



CRAFT IN AMERICA

EDUCATION GUIDE

Apprenticeships: Altering the American Potter



"I imagine as you talk to us Leach trained potters you've been hearing quite a bit about the past. I almost wish we could abolish that word, because I think what we're about is the continuum."
- Clary Illian

LESSON OVERVIEW

In this lesson students get to know three American potters who are connected by their individual experiences as apprentices at Leach Pottery in St. Ives, England. Students will be introduced to two internationally influential potters – Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada who took on many apprentices, as well as connect the notion of apprenticeship to their personal lives. Utilizing the Craft in America website students will explore and research the work of a featured artist/s, looking for qualities and attributes they feel they would like to apply to their own work. In studio practice, students will create a series of altered functional forms that have been influenced by the work of other craftspeople.

Grade Level: 8-12

Estimated Time: Five to seven 45-minute class periods

Craft In America Theme/Episode: *CROSSROADS*

Background Information



Jeff Oestreich was trained to the austere simplicity of traditional Asian pottery while serving as apprentice to Bernard Leach in England in the 1960s. A highly regarded studio potter, Jeff has exhibited widely in museums and galleries world-wide. His work can be found in the outstanding collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Incheon World Ceramic Center, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery, among others. He opens his studio to the public every year. It is a beloved tradition of the potters of the St. Croix Valley.



Clary Illian is a potter who lives in Ely, Iowa. Illian apprenticed at Leach Pottery from 1964 – 65. Hewing to the Leach philosophy, her subsequent work concentrated on the purity of the pot's form and the potter's life – one lived with strong convictions and a pure heart. She lives today in the environs of the St. Croix Valley, Minnesota, producing useful daily pottery for local customers at a reasonable price. *Clary Illian: A Potter's Potter*, a retrospective at the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, ran from August 2012 to February 2013.



Warren MacKenzie is one of America's greatest living potters and an inspiration to younger generations. Having apprenticed at the Leach Pottery in 1952, MacKenzie brought the Mingei aesthetic to the St. Croix Valley where it took root and spread. An inspired teacher, MacKenzie embodied the philosophy, impressing young potters with a dedication to the ideals of simplicity, serviceability and rough beauty. His work is collected by the world's finest museums.

Key Concepts

- The craft of clay is shared among generations and cultures.
- Humans want to personalize functional objects.
- Ideas come from ideas.
- The altered form allows for potters to create unique forms with efficiency.

Critical Questions

- How do potters share ideas?
- How do artists integrate form and function?
- From where do ideas come?
- What is an altered form?

Objectives

Students will:

- Learn about the relationship between Shoji Hamada and Bernard Leach.
- Meet three clay artists who apprenticed with Bernard Leach.
- Consider the influences artists have over each other's work.
- Research craft artists using the Craft in America website.
- Create a series of altered forms in clay.

Vocabulary

Apprentice, utilitarian, altered form, sgraffito, Mingei

Interdisciplinary Connection

History

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

Content Standard:

1. Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes
2. Using knowledge of structures and functions
4. Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures
5. Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

Resources and Materials for Teaching

Resources

- Craft in America DVD, *CROSSROADS*. Also viewable online at www.craftinamerica.org/episodes/crossroads
- Craft in America website, www.craftinamerica.org
- Leach Pottery website, www.leachpottery.com
- The following video is a three minute extract from *A Potter's World* featuring Bernard Leach. This and many other short clips about Leach and Hamada can be found on YouTube for further investigation by teachers and students: youtu.be/lxpcUnquXJI

Worksheet

- *Style Sheet*

Materials

- Clay
- Pottery wheels, if available
- Rolling pins
- Canvas
- Fettling knives and other clay tools
- Water spray bottle
- Mold forms, heavy plastic tubes, simple plastic bowls, or other structural forms from which multiples can be made
- Plastic to cover works in progress
- Sketchbooks or sketch paper
- Pencils



INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

"When I think of the joy in my life as a potter, it's not the awards, the accolades - it's the teaching...it's passing it on."
- Jeff Oestreich

Before Viewing

Share the quote at the beginning of the lesson with students:

"I imagine as you talk to us Leach trained potters you've been hearing quite a bit about the past. I almost wish we could abolish that word, because I think what we're about is the continuum."
- Clary Illian

Introduce to the students the potters Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada.

Bernard Leach was a potter from England and wrote an internationally influential book, *The Potter's Handbook*.

Shoji Hamada was a potter from Japan and in 1955 was given that country's highest honor, that of a Living National Treasure. Both potters ran large studios that created functional pottery with great attention to aesthetics and the desire to serve the needs of their communities. The video clip illuminates what happened when they met.

Tell students that Shoji Hamada and Bernard Leach took on many apprentices throughout their lifetimes. In the Craft in America episode, *CROSSROADS*, students will be introduced to three living American potters who apprenticed under Bernard Leach at his studio in St. Ives, England. Each of these potters was influenced heavily by the experiences at St. Ives. They all discuss how their time with him has affected their work.

An apprentice learns a skill from someone who already is able to do that skill very well. As we live our lives we are all apprentices in many regards. Invite students to consider the ways in which they have been apprentices in their lives. Record contributions on the board or on chart paper. How did they learn to hit a baseball, write in cursive, drive a car, sew, fold towels, mow the lawn? Ask students if they now carry out these skills exactly the same as the person who they apprenticed under. In what ways did they personalize these skills for themselves? Did they change the way in which they perform these skills to serve a new purpose? Have students keep these ideas in mind as they watch the segment on the DVD or online at www.craftinamerica.org/shorts/midwest-potters-segment.



