

BEGINNING OF
EXPLORATION

BRUCE COCHRANE

BY JESSICA CABE



Three boxes, 8 in. (20 cm) in height, stoneware, soda fired to cone 10, 2016.



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From the moment he pinched his first bowl more than 40 years ago, Bruce Cochrane has been enamored with functional pottery, and particularly with the wheel. But during a trip to Italy in the 1980s, Cochrane saw 18th-century tablewares that inspired him to view pots as more than just utilitarian wares.

The pieces he saw in Italy were over the top, elaborate, and intended for the upper class. They were visions of excess and exclusivity. Once a month or so, the tablewares would be used to elevate a meal, and afterward, they would go back on their shelves to be admired as pieces of art. “That notion of the role of the pot being functional and then decorative as well, that intrigued me,” Cochrane says.

Before that exchange with those decorative wares, Cochrane was throwing unaltered pieces based on folk pottery. Afterward, he began exploring the altered thrown form, adding structural elements, texture, carvings, and other decorative touches to his work.

“If you think about it, there’s not much that hasn’t been done already with just a straight thrown form,” Cochrane says. “So I find throwing, altering, adding other thrown parts, more interesting at this stage. I find it provides an opportunity for more innovative and personal solutions.”

The results are stunning. Cochrane’s pieces are indeed decorative, but they are not dainty. The forms are strong, rigid, and sturdy. Even elaborately carved works do not strike fear in the hearts of those who would like to use them on a daily basis.

Cochrane plays with this formal rigidity by wood firing his unglazed pieces. This results in random flame patterns and variations on the pots that soften their overall aesthetic. This relationship between precise forms and imprecise surfaces results in pottery that continues to inspire and please the eye.

No matter how elaborate Cochrane’s work becomes, it is safe to say that at the core of everything he makes is the idea of functionality—an idea he fell in love with the very first time he touched clay.

Enthusiasm for Handmade Pots

Bruce Cochrane was born in Vancouver and moved to Montreal at age 12. He was introduced to ceramics at John Abbott College, where he enrolled in a liberal arts program during his second semester.

“I was looking for an elective, and my friend had taken pottery the previous semester,” Cochrane says. “He said, ‘You should take it, it’s a lot of fun.’”

The class was three hours long, and the first session focused on pinch pots. Cochrane was still in the classroom eight hours later, pinching away.

“It was love at first touch,” he says. “The material itself can be a very seductive thing. You pinch it



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2 Box, 10 in. (25 cm) in length, stoneware, wood and soda fired to cone 10, 2016. 3 Lidded form, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, stoneware, wood fired to cone 10, 2017. 4 Sectional jar, 18 in. (46 cm) in height, stoneware, wood fired to cone 10, 2015. 5 Press-molded accordion jar, 14 in. (36 cm) in height, stoneware, fired to cone 10, 2008.

or touch it, and it makes a mark. I guess it was the immediacy of it that hooked me. You can just take this ball of earth, stick your thumb down in it and pinch around, and in 15 minutes you have a bowl. I just wanted to do more and keep going.”

So, he did. At the encouragement of his teacher, Julia Manitiuss, he attended a workshop led by Walter Ostrom, who taught at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD). Cochrane says Ostrom’s teaching style made ceramics fascinating and fun, and that one-day workshop only inspired him to learn more about pottery. So the following year, he enrolled at NSCAD and studied under Ostrom for four years.

Cochrane credits Ostrom with imbuing in him a deep love and appreciation for functional wares. He perhaps could have just as easily become a sculptor in clay if his first mentor were someone else, but Ostrom’s enthusiasm for the everyday delights of interacting with handmade pottery caught on with Cochrane.

“He was an incredible advocate of functional pottery and how it can enhance our daily lives,” Cochrane says. “It celebrates the act of food preparation and food serving. And you’re connecting with the maker; it’s sort of a collaborative thing when you arrange food on a handmade plate or flowers in a handmade vase. I don’t think there are too many other art forms that allow that kind of collaboration.”

Ostrom was the one who encouraged Cochrane to attend graduate school, so after earning his BFA in 1976 he began his graduate studies at Alfred University (then the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University). He spent the next two years doing what all artists do in graduate school: developing his work and forming close friendships with his classmates. “The facilities are second to none, but I think the best part about being there were my classmates and just the energy of the group pushing each other along,” Cochrane says.

He shared his time at Alfred with artists like Chris Gustin and Akio Takamori, and he studied under Val Cushing, Wayne Higby, and Robert Turner.

Cochrane says everyone he interacted with at Alfred pushed and inspired him in different ways, and after earning his MFA in 1978, he planned to immediately set up a studio to continue creating work and developing as an artist. But he hung around Alfred to help with summer school that year, and he learned of a teaching opportunity at Sheridan College in Toronto, Canada. With his student loans on his mind, he decided a steady paycheck from teaching would be a good idea for a few years, even if it meant putting off his studio plans.

“So I went to Toronto and started teaching,” Cochrane says. “Thirty-one years later, I was still teaching.”



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Passing on the Energy and Commitment

When Cochrane started teaching at Sheridan College in 1978, he immediately enjoyed it far more than he'd thought he would.

"I think the best part about teaching is to see someone grow," he says. "You don't want to take all the credit for it, of course, but being responsible for someone's creative development is very gratifying."

Cochrane says he modeled his teaching after Ostrom, who was full of passion and enthusiasm. It worked; he saw his students responding to that level of excitement about clay, and he observed an inspiring level of commitment from them.

