

A STUDY OF CLAY HANDLES ON CERAMIC VESSEL FORMS

by

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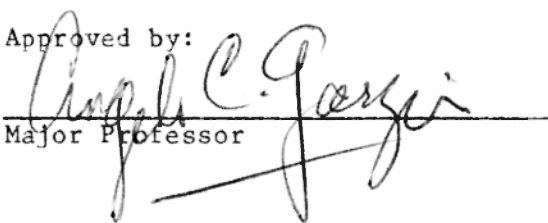
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## PART I: HISTORIC USE OF HANDLES

### INTRODUCTION

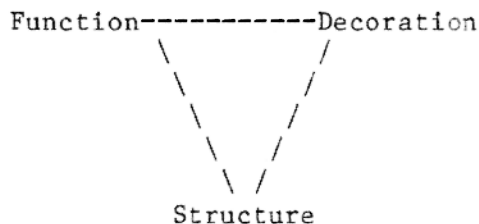
Throughout history, potters have made handles on ceramic vessels. These appendages have taken various forms influenced by the purpose, social role, and economic status of the ware. Because handle-making has provided a focal point of the author's involvement in clay, the following study was undertaken to investigate historical and contemporary use of handles. Through study of various handles, awareness of aesthetic and practical considerations is broadened leading to further development of forms. Ultimately, the goal of the study is to increase knowledge of how other cultures and potters have used handles, to gain understanding of how social and economic conditions affected handle forms, and to interpret aesthetically this information for personal application.

The study will focus on three major types of handles and examine their historical, technical, and aesthetic aspects. The three major categories for study are:

1. Functional
2. Decorative
3. Structural

Categorizing types of handles is a theoretical exercise, complicated by the fact that handles seldom exist for only one purpose. Even the most functional handle has aesthetic or decorative impact on the total form, and conversely, very decorative handles often perform a physical function as well as visual elaboration. The structure of any form would differ to some degree if the handle were removed. The types chosen for study, functional, decorative, and structural, are not rigid groups with

easily defined boundaries. Rather, they represent a blending of qualities that are more or less evident in all handle forms:



Specific handles on ceramic forms exist somewhere on the interior of the triangle combining all three qualities; therefore, in classifying handles for purposes of study, the dominant quality must be considered.

To adequately cover the total historical and aesthetic chronology of handles would be a task beyond the scope of this study. It was therefore essential to focus on cultures and eras which typify the characteristics of each handle type. Likewise, many examples of contemporary application of handles can be found. The potters whose works are mentioned are well-recognized in contemporary ceramics and have been influential in the author's work. Their works exemplify modern interpretations of each handle form type.

#### FUNCTIONAL HANDLES

The following criteria were considered as important factors in placing a particular handle in the category of functional handles:

1. The primary purpose of the handle is to perform a physical function, such as lifting, holding, or pouring from the container. The "form follows function" idea is evident.
2. The handle is simple in form, essentially free of embellishment. Although some elaboration may occur, an economy of design elements is used.

Each of these points is open to personal interpretation by the viewer. There exist no rigid quantifiable rules by which to measure the "functionality" of handles. However, with the above points in mind, it is possible to be rational in determining if a handle's primary role is functional.

Criteria number one is determined by the user. Between each user and pot there exists a unique relationship. Social customs, prior knowledge, physical strength, and personality are among the factors that influence a user's judgement as to the necessity and success of a functional handle. The fact that the primary purpose of a handle is function has implications for size and form limitations. Handles that are too extreme in either aspect lose a degree of utility.

The second criteria is also a flexible standard. The maker of a handle must always consider some visual and tactile elements as well as the physical purpose, because the handle is seen and felt through use. Moreover, certain textures which appear merely decorative may also serve a physical function such as making the handle stronger or easier to use. For these reasons it is important to view the criteria as aids to understanding a ceramic form, not as rigid rules for academic classification.

The functional handle has a long history. As man first recognized a need for an appendage to aid in lifting, pouring from, or holding his clay vessels, he began adding them onto his pots. Handles were often derived from those made of other materials already in use on clay and non-clay forms. Twigs or cords may have served as prototypes for the first clay handles. (Figures 1, 2, Slide 1) Because of clay's plasticity, it readily assumes nearly any shape given it, producing

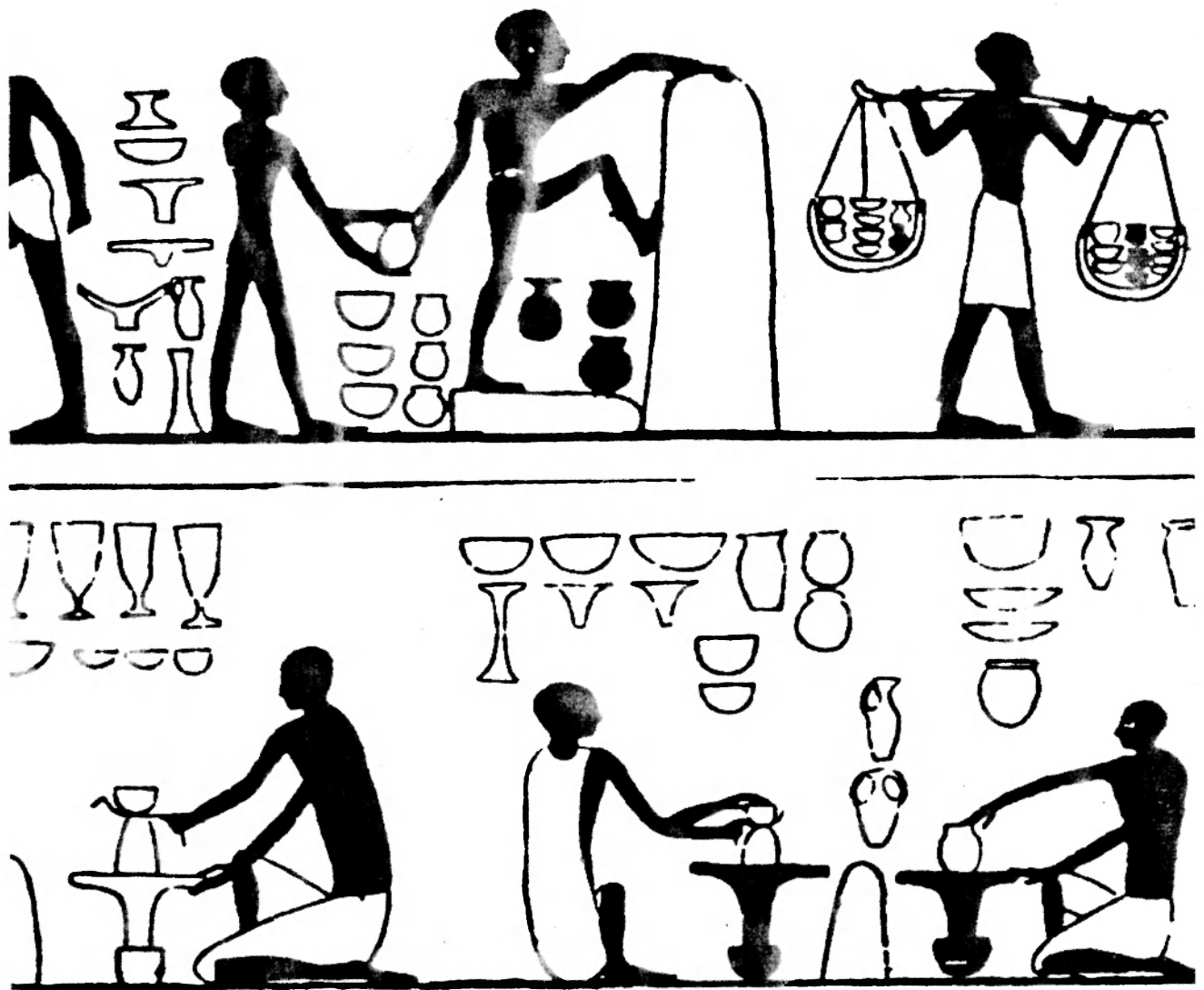


Figure 1. Egyptian wall painting showing pottery-making. Tomb 2, Beni Hasan, c. 1900 B.C. Both clay and non-clay handles are depicted.



