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# Connected: An Artist's Investigation into Digital Communication

Brenda Roveda

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Connected: An Artist's Investigation into Digital Communication

A Thesis Presented

By

BRENDA ROVEDA

MAY 2018

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A Thesis Presented by

BRENDA ROVEDA

Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies Bridgewater State University  
Bridgewater, Massachusetts

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

Master of ARTS in TEACHING CREATIVE ARTS

APRIL 23, 2018

CONNECTED: AN ARTIST'S INVESTIGATION INTO DIGITAL  
COMMUNICATION

Brenda Roveda

## **Abstract**

The purpose of my thesis was to develop a body of utilitarian ceramic pottery, which examines the internal conflict I have with digital communication and its impact on social interactions. I draw inspiration from historic ceramic artworks for my wheel-thrown and hand-built forms. My traditionally inspired utilitarian forms are ornamented with surface decorations that represent contemporary symbols of the digital age. By doing this I intend to create artworks that allow the viewer to contemplate the evolution of human communication and their own reliance on technological devices.

My studio investigations incorporate scholarly research of historic artworks and time periods combined with personal reflections regarding contemporary society's reliance on digital communication. My written thesis examines my creative process, how my approach to instruction has influenced it, and how my studio investigations have impacted my pedagogical teaching philosophy. The culmination of this project will be a shared graduate art exhibition in the Wallace Anderson Gallery in April.

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## **Introduction**

This body of work explores the conflicting feelings I have regarding digital communication. While I value and rely on the little powerhouse of a computer I keep within reach for its many abilities and conveniences, I also resent it for its interruptions, distractions, and my growing dependency on it. These conflicting feelings have led me to question our cultural shifts and values regarding communication.

Similar to many of us, I utilize technology daily for correspondence on different levels including email and social media professionally and personally as a useful tool. I resource the internet's many tools for my own research and classroom instruction. However, I am concerned about the effects of screen time, constant contact with others, and the overall inundation of media. I am connected but conflicted and this work examines these feelings.

I create wheel-thrown forms inspired by four different cultures, which I have chosen for their rich history of ceramic art and their use of ornate patterns and symbolism. My idea is to make highly recognizable art-historic forms and

decorate the surfaces using contemporary symbols referencing technological communication. The juxtaposition of contemporary semiotics as surface treatment on old-world forms represents my conflict regarding the accelerated evolution of technology as our primary source for correspondence.

For the wheel thrown forms, I draw upon the 15<sup>th</sup> century blue and white storage vessels of Ming Dynasty, China, the utilitarian earthenware of 15<sup>th</sup> century Persia to present day Morocco, traditional Acoma Pueblo pottery, and ancient Greek vessels from the Geometric period circa 900-700 BC. These historic wares utilize symbolism and patterns significant to their spiritual beliefs and cultural practices relative to the periods they were made. Despite the visual and cultural distinctions, there are many overarching influences and decorative themes among them.

All of these influential regions continue to produce celebrated culturally specific ceramics, which honor their historic predecessors aesthetically. This makes them highly recognizable, even to the untrained eye. Within this diverse historic pottery group, some common decorative themes exist. These include; banding, symmetrical graphing, geometric shapes, repeat patterns, use of symbolism, and the utilization of negative space as decoration are common themes among the chosen references. They also share an emphasis on livelihood, spirituality, nature, customs, and cultural values through the application symbolism and pattern.

The shared decorative themes, historic significance, as well as the utilitarian and ceremonial purposes of the chosen pottery influences, are the



reasons I have focused in on these cultural references in my work. Although I deviate from the specific symbolism of the historic pottery influences, I use them to inspire and inform my work. The motifs and patterns depicted on each piece compliment the form with a balanced, symmetrical layout. I strive to achieve visual balance in my finished work as a way to represent my desire to achieve balance in our evolving world.

### **Conflict as Concept:**

I developed my current theme addressing my internal conflict with digital communication, through the process of research, sketching, writing, critical feedback, and revision. As a high school educator and a parent, the issue of cell phone use and screen time is a very real concern of mine. As a teacher I am often challenged with the acceptable use of technology in my studio-classroom. However, on a personal level, I too find myself scrolling through social media, shopping sites, and news networks as an easy escape from boredom or a tool to procrastinate from undesirable tasks.

Technological advancements have been made at an accelerated rate over the past two and a half decades. From this rapid transition of how we communicate, some common social etiquette and customs like family dinners and face-to-face conversations require a concerted effort to maintain, usually through limiting use of or banning devices. Others use their devices as a way to pass time or pacify a restless or bored child. In education we are embracing the use of technology, setting goals to be a 1:1 school, one device for every student. In my experience with this program at my school, I see the misuse and abuse of

these devices among students along with a very positive effect such as nutriling socio-economic inequalities regarding access to technology.