Cochrane retired from Sheridan College seven years ago. Now, he's a full-time studio potter, and leads workshops across the US and Canada (over 90 since 1980). He also continues to exhibit his work, and has participated in over 300 exhibitions since 1978.

BRUCE COCHRANE



Earthenware bowl
1988



Teapot, reduction-fired porcelain
2001



Teapot, reduction-fired porcelain
2003

TIME LINE

1978
MFA New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University

Starts teaching at Sheridan College, Toronto, Canada

Solo Exhibition Ontario Crafts Council
1980

1984
Solo Exhibition Prime Gallery, Toronto (also 1989, 1994, 1998, 2003, 2006)

1987
Thrown and altered earthenware butter dish



1990
Bruce Cochrane/Sandy Simon The Clay Studio, Philadelphia, PA

2004
Solo Exhibition 25 Year Review: Burlington Art Centre; Burlington, Ontario

2005
Oval covered serving dish, soda fired



The financial security of teaching for more than three decades—and the continued security from a teacher’s pension—has allowed Cochrane to experiment and change his work in a way that would be more difficult for most full-time studio potters.

“I think when you’re making a living with your pottery alone, you’re pretty consistent with your line of work; the market kind of demands that,” he says. “But I’ve had the luxury of changing it up.”

Over the years, Cochrane has changed up his forms, surface decorations, clays, firings, and every other part of the making process. But one thing that remains consistent, no matter how much he does after the fact, is that every piece he creates starts on the wheel.

“After 40 years, it’s still a joy to sit down and throw,” he says. More generally, Cochrane says it’s still a joy to make pots. He spends easily 12 hours a day in his studio, and he has sketchbooks filled with ideas for new forms.

“There’s enough to keep me going for the rest of my time,” he says. “There’s no problem there.”

the author *Jessica Cabe studied arts journalism at Syracuse University and has been a clay hobbyist for two years. She lives in Chicago, where she works as a reporter for DNAinfo.*



6 Teapot, 7 in. (18 cm) in height, stoneware, wood fired to cone 10, 2017. 7 Relief bowl, 8 in. (20 cm) in height, stoneware, wood fired to cone 10, 2017.



Press-molded terrine with thrown elements, soda-fired stoneware

2006



Double walled jar, soda-fired stoneware
Solo Exhibition David Kaye Gallery, Toronto (also awarded solo shows 2013, 2015, 2016);
Solo Exhibition Harbinger Gallery, Waterloo
Retires from Sheridan College

2010



Stoneware vase with porcelain inlay, wood fired

2015

2007

Bruce Cochrane/Ben Owen, Akar Gallery; Iowa City, Iowa

Press-molded stoneware flower brick with thrown elements, wood fired



2009

Three-ringed jar, reduction-fired stoneware



2016

Wood-fired box with slip





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THE BUCKET JAR

After Cochrane spends time working out the form on paper, he begins the process of making his bucket jar as he begins all of his pieces: on the wheel.

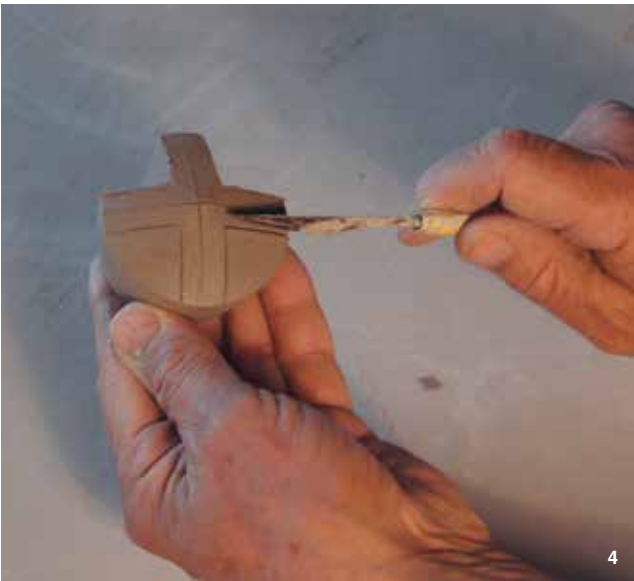
He first throws an open-ended conical form, using a straight metal rib to achieve the signature rigidity in his pots (1). Next, he throws the inside shoulder/lid seat, base/foot ring, lid, and knob for the jar (2). This method of combining multiple thrown pieces on one pot is standard procedure for Cochrane and one way he keeps his thrown forms evolving and personal.

After all the elements are thrown, it's time to start putting them in place. Using the wheel, he attaches the base/foot ring to the small end of the conical form (3). Using a knife,

he then cuts the solid, thrown knob into a new form, in this case an X-shape (4).

He then shifts his attention to the top of the pot by flipping it right-side up and putting it back on the wheel. The first thing he does to the top of the jar is to reshape the lip by throwing it to its final form (5). When the lip is set, he drops the shoulder/lid seat into the jar about 3 inches below the lip. He uses the wheel to attach the shoulder to the inner wall (6 and 7).

He then completes the lid by attaching the formed knob (8). He sets the lid on the jar and is ready to alter the nearly-completed form.



Using a knife, Cochrane cuts shapes in the lip area—making sure his cuts are identical on opposite sides of the form—to reference the bucket detail (9). He cuts out the reverse shape on the foot ring.

The last step in creating his bucket jar is the surface treatment. Once the jar is in the firm leather-hard state, the exterior surface is shaped with a Surform to soften the form and give the pot texture (10). The texture is enhanced by the wood firing process (see finished jar, right). Cochrane seldom uses exterior glazes and instead experiments with different clay bodies, from light to dark, and occasionally uses white slip to achieve surface variation in his wood firings.