Figure 2. Chinese "traveler's flask." Liao Dynasty, c. 1000. Private collection, Japan. Clay is used in the same manner as another material, in this case, animal skin.



utilitarian, decorative, and structural possibilities. Therefore, all three types of handles are found in early stages of pottery-making by various cultures. (Figures 3, 4, 5) The primary handle form used on any particular ware is as related to the role the pottery filled in society as it is to the time period in which it was produced.

English and German jugs, pitchers, and tankards produced from the 14th through 17th centuries exemplify pottery which bears functional handles. The forms are strong and simple in keeping with their utilitarian purpose of serving or storing liquids. (Figures 6, 7)

Medieval English ware became more standardized and plain than the earlier decorated pitchers and jugs through industrialization during the 14th and 15th centuries.<sup>1</sup> Because social conditions demanded an economy of time spent on each handmade, wheel-thrown piece produced, decorative elements were limited for maximum output of items. The functional nature of the vessel was most important; still, the potters' sensitivity to the plastic nature of clay is evident in small details of handle attachments. The lower end of the handle may be splayed out to form a pattern of decorative foliations, impressed into a trefoil shape, or extended with small swoops.<sup>2</sup> (Figure 8) These attachments were both functional and decorative in that they strengthened the vessel physically at the attachment point and visually by providing design accents.

Another functional detail which carries decorative possibilities is found in the textures added to the handle. These incised wavy lines or dots aided in gripping the vessel and helped the clay withstand the



Figure 3. Early Bronze Age jug, Jericho, Palestine, c. 2900 B.C.  
Palestine Archaeological Museum, Jerusalem. An example of early  
functional handles.



Figure 4. Amphora, Stephania Cyprus, c. 1650-1600 B.C. Nicholson Museum, University of Sydney. An example of early use of decorative handles.

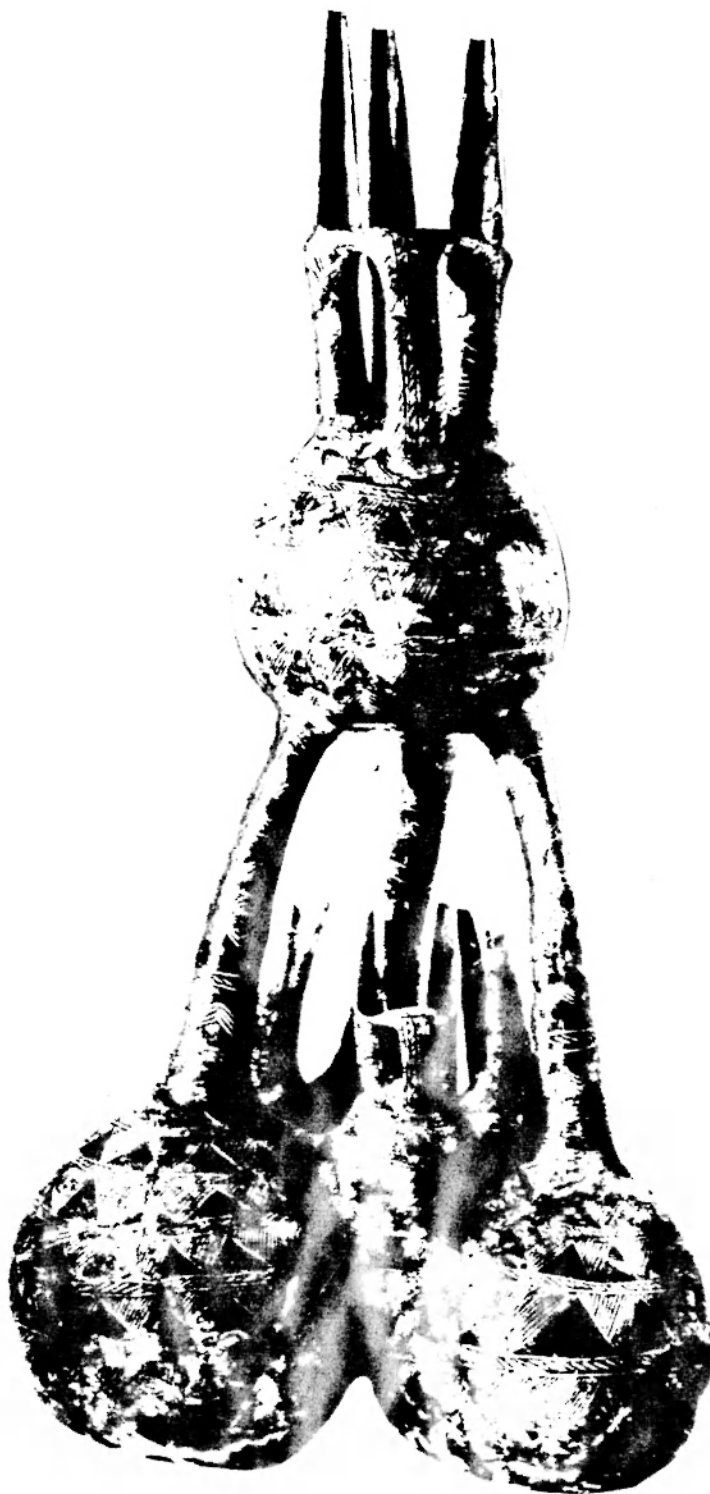


Figure 5. Early Bronze Age multiple jug, Vounous, Cyprus, c. 2100-2000 B.C. Cyprus Museum, Nicosia. An example of early use of structural handles.



Figure 6. English jug, 13th or 14th century. Yorkshire Museum, York.



Figure 7. German salt-glazed jugs, Old Siegburg ware, 15th century.  
Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn.

