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Cups as a Record of Humans: Material Culture Effects on Social Communication

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**Cups as a Record of Humans:
Material Culture Effects on Social Communication**

**By
Bethany Nicole Lamb
Wright State University, 2022**

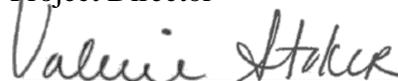
WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

July 25, 2022

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE PROJECT PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY **BETHANY LAMB** ENTITLED **CUPS AS A RECCORD OF HUMANS: MATERIAL CULTURE EFFECTS ON SOCIAL COMMUNITIES** BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF HUMANITIES.



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ABSTRACT

Drinking vessels are a uniquely universal tool. They are used in all cultures, pertaining but not limited to ceremony, practice, practicality and custom. This thesis examines changes in ceramic cups and how this material culture reflects a collective record of human intention. My project emphasizes how the aesthetics of ceramic work is influenced by the social structures of the societies they are made into. When making pottery the ceramicist absorbs the style, history, social status, ergonomics, and intention of external stimuli that then become part of their own work. Observing pottery over time, physical changes depict a variety of human priorities and choices. These choices demonstrate what is important to a society as well as the hierarchy of who has the power to make these changes. Alongside this essay, *Heirlooms*, a ceramic exhibition, allows me to participate in the making of material culture by creating cups that others will experience in a first-person format. I provide small simple drinking vessels to suggest an intentional slow approach to consumption. These standards of creation are influenced by ancient Chinese cups without handles that were small in stature, as opposed to the mass consumption presentation of some modern drinking vessels. This allows me to become a part of the continued human socio-material conversation through physical agency with clay.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Approach

This thesis is a combination of personal experience with clay and the influences of historical objects on current American studio pottery. As an artist I participate in creating things that become material culture. To study my own artistic agency means that I must look at the cultural influences that have helped form my ceramic process. Delving into the history of ceramic wares I have narrowed my scope to only a few spheres of influence to simplify the vast body of work that is the cup. A uniquely universal object, the cup spans across human history as a tangible record of changes in human cultures. Though these changes can be observed in any culture I will be limiting my scope to drinking vessels from ancient China and eighteenth through nineteenth-century Great Britain. Alongside studying historical forms, I consider their influences on modern studio pottery, which is where I reside as a ceramicist. My intention with this project version of the Master in Humanities is to influence our current consumer culture in a way that would allow us to be more mindful of the connections made through ceramic wares. By studying changes in historical material culture, I can utilize that awareness as a visual representation of historical communities' priorities. In turn I can then apply this process to how the modern cups and forms are shaping the current priorities and goals of cultures, including my own ceramic practice.

Historical ceramic references give visual aid to the social changes that occurred in the societies in which they were created. The specific methods and processes used to make a drinking vessel reflect social pressures. An example of the pressure that changes how a potter

creates is the social acceptance of a certain material or form over another. Popularity of a substance or shape can guide a studio potter to gravitate towards making objects that please the user instead of creating work for the sake of creation. The popular use of a cup may be because of its ability to perform a task well or represent something for the user. The material that a drinking vessel is made of does not happen by chance but is a deliberate choice by the potter to support an object's functional performance and symbolic properties (Kreuzbauer et al. 765). This has a unique ripple effect on the intentions of a potter as an artist since they can be governed by the social cues of their culture. These social cues not only affect historical potters but my own work as well. These influences change what, why, and how ceramics are made. I do take into consideration that my own culture weighs on the lens through which I perceive other cultures and acts as a subjective influence. I cannot separate myself from my culture but can only add others' methodology to my repertoire. I let historical sources inform me of the means by which ceramic practices arrived in my own time. Working through the ways historical potters would have created provides me with material empathy.

Starting with the basics of interacting with objects, touch must be considered. Touch is one of the major comprehension tools of the human body (McGlone et al. 737). Becoming mindful of how we interact with surroundings and materials allows us to enrich and our comprehension of our existence. When there is intention behind material use and reflection of historical forms, users add to a mental scaffolding that informs them of how they, and the things around them, have arrived in their current moment (Malafouris, *Thinking is Thinging* 4). Though this thought process is not a requirement for the use of drinking vessels, it is a way for humans to examine the way we learn and how things come to be as *experiences* instead of what things are as objects (Malafouris, *Mind and Material Engagement* 8).

In this essay I will first discuss the reasons why drinking vessels provide a representation of human culture. I will support this by providing historical examples of how changes in cups depict the priorities of societies. Lastly, I will connect the development of my own ceramics to the centuries of changes in material culture through cups. These steps of historical consideration allow me to address why objects are made and what influence these wares have on their society. Material culture trends can be used as a mechanism to investigate others' intentions and so better understand human culture and the things that drive it. This is important because the ability to do so allows us to better understand ourselves as humans, driving the advancement of our social lives (Kreuzbauer et al. 767).

