisor: Graham Pearce

Date: 2/8/83

Associate Advisor: Chris Helgeson

Date: 9/7/83

Assistant to the Dean  
for Graduate Affairs: Fred Meyer

Date: 1/9/84

Dean, College of  
Fine & Applied Arts: John G. Gagnier

Date: 3/9/84

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Marian L. Baker

Date: 8/24/83