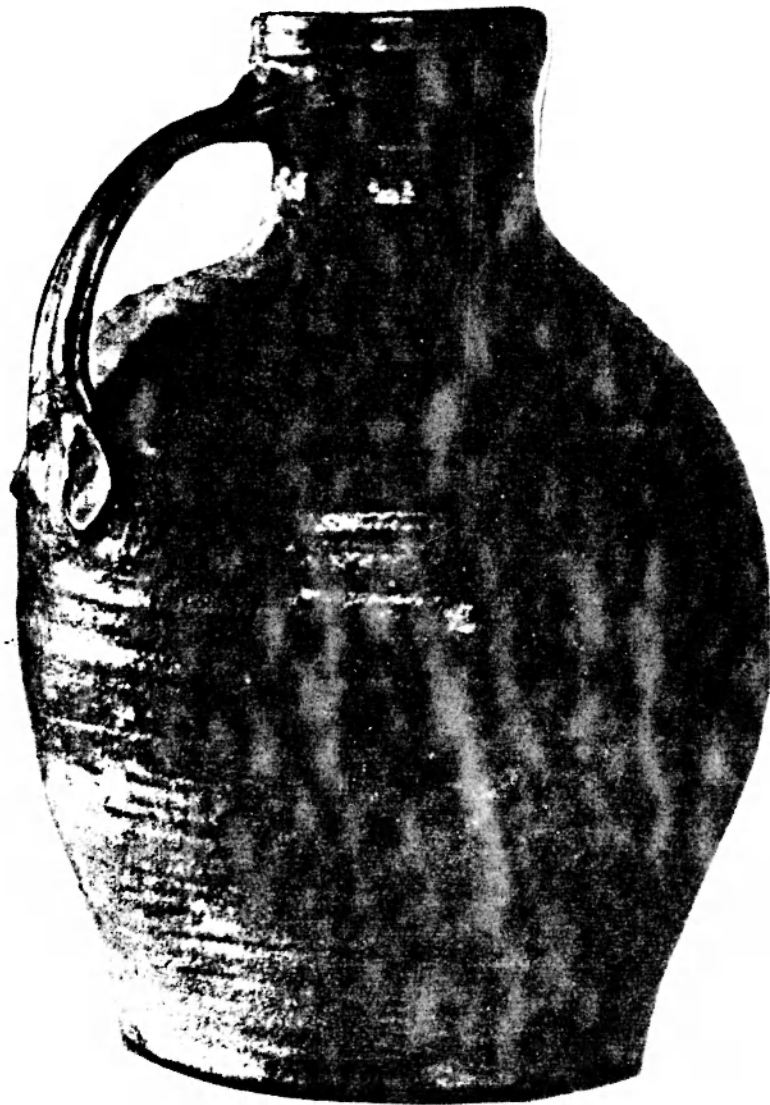


Figure 8. English jug, 14th century. City of Nottingham Museum and Art Gallery. Handle showing potter's attachment marks.

uneven heating in the kiln without splitting or cracking.<sup>3</sup> (Slide 2) Other handles were grooved or ridged longitudinally for strength and grip. The ridges were sometimes pinched to form scallops or had a plait of twisted clay along the handle.<sup>4</sup> (Figure 9) Again, functional considerations produced decorative visual effects.

English medieval jugs exhibit unique solutions to the problem of providing a strong attachment between jug and handle. The potter, when attaching the handle, pressed out from the inside wall of the pot, thus forming a slight external protrusion over which the handle was attached. This provided more surface area of contact between handle and pot, forming a tighter bond. Another method used by medieval English potters was to pierce the wall where the handle was to be attached. Clay from the handle was then pressed into these holes during attachment, producing a strong union.<sup>5</sup> These techniques were very successful in accomplishing a strong handle-body union. Several shards have been found which, though broken elsewhere, still have a firmly attached handle. (Slide 3) On a soft earthenware body, these techniques were especially helpful because without them, the low firing temperature produced only a weak bond. These special attachment techniques are not found on later pieces manufactured commercially or on those of more vitreous stoneware clay.<sup>6</sup>

Similar forms and functional concerns are evident in salt-glazed pottery from Germany. Potters of the Rhine valley began producing great quantities of sturdy salt-glazed drinking wares around 1500 when an improved method of brewing ale by including hops was discovered. The better-tasting ale made drinking at inns and taverns very popular among the working classes. (Slide 4) There was a public preference for the durable stoneware mugs and jugs over more easily broken earthenware or





Figure 9. English jug, 11th or 12th century. Gloucester Museum. Handle with pinched ridges.

more expensive metal containers.<sup>7</sup> Later, in the 1600's, salt-glazed wares were exported in large quantities to England where they were highly regarded for their uniqueness and durability.<sup>8</sup> The finest were often fitted with metal covers and stands. (Figure 10)

The handles on these tankard and jug forms reflected their utilitarian nature. They were strongly made, either by coil or by pulling an oval strap of clay, and firmly attached to balance the form comfortably in use. The prototypes of German pulled handles may be seen in Roman common ware (Figure 11), but the 16th century German potters mastered and refined the technique. The oval strap handle with grooves produced by pulling is easier to grasp and does not allow the vessel to slip or rotate in the grip as a smooth rounded handle can. The thin salt glaze enhances the linear textures left by the act of pulling the handle from the clay piece, allowing the vitality of the forming process to be evident in the finished ware much as the throwing marks are. Attachment of the handles was sometimes smoothed over, but often showed the potter's finger marks. These impressions may be evident on either end of the handle, and some pieces have recurved ends or small tails on the lower handle end. (Slide 5) Even as the salt-glazed wares became more decorative, the handles remained relatively free of ornament, giving the pieces vigor and strength. (Figure 12)

English and German handles are classified as functional because they are successful in performing the intended physical functions. The forms to which they are attached are large, heavy, and when wet with ale, slippery. A handle is necessary to hold, pour, and drink from them efficiently. Even though they exhibit decorative details of attachment



Figure 10. German salt-glaze schnelle. Siegburg, 1560. Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn. Gold fittings.



Figure 11. Jug, Gaulish (Roman Empire), 1st Century A.D. Colchester and Essex Museum, Colchester. Pulled handle.



Figure 12. German salt-glaze pitcher. Cologne, 1539. Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn. Simple handle on embellished form.

or texture, the purpose of these details is functional, to give an overall effect of utility.

Contemporary potters who work primarily in functional forms exhibit many of the same concerns as the early German and English potters. They strive to make useful pots based on traditional forms. Although there are many fine potters who work in the realm of utilitarian forms, the scope of this paper allows only a few to be discussed here as outstanding examples of influential potters.

The current generation of functional potters has been greatly influenced by Bernard Leach (1887-1979). As a young man, Leach studied country pottery in Japan, learning the art of pottery making under the 6th Kenzan, a Japanese traditional Raku master. He furthered his ceramic studies by learning techniques of stoneware and porcelain and by travels to China and Korea. His training and understanding of traditional methods and materials of the East encouraged him, upon his return to England, to investigate his own English pottery roots in traditional country ware.<sup>9</sup> Leach, in his work, A Potter's Book, emphasizes the importance of losing oneself in tradition, the honesty and unself-consciousness of utilitarian forms made by hand with simplicity and spontaneity.<sup>10</sup> A close relationship can be seen between Leach's ware produced in the 20th century and ware produced by English potters of the 14-17th centuries. (Figure 13)

Leach trained many apprentices at his workshop in St. Ives, England, during the 1940's, 50's and 60's. Two of these were Americans who had a great deal of influence on other potters when they returned to the U.S. Warren MacKenzie, ceramics professor at the University of Minnesota, and Clary Illian, studio potter in Garrison, Iowa, both apprenticed with



Figure 13. Slipware Jugs made at Leach's St. Ives studio.

Leach at his studio, and both continue to make traditional functional forms in which "utility is the first principle of beauty," as Leach said.<sup>11</sup> This tradition of utility is seen in all aspects of the forms made by MacKenzie and Illian, including the handles. Stylistically, the handles show many similarities to historic English country ware such as the broad oval handle with finger grooves, the ample space for grasping, and the strong attachment to the form, which contribute to the sturdiness, vitality, and familiarity found in both the historic and contemporary work. (Slide 6 and Figure 14) The reasons for making traditional utilitarian ware in the 20th century go beyond the need for utensils. According to Warren MacKenzie, the maker and user share a sense of communication through the familiar forms. These pots "tap a source beyond the personal and deal with universal experience."<sup>12</sup> As Clary Illian states, "A beautiful and useful object needs no apology."<sup>13</sup> The simple, functional handle is entirely appropriate for their work.

Even though contemporary utilitarian potters rely consciously or unconsciously on tradition as a basis for forms, they must be aware of the nuances of expression which occur with personal variations of these forms. Functional handles are additions which can be used expressively by varying the thickness, width, texture, and location for aesthetic as well as utilitarian purposes. The final form of a functional handle is influenced by many factors: utility, personal expression of the potter, tradition, and forming technique.