I have utilized the resourcefulness of the internet heavily for my thesis research including images, history, and technical applications. Yet even during this research it was all too easy to digress from my work to check email, social media sites, or the news at the touch of a few buttons. At times, during my research, I went down the rabbit hole of the world-wide web... digging through sites for the information I sought often making it less efficient in that way but incredibly convenient and resourcefull in others. I made discoveries, gained insight and understanding through some of these digressions which I may not have made using traditional/text research methods. This conflict, the push and pull I have with my use of devices and the balancing act we all face became the basis for my thesis work.

The concept of conflict is often depicted as illustration in historic paintings or even comics addressing issues of inequality, war, politics, or relationships. I attempted illustration on several works using different techniques at two intervals over the course of my investigations. However, the finished works read as if I were making a statement or taking a stand against digital communication rather than expressing my own internal conflict about it. I came to the realization that the coding and contemporary symbolism as surface designs on art historic forms opened the work up for interpretation by the viewer. The following quote communicates this idea well.

Sometimes rather than creating images of conflict or creating art that responds to it directly, artists employ conflict as an internal quality of their work. Some artists deliberately create an element of contradiction in their artwork in order to create tension or irony, to highlight certain qualities, or to create unforeseen relationships that allow us to think differently. Through unexpected juxtapositions, they challenge our expectations and perceptions of the everyday.<sup>1</sup>

The use of digital semiotics for designs on the surface of historic inspired forms is the unifying factor in the collective works and used as a method to express my personal struggles with my adjustment to modern communication. When I began making this artwork I decided to reference the blue and white wares in the Ming by using a similar palette. In my work, the limited palette is employed on each series in either blues, black and white, or red, orange and yellow . However, as I expanded my palette, the pottery took on a more festive look by including a variety of symbols and a mixture of warm and cool colors. This was a characteristic I welcomed because it added to the element of irony within the vessels often used in funerary rituals.

I carry with me a powerful computer and use it with profound regularity. This computer holds my billing and banking accounts and contacts. It serves as a phone, calendar, navigator, watch, alarm clock, encyclopedia, file cabinet, television, camera, newspaper and toy all in one little device. It is incredibly resourceful and convenient. It can be used as an asset or it can be a destructive force to productivity.

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<sup>1</sup> "What about Internal Conflict in Art?" Khan Academy, 5, accessed April 09, 2018, <https://www.khanacademy.org/partner-content/tate/conflict-contradiction/art-and-conflict/a/what-about-internal-conflict-in-art>.

The historical pottery I draw upon represent the first half of my life in which the only phone I used was tethered to a wall outlet. The digital semiotics on the surface represent the the technology boom which I have experienced in second half of my life. My hope is for the viewer is to recognize the historic characteristics of my work combined with the contemporary symbols and question evolution and technology and its impact on us, individually and as a whole.

## **Historic Influences**

### **Ming Dynasty, China 1368-1644 AD**

The blue and white wares of the Ming Dynasty during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries were the influence for the first body of work in my thesis investigations. The wheel-thrown storage vessels from the Ming Dynasty period are symmetrical and smooth surfaced. The elegant forms have bulbous bodies with collared necks and feet. They are painted with cobalt blue under-glazes over the white, porcelain clay body and transparent glaze.

The Ming Dynasty went through a cultural transition and expansion similar to how we are experiencing a cultural transition and technological expansion through technology.

The early Ming dynasty was a period of cultural restoration and expansion. The reestablishment of an indigenous Chinese ruling house led to the imposition of court-dictated styles in the arts. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>

This synthesis of traditional style from the Song Dynasty with new ceramic technologies and decorative applications influenced from western trade developed a style unique to the Ming Dynasty.

The fourteenth-century development of blue-and-white ware and cloisonné; enamelware arose, at least in part, in response to lively trade with the Islamic world, and many Ming examples continued to reflect strong West Asian influences. <sup>3</sup>

Blue and white pottery of this kind is still some of the most sought after pottery, produced on a massive industrial scale, and exported globally.

The deliberate use of symbolism under empirical rule, includes illustrations dragons, Buddhist Immortals, flowers, clouds, dragons, waves, calligraphy and decorative horizontal bands of pattern and scroll, waves and leaves.

Large-scale landscapes, flower-and-bird compositions, and figural narratives were particularly favored as images that would glorify the new dynasty and convey its benevolence, virtue, and majesty. <sup>44</sup>

The cross-pollination of regional aesthetics reemerges throughout my research.