1.2 Why the Drinking Vessel

The study of the evolution of drinking vessels is a unique way to observe how the material culture of groups affects what items craftsmen make; in turn these products reflect societal standards. Material culture pertains to the objects and things that would cease to exist if humans did not create them (*Britanica*). Objects made by people are a record of human intention they show the inextricable connection between brains, bodies, and things where cognition occurs (Barona 143). When making ceramics I can create an environment where moments of cognition can be observed in real time. Working with clay is a way to "see ourselves thinking" because the moments of decision making can become physically observable for the novice as well as the experienced maker (March 134). This is most apparent when throwing on the potter's wheel. In this case the clay, which is malleable, changes shape at the slightest touch or movement from the potter, thus requiring full body interaction between potter and clay (Brinck et. al. 25). It is important to recognize these moments of thought becoming action and physical form. Cognition takes form where the action is: this is the mind in the process of being. Historical wares would

have been made in the same fashion. A cup would record a potter's intention and material conversation even if that cup is now centuries old. A cup would not lose its contained intention due to the passage of time. Imagine, then, that cups could then be used as mechanisms of physically interacting with the lifestyle and intentions of other people. If ceramic wares are a record of cognition, then the study of them can provide a new understanding of other humans through material engagement.

1.3 The Power of Sets

The making of a drinking vessel and its subsequent use creates a visual description of human habits. As I have mentioned, cultures change how and why a potter creates. When objects are made to be used, their utilitarian nature can dictate the methods of their creation. The social popularity of their use will in turn encourage their continued creation (Yang et al. 3). This forms a conversation not just between a potter and clay but also between the making of wares and a society's priorities. A cup can be used by only one person completely on its own; however, the depth of this collaboration increases when cups are created in a set. The set invites users to participate with a group rather than by oneself. First, it is pertinent to consider what makes a set. More than one cup is required to be considered a set. Things like dinner sets can increase to include 1000+ pieces of porcelain, encompassing more than cups; this expands the possibilities of way sets are presented (Van Gent 6). The idea that sets come in at least two suggest that they would appear to go together, meaning they would be similar in physical appearance. Since physical appearance is one of the first things noticed when approaching 3D work, a viewer may assume similar forms are part of a set. In my project that goes along with this essay, I communicate the intention of human groupings with both odd and even sets of cups.

In drinking tea, for example, the practice is building upon shared methods. This can be dictated by both known and unknown cultural influences. When taking part in drinking from certain types of vessels, the users may know the background of the practice if they have been taught. However, most people who may partake in tea or coffee drinking from ceramics do not know the history of how the vessel they use came to be. The same goes for those making cups, such as the ceramicist. Yet certain forms are most recognized as a cup instead of being called a sculpture, vase, or bowl. So where do these assumed accepted guidelines for how to use a cup or what to call a cup come from? It is a collaborative approach gained through tactile material engagement, sociocultural cues, and popular material culture over time. These dictate how an object is accepted, used, and created (Brinck et al. 24). With the idea of sets being a certain number, it is a socially accepted and implemented standard of etiquette that is learned. But why not own an odd number of cups that match? What drives us to follow certain guidelines by which we coordinate our consumption? By examining the roots of cups in cultures and how they change over time we can better understand how societies mediate what is socially acceptable and how those acceptances sanction the structure of societies.

2 THE FLOW OF AGENCY

Material Culture's Connection to Personal Agency

Drinking vessels are a way to manipulate our understanding of social space and personal agency. Ingrid Brinck and Vasudevi Reddy (2020) describe knowledge as being gained with one's body, not by or through it. The use of kinesthetic learning with 3D forms allows one to understand it in first-person. Experiencing "with one's body" means that it is the body itself that is forming the reaction and feelings instead of the mind using the body to understand. These reactions can be seen in posture, positioning, timing, rhythm, and body orientation (24). Hearing

a description, seeing a picture, or interacting are very different understandings of a cup. A description can only go so far in forming an understanding of an object. The cup, when used, gives more than just observational cues; it communicates the limits and intentions of its use through its weight, texture, thickness, and so on. These cues also encourage the users to apply their own prior knowledge of cups. This prior knowledge and preconception can be at odds with a maker's intention, resulting in an unintended method of use. It is interesting to consider, then, that there may be an alternate form of material engagement when the interactions between form and senses are unhindered by the potter's intentions. The outcome of use would then simply be based on the moments of touch. Or perhaps someone changes the cup's use to pot a plant or set it on display more sculpturally. This does not negate the physical conversation that the user has with the form; there are still meaningful and purposeful moments of interactions happening between the user's physical and visual understanding of the cup. The body is part of the scaffolding that builds our perception of forms.

