



CRAFT IN AMERICA

EDUCATION GUIDE

Conversations and Cups



"I think most people who've been through a war, they don't talk about it. So sometimes I think the cups can be that little spur to start a conversation that wouldn't happen otherwise."
– Ehren Tool

LESSON OVERVIEW

Students will explore the work of ceramic artist Ehren Tool, who creates clay cups on the potter's wheel and embellishes them with military images. Tool gives away his cups and to date has given away over 14,000 in an attempt to provide a catalyst for conversations between veterans and those who have not served in the military. In this lesson, students will engage in research in order to gain what Tool describes as "war awareness," a sense of those in their community who have performed military service in the past and a recognition of the Americans who are currently serving in the military and where they are stationed. Finally, students will make a ceramic form that features imagery of a chosen veteran or service person.

Grade Level: 9-12

Estimated Time: Two 45-minute class periods (research) and five 45-minute class periods (studio work)

Craft In America Theme/Episode: SERVICE

Background Information



Ehren Tool is a ceramic artist and Senior Laboratory Mechanician at the Ceramic Department at the University of California, Berkeley and Marine Veteran of the 1991 Gulf War. Tool was greatly influenced by American expressionist ceramic sculptor Peter Voulkos. Tool says of his own work, "The images on the cups are often graphic and hard to look at. You may be for or against a particular war, but I think it is too easy for us to look away. I think we as a country and as humans should look at what is actually going on." Tool received his MFA from the University of California, Berkeley and BFA from the University of Southern California and has exhibited his vessels at the Oakland Museum of California, the Craft and Folk Art Museum, the Berkeley Art Center, the Bellevue Arts Museum, and The Clay Studio among others.

Key Concepts

- The United States Armed Forces have an historic tradition of recognizing the power of crafts to restore veterans to post-war civilian life.
- Crafts can be used to create awareness of social issues.
- Crafted objects can be catalysts for difficult conversations.

Critical Questions

- In what ways have the U.S. Armed Forces used studio crafts to restore veterans to civilian life?
- How can a crafted object create an awareness of social issues?
- How can a crafted object be a catalyst for difficult conversations?

Objectives

Students will:

- Comprehend the historic connection between the U.S. Armed Forces and crafts.
- Demonstrate awareness of current U.S. military service involvement around the world.
- Locate veterans in their community.
- Create a clay object that represents current U.S. Military involvement or that represents a veteran.

Vocabulary

G.I. Bill, socially invested, vocation, military culture, civilian culture, catalyst, didactic, scale, repetition.

Interdisciplinary Connection

History/Social Studies: The entire *SERVICE* episode, but especially this lesson, lends itself to exploration through a partnership with a social studies teacher. Students will be exploring local service personnel and veterans, and social studies faculty may already have valuable knowledge of local memorials, veterans, or connections with local veterans' organizations. Students could partner across the art and social studies disciplines to do research, plan, and then make final ceramic forms that foster war awareness and that honor veterans and those who currently serve in the military. Students may want to work together to plan a school display of the work, combining documentation of local veterans and military involvement alongside the ceramic objects.

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

Content Standard:

3. Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas.
4. Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.



Resources and Materials for Teaching

Resources

- Craft in America DVD, *SERVICE*. Also viewable online at www.craftinamerica.org/episodes/service
- Craft in America website, www.craftinamerica.org
- Local veterans and service personnel among staff, faculty, and relatives of students
- Local newspapers
- News magazines
- Access to online resources for research
- *The Military Times* feature "Honoring the Fallen" which lists a photo of every American soldier who has died in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation New Dawn: projects.militarytimes.com/valor
- *The Washington Post* feature "Faces of the Fallen" which lists a photo and biography of each soldier who has died in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom: apps.washingtonpost.com/national/fallen
- Homes for Our Troops is an organization that builds houses for injured veterans: www.hfotusa.org/home
(This is the same organization that built the house for ceramic artist and veteran Judas Recendez, also shown in the *SERVICE* episode: www.hfotusa.org/recendez)

Worksheets

- *Recognizing Those Who Serve*
- *Military Symbols*

Materials

- Clay
- Slip
- Glazes
- Clay tools
- Kiln
- Optional: Pottery wheels (Forms can also be hand built.)
- Items with which to create molds such as toys, small models, medals, and found parts such as gears or other useful patterned objects
- Assorted metal or rubber stamps for stamping designs in clay
- Picture files of military related images: memorials, insignias, medals, equipment, vehicles, maps, soldiers (including veterans and medical personnel), uniforms, boots, parades, etc.



INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

(Video and discussion: one 45-minute period)

This education guide focuses on the Ehren Tool segment of *SERVICE*, although the entire episode gives a multi-dimensional portrait of U.S. military service, of veterans' experiences of war, and of the value of crafts in relation to military experiences. It would be educationally valuable to explore the entire episode in stages.

Before Viewing

Introduce students to the video segment by explaining that Ehren Tool is a Gulf War veteran who makes ceramic cups.

*"My wife calls my work 'war awareness art.' I'm not so concerned with if you're for or against a specific war, but that you're ignorant of what's happening is not okay with me."
– Ehren Tool*

Ask students what they think they might see when watching the video. View the segment on Ehren Tool in the *SERVICE* episode on the Craft in America DVD or online at www.craftinamerica.org/shorts/ehren-tool-segment.

Note: On the DVD at approximately 42 minutes, there is a second segment in the episode that shows Ehren Tool and fellow potter and veteran Jesse Albrecht performing a marathon cup making production in the Clay Studio in Philadelphia.

After Viewing

Ask students for their reactions to the segment. Did anything surprise them? Do they feel ignorant of current U.S. military issues and news? Let students share, regarding Tool's quote, how much they know about current U.S. involvement in military actions: where they are happening, and if anyone they know is in the military and what their experiences are. A running bulletin board of information that can be continually updated will be useful, and serve as a respectful recognition of students' awareness, their questions, and their stories of family and friend involvement in military service. Some students may be planning a military career or may already be committed to a branch of the service.



Possible questions to foster conversation

How does Ehren Tool use scale in his work? What does he say about scale? Tool describes the scale of violence in war, and its effect on the soldiers who experience it. He says,

"Once you're exposed to war, and that kind of violence at that scale, I think it does change you in a way."

Tool also describes the size of the cups in relation to the scale of war:

"I think the cup is the appropriate scale to talk about issues of war and violence, and then the shape; it's just a shape that feels good in my hand. And that's the way I want them to be used, is hand to hand."

What does he mean by that? Have students consider that Ehren Tool also calls the cups "little silly cups." How is a little cup the opposite of what he calls "confrontational"? Also, what other images does "hand to hand" bring to mind? Can you think of violent as well as non-violent images associated with that phrase? (Hand to hand combat, firefighting brigades that hand buckets of water hand to hand, people gathering and joining hands, delivering things by hand and in person, rather than not in person.)

Ehren Tool has a purpose with his cups. What is it, and how do you imagine it working? Tool says, "I think when the cups are the best is when they spark a conversation between somebody who knows what the images are and somebody who doesn't. I think most people who've been through a war, they don't talk about it. So sometimes I think the cups can be that little spur to start a conversation that wouldn't happen otherwise."

Returning to the idea of scale, how does the small size of the cup encourage this conversation?

How does Ehren Tool use repetition in his work? He states,

"There's over 14,000 cups that I've made and given away now. It is a vocation. It's something that I feel called to do, is to make these little silly cups and give them away."

How does Tool use repetition in his video *1.5 Second War Memorial*? What message does the video send? At one point in the segment, we see a wall full of the cups. What is the effect or feeling of seeing the wall full of cups? What awareness does that create?

Describe the project to students: that they will be researching the current news of U.S. military involvement, followed by searching for veterans and those currently in service in their community and school, as well as searching online for those veterans elsewhere in the United States. Let students know that this is in preparation for creating a clay form; whether a cup as Ehren Tool makes or another small form that would be suitable for encouraging awareness or a conversation about current military news or about soldiers' experiences.

Note: While Ehren Tool makes his cups to foster conversations between veterans and people who have not served in the military, he speaks from the position of a veteran and so has a different perspective (and experiences) than high school students. However, students' productions may foster important conversations about what Tool calls "war awareness," an idea related to the United States' long tradition of honoring the service and experiences of veterans. Begin the *Recognizing Those Who Serve* worksheet if there is extra time.