In an effort to express my conflict regarding modern technology I sought to juxtapose historic forms against contemporary digital semiotics. I began my studio investigations by making large wheel-thrown storage vessels influenced in form by the Ming Dynasty pottery shapes. These large bulbous pots are between 14"-22" in height. I began by using 0's and 1's to represent the computer language of binary code by meticulously stamping the vessels all-over in a uniform pattern with a limited pallet of blue underglazes. This transitioned

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<sup>2,3,4</sup> "Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), accessed April 11, 2018, [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ming/hd\\_ming.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ming/hd_ming.htm).

into using binary code as an expressive language, translating descriptive words such as “bubble”, “connected”, “disengaged” “overload” to name a few.

The pictures featured in Figures 1-4, show the Ming influence on the left and my adaptation using Binary code. The vessels picture in Figures 2 and 4 are the final two forms I made in this series. They depict the transition I made from using Binary code representationally to translating the code as an expressive language. In figure 2 &4, I spell out “connected” throughout the bottom of the pot in binary code using warm colors and I repeat the word “connected” in English throughout the neck. I purposefully disrupt the uniform; all over blue pattern with the complimentary orange stamps to express how being connected to our devices can be disruptive to our lives.

I began to bring in more color in my final pieces of the Ming series, see Figure 4. I use complimentary colors to reflect opposing feelings toward digital correspondence. In this piece I alternate the translated letters, which are 8-10 numeric digits each in code, to spell out positive and negative adjectives like, “connected” and “disconnected”, “always-on” and “unplugged”. My hope is for the viewer to initially see a well-balanced traditional looking piece of pottery and then to observe the irony of the contemporary surface context.



Figure 1.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 2. Roveda *Connected* 2017

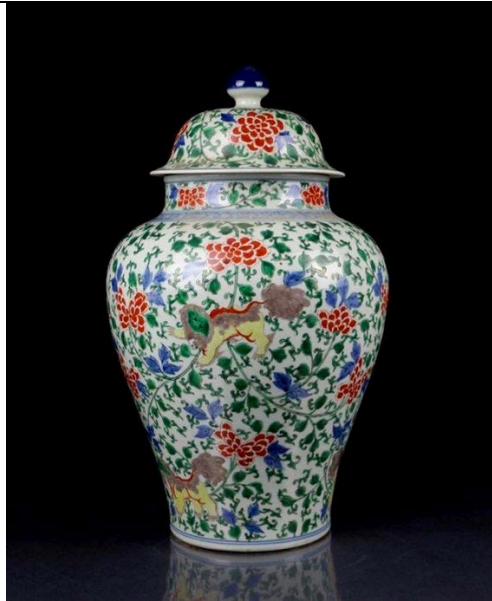


Figure 3.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 4. Roveda *Overload* 2017

<sup>5</sup> "Bottle with Daoist Immortals | Work of Art | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History | The Metropolitan Museum of Art," The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, , accessed April 09, 2018, <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/16.61/>.

<sup>6</sup> "A Top Grade Chinese Ming Wu Cai Porcelain Cover Jar," LiveAuctioneers, , accessed April 09, 2018, [https://www.liveauctioneers.com/item/35252922\\_a-top-grade-chinese-ming-wu-cai-porcelain-cover-jar](https://www.liveauctioneers.com/item/35252922_a-top-grade-chinese-ming-wu-cai-porcelain-cover-jar).

## Islamic Pottery of Persia and Morocco

In my second body of work, I reference Islamic pottery of 15<sup>th</sup> century Persia and the traditional Moroccan pottery still being made today. The Islamic designs exemplify the use of cultural symbolism with exquisite geometrical patterns. The utilitarian serving platters, large bowls, and Moroccan tagines (casserole dishes) are intended for making and serving food to groups of people. The inference to community, face-to-face interactions, customs, and family values adds an oppositional element to computer generated communities and communications context of my thesis statement. I found it very interesting that introduction of cobalt to China from Iran through trade in the 14<sup>th</sup> century lead to 15<sup>th</sup> century stylistic influences into Persia from China as demonstrated below in figure 5.

“vividly illustrate the transition between the decorative styles and motifs of fourteenth century Persian ceramics and those current on ceramics produced under the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth - seventeenth century. The traditional elements are most clearly seen on the second [EA1978.1593], (Fig. 6) where the design is of a six-pointed star within two other six-pointed stars, the whole framed by a (fragmentary) Persian inscription. The ‘fish-scale’ filler pattern and the trefoils appear to be based on fifteenth century metalwork. The shape, like the colour scheme, however, was introduced into the Islamic world from China in the late fourteenth century, and the decoration on the outside of the rim is a simplified version of a common fourteenth century Chinese border design.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> University of Oxford, "Ashmolean Eastern Art Online, Yousef Jameel Centre for Islamic and Asian Art," Ashmolean – Eastern Art Online, Yousef Jameel Centre for Islamic and Asian Art, , accessed April 11, 2018, [http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/7/674/679/all/per\\_page/25/offset/25/sort\\_by/date/object/11036](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/7/674/679/all/per_page/25/offset/25/sort_by/date/object/11036).