A material like clay can be experienced in different ways. One way is to encounter it once it is fired where it will not change shape. If it is broken, the intention behind the form would obviously be lost. The unbroken cup, hardened by firing in a kiln, maintains an intended use because of its irreversible state. Secondly, in its unfired malleable state clay is shaped through the collaboration of the body, mind, and material simultaneously. When I create on the wheel, forms seem to be born of the moment, not just by my preconceived plans, but through the material I work with. Letting go of control allows me to indulge in a sense of direction from the clay. Paul Louis March describes this same experience as he depicts an "emerging sense of agency [he] feel[s] on the cusp of — almost tripping into — an unfolding future" when he creates things with clay (149). Conversely, take the hylomorphic model from Aristotle. In this theory

things are the combination of matter (what things are made of) and form (the shape the matter takes) and that these two are fully separate. From this perspective, conceptual work is strictly in the mind with ideas imposed upon material (March, 134). In this format the mind and matter are separated in a cause-and-effect fashion with the mind being the primary action and the material being secondary. Tim Ingold argues the opposite, that materials are the controlling factor imposing standards on the secondary, submissive mind. He suggests that superiority be given to the process over any product (92). An object then becomes a thing inviting the maker to participate in bringing the form into fruition (97). According to this view, the material controls the outcome and the creator's intention simply follows the ways in which material unfolds. The issue is, without the intention of the mind, can there be objects at all? If objects are material culture and they exist due to human influence, then there is a certain extent of intention from a maker to bring about its creation.

My own view is that it is not just the mind controlling the material or the material controlling the mind, but a constant collaboration of a mind's intention to create and a material's ability to procure a means by which to actualize that idea. That material will provide standards for how it can be worked, and so control to what extent the maker can create. This is not to say that ideas for creation cannot be within the mind, but rather that without action there is a lack of evidence. Evidence can be in words or wares; ideas are articulated so others can observe. Moreover, I do think that the application of an idea is directed by the agency of the material being used. Due to the way bodies exist in space, we push and pull against things to make other things happen, like the actions of a potter at the wheel (Rompay et al. 2). Ceramicists will experience how to work with clay based on sensory information gained with the material's organic structure and parameters instead of a hypothetical pre-thought about what they want the

clay to do. This means that artists think with their senses in communication with other matter, rather than simply thinking and then creating separately (Rompay et al. 2). There are times when I start with an idea for a pot and yet the outcome is not what I envisioned. This is not just because of me working, but the material and my body communicating. So, there is some truth to the agency of things, but I do not think they have an agenda to do so. I believe that Ingold's approach has merit if one can set aside intention. We can be guided best through the tools and materials, creating a freer sense of throwing. However, I do think that we have more input into the situation as creativity can emerge through the act of sculpting (March 149).

To summarize, it is helpful to understand human agency in the making of cups because it is here where the record of human intention can be preserved. An archaeological approach to material culture can provide ways of understanding the social lives and thought processes of other people (Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind* 35). Cups from history hold more than just liquids. They hold methods, practices, and intentions. It is from their social context that they are made, and they retain that context going forward (Gosden 196). A potter's interaction with clay builds upon the environment in which they work. The style of a cup's physical formal qualities is a result of utilitarian goals that can come from more than one culture. Sometimes the shape or size of a cup stems from a combination of ideas or methods passed on from person to person fused together to form something new. Understanding that these ideas come together gives a deeper meaning to the materials that make up a culture's practice (Gosden 209). Connections can then be made between utilitarian wares and humanity's past as shifts in material culture adhere to the preferences of people at the time. Drinking vessels are not just an object, but a reservoir of human intention that can be interacted with through their use.

3 LITERATURE

3.1 Cultural Origins

Cups are used by groups of people, and their symbiotic relationship provides a look into the inner workings of societies at the time. Chris Gosden points out how objects and practices have a complex genealogy, and we should consider how the objects themselves came to be (207). To apply this thought it is the cup's changing form that can signal when there are societal changes that would have caused it to do so. These changes can be traced from society to society as adopted techniques were passed on from human to human. For example, in Chinese culture, specifically the second century BC to early fifth century AD in the region of Jiangsu to northern Zhejiang province, cups saw a shift in material (wood to ceramic), shape (from oval with ears to round), and the addition of items such as a saucer. Some of these changes occurred when there was a large influx of immigrants into the area (Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens). These same choices in how to present a teacup are then echoed in eighteenth-century British society as British lifestyle took on tea drinking as a staple (Wang 13-14). Embracing tea drinking included its material culture of cups. Cups used by the British would emulate the shapes adopted from Chinese tea culture. The drinking vessels and ceramic practices of the British then go on to be carried into the United States to influence studio pottery practice and cup usage. This system of influence, as globalization transported the methods of making things, created lines that can be traced to form a genealogy. In this way, anthropological studies of materials can examine them as collaborators in the development of socio-material culture.