Worksheets and Research

(one or two 45-minute class periods, plus some outside the classroom research, gathering, and interviews)

Worksheet: *Recognizing Those Who Serve*

Through this worksheet, students begin looking for news about current U.S. military involvements. Computer searches will be useful here, but recent newspapers also provide much information, including news on local citizens in the military or local veterans' group activities. Students should take notes on the worksheet and add information to the bulletin board. Let the school staff and faculty know that students are seeking information about veterans and those serving in the military. Students can gather news as well as name, rank, photo, and history of service of soldiers, and any stories that individuals would like to share. A second source of information are the online services listed above in Resources, in which websites feature updated lists honoring those who have died during military service. Since each student will choose a separate individual or topic, some students may find an individual on the sites that they wish to honor.

Worksheet: *Military Symbols*

On this worksheet, students will consider how military culture "translates," as Ehren Tool says, into civilian culture, and how Tool translates it back again by using the imagery on his cups. Students will find examples of military depictions in civilian culture and collect images and objects for use in their work. Students will consider the message or effect they wish to communicate. Students will sketch ideas for their chosen project and choose the imagery, symbols, and potential decorations (such as paint or glaze) that they will use.



Studio Production

(five 45-minute class periods)



*"Making art and sharing the objects with people; I believe that's a worthwhile expenditure of my time, my life."
– Ehren Tool*

Using their sketched designs as a guide, students will form an object with clay and then embellish it with the desired imagery, textures, and glaze.

Make stamps and molds.

"I use lots of molds. A bunch of the other stuff is just toys. This is the gas mask I wore in the '91 Gulf War, thinking that the air was poisoned, and now it's a toy for ages 6 and up." – Ehren Tool

Spend one studio period creating stamps and molds for the clay cups and for other forms students may create. To note how Tool embellishes his cups, it may be useful to replay the segments that show him pressing the clay cup from inside, into a mold. The design then appears convex. Shapes and stamps can also be pressed into the clay so that the impression is concave. The class should start by making molds of the collected objects (such as medals and small toy guns) so that the molds will be ready when the clay cups or other forms are ready to be stamped. Knead a small amount of clay, press the object into the ball of clay and remove it. If students are carving stamps, remind them that any letters, words, and phrases must be reversed so they will "read" correctly. Let the stamped images dry. Fire the stamps.

Form an object with clay:

Students may choose to create a cup in the manner of Ehren Tool. Tool throws "off the hump," that is, he centers a large amount of clay on the wheel and then forms cups with a smaller portion of clay at the top of the mound, slicing the cups from the clay base as each is formed. Alternatively, cups may be wheel thrown one at a time. Cups may also be hand built. To hand build, a cup can be made from a rolled slab of clay. Cut the clay slab (3/8 inches thick works well) into a rectangle and form it into a cylinder (the cup sides). The seam where the clay overlaps may be smoothed completely or left rough and visible. In either case, roughen the overlapping edges of the clay and apply slip to the edges, then join by pressing the edges together. To make a bottom, place the cylinder on a separate slab of clay, and trace around the lower edge of the cylinder with a fettling knife as though cutting out a cookie. Attach the cut out bottom to the cup sides: score (roughen) the surfaces where they will meet then add wet slip and press the edges together. Smooth the seam inside and out.

The clay should not be so wet that it sticks to the stamps/molds, nor so dry that the cups sides crack when stamping designs. When the clay object is ready, embellish it with the stamps and then let it dry. Bisque fire the projects. Students may choose to leave the forms uncolored or unfinished, or they may paint or decorate the fired pieces rather than add glaze. Otherwise, add glaze decorations as desired and then glaze fire the projects.

Students may choose to make another form (instead of a cup) to embellish with imagery, and they will most likely come up with their own ideas. Some other ideas to consider are a plaque, a large dog tag (or a series of smaller ones) or a boot print in a slab.

CLOSING STRATEGIES

"I think that peace is the only adequate war memorial." – Ehren Tool

Reflection

Students can help to decide the best destination for their productions. One idea to further encourage war awareness and appreciation of military service is a display of the collection in a space within the school, or in another public place such as a local library.