Figure 5.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 6. Brenda Roveda *Star Bowl* stoneware 2018

In addition to the 15<sup>th</sup> Century bowl I draw inspiration from the traditional Moroccan tagine pot. The Moroccan tagine is a type of casserole dish which origins seem to be debatable.

According to the Encyclopedia of Kitchen History by Mary Ellen Snodgrass, the tagine dates back to Harun al Rashid, a late eighth-century ruler of the Islamic empire. Foods cooked tagine-style appeared in *The Thousand and One Nights* (or more commonly known as 'Arabian Nights') in the ninth century. Some sources date it back to the Roman Empire because of the portable ovens used by Romans that are similar to tagines.<sup>9</sup>

Although original tagines were not decorated and glazed, the contemporary tagines of Morocco employ elaborate geometric designs rooted in Islamic tradition. The Fez ware of Morocco, named for the region where it is made is blue and white however, most of the contemporary pottery of Morocco still in production is painted with vibrant multicolored motifs. The platters and

<sup>8</sup>[http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/7/674/679/all/per\\_page/25/offset/25/sort\\_by/date/object/11036](http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/7/674/679/all/per_page/25/offset/25/sort_by/date/object/11036)

<sup>9</sup> "Moyo Blog | Moyo Restaurants," accessed April 10, 2018, [http://www.bing.com/cr?IG=C2A98FCEDEC944189AD43B84BB15CAB6&CID=3D42BA001F43664F22B5B1CE1E0C67DF&rd=1&h=npESBmOY7Ec\\_ELv59--SF1Oc-b2e0xkkRc7AsFJ\\_Fso&v=1&r=http://www.moyo.co.za/moyo-blog/&p=DevEx,5066.1](http://www.bing.com/cr?IG=C2A98FCEDEC944189AD43B84BB15CAB6&CID=3D42BA001F43664F22B5B1CE1E0C67DF&rd=1&h=npESBmOY7Ec_ELv59--SF1Oc-b2e0xkkRc7AsFJ_Fso&v=1&r=http://www.moyo.co.za/moyo-blog/&p=DevEx,5066.1).

tagines provided me with a flat and expansive smooth surface on which to explore design.



Figure 10.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 11. Brenda Roveda *Family* 2018



Top view

<sup>10</sup> "Souk Tagine," Just morocco, accessed April 28, 2018, [http://www.justmorocco.com/pd\\_souk\\_tagine.cfm](http://www.justmorocco.com/pd_souk_tagine.cfm).

Using handmade stamps of Wi-Fi symbols and signal bars made from cut foam and carved rubber. I expanded upon the binary code and created symmetrical patterns that spiral out from the center. The size variation of the stamps and the bands of pattern developed into mandala-like patterns on the circular surfaces. This was a transition from the all-over binary patterns of the Ming influenced vessels I made. I chose to begin with a limited palette of blues to achieve a cohesive transition from the Ming inspired wares that also referenced the Fez ware. I expanded my use of color by using a warm color palette of vibrant red, orange and yellow on a platter and a tagine. This was an additional element of contrast to express the positive and negative feelings I have surrounding contemporary communication.

The platters and tagines present an array of pattern in which the negative space displays star shapes with the center being an eight-pointed star. The eight-pointed star is significant to the Moroccan platters and tagines because in the Quran it is a symbol of the “Seal of the prophets” or “last of the prophets” referring to Muhammad. Often found in tile patterns on mosques, the 8-pointed star is presented on mosques from Southern Spain to the Dome of The Rock in Jerusalem. I threw a bowl, several platters and two tagines to reflect the cultural tradition of communal eating.

Every culture around the globe has traditions centered on meals. It is a life source, providing nutrition but we also take pleasure in meals sharing time together, face-to-face. Family and community are deeply important to me and

food is the common denominator of our celebrations and gatherings. Food is embedded in all cultures and in the pottery, which are made to serve it on. These utilitarian forms represent family meals, religious practices surrounding food and the intimate human exchange of preparing and consuming food together.

Cuisine is central characteristic of a region and culture in addition to art, religion, architecture, and music. In consideration of my thesis and the social changes I perceive regarding community and communication, I reflect on how I connect with family through social media, email, and text. It serves as a wonderful tool to keep in touch over long distances and busy lifestyles. However, there is an intimacy we experience during the sharing of meals, a nurturing in the preparation and labor that goes into it by loved ones. We make memories linked to our senses, taste, touch, smell...interactions and conversations that cannot be replaced or duplicated through a computer screen.