Going back over 5000 years, tea drinking was a practice in the Chinese culture standardized in the Tang Dynasty by the publication of *The Classic of Tea Lu, Yu* (Yang et al. 3). This step toward placing a standard on tea practice would be passed on not only in China but

adopted and changed by many cultures. As the world became more connected through global trade and commerce, goods were not the only thing exchanged. Lifestyles and practices followed material culture embedded in the goods. This made tea drinking a social, political, and economic driving force. The coveted drink mixture was the catalyst for mass production and the ritual of consumption. In correlation to this spread, ceramic goods were shaped to represent the preferences of humans in physical form as those forms represented the importance, practice, and standards of the community in which they resided (Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire* 129-130, 153-155; Finn 49-55). Applying the understanding of looking at wares as more than just objects but as projections of human cultures, observers can physically take part in material culture comprehension.

An example of a drinking vessel change demonstrating a collective manipulation of form that reflects societal structure is that of the oval ear-cup's transition to the round cup. This drinking vessel comes from China with examples from as early as the fifth century BC. A study of the ear-cup to round cup from second to sixth century AD was used to better understand the changes of tableware in medieval China. Archaeological data was collected from various tombs to observe these material changes. One example of the ear-cup comes from the tomb of Marquis Yi 433 BC. It is made of wood with a lacquer finish, shallow and oval in form with a flat base and two protrusions on the sides that tilted up which are referred to as an "ear" (Fig 1). Their shape and size were connected to their intended use ranging from drinking wine or stew, to holding condiments (Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 18).

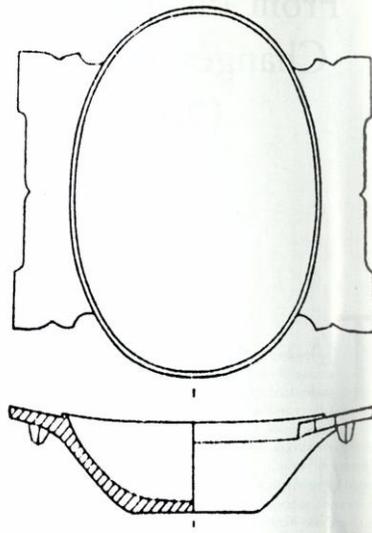


Fig. 1 Ear-cup in lacquer from the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng at Leigundn Suizhou, Hubei, ca. 433 BC. L. 15.8cm, l. 11.4cm, H. 4.7 cm. From *Zēng Hóu Yǐ mù*, Beijing 1989, vol 1, fig. 229/6.

Over centuries this common form shifted into smaller shapes with more discrete ears (Fig 2). By the Han period, the second century BC through the second century AD, these ear-cups were being influenced by the use of the round cup. This could be seen through the shrinking size of the ears and extending the height of the edges. By the fourth century AD the round cup with a “deep body and straight sides” had readily become the typically used form (Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens 22).



Fig. 2 Ear-cup on a tray, porecellaneous stoneware: left H. 4cm, D. 16.2 cm. 3rd century; right: H5.5 cm, D. 15 cm, 4th century. From *Esshuyo no seiji I*, Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka 1993, nos.65, 66.

In figure 2 with cups from the third and fourth century show the development of a tray. These trays were smaller than those of the second century AD, which would have carried up to 6 ear-cups, whereas in the third century, trays began to only hold two. It can then be assumed that it is from these smaller trays that the standard saucer was eventually conceived. The tray continually got smaller until it was only spaced for one. (Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 24).



Fig. 3 Cup and saucer decorated with lotus-petal motif, 5th century AD. From *Esshuyo no seiji I*, Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka 1993, no. 71.

As you can see in figure 3 over time the round cup was combined with the single tray. These developments phased out the use of the wood and lacquer ear-cup over centuries of material use.

3.2 Socio-material Effects on Chinese Lifestyle

The importance of studying Chinese dinnerware is what it tells us about the driving forces that change a society's material culture. Knowing what causes changes in material culture creates a sample of the priorities and goals of people at the time. Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens speculates the myriad of causes for these changes can be attributed to a combination of causes that were economic, technical, and socio-cultural. And these still are not singularly responsible for the change (24). It is the combination of societal nuances and lifestyle that shifts material

culture. Consider the cost to create these cups in ancient China. The shift from lacquerware to ceramic cups became more cost effective. Lacquerware was labor intensive and required “social stability and security” in the form of consistent workers and access to material goods, whereas the ceramic wares could be quickly and cheaply made (Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens 24). A clay bowl with a consistent round shape can be more reliably duplicated than an oval one with added appendages, equating to a more simplistic process and means of producing goods. These changes in materials give a visual to the economic status of the socio-material conditions that gauge types of production.