#### DECORATIVE HANDLES

A logical contrast to the functional handle is the decorative handle. The distinction between the two types is not as easily made





Figure 14. Pitcher by Clary Illian.

after study of various forms. Although handles can fill both roles, there do exist handles that may be classified as primarily decorative according to the following criteria:

1. The primary purpose of the handle is visual focus or embellishment, although it may also perform a physical function. Utility may be sacrificed for visual effect.
2. The handle is often embellished with carving, modeling, or textures.
3. The handle may be imitative of other materials such as wood or metal.

The decorative handle might logically seem to be a later development in the ceramic art. However, the use of the decorative handle appears early in ceramic history. Evidence of man's urge to embellish and decorate can be found in his earliest works which include touches of elaboration or refinement that suggest aesthetic decisions, which reflect a desire for beauty. "Handles as an expression of exuberance, whimsy, often appear where they are not really needed," according to Daniel Rhodes.<sup>14</sup> There is evidence of this urge to elaborate in early civilizations throughout the world. Examples are the wavy ledge handles of ancient Egypt, the small carved forms on Chinese Shang jars, twisted clay coils on neolithic wares of the Mediterranean, or decorative handles on early Greek pots. (Figures 15, 16, 17, 18) Throughout history, decorative and functional handles existed periodically or coincidentally as the need for embellishment or economic utility took precedence on particular forms.

The use of decorative handles is more related to the function of the pot in society than it is to a particular time period or society that produced it. The higher the social status of the pot, the more likely

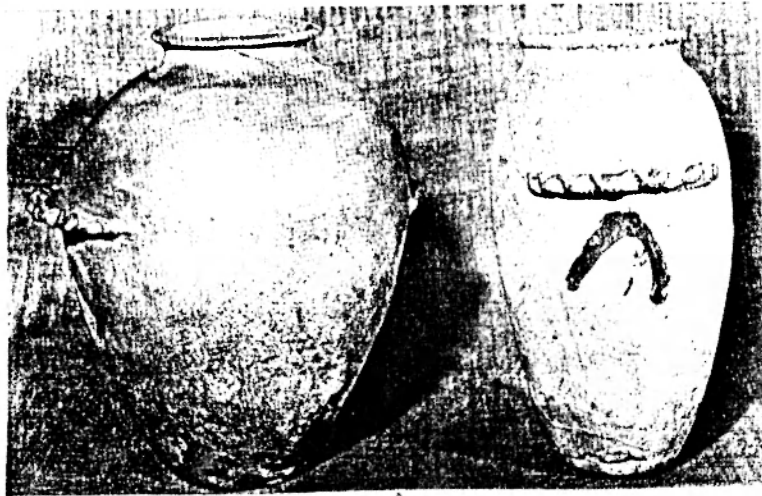


Figure 15. Terra-cotta jars, Egypt, Predynastic period. Wavy handles.



Figure 16. Jar, China, Shang dynasty, C. 14th-11th century B.C. Carved handles in the form of water-buffalos. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington.



Figure 17. Urn, Valencia, Spain, c. 500 B.C. Museo Arqueologico,  
Barcelona. Handle with twisted clay coils.



Figure 18. Pyxis with female protomai, Corinthian, c. 570-560. Royal Ontario Museum. Greek use of decorative handles.

the pot is to have a time-consuming decorative handle added to it. Intricately carved clay handles are found on ritual urns and funerary vessels of ancient China. (Figure 16) The high social status of the ware warranted its production as precious items and the handles contributed to the total effect of valued objects. The tendency of decorative handles to imitate other materials is also seen in this early Chinese ware, produced in the Shang, Chou, and Han Dynasties from c. 1000 BC to AD 200. Handles and decorative additions often are direct imitations of those found on bronze vessels. (Figure 19) Similar metal influence is found on Greek forms produced in the Classic and Hellenistic periods, 580-200 BC. (Figures 20, 21) By giving common clay a metallic form, the pieces took on the higher status of the more valued metal material.

A more recent example of a type of ware which relied on the decorative handle for visual emphasis is soft paste or creamware produced in 18th century England. Europeans had a long tradition of using handles. They appear more frequently there than on ware produced in the far east where the aesthetic of handling the pot directly is more important. The traditional handle form became quite decorative on white wares and earthenware produced throughout England during the 17th-19th centuries as an attempt to provide a growing middle class with a good imitation of more expensive Chinese porcelain. The highly decorated tea wares such as teapots, caddies, and cups were quite popular as signs of social status and economic value. Animals, fruits, and vegetables were a few of the many variations that traditionally functional ware took, in addition to more conventional bowl, cup, and teapot forms. Often the handles imitate other materials such as bamboo, vine, or wood. (Slide 7)

The English potters who created elegant creamwares used the twisted

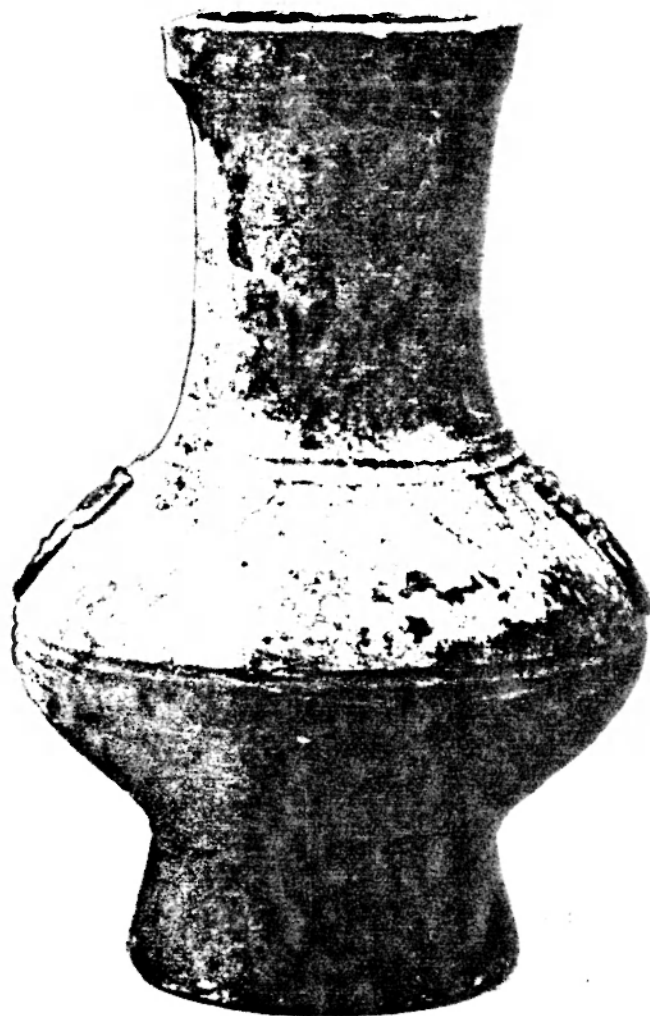


Figure 19. Wine jar. China, Han dynasty, c. 206 B.C.-A.D. 220. Hastings Museum. Shape imitating bronze.





Figure 20. Bronze Krater, 2nd half 4th century B.C. Derveni, Greece.  
Archaeological Museum of Thessalonike. Metal prototype for clay forms.



Figure 21. Red-figure volute-krater, Athens, c. 490-480 B.C. Royal Ontario Museum. Clay used to imitate metallic form.

handle as another decorative device. (Slide 8) Because this motif of intertwined or double coils of clay is found on pots of diverse cultures, it implies that the nature of the clay itself influences form. Clay's natural plasticity allows it to be wrapped around itself, a fact that many potters have used to decorative advantage. (Figures 22, 23)

The term "decorative" is not meant to imply that these handles are insignificant to the vessels which bear them. One of the qualities of good design in any artwork is that all parts of the work contribute to the unity of the piece. No part can be left out, nor can anything be added without changing the work's aesthetic unity. In this way, the decorative handle is significant, for it is necessary for the potter's visual and tactile expression.