On an artistic level, working on the Islamic influenced pottery, I became very interested in the use of negative space as an equal element to the stamped designs. Intrigued by this idea of using repeat patterns with special consideration of negative space my research lead me to Southwestern Native American pottery.

### **Southwestern Native American**

My third body of work is inspired by the traditional pottery of the Acoma Pueblo in southwestern New Mexico, which dates back to 1150 AD. The hand-

painted pots transition smoothly from a narrow, footless bottom to a wide body and back to narrow top with or without a neck for the small opening at the top for the seeds to be deposited. They exemplify a sophisticated use of geometric patterns using well-balanced positive and negative shapes that compliment the distinctive forms they are painted on.

The forms I reference are based off of the seed jars that the Acoma people used to store seeds such maize for the following planting season. The white pottery is covered in black patterns, which have symbolic significance to the Acoma people such as rain, clouds, and mountains represented as hatching, dots, and triangular spiral patterns. The use of rain symbols of on seed storage jars speaks to the maker's spiritual intensions and importance of storage. These motifs speak to the interrelationship of all living things and nature. This is important to my conceptual goals as it speaks to the idea of physical storage verses contemporary virtual storage. The symbolic use of rain and clouds relates back to the Ming Dynasty storage vessels and is intended to serve as physical metaphors for the contemporary storage *Cloud*.

Some of the pots use a cinnamon-orange colored design in addition to the black and white. The geometric designs are matte and remain un-glazed as a way to preserve the seeds against moisture. Visually, it helps to emphasize the contrast of the flat black geometric shapes painted on to the white clay. The painted patterns and coiled pots are still being made today and are highly recognizable for their distinct style unique to skill sets passed down from generation to generation of potters.



Figure 13<sup>11</sup>



Figure 14<sup>12</sup>



B.Roveda *Broadband & Wi-Fi*



B. Roveda *Wi-Fi* 2018

For this series of work I decided it was important to use black underglaze over a white underglaze on small bottles and water vessels with fluted lips. Since the Acoma designs primarily use geometric shaped symbols, I chose to only apply the digital Wi-Fi symbol as it relates to the triangular shape. The triangle shape used in Acoma pottery is representative of mountains and used in repeat patterns on many Acoma pots. I also made stamps, which are an embellished adaptation of the cellular bars. This stamp can be compared to the

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<sup>11, 12</sup> <https://www.fineindianart.com/product/marilyn-ray-acoma-pueblo-pottery>

stepping shapes on Acoma pottery which representing water and the spiral patterns symbolize the cycle of life.

This use of geometric shapes, combined with the decision to use a black and white palette with a gradation of scaled geometric shaped symbols, is an intended reference to the Acoma style. I limited the stamped designs to a central band or the top portions of the pots to contemporize them and draw distinction from the pots, which inspired them while retaining the visual association to the highly celebrated Acoma pottery. The developments of these designs were revisited on my final body of work in which I draw inspiration from Ancient Greek amphoras.

### **Ancient Greek Amphoras**

For my final series of pots I drew upon the pottery from the Geometric Period of Ancient Greece. The Greek Geometric Period dates from 900-700 BC and similar to the Ming Dynasty, it was a time of transformation and growth. The development of the Greek alphabet occurred during this period. This is relevant to my work as it is also a time of technological and communicative advancements, relative to an early civilization.

The amphora was used to store and transport wine, grains, and oils. It also had ceremonial value as funerary vessels and as awards. I found this interesting, as the contemporary trophy often used in sports today is still reminiscent of the Greek amphora in style. The amphora has two basic shapes; the neck amphora and the one-piece amphora. The neck amphora has a rounded body with distinguished angle where the cylindrical neck meets the

body. The one-piece amphora has a narrower body and the neck meets the body in a more continuous curved. They usually have two handles connecting the neck to the body.

The Geometric period preceded the black figurative amphoras by nearly 200 years. There is evidence of storytelling and figurative imagery in the geometric pots that lead to the black figurative pottery which were more technically astute in form and decoration. The Greek amphora vessels were widely utilized in trade and maintained their popularity for hundreds of years. Their designs influenced other cultures including the Ming Dynasty. The narrow foot, bulbous body, collared neck, and fluted lip of the Ming wares are hallmarks of this cultural fusion of style.