The characteristics that a cup takes on can be seen changing material engagement even today. In a study by Su-Chiu Yang, Li-Hsun Peng, and Li-Chieh Hsu, the authors discuss the power of teacup form as visual stimulation and how these things dictate their use. They propose that paying attention to the preferences in material, design, and practical beauty can bring about shifts in cultural practice (3). This can be done by investigating the physical attributes of a cup and what those physical characteristics do for the taste of the drink as well as the social meanings. Shape, color, design, and size vary based on the time period they come from and so it is a signifier of intended purpose (Yang et al. 5). Multiple studies have demonstrated that the physical presentation of cups affects the taste and/or perception of the beverage (Piqueras-Fizman et al.; Risso et al.; Yang et al.). Through these studies, we know that an object’s tactile sensation influences our psychological responses. For example, the color of a cup can change a user’s attraction and aversion to a drink (Piqueras et al. 329). The interaction with the cup becomes part of the drink, part of the experience of drinking, and since we gain knowledge with our bodies, that interaction can affect our preferences. The act of drinking is an experience for the whole body. Tactile cues influence and change the experience, adding to the associations

born of such an interaction (Yang et al. 6). If this is so, the choices made through the creative process by potters can shape the outcome of future material culture by shifting the way people use the objects they produce. This shift in experience equaling shifts in action do not stop in Chinese tea cultures but spill over into others.

3.3 British Tea Origins

Great Britain is one such society that has been drastically changed because of Chinese influence on its drinking habits. Motivated by global commerce and power, the British were one of many societies who adopted tea drinking from the East, which led to changes in their material culture. Tea was introduced in the 1600s by the Dutch to Britain as the British Empire gained access to global goods through the East India Trading Company (Hohenegger 8, 17). Due to its high-cost, tea was limited to upper-class society allowing them to display their stability in wealth and ability to attain novelties (Berg 19). Relying on the Chinese monopoly of tea imports prompted the British Empire to have their own sources of this good. In turn this led to their occupation of Assam, India in 1824 which they entered on terms of assistance to India against the Bernese (Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire* 153-154). The British did not leave after they helped extricate the Bernese from Assam as they promised. Continuing their colonization in India gave Britain ready access to tea goods, opening the door for tea to become a mass consumed drink among all Britons. Having “British tea,” which was coming from India, formed what is now seen as part of British national identity and lifestyle (Weygant 144).

Along with the advance of tea goods comes the use of the teacup. The afore-mentioned changes of ancient Chinese ceramic forms led to similar physical representations in British teabowls and teacups. The single cup and saucer, a result of centuries of change in Chinese ceramics, became part of the common practice of those partaking in the beverage in Britain. In

figure 4 both the teabowl with no handle and the coffee cup with a handle are displayed together, much like that of the ear-cup and round cup's coexistence.



Fig. 4. *Teabowl, coffee cup and saucer. 1796*

The attraction to Chinaware stemmed from a desire to attain a sense of magnificence by using the most elegant novelties (Berg 20). Having access to foreign goods was a performance by those with money and power. Tea became more than a drink and its wares more than a vessel.

Chinese porcelainware was sought after as a home décor depicting one's ability to encompass a blooming global knowledge and financial exploratory means (Bickham 108). Material goods in eighteenth-century Britain became part of the status quo of social life, nationality, and power. The use of teacups spanned from domestic midday breaks to extravagant parties where cups were just the catalyst for the new wares that would follow. Whole spaces would be fashioned to support afternoon tea. This could include the addition of tea pots, caddies, spoons, locked tea chests, and more, that would accompany and transport the cups with the coveted beverage (Wang 16). The hostess's social skills would have been under scrutiny measured by her ability to dress, invite, and set the scene of the affair. From clothes to furniture, the hostess must make a space full without "impeding guests" and dress in a way that would "make the tea taste sweeter, and the cups look prettier" (Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire* 154-

155). This parade of means propagated a materialistic obsession. The teacup via teatime would proceed to encourage a material culture that used cups and the wares that came along with them as symbols of power and prestige.

3.4 Socio-material Effects on British Lifestyle

Promoting class structure, the possession of ceramic wares could separate the wealthy and poorer classes, creating divides instead of common ground. Those with less means would be prompted to participate and gain the illusion of being in good standing by taking tea, meaning that respectability and moral character were available to anyone who would attempt to look the part. The plebian housewife would find means by which to rise to the social standard of tea drinking through stretching her tea by mixing bread crusts and barley cake to mask the sparse tea and hide what struggles the family faced (Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire* 129). A housewife could paint herself in the light of domesticity with the proper cup and tea. Buying goods and consumer rituals were the building blocks of domesticity and imperial rule as the popular culture of materials gave power to those who dictated the fashion of wares.