A contemporary potter who uses decorative handles is Don Reitz, ceramics professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. During the late 1970's and early 80's, he made large salt-glazed forms constructed from several thrown sections. (Figures 24, 25) These vessels convey a sense of physical energy to the viewer in part due to their large scale, and in part due to the intuitive, playful manner in which he uses the clay. The controlled forms, which are dramatic in their volume and sudden change of line, are contrasted with casually applied, gestural handbuilt clay appendages. Although positioned and applied as functional handles might be on traditional forms, these handles do not physically function, as the pots themselves are more visual than utilitarian. The additions are complex pieces of sculpted clay, seemingly uncomfortable to grip or hold. They are visual accents which give the viewer a record of the physical action used to create them. The tactile qualities shown by the fingerprints and pinches are important reminders that the large forms were made by human hands.



Figure 22. English creamware teapot, Leeds Pottery, 1767. Donald Towner Collection. Intertwined clay handle.



Figure 23. Drug jar, Florence, Italy, 1475. Hastings Museum.  
Intertwined clay handles.



Figure 24. Don Reitz, five-section form, 42".



Figure 25. Don Reitz, Salt-glaze form, 30".

Without the "handles," the forms would lose some of the intense energy which Reitz conveys.

Because of the ornamental character, decorative handles are made in many ways such as molding, carving, modeling, pulling, or extruding. Each method exhibits unique possibilities for visual accent to the form, but the general effect of the decorative handle is the same regardless which technique is employed. It imparts a sense of artistic value or preciousness to the object because of the time and aesthetic sensibility involved in its creation.

#### STRUCTURAL HANDLES

In examining pots from various historic periods and cultures, there are certain handled pots found which do not seem to fit in either the functional or decorative categories. The handles on these pots seem to go beyond utility or embellishment to another purpose which can be labeled "structural." The following are criteria which determine this category of handles:

1. The handle is an integral part of the total form. It is seen as a unit with the form.
2. The handle is sculptural or three-dimensional in attitude.
3. The effect of the added appendage is to create a new form.
4. The size of the handle is important. Structural handles may be larger in proportion to the pot than either functional or decorative handles.



An excellent example of structural handles used historically is the stirrup handle/spout used on container forms done by the Mochica Indians of ancient Peru. (Figure 26) There exist other examples in history such as the "winged" Alhambra vases of Spain (Figure 27) or sculptural additions on vessels made by neolithic cultures (Figure 28), although this type is not as prevalent worldwide as functional or decorative handles.

The stirrup handle is a curved hollow tube attached to the body of the pot on both ends. From the middle of the tube another straight hollow tube extends. The unique form is first found in Peru around 1500 BC at sites of the Chavin culture at Cupisnique, on the northern coast.<sup>15</sup> (Figure 29) At about the same time, the form also appears in the Olmec culture of Mexico, perhaps suggesting contact between the two cultures.<sup>16,17</sup> (Figure 30) Because the unique form of the stirrup is so unusual, separate invention is unlikely.<sup>18</sup> Whether the stirrup handle originated in Meso-America or South America is an unanswered question. However, the form was to become much more significant and prevalent in Peru than it was in Mexico.<sup>19</sup>

The Peruvian potters, especially the Mochica, who occupied the former Chavin areas of coastal Peru from c. 100-800 AD, attained a high level of technical and aesthetic expression in their work. They adopted the stirrup/spout container as their major ritual and expressionistic vessel as evidenced by the large number of extremely well-crafted vessels of great subject variety found at burial sites.<sup>20</sup> The subjects depicted on stirrup forms were modeled or decorated to show all aspects of the Mochica's life from religious rituals to food, dwellings, portraits, animals, and sexual practices. (Figure 31, Slide 9) Some



Figure 26. Peru, Mochica, c. 650. British Museum.



Figure 27. Wing-handled vase, Malaga, late 13th-early 14th century.

Hermitage Museum.



Figure 28. Vessel, Algeria, 19th century, British Museum.



Figure 29. Peru, Chavin, Formative period, c. 800 B.C. British Museum.



Figure 30. Stirrup spout bottles, Tlatilco, Mexico, Olmec, c. 800-300  
B.C. Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York.

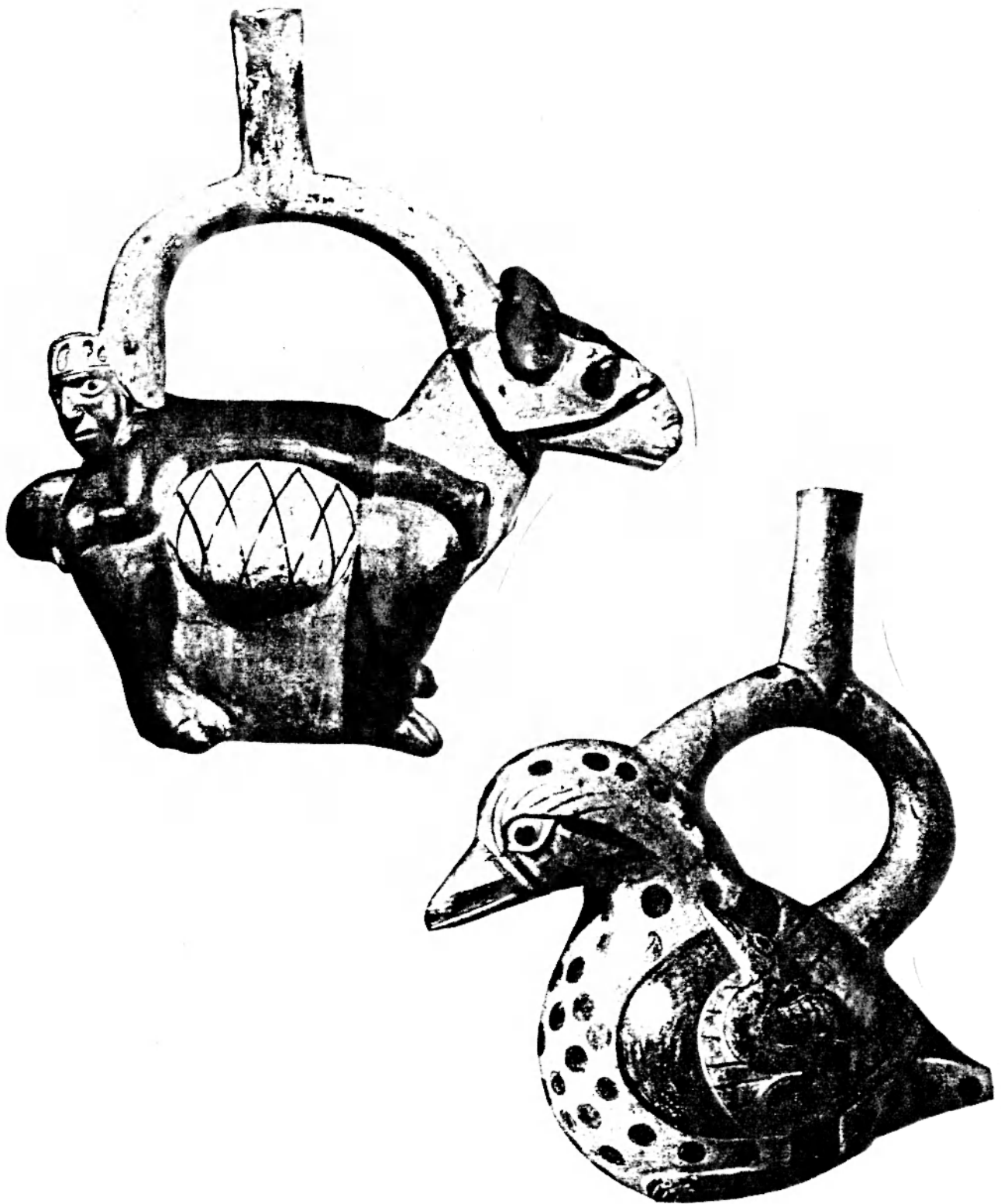


Figure 31. Peru, Mochica, 200-800. Stirrup pots in animal form.