To establish the Ancient Greek reference, I chose to make both types of amphora forms. I began my horizontal banding and repeat pattern format typical of the geometric period designs displayed in figures 14 and 15. To reference the Geometric period I used the horizontal bands of repeat patterns on the surface. I used the collection of stamps I had made and orchestrated designs based on shape, fit, and use of negative space in the design. I had explored contrast in color, a cool palette for one vessel, warm for another, and combination of warm and cool on another. I began with the limited blue palette on the neck amphora to further reference the connection to the Ming Dynasty through trade. I used the most variation of stamps I had used to that point resulting in an intentionally busy surface design.



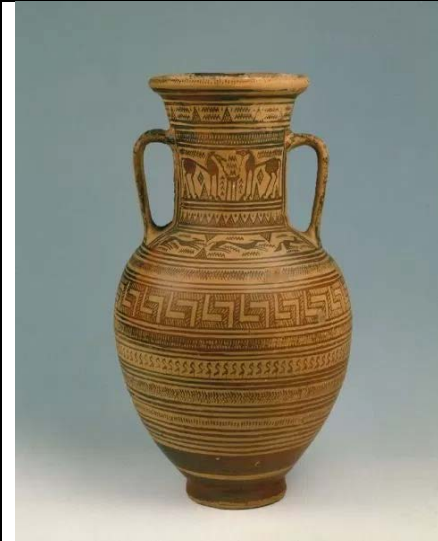


Figure 14<sup>13</sup>

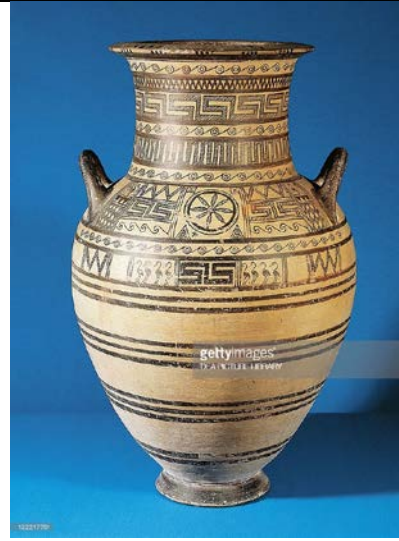


Figure 15<sup>14</sup>



B. Roveda *Sufficiently Charged* 2018



B. Roveda *Distracted* 2018

For the narrower, one-piece amphora, shown in Figure 16 I used a warm color palette of red orange and yellow. I applied the diamond shape, cellular bar

<sup>13</sup> <https://justwatchingpaintdry.wordpress.com/2015/10/03/6-art-history-references-hidden-in-disneys-hercules/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.gettyimages.ae/license/122217701>

stamps in alternating bands of pattern over the pot, similar to the treatment of the Acoma and Moroccan tagines in pattern layout. I use the negative space between symbols to establish lines within the pattern. The undefined borders refer to blurred lines of communication we sometimes experience through digital correspondence. The element of contrast with color and pattern is an additional expression of my oppositional emotions. My hope is for the viewer to have a clear understanding of my hot and cold feelings regarding digital communication.

All of the historic references I used as influences for my work enlist the concept preservation in some way. Most are storage vessels with various purposes; to hold grains, oils and wine for trade, spreading aesthetic styles and regional resources along ancient trade routes over hundreds and thousands of years. Now we can access museums and images from anywhere on the globe via the World Wide Web provided we have access to it. I use these storage vessels as a metaphor of the contemporary *Cloud* and the virtual storage of information it provides.

The funerary vessels preserve ashes of human remains, ornamented with the personal history or story of that person's life that was usually a significant figure in that society. This is also metaphoric of the contemporary *Cloud* and the digital information we store in it specifically, photos and videos that tell our story. The idea that only the high court of the Ming Dynasty or high stature Greeks had funerary vessels made correlates with inaccessibility of the web for less fortunate people and the perpetual divide of rich and poor in a contemporary context.

The Acoma inspired vessels serve to store seeds for future harvests having an infinite possibility to grow and reproduce, metaphoric of the Internet's ability to store and spread information. Finally, the utilitarian cookware and serving platters and bowls address the preservation of cultural values regarding human interaction and are intended to address how or if we may be doing that through social media. Ultimately, they all speak to my contemplation of human communication, evolution and the affect of technology on us as a culture.

### **Teaching**

As a high school ceramics teacher, I draw upon many strategies to provide differentiated instruction in an effort to accommodate the learning styles of each student. My goal is for every student to gain a well-rounded foundation of ceramic skills and an appreciation for the visual arts through their explorations in clay. Through the development of skills and techniques, they find their own artistic strengths and use them to communicate their ideas in meaningful artwork. Students are exposed to a broad spectrum of ceramic art and art history, methods and materials based on the national standards for 9-12 visual arts.