On the other hand, the adoption of the tea practice also created new proper spaces for men and women to interact. It grew in popularity under the guise of being a patriotic way to strengthen the nation's comradery (Weygandt 145). While tea parties were seen as a feminine affair, men attended too, since it was an acceptable situation for them to mingle (Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire* 155). The habits formed among teacup-using citizens resulted in certain characteristics being attached to the practice such as a "virtuous woman" and "tamed savage man" (Weygandt 146). These allusions pertain to the consumption of tea versus alcohol and how temperance would reflect a sober society. Partaking in the consumption of tea could refine the manners of "rough and rowdy working men" and promote "domestic happiness" (Rappaport,

Sacred and Useful Pleasures 992). Civility then became achievable by following the consumer standards of material culture. It can then be observed that the adoption of Chinese tea customs and wares permanently shifted the structure by which British lifestyle was conducted.

4 APPLICATION

4.1 Socio-material Effects on American Studio Pottery

This now brings us to American studio pottery, where the practices and social structures of other civilizations have been influential. American material culture is a fast-paced mass consumerism. It is due to this that I have been drawn to ceramic methods of other cultures, hoping to form a deeper more meaningful connection to the roots of my craft. Through an observation of historical forms, I simplified my form to smaller vessels with simplistic markings on them. In today's age we have the large, lidded thermos, which is designed for an on-the-go drink to stay warm. This capsule of heat allows the user to multitask without the risk of spilling and includes the ability of not delaying other tasks to wait on a beverage to reach a consumable temperature. It is also large enough to hold all the liquid that could be desired. This leads to forms that suggest a mindset of "more is better" as a user is not limited by the vessel to slow down or control consumption. These containers are typically metal or plastic. Ceramic material, like that of the Chinese ceramic round cup instead of the wooden ear cup, can suggest a different approach to drinking. Though there are thermoses that are ceramic, it makes them more likely to break when on the go, ergo less utilitarian.

My cups are deliberately smaller, typically four to ten ounces, and made of clay to push back against this hyperactive lifestyle that I believe these machine-made on-the-go cups represent. These smaller forms mean if you want more of the drink you will be staying close to the source of the beverage to be able to refill the cup. This requires you to stay in one place long

enough to use them, requiring a longer and more focused use of your time. Along with these more in-depth interactions a user can take more time to observe a cup's qualities. Both the thermos and cup could have the same drink in them, but their experiences are not the same. It is the ability of the potter to see in what ways to encourage others to take part in drinking and material culture. This shift in experience can create a shift in communal material culture action.

In galleries and museums, the ceramics that have been retrieved from other cultures, that are set on pedestals and exalted as works of art, are simply the everyday objects from the society they come from (Scheier et al. 12). The same attention and reverence that is given to museum cups can be applied to today's everyday drinking vessels. Intentional material awareness is not just for the potter but the users as well. Though the user is not involved in the making part of material engagement, they are a part of its use, and it is in this relationship that users can change their experience to become a more meaningful one. Consider material items with which people can have deep significant interactions, like heirlooms. These passed-down items are material records of ancestors and provide descendants with the ability to touch the things those they care about touched. Being able to hold or use these items can give physical understanding of how another person would have interacted with it before. These interactions are first person experiences that demonstrate what other's lives and material culture would have been like (Malafouris, *Thinking as Thining* 4). This method of agency with things visually connects those who hold and use them to the past. In contrast, when using a cup most people would not contemplate the historical context of how their cup came to be. They may not even register a cup as anything more than a tool for drinks. This simple approach to a cup is not wrong, but it is limited. It removes the richness and story of the humans whose material culture has formed the materials of today. Alternatively, cups could be interacted with as meaningful heirlooms. Cups

would then represent that intentional hand of an artist, the passing down of human ideas for form and function, each cup being a deliberate form of practice and culture. This can also be simplified to be less historical and more personally immediate. For example, a single hand-made cup may hold a greater significance than a complete machine-made dinner set. That gift brings with its use memories of that person and maybe why, when, or how they gave it was given.

5 METHODS

5.1 Ceramic Materials and Tools

This thesis approach of essay with an accompanying project allows me to apply, in a studio pottery setting, the processes and motivations that have shaped the cup's material culture. Not only are historical items examples of communication through materials but current ceramicists making work today continue this method of recording humanity. My methods stem from a desire to circle back to the origins of cups in ancient China. Though this is not my own culture it is through exposure to their methodology that results in more simplistic styles in my work. The clay that I use is a mid-fire black clay called Brown Bear that is fired to approximately 2157 degrees Fahrenheit. Most of the surface of my forms are bare clay. This means that there is no glaze on most of the cup. This natural surface ties to a desire to be grounded to the original "truth" of the material (Smith). The idea of the "truth" of a material stems from the thought that to create, a ceramicist cannot rely on theoretical or secondhand knowledge to form an understanding in clay. It is through the repetition of throwing on the wheel and a "feeling for [clay's] primitive qualities based on a slow growth of understanding" that a clear expression of a private sensation can be made (Scheier et al. 5). The choice to expose the clay surface on all the cups comes from a desire to provide a tactile experience for the user that is

closer to the one I have when working with raw material. This closeness to the original material supports the connection to processes and the origin of the material being used.