pots are characterized by realistic painted detail along with stylized presentation of figures. (Slide 10) Others found are realistically modeled portrait vessels, perhaps used as political tribute or signs of allegiance.<sup>21</sup> (Figure 32, Slide 11)

The particular purpose of the varied vessels is unknown, but there are clues as to their cultural role. First, because the vessels show no signs of use, everyday utility was probably not the prime factor in their production.<sup>22</sup> Great quantities of the work are found buried with the dead, suggesting instead a ceremonial or funerary function.<sup>23</sup> Second, the stirrup handle/spout, which initially may appear very functional, in actuality would have been difficult to use. The stirrup spout would pour very slowly and be awkward to handle. If the chamber were full of water and the pot held by the handle, the handle might drop off because of the weight of the vessel and the softness of the earthenware due to a low firing temperature. This weakness results from the forming technique in which the body was made by modeling or molding the pot in parts, before the handle was added to the full form.<sup>24</sup> Finally, both realistic and fantastic forms are found, suggesting a different purpose than merely recording the Mochica lifestyle. The vessels may have been valued as art objects, for social status, or used as effigy vessels.<sup>25</sup>

Although a great variety of subject matter is presented, the pots exhibit the common traditional stirrup which unifies them as a group. The Mochica's cultural beliefs may have caused the form to be repeated throughout their history as essential and meaningful. Elizabeth P. Benson in The Mochica, suggests that the stirrup spout was part of the Mochica's interest in dualism--the two openings on the pot become





Figure 32. Peru, Mochica, 200-800. Stirrup portrait vessel.

one--that is present in other aspects of their expression.<sup>26</sup> The stirrup vessel provided the traditional structure through which the potter expressed everything from everyday life to religious events, just as today many potters use the traditional vessel as a point of departure for their personal expressions. Interpreting the Mochica symbols is difficult since we have no explanatory writings to accompany them. The Mochica iconography remains mysterious to the modern observer.

Even though the stirrup spout was found throughout the Mochica period, it did not remain a static element. The proportions of spout and lip changed throughout Mochica history becoming taller, narrower, and more elegant as the vessels became more refined. In general, earlier wares were monochrome or modeled, while later wares showed more color painted on more elegant forms. (Figures 33, 34) Modeled portrait heads, houses, animals, and vegetables were made throughout the Mochica period. (Figure 35) The structural form of the handle was most unified with the form when it was added to the simple globular shapes similar to those first made by the Chavin. It echoed the rounded shape both in exterior contour and interior negative space. (Figure 29) On some pots, painted decoration was used on both handle and main body of the pot, thus continuing the design and further unifying the form. (Figure 34) On sculptured pots, the relationship of handle to form is less obvious, but important to the total impact of the pieces. The hollowness of the handle is evident from its form. This causes the viewer to see it as part of the vessel's volume. It shares the same interior space, uniting the handle and pot intellectually and visually. The size of the stirrup handles made them a significant structural aspect of the piece. The additions were approximately one-third to one-half of the total form's

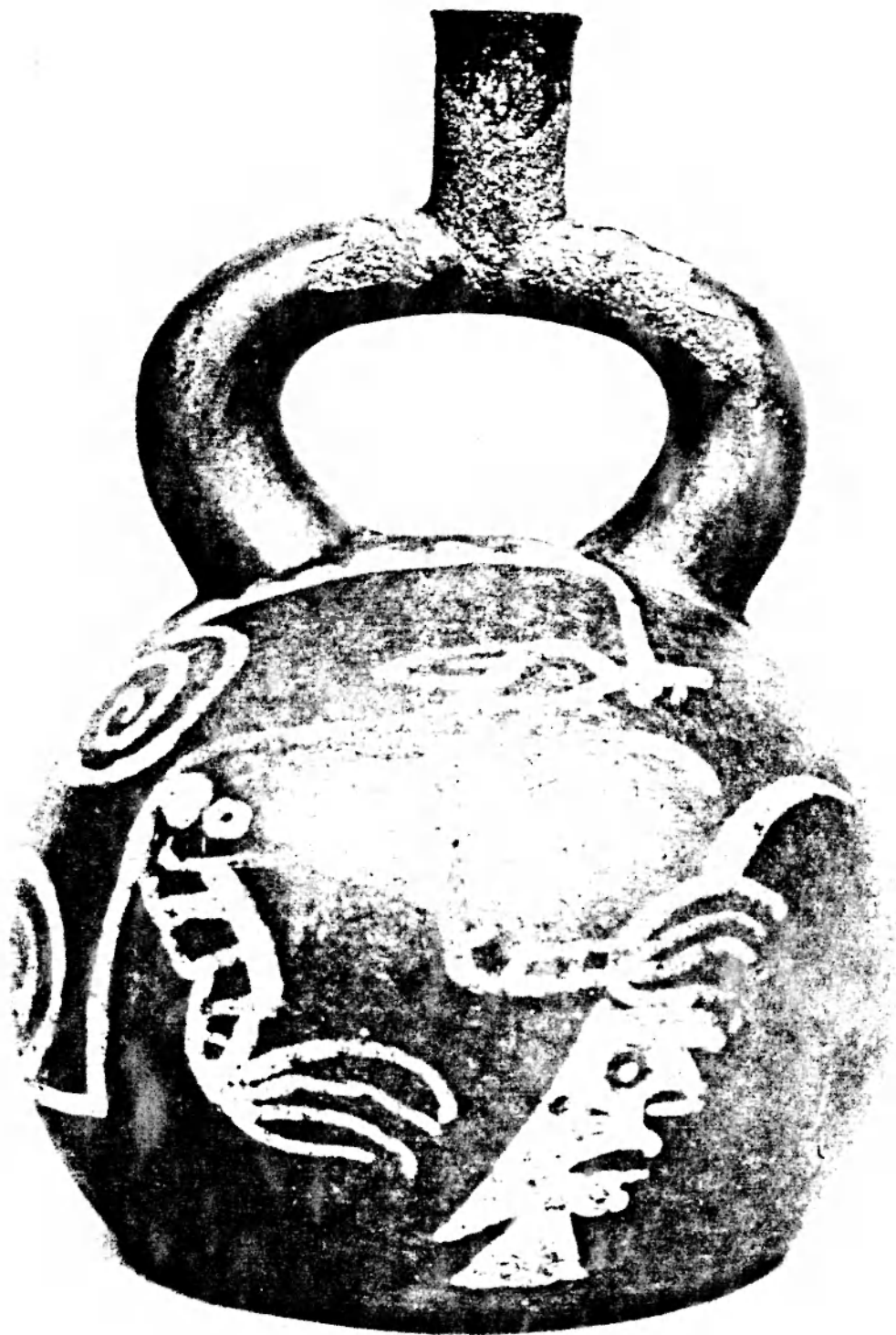


Figure 33. Peru, Mochica, 200-800. British Museum. Early stirrup spout shape.



Figure 34. Peru, Mochica, 200-800. Later stirrup vessel shape.



Figure 35. Peru, Mochica, 200-800. British Museum. Stirrup vessel in shape of a condor.

height. Their upward thrust draws the viewer's eye upward while the circular stirrup portion returns the eye to the pot again and again.