My lessons are designed to teach hand building and wheel throwing techniques while exposing students to multicultural art historic influences. Each lesson allows for personalization, self-expression, and originality. I begin with foundations of hand building techniques for Ceramics I classes such as; pinch pots, coil pots, solid sculpture-removed, and hard slab construction in the semester long classes. In addition to hand building and wheel throwing techniques learned in wet clay, the three year curriculum covers a variety of

surface applications including various techniques used for impression, relief, wax resist, slip trailing, image transfer, stenciling, silk screening, and sgraffito. The elements of art and principles of design are emphasized in each lesson and reflected upon in a variety of formative and summative assessments including; rubrics, self-reflection assignments, one on one feedback, and peer critiques.

As students move on to the full year advanced classes there is an emphasis on critical thinking, in a variety of manners from idea development, problem solving, glaze testing, conceptualization, abstraction, and functionality. Strategic planning and time management is vital to long-term projects. Equally important are critiques which we do in several modalities; self-reflections, group/peer critiques, in-process critiques, and student teacher critiques.

The full year Ceramics II course introduces students to wheel throwing and handbuilding techniques are expanded upon. Assignments are progressively more challenging as students continue to attain hand building and wheel throwing skills. Art history, cultural exposure and contemporary influence continue to drive student learning. The final project for Ceramics II students is a self-proposed project, which requires students to design their own lesson based on their personal interests and artistic goals. It serves as a summative assessment of skills acquired through the course and the written proposal prepares them for student-driven projects in Ceramics III.

For advanced students in Ceramics III the curriculum is designed to include more self-driven projects. As the year progresses, students give written proposals with sketches for projects based on their individual artistic goals. They

can propose hand built and wheel thrown projects and are challenged with planning and executing their studio investigations. These students also contribute to the upkeep of the studio and learning the processes of and assisting in the loading, firing, and unloading of the kilns. In addition, they contribute to recycling clay and putting together displays. As students take on more responsibilities in the classroom/studio they gain a sense of pride and leadership, often helping students in the Ceramics II class since the advanced full-year classes are combined.

### **The Artist-Teacher**

My thesis work has impacted my teaching in many positive ways from technical applications to my teaching philosophy and instructional strategies. I have integrated several classroom and studio maintenance practices I have learned through my own artistic explorations. I have developed new artistic approaches, which will continue to generate new lessons and expand my curriculum. I explored various techniques including, image transfer, foam monoprinting, stenciling, stamp making and application techniques, graphing and layout methods while expanded my wheel throwing skills.

As part of my research I read the *Artist-Teacher; A Philosophy for Creating and Teaching*, by G. James Daichendt. The Artist Teacher is a term coined by artist and art educator, George Wallis, which is based on the belief that an artist is the most effective person to teach art.

If one idea ties all artists of all periods together, it is that artists produce objects/concepts and in doing so use a particular way of thinking that aided their production process. This production and thinking process is a central tenet to being an artist, and this aspect

(artistic thinking) is what many art teachers hope their students experience. However, if the art teacher does not engage in such thinking, how can one expect the art teacher to facilitate such thinking in the classroom? <sup>15</sup>

Immersing myself in research, generating concepts and ideas, and making art while teaching full time has been quite challenging. However, it has also been very rewarding on many levels. As an artist I have had to be a critical maker and thinker.

The body of work I have created for my graduate thesis has strong correlations with several lessons I teach in my classroom. My teaching approach is rooted in the rich cultural history of ceramic traditions from around the globe. My students gain an understanding of the extensive history of pottery and how that pottery was used for both functional and ceremonial uses. They study the designs and aesthetics specific to each culture and their spiritual beliefs. We discuss the role of pottery in archeology and anthropology and how much information about ancient civilizations is often acquired from excavating pottery. Students gain a broader understanding of history and its relationship with art and architecture. My goal is for students to draw connections to present day cultures and art history and use that information to inform their artistic decisions.

My approach to drawing from art history in this body of work is relevant to my teaching approach. For example, I assign my Ceramics II students a lesson called, History in the Making. In this lesson students are asked to combine aesthetic characteristics from two historic cultures from the 30,000 years of

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<sup>15</sup> G. James. Daichendt, *Artist-Teacher: A Philosophy for Creating and Teaching* (Bristol: Intellect, 2010). pg 64

ceramic history. Most students combine a form of one culture and a surface design of another. The goal is for students to better understand ceramic history while they address the relationship between form and surface design. This builds awareness and connections to the importance of the art on a vessel, the meaning behind it, as well as how it was made.