My choice of glazes, as well as placement and application of the glaze, are intentionally simplistic. Utilitarian forms are created based on practicality before aesthetics. For example, a drinking vessel needs to be food safe. I began by choosing glazes that are nontoxic. I limited my color palette to cool colors and earthy tones that did not run or move on the surface a lot. The glaze was then applied to the interior of the form along with at least the top portion of the cup where the mouth rests. The attention to this application provides a visual permission of use to the user giving cues that it is for drinking use. When anyone uses a cup, we trust that the maker has taken these precautions to make sure the form is appropriate for drinking use. However, utility is not the full extent of a form being made but simply the grounds on which one's unique techniques are built, as my material interaction differs from the next potter, unique only to myself. "Utility alone does not curve a wall or shape a handle. It only suggests those necessities are practical solutions to better use" (Van Keuren). It is just as important to think about the form of the cup as part of the drink, as the utensils influence the experience of drinking (Yang, et.al. 1).

When contemplating the physical assets of my drinking vessels there are endless numbers of standards for how they could be considered. Creating forms that are intended to be used with hot liquids requires me to think about the ergonomics of their use in relation to the hands. This brought up the difference between a drinking vessel with a handle, often called a mug, and one without, usually referred to as a cup. The names suggest a certain socially assumed action and potential type of liquid to be consumed. The handle in turn provides a way to pick up a cup even when there is a potential for unpotable liquid due to hot temperatures. This model is an echo of

how Chinese teacups changed in a similar way from the ear cups to the round cup (Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 23). I intentionally do not include handles in my work to reference early cups that did not have them (Wang 16; Pirazzoli-t'Serstenens 21-22). This connects to my desire to reject the fast-paced lifestyle that my American material culture prompts. It is the small changes in the physicality of cups that I want to emphasize; they are the tangible displays of an individual and collective choice. Cups without handles also promote a quicker less intricate method of building them. It also allows them to be placed closer together in a kiln conserving space (Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 25). This symbolizes, for me, a recognition of intentional simplicity in forms supporting a simple practice.

After referring to historical wares to guide my intended shapes, I then encountered firsthand the restraints of the material. This occurred when throwing and hand building with clay. It was then that I connected back to methods of material engagement where the application of my intentions met the intentions and restraints of the material itself. Within this, I faced the same moments of interaction that my potter predecessors would have had with their clay. During this process I learned from the material and increased my understanding of how it responded to my touch. Over time I was able to more closely relate what I saw in my head to what came from the conflation of hands and medium. Skills I learned through this kinesthetic lesson encompass but are not limited to “regulation, imagery, metattention, epistemic action, planning, problem-solving, and imagination (Brinck et.al. 24). As I threw on the wheel, I reacted to what the clay was allowing me to do in the moment. Improvisation allowed me to follow the material as a form is developed (Ingold 97). These forms were then solidified through a firing process to become usable. Once finished they become a consumable part of material culture, available for others to interpret and interact with.

5.2 Presentation and Participation

As far as physical presentation in the space, ceramic drinking vessels were placed on pedestals in the center of the room. The orientation of the pedestals to each other were spaced in a way that created pockets of floor space around the work for people to walk into. Each pedestal was approachable from multiple directions. This allows the work to be approached in the round. The pedestals were at a lower height to allow visitors to pick up and interact with the work as they would with most cups outside of a gallery, like on a table or countertop. The use of a pedestal verses a table or shelf gives the work a similar presentation to cups in a museum. Reverence is provided to wares that are old and historical, but they were once also just the cup that was used daily. When cups are created today, they are the recorded material history in the making. Their inspiration and methods come from learned material engagement and passed down knowledge of the craft. The pedestal helps the viewer to see them as more than just a cup, but instead as a work of art that has the potential to contain more than just utilitarian goals. Current cups are the result of the ancestry of cup making.

In the gallery cups were placed on surfaces in coinciding sets. These groups allow for a small series of similar forms to work together, insinuating the need for communal activity. The groups of cups had similar forms and glaze to each other while differing from the next group. This form repetition touches on the methods an artist goes through with the clay, as the weight, water, and size references guide communication during creation. In the groupings there were also single attributes on the cup's surface to differentiate it from its group members. These simplistic underglaze markings are moments of surface grounding that form individual tactile associations with each piece, since it differs from the rest of the surface. These minimal marks symbolize a break from utilitarian monotony.