The Mochica symbolism called for a handle which emphasized the special role of the object. In contrast with the functional handle which emphasizes unpretentious utility or the decorative handle which provides visual focus, the structural handle emphasizes the uniqueness of the object to which it is attached by actually creating a new form.

Contemporary potters also make use of the structural handle to create unique forms, imparting a sense of importance or significance. As in other handle categories there are many examples one could name. Betty Woodman of Boulder, Colorado, is a potter whose structural handles capture the fluidity of clay as she makes "pots about pots." As she states, "I am not as interested in actual function as in taking an artistic stance about function, that is, function out of the context of use."<sup>27</sup>

An example of this examination of the functional form, "Vase with Shadow," was exhibited during the "Ceramic Echoes" conference in Kansas City in 1983. (Slide 12) The form is presented in such a way as to make the viewer aware of its significance beyond a functional flower vase. Both the price and the presentation reveal that Woodman views her work's role as expressing ideas beyond utility. The handles are expressive parts of the total form. Indeed, the strap handles become the total form of the clay shadow behind the vase. The handles are a necessary part of the pot's expression, not merely decorative details. Without them, the piece would not carry the same meaning. Woodman has a very sculptural attitude as she builds with handles. She bends, folds, and overlaps them to make forms which express her dynamic ideas. The

handles of her forms are large in relation to the traditional handles from which they are derived, thus forcing the viewer to consider them as part of the whole through their large scale and unique treatment. All the above factors contribute to the feeling of significant, unique, valued object. (Figure 35)

#### CONCLUSION TO PART I: HISTORIC USE

The handle forms used by any particular culture at a given time are related to several factors. These factors do not always allow for an evolution of simple to complex to experimental form. Although this might seem to be the logical process, the economic, religious, and cultural influences tend to complicate the progression. The following factors seem to have the greatest amount of correlation, based on the preceding examination of pots and cultures:

1. When economic concerns, practicality of ware, daily use, and sturdiness are important, functional handles and forms are prevalent.
2. When preciousness, imitation of other materials, and artistic expression are important, decorative handles are most evident.
3. When special or ritual significance is desired, structural handles may be used to create new forms.

Handles on ceramic forms, though often ignored or considered insignificant by the viewer or user, can offer great potential for the potter to express himself aesthetically as well as provide insight into understanding the concerns of ancient and contemporary potters. In Part II, the aesthetic implications are discussed in regards to personal techniques and forms.

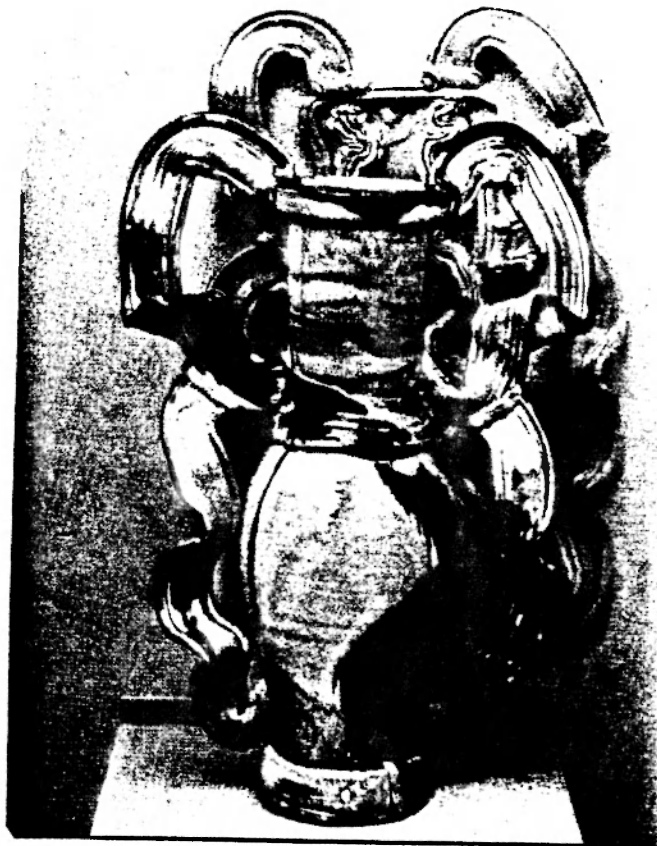


Figure 36. Betty Woodman, "Frigorous Vase and Shadow," 1984, 29".



## PART II: PERSONAL USE AND INTERPRETATIONS OF CLAY HANDLES

After studying historical and contemporary pots with handles, I sense a close bond with other potters of all eras. Whether we create in a functional or non-functional manner, all potters share common techniques and concerns as we create with clay. I am also more aware of the infinite variations possible within the basic handle form. This knowledge helps to develop greater understanding and foster experimentation in my own work. This section of the paper will deal with my current applications of the three types of handles described in Part I. It will also discuss my aesthetic decisions regarding handles and acknowledge some of the people who have had the most direct influence in the formulation of these ideals.

### FUNCTIONAL HANDLES

Functional pots make up a large part of my work, consequently the functional handle is a focal point for my clay expression. Not only is the handle important to the ultimate use of the vessel, but also it directly expresses a feeling to the user. Nuances of form which occur because of variations in handle width, placement, attachment, or thickness convey an attitude from the maker to the user. Through these factors, the character of the pot becomes evident. No matter whether the handle is bold, sturdy, simple, delicate, or casual, I strive to impart a sense of care and craftsmanship through its form.

My most functional handles are found on very utilitarian wares such as cups or pitchers. These forms depend on comfortable handles for successful use. Usually, little decoration is added to them other than

perhaps a distinctive end treatment or ridges left by pulling. Like the German functional potters, I find the pulled handle complements the thrown form most effectively. The marks left by the hand in pulling the handle from an elongated clay piece are very similar to those ridges left by the hands in raising the walls of a thrown pot. Additionally, the act of forming the handle is very similar to the actions involved in the use of the vessel, creating a close relationship between maker and user. Some of the aspects of making and attaching pulled handles to which I try to be sensitive are the size of the handle, the negative space which the handle creates with the pot body, and the areas of attachment.

The size of the handle refers to width, thickness, and length. If any of these dimensions is too great or small, the utilitarian form becomes uncomfortable to use and aesthetically imbalanced. I feel the functional handle should complement the form but not dominate it, much as an arm relates to the human body. Specifically, the handle should appear thick enough to support the weight of the filled container, wide enough to be held securely, and large enough to accommodate the number of fingers necessary for lifting it comfortably. I tend to make handles to fit my own hand, therefore, I must consciously remember that many of my forms will be used by hands of various sizes, both larger and smaller than my own. One feature which aids any size hand in grasping is the use of a small thumb grip or wad of clay attached to the upper curve of the handle. This small detail can also be used to visually unite the upper and lower ends of a handle through similar treatment such as rounding or impressing both areas in a similar fashion. (Slide 13)

Another important aesthetic/functional feature of the pulled handle is the stance or angle of attachment. I prefer the tear-drop or

ear-shaped negative space which is created between the handle and pot when the handle springs upward from the pot. Functionally, this upward curve provides a comfortable shape for the fingers to fit when lifting. Both the under curve and the side attachments are carefully considered to create a smooth flow from pot to handle. (Slide 13)

The surface of the pulled handle often has ridges or grooves left by the pulling process. These features are directly related to the handle's cross-section, with deep grooves producing strong lines. An oval cross-section is usually used, and care is taken to avoid sharp or thin edges which can easily chip in daily use.

