A Sculptor as Potter  Louise C. Chard

The expression, "Art for Art's sake," is decidedly out of fashion, and has been laid away for some time; occasionally it is taken down from its shelf, dusted and cautiously used, but when we see that it is regarded with more or less amusement, we hurriedly withdraw it. But as regularly as we try our last year's garments, so we try this. It is after all such a splendid thing that we are regularly tempted to try to make it the fashion. We are about to dust it again, and this time we are sure that we are right in valuing it so highly.

The work of Mrs. and Miss Perkins bears proof positive that this theory has been held to; nothing more truly artistic than this work has been seen in modern pottery. Made of clay without the use of a wheel; colored with a dull black; moulded on the lines of the ancient Greek, Roman and Etruscan vases, urns, bowls, lamps or whatever is needed for the moment; decorated by the hands of one who keeps the decoration well in hand, never permitting it to become "the thing," but only part and parcel of the vessel it decorates: this pottery presents a most thoroughly artistic whole.

When we say that the color chosen is black we can convey no idea of the reflected color it bears. It is as one might say to a blind man: "a plum is purple," never giving him the delight of knowing all the grades of color purple may have.

In texture this pottery is of mat surface, which gives it much more depth of color than a glaze affords. In fact, the pottery has very much the color effect of Japanese bronze. These potters keep to one color, feeling that in so doing they concentrate the attention on the form, and as a consequence not one uninteresting form is found among their work. If our attention is called to this, we remember seeing pottery of much honor and renown, which if done into this simple flat tone would be relegated to our kitchens. Load a vase or candlestick with an elaborate, or an elaborately simple design and you catch the eye of the Philistine. Thousands of pieces of pottery are turned out every day in shops where the workman is called a "craftsman," and not one beautiful shape is to be found among them.

The decoration of the forms illustrated is suggestive for the most
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part, apparently very crudely modelled until, on closer observa-
tion, we find all the force and vigor of colossal proportions. One
candlestick has, heading its dignified proportions, a frieze of
human figures in long, sweeping draperies, with locked hands,
forming, in pairs, a solemn procession. Another, a small bowl
shaped like a porringer, has for its handle a sleeping bird, its great
wings folded under the bowl and its head drooping on its breast.
Many of the forms, though there are no two pieces made alike,
have the beautiful grooving at the base, shown in the illustration,
while above, around the centre of the vessel, is a design using the
figures of men and women. An ink-well and tray for pens are
most unusual. The ink-well is covered with a purely conven-
tional design, the lid surmounted by the figure of a lioness at rest,
the tray bordered by a beautifully interlaced design, while inside
are two designs dating back to most ancient Eastern symbols.
Then, there is a platter with its conventional design of the olive,
and a little box on a standard, with a lid whose knob is the tiny
figure of a woman crouching forward, her drapery pulled close
about her.
A very beautiful form of the cross is much used by these skilful
workers. Some of the shapes are rounded at the base so that a
frame work is necessary to hold them, and there are water bottles,
some hung by cords strung through three tiny handles on the sides
of the bottles, some suspended by one loop in the centre, a spout on
either side, flat flasks, long narrow ones and short ones with long
necks.
Some huge "garden pots," done in Standish, Maine, and modelled
after the old Italian "well heads," are superb in proportions.
These are modelled in terra cotta, sand blown, making a delight-
ful color for use in gardens or on a terrace, and with trees of Osage
orange or of box, would be most decorative. One in the illustra-
tion has, on one side, the Tudor rose, on the other side, a shield
with a design of three bunches of grapes, while its corners are
formed of huge acanthus leaves. Twelve hundred pounds of clay
are in this huge pot.
Another of these pots has straight lines, is larger at the base and
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has for decoration conventional borders, the Latin Cross and two
birds drinking from one urn. Still another, modelled on Greek
lines, has figures of men and women—water-carriers and dancers
—full of motion and delightfully simple.
Miss Perkins is a sculptor and this pottery with which many would
be well satisfied and at which juncture would complacently pause,
she considers merely a side issue. The figurines shown at her
studio are full of sentiment and, though sometimes no more elab-
orated than the figures on the vases and urns, are the real thought
expressed. One especially admired is of an Egyptian woman of
splendid strength, her baby, nude, at the back, held by a hand
drawn over her shoulder. The little childish proportions melt
into hers, relaxed in perfect child-confidence in the strength and
patience of the mother.
Such work as this cannot be described adequately any more than a
piece of music can be shared unless heard. This work must be seen.
To these potters be all honor given. Certainly the medium does
not inspire. All this good work has been obtained at the cost of
much study and observation, with the conviction that to follow
one’s ideal of the beautiful and the true is the only way to have
true art; that by pleasing the people we unconsciously lower our-
selves and cheapen our art; that cheap art means of necessity cheap
ideas, or worse, none at all. Philanthropists are disposed to quar-
rel with us over this “art for art’s sake,” and are heard to insist
that art’s sacred privilege is to elevate, but we insist that art must
be followed with singleness of purpose and that if so followed, it
fails not always to inspire and elevate. May we not have, instead
of the quantities of indifferent art in our homes, one or two really
beautiful objects such as these, and return in spirit to the old time
when to be a craftsman was to be an artist as well? The art and
the craft were then inseparable, and as much study and design
were necessary before a craftsman began his snuff-box, or buckle,
or button, as was thought proper for an artist before beginning his
canvas or decoration, or for a sculptor before cutting one chip from
his marble. We cannot all drink from Cellini’s goblets, but we can
have our objects of decoration few—even a single one—but good.