Though the cups in this series are similar in style they were not all created at the same time. They were created over a series of months where my constant throwing on the wheel allowed me to grow in my skills and provide time for the clay to teach me the limits and abilities of its material structure. It was through this process that certain forms were kept, and others were let go. Not all forms made it into the final groupings. This is a common practice for potters as they can see in which pieces the communication between potter and clay was the strongest. For me the cups that when fired presented the most simplistic and natural surface as well as the ability to hold it comfortably would prevail.

We understand our bodies in space according to our senses. Thomas van Rompay et al. proposed that we understand the existence of objects by imposing our own body understanding on them. The repetition of these interactions forms a “non-linguistic” schema that gives meaning to our experiences (3). When approaching the cups in my series, I can assume that individuals brought their own past material culture with them. This scaffolding led them to interact in a certain way with the objects at hand. It can be proposed, however, that a visitor may not know how to use a cup due to a lack in that material exposure. While unlikely, this did not hinder them from simply handling the cups and creating a physical understanding of how it felt to them.

Before entering, participants were informed that they were allowed to touch objects in the space. This will be important because most galleries instruct viewers not to touch, only to observe. The instructions told them that to fully understand the work they should touch it. I believe this will create true moments of physical perception. This relates to my purpose of ceramics being a visceral communication of material culture. My preferences in processes, based on my own material engagement, manipulated what was provided to my audience. Through being able to touch the cups the audience engaged with certain aesthetics. The aesthetics were

presented by providing a form that was stylistically different in surface treatment and size. Viewers could then add to their repertoire the ways in which cups could be presented. Though I was not privy to the personal responses of the participants, my intention was not documentation of those moments but that I am just a catalyst for continued intentional ceramic use that will feed into the understanding of the power of a communal material culture.

When approaching an object in 3D space there are a series of sensory steps I believe most participants take. First is visual and surface based. There can be some added influences from the room size, lighting, personal physical restrictions of viewers and so on, but I will not be addressing these in this essay. I do, however, understand that environments play a part in sensory reactions so ultimately, I strove to limit added environmental stimulus. The visual step, environment aside, relates to previous visual cues that the viewer has seen before with similar forms. Recognizing a form as a certain “thing” like a cup, versus a vase or sculpture, comes from these learned experiences. Preconceived ideas can be applied even before touching, as certain forms symbolize a function. Because cups have been a part of all societies, it is safe to assume that most everyone who came into the gallery approached the cups with background knowledge of a similar form and its function.

The second step in interacting with the form is touch. Invited to pick up the cups, participants move past only the visual cues into a secondary sense added by their hands. Hands are not the final sensory receptors, though; mouths play a part in the way cups are understood and chosen. Touch as communication with cups is not limited to my work but can be observed in one’s own home. Cups are intimate objects held close to bodies and placed in mouths creating concrete moments of physical interaction. The thickness of the body, thinness of the rim, overall weight and size, surface texture, height and scale, contribute to the response of the user to the

vessels (Yang et al. 6). The benefit of looking at cups as complicated historical storytellers allows users and creators to interact with a heritage of cup forms. These objects of intimacy are continuing to create meaning for people, symbolize status, memories, and intention. These findings have important implications for the broader domain of human material culture.

6 CONCLUSION

The study of pottery and the drinking vessel and its effects on societies can be a beneficial lens of introspection. Viewing the shifts in the modernity of the cup, we can contemplate the people creating them and what makes up the tides of their societies. With this concrete form to examine, the methods and values displayed can be applied and duplicated by other potters and communities. Not only for the potter but also the user, becoming aware of the social structures these cups represent and how we have arrived in our current state. As a potter I can, through the study of these inspirations, see the collective influence of other potters in my work and so share in a collective conversation. I am not creating aimlessly through influence but mindful representation of my environment, committing experience to form. Understanding human social change can come from looking at material culture. The use of a cup, and pausing to recognize the physical conversation between body, maker, and self is a step into realizing the power of studying material culture to understand ourselves. It is in this that we can, as a group, see how cultural practices come to be. Taking part, we collectively add to the repertoire of human actualization through socio-material engagement.

In this gallery space where people can interact with cups, I cannot assume that they will inherently understand the history that is embedded in their forms. They may simply create their own preferences based on the physical interactions they have in the moment. It is the evolution of the cup that shows the differences in cultural priorities. As the Chinese ear-cup gives way to

the round, the round to the British handled teacup, then in turn to, America's handled, venti, insulated thermos, cultures and intentions are connected. The cups I make promote a slower material awareness as a resistance to the dehumanizing process of consumption and mass production. And for those who do not experience my drinking vessels, I encourage applying the observation and contemplation of genealogy and purpose to any cup. A cup can be what changes one's daily experience, it can be the grounding to a memory, a vessel to a tradition, a connection to another. Through this we can all create a conversation about when and how we choose the cups we use and what those choices display about our culture.

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