The forms that my pulled handles assume are strongly influenced by those I have seen and studied. My former professor, Ray Kahmeyer (Bethany College, Lindsborg, Kansas) and current professor, Angelo C. Garzio (Kansas state University, Manhattan, Kansas) have both directly influenced my work. The ideals of beauty through utility and strength are present in both potters' forms. It is an attitude which is similar to Bernard Leach's respect for the traditional form. Both Kahmeyer and Garzio have used traditional handle forms in an expressive way, adding or modifying elements to convey more personal involvement with the form. (Slides 14, 15) Their handles impart a sense of themselves to the user, a feeling of integrity, strength, and vitality. This is a goal towards which I will continue to strive: to convey to the user a part of my personality through all my clay work, including such unpretentious elements as functional handles.

## DECORATIVE HANDLES

I find that I use decorative handles on pieces which are used less often than cups or pitchers. Handles on items such as lidded storage jars or vases are used occasionally in lifting, but more often the pieces sit as presentational vessels, and the handles function as visual details. The handles on casseroles and baking dishes are both functional and decorative in that they are essential to using the form efficiently, but also are dominant focal points for visual attention.

Decorative handles are more complex and ornate than the simple pulled handle I use on more utilitarian ware. They are often embellished with strong textures and take unique forms which are less predictable than the more traditional functional handles. Because the amount of time and aesthetic sensitivity involved in making a complex decorative handle is more evident to the viewer, it carries a connotation of preciousness or value. I feel that decorative handles cause the viewer to regard the piece in a more aesthetic light, implying that the piece is more "artistic" than a less decorated item. This can be a problem in comparing and creating different form types. Simply because a form is more complex does not always mean that it is of higher quality or of a more artistic nature. As I make decorative handles, I must remain sensitive to the total form of the piece so that the decorative details add aesthetic meaning not merely trite, superficial distractions.

Visual focus can be achieved through many means on clay forms: shape, surface, color, or texture. I feel that the decorative handle is a very appropriate means because it makes use of clay in a plastic,

three-dimensional manner, similar to how clay is used in creating the vessel. Additionally, the handle can also be viewed as a line in space, essentially a two-dimensional element that may relate to surface treatment on the vessel or echo three-dimensional form. If textures are used to create patterns on the handle surface, this two-dimensional/three-dimensional relationship can unite the vessel and handle aesthetically.

Because decorative handles have fewer functional requirements, they can take on an endless variety of forms made by many different techniques. Two of the decorative techniques I use most often are handforming textured clay straps and twisting pulled handle sections. Both methods produce linearly textured handles which can be repeated in linear elements on the surface of the form. I find these two- and three-dimensional interrelationships contain very exciting possibilities for unique personal expression. (Slides 16, 17)

Just as I have been guided in the development of functional handle forms, so I have been influenced in ideas regarding decorative handles. The work and thoughts of John Kudlacek (Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas) have had an impact on my work in this vein. Kudlacek is aware of the physical function of his handle forms, but he is chiefly concerned with visual effect. As he states, "I am most concerned about the form....That the finished product may be functional is incidental."<sup>28</sup> "If the piece is to be used, the handles should work. If the piece is essentially an object relegated to static display, handles may be vestigial or strictly ornamental."<sup>29</sup> His handles are unique aspects of the forms he produces, contributing to the overall effect of original "art" pieces. (Slide 18)

My own use of decorative handles is combined with a regard for utility. The more often a piece is likely to be held, the more concerned I am about practicality. The more presentational a form is, the more freedom I have to use the clay handle as plastic expression of whimsy, fluidity, movement, intensity, or other intuitive, subconscious ideas which develop through the process of creating with clay.

#### STRUCTURAL HANDLES

All of my work is based upon traditional utilitarian ware, but being a part of the contemporary ceramic world, I am aware of how others use clay to create unique forms for purposes beyond function. I have not yet explored clay as a purely sculptural medium separated from function, but I do use the sculptural aspects of handles to help create more unique personal expressions. My more sculptural forms derive their shapes from traditional bowls, but I strive to give them added presence through large size and unique handle treatments.

The sculptural units I use for handles on these large planters consist of thrown, hollow "doughnuts" of clay. The curved shape relates well to the curved volume of the vessels. Again, an important concern is the interaction of two- and three-dimensional forms. I feel this can greatly contribute to the unity of the total piece. (Slide 19)

Another application of structural handles which I have recently explored is seen on my Raku baskets. The handles are formed by extruding clay in order to produce shapes not possible through pulling or throwing. The technique produces large sculptural handles with unique cross-sections and contours. They are used to give the pieces a more original, special feeling through less traditional shapes and applications of clay. (Slide 20)

## CONCLUSION

This study has proven most enlightening in several areas. I have looked at many pictures of pots as well as many actual pieces. The infinite variations and yet common characteristics of handles continue to amaze and intrigue me. At the Royal Ontario Museum I was able to sense and see influences of handle forms travel from the Far East to Europe and then to the New World and from the Mediterranean to Europe. I could see common features used by many cultures, such as imitating metal or rolling coils together for handles. I was able to pick up ancient pots and sense exactly the motions the potter used to make and attach the handle because they are the same motions I make today. The exposure and concentrated study will influence me to explore handle forms which I may never have considered. It led to greater awareness and sensitivity to function and expression in my own work. Probably the most significant idea that grew out of the study is the re-affirmation of my commitment to clay as an artistic medium. Potters have created an infinite number of variations of the vessel throughout history. Some of these forms are considered art pieces, some are fine examples of the craft, and some are simply useful objects. The distinction among them lies in the potter's ability to affect the user's sensibilities, to communicate aesthetically with an audience through sensitivity to the clay's unique qualities of form and surface.

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## LIST OF SLIDES

1. Neolithic Pot, Europe, handle forms derived from non-clay materials. Photo courtesy A.C. Garzio.
2. English medieval handle shard showing incised grooves. Royal Ontario Museum.
3. English medieval handle shards showing attachments. Royal Ontario Museum.
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5. German mug with "tail" on handle. Raeren, c. 1550, Royal Ontario Museum.
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A STUDY OF CLAY HANDLES ON CERAMIC VESSEL FORMS

by

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The purpose of this study is to enhance understanding of clay handles on ceramic vessels. The study will examine both the purposes and aesthetics of handle applications. In Part I, historic and contemporary handles are categorized into three groups: functional, decorative, and structural. It is acknowledged, however, that all handles share common qualities and the distinction among types is not sharply defined.

Functional handles are those which are necessary for the successful use of the vessel. English medieval and German salt-glazed wares are historic examples of the utilitarian use of simple sturdy handles. Bernard Leach and those who studied with him use the functional handle to express beauty through utility, thus continuing the medieval tradition in modern times.

Decorative handles are often found on wares which fulfill a more specialized social role than daily food service. They are visually necessary for the forms but may sacrifice functionality for decorative effect. Textures, carvings, modeling, and other elaborations are often found on the decorative handle, imparting a sense of valued, aesthetic object. Creamware produced in 18th century England is an example of ware which used the decorative handle to convey elegant refinement. Handles on the forms made by contemporary potter Don Reitz are also decorative, but give a different effect. Instead of refinement and elegance, Reitz's handles suggest aggression and spontaneity.

The third category of handles, structural, goes beyond function or visual elaboration to create significant new forms through its use. Handles such as those found on vessels made by the Mochica of Peru exhibit the characteristics of large size, unique form, and vestigial

use which help define this category. Betty Woodman's contemporary vessel forms with elaborate handles show a similar attitude of importance toward the handle.

Part II of the thesis deals with the author's aesthetic and technical concerns of each type of handle. Even though specific forms may vary, common concerns are realized among historic and contemporary potters. Because potters throughout the world use the same medium--clay--and because the basic physical techniques of forming clay are similar, common handle forms continue to appear. Therefore, the quality of a particular clay handle does not rely so much on its newness or originality of concept as it does on its effectiveness as a visual and physical aspect of the total clay form.