Photos Courtesy of the North Carolina Office of Archives & History, Raleigh, North Carolina and Leach Pottery

After Viewing

Building Ideas

Initiate a conversation with students about ideas. How do artists come up with ideas? Ideas sometimes come from other ideas. Ideas come from wanting to understand. Ideas come from needing to serve a purpose. Ask students if they can recall an idea that came from another idea in the video. Discuss the difference between copying an idea and being motivated, changed, or influenced by an idea. It is important that students consider how they can apply attributes of other work without simply trying to reproduce what another artist has created.

The three American potters featured in the video were drawn to the work of Bernard Leach. They sought him out and wanted to learn from him. Craftspeople often want to learn from each other. Recall that Warren and Alix MacKenzie made a film about the Leach Pottery for just that purpose—for others to learn and be influenced by this particular way of working.

Explain to students that they will explore a large resource of potters and other craftspeople neatly organized on the Craft in America website. Before we consider others however, we need to consider what we already know, what we find our own aesthetic preferences to be. Have students think about their aesthetic and design preferences—the way they want the things they make to look and feel. Do they like complicated designs, simple surfaces, delicate forms, heavy forms? Have them record their ideas on the worksheet provided.

Utilizing the Craft in America website, have students explore the many clay artists. (If students do not have access to electronic resources then provide paper resources, such as old editions of *Ceramics Monthly* or by printing out images for students to consider.) While there are plenty of potters from which to choose, other craft artists that work in fiber, wood, metal, or glass can be inspiring when making aesthetic choices in clay. We recommend that students explore beyond the clay artists. Just as they did in reference to themselves, have students record the qualities they find in another craftsperson's work on the worksheet provided.

Visit www.craftinamerica.org/artists to view craft artists on the Craft in America website. Students can select from one of the categories listed (Clay, Wood, Metal, Fiber, Glass, Paper) and an alphabetical list of artists working in that medium can be found. Once an artist's name is chosen, students can explore images of the artist's work as well as a short biography. Most often, students will find a link to the artist's website and a short video.



Studio Production

(one 45-minute class period)

Altered Forms:

The first step in constructing altered forms is to be able to repeat the construction of the basic form over and over again. If students already have some proficiency on the potter's wheel, have them choose a form they can repeat with ease. Remind students that when making multiples on the wheel it is good practice to weigh the amount of clay with which they are starting, and use that same amount each time they attempt that form. It is also helpful to have a ruler and a pair of calipers for measuring.

If hand-building will work better for your class then we suggest using slabs of clay to form cylinders or bowls over sturdy forms. Remember to cover objects with a sheet of newspaper to ensure that the clay will lift or slide off of the form with ease. Remove the clay from the form while still in the early state of leather-hard, allowing for manipulation of the clay without it cracking.

Encourage each student to pinch, cut, carve, pierce, peel, and paddle. If students choose to paddle or pierce the clay then guide them in allowing the clay to stiffen up a bit, but still retain moisture. Students will need to determine when to trim wares made on the wheel. If the altering needs to take place when the clay is soft then trimming would occur last. If a student wants to pierce or do slip and sgraffito work (like Clary Illian) then the ware should be trimmed first then altered.

After hand-built cylindrical forms have been altered, turn them into functional objects by adding a base. Simply roll out a slab of clay to same thickness the slab was made to build the cylinders. Set each altered form on the slab then trace the base for a perfect fit. Score and slip to join the base with the forms.

In creating a series of altered forms we recommend that you require students to make at least three forms, although five would be ideal if time allows. The first manipulation of the form should come from the student, letting the student manipulate the form in a way that seems pleasing to them. Subsequent ideas should be influenced by the research completed about the other artist. Using their completed worksheets, have students apply the qualities they were drawn to in another potter's work.



CLOSING STRATEGIES

Reflection

Looking at the final products, have students conduct a Self Evaluation by explaining to the teacher or another student how they applied the attributes they were drawn to in the other artist's work. Have students support their explanations with the worksheet where they recorded the qualities they found interesting in the other artist's work. Then ask the students to consider what was harder or easier—the physical act of constructing or deciding the ways in which they would alter the form?

Assessment

By lessons end students should be able to:

- Identify Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada.
- Elaborate on what it means to be an apprentice.
- Understand that crafts people learn from each other.
- Create a series of altered forms influenced by other artists' work.

Extensions

A further exploration of variation of a form can be found in the Craft in America lesson *Thomas Mann: Design Vocabulary*. While this lesson focuses on a design vocabulary it draws upon Mann's seemingly endless variations of the heart shape: www.craftinamerica.org/guides/thomas-mann-design-vocabulary

Authors

The Educators' Guide for *CROSSROADS* was developed by art educators Amy Albert Bloom and Dolores E. Eaton under the direction of Dr. Marilyn Stewart, Professor of Art Education, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown, PA.

Lead Author for *Apprenticeships: Altering the American Potter* is Dolores E. Eaton. October 2012.



Worksheet: Style Sheet

The word bank below is to help get you started in describing the artistic qualities of your work and another craftsperson's work. Add your own words when describing the qualities of the work you are considering. Use the back of this worksheet to make sketches or attach images of the work you would like to influence your project.

Student Artist's Name:

I find my work to be:

Craft in America Artist's Name:

I find the work of this artist to be:

What I like most about this work is:

WHIMSICAL HARD EDGED SOFT EDGED ROUGH DARK DELICATE
HEAVY TEXTURED SMOOTH BRIGHT EARTH-TONED JAGGED
PICTORIAL ABSTRACT GEOMETRIC ORGANIC VIBRANT FLUID