Another Ceramics II assignment that is reflected in my work is an architectural letter. This is a project in which students use slabs to build a letter that stands between 10"-12" in height. Each student is asked to select a letter that holds personal meaning, and are asked to decorate the surface with at least three different surface application techniques. These techniques include, but are not limited to: stamping, image transfer, wax resist, and stenciling. I am asking them to explore multiple design applications that must be unified and cohesive in composition. Since I investigate surface decoration in my own work I can guide my students in aspects such as concept, form, scale, technique, texture, and surface design. Bringing what I have gained from my studio experience into the classroom helps increase students' potential for artistic achievement.

In addition to this, I am developing a repetition of pattern lesson, that will include a level of student collaboration. For this I will expand upon the clay stamps I introduce in Ceramics I by sharing stamp making techniques I used for my work made from carved rubber and cut foam. Every student will make their own stamps and choose one to add to a class collection. They will then use their individual stamps and the shared class collection to create repeat patterns on a utilitarian vessel or dish of their own design. It teaches them new stamp

making techniques and graphing methods which they can use throughout the course.

Teaching students to collaborate by sharing their stamps will get them to interact in a new way and give them access to a collection of stamps they would not otherwise have access to working on their own. Students will reflect on how they applied and utilized these techniques through formative and summative critical analysis. They will analyze the collaborative, art making experience, how it affected their work and what they learned from other students' use of the stamp application and design through written assessments. These critiques will drive and inform future work, specifically regarding the use of pattern and color and do it in a timely manner compare to painting patterns. Ultimately, students will make discoveries and use the stamps differently and in some, allowing for a shared learning experience for all of us.

Throughout my studio investigations, each form I threw presented new and unique challenges for me to work out. This required me to experiment and develop new approaches for surface treatments. I have created approximately fifty stamps out of foam and rubber. I have painted, washed off, and repainted many forms in attempt to find success. Through this journey, I have become more efficient in throwing new forms, making stamps, graphing and applying surface designs. I have explored illustration, stenciling, and various color palettes that were not all successful or cohesive with the body of work. Still, they served as significant learning experiences, which helped direct my work. When we are encountering our own setbacks and failures as artists, we can value and quantify



our students' artistic misfortunes as attributes to their future accomplishments. As working artists, we are sympathetic to the creative process, having understanding and knowledge to guide them through their struggles and work toward personal success.

The best part of being a teacher is you learn from the challenges, failures, and successes of your students. The best part of being a student is you learn from the years and years of experience, including challenges, failures, and successes of your teachers. It is a wonderful exchange... one I cherish.

### **Conclusion:**

During the course of my investigations I expanded my ceramic knowledge of Ming Dynasty, China, Morocco, Persia, Acoma Pueblo, and Greek pottery. These cultures are celebrated for their unique styles of decorative pottery and their place in ceramic art history. As my research progressed I learned about the synthesis of styles that transpired through the far Eastern trade network between three of the cultures, Chinese, Islamic, and Greek pottery.

These stylistic adaptations occurred over the course of hundreds of years and today they are a resource of information literally available at the tips of my fingers via a virtual global network. This is one of the many positive attributes of modern technology to which I have utilized throughout my thesis work. Yet, within this infinite amount of online information, throughout my research, there were also limitations to specific research when the best information was found in books.

I chose these four specific cultures for their marked place in art history, cultural significance, use of symbolism, and their presence in art museums and galleries around the world. My intention is for the viewer to acknowledge that connection to the past. That recognition, combined with their awareness of contemporary semiotics presented on the surface, will reveal the paradox within each piece and affirm my concept of conflict.

The development of this concept and becoming an active maker for my thesis body of work has not only reinvigorated my passion for the ceramic arts, it has undoubtedly made me a better teacher. The past six years I have spent as a full-time high school ceramics teacher, has truly influenced my artwork. My background in production pottery, as a small business owner of a pottery shop, and as a private educator have all had positive influences on my eleven years in public education in the visual arts.

This body of artwork has proven to me that the Artist-Teacher philosophy is the most effective approach to teaching art. When we are participating in the active process of making art we are the best teachers of art. I feel confident calling myself an Artist-Teacher and look forward to pursuing many more artistic investigations to come. In addition to the positive artistic and pedagogical outcomes I have accomplished from this work, I have contemplated an inner conflict through creating art.

My research affirmed an interconnectedness of the ancient cultures of Persia, China, and Greece and how their art shows evidence of artistic assimilation gained through trade routes. This insight has helped me gain a

relative perspective and a level of acceptance to our current interconnectedness via digital media. Each of the historic cultures I researched experienced cultural and technological advancements has changed my viewpoint regarding our own cultural developments and technicalogical advancements. I have addressed my inner conflict regarding digital communication and I have become a stronger, more informed artist who has obtained a new outlook on my own handling of my communication practices.

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