Assessment

By examining the worksheets and the student's artwork, and in discussions with the student throughout the project, it should be evident that the student can:

- Comprehend the historic connection between the U.S. Armed Forces and crafts.
- Demonstrate an awareness of current U.S. military service involvement around the world.
- Locate veterans in their community.
- Create a clay object that represents current U.S. Military involvement or that represents a veteran.

Extensions

Students may examine the work of the following artists, all veterans:

- Judas Recendez makes wheel-thrown clay vessels, many of which feature expressive marks that describe his feelings about his military service. His story is included on the *SERVICE* DVD or online at www.craftinamerica.org/shorts/judas-recendez-segment
www.craftinamerica.org/artists/judas-recendez
- Tom Pullin creates metal sculptures that reflect some of his difficult military experiences and is featured in the *FORGE* episode of *Craft in America*, which can be viewed online at www.craftinamerica.org/shorts/tom-pullin-segment
www.craftinamerica.org/artists/tom-pullin
- Ramona Solberg was in the WAC (Women's Army Corp) in World War II, and became a jewelry designer after attending school on the G.I. Bill. She was an originator of "found object" jewelry. An interview with her can be found at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-ramona-solberg-12835
- More of Ehren Tool's work can be seen online at:
www.dirtycanteen.com/ehren-tool.html
inthemake.com/ehren-tool
hyperallergic.com/53007/the-cups-of-war

Authors

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Worksheet: Recognizing Those Who Serve

"It's really hard for me to ignore those young guys who are still out there in the sand; it's really... it's close to my heart." – Ehren Tool

Ehren Tool claims in the *SERVICE* episode that he is "not an instructor," but he teaches through his cups. You will also teach through your clay design, perhaps about a veteran or information about current military service. In preparation for that, you have three areas to research:

- Find out about any current U.S. military involvements. In other words, are U.S. soldiers fighting anywhere right now, or recently? Where, and for how long? What happened recently or is happening now?
- Find local people who are veterans or who are serving in the military. For example, some teachers, staff, parents, or administrators may be in the National Guard or may have served in the past. Collect their information such as name, rank, and time of service, any stories they share, and a photo if you can get one.
- Locate stories about veterans and military personnel in the United States. You may find stories about soldiers returning home or about veterans' affairs (for example, debates in congress about veterans' benefits.)

Where to look: There are several stories in addition to Ehren Tool's in the *SERVICE* episode that feature other veterans. Local newspapers, online news sources, news magazines, local veterans' organizations, and nearby memorials dedicated to different wars are other sources. Ask family and neighbors if there are veterans in their family.

Take notes: Write information on this worksheet (on the back) and then add it to the bulletin board for the class to share.

Choose a topic you want to cover or a person you want to honor. What surprises you? What have you learned? What news do you want to discuss? Whose story do you want to share?

Worksheet: Military Symbols

"This is the gas mask I wore in the '91 Gulf War, thinking that the air was poisoned, and now it's a toy for ages 6 and up. It's kind of surreal to see how military culture is translated into civilian culture." – Ehren Tool

In this worksheet, you will explore how military culture "translates," as Ehren Tool says, into civilian culture. Then you will choose the imagery and objects you would like to depict in your clay design. Use the back of the sheet for writing and sketching.

- List the military and war toys that you and/or your friends or siblings have played with.

- List movies and television shows that feature wars and battles.

- List video games with war and military themes.

- Where do you see other translations of military culture? In fashion? In the design of everyday objects such as backpacks and cars?

Note how Tool translates the imagery back again by using it on his cups. The toy gas mask becomes an image on a cup about war. How can you use some of these images in your own creation? What meaning will be expressed when you use them?

Begin sketching ideas for your clay project. Think about the imagery, symbols, and potential decorations (such as paint or glaze) that you want to use. Do you want to use any words or phrases? Will you use paint or glaze, will you apply it in splotches, or glaze your entire piece? Will you stain it?

What do you want your design to communicate? How will you do that? After sketching, ask classmates how they "read" your design. Does their reading match your intention? If not, is that a problem? Can your project have more than one meaning?