

ceramic artist of the year Forrest Lesch-Middelton

In selecting the Ceramic Artist of the Year, we look for someone who is making work of this time, made with an approach to studio and career that is of this time, as well as a person making contributions to the field beyond the work itself. And that is difficult to do unless you are focused on doing exactly that—and even then, involvement beyond one's own studio can require extraordinary effort. To stand out as a hard worker in a world of hard workers, which I think we can all agree defines the world of making pots, is a pretty high honor, but that is not the only honor we intend to bestow on Forrest Lesch-Middelton. We do, in fact, want to make sure he is recognized for the product of his work.

It would be easy to stop at the surface of his work, but that would be a mistake. And it would be easy to stop at the work itself, which, while paramount to this assessment, would also be a mistake, because it would mean that you would miss so much about his embodiment of contemporary ceramics. He has real-world experience with running a gallery, with being a kiln tech, with teaching, with running a community clay program, with volunteer, non-profit board work, and he still finds time to breath in and out—oh, and to make pots, too. Pile all of that on top of starting a brand new production tile business and being a dad, and you start to realize that perhaps you're not as busy as you had thought. I'm feeling downright relaxed. So let's have little chat with this very busy guy.

—Sherman Hall, Editor, Ceramics Monthly

One of the reasons we chose you for this award is your past and current involvement in so many different aspects of the studio-ceramics field, from administration of clay centers, art centers, and galleries, to several types of studio and tech work, various small-scale teaching jobs, and now production tile work—to say nothing of your own actual studio work. How do you perceive your accomplishments (and the number of them) thus far in your career? It all sounds very intentional, but in reality it has been a very organic process. As I look back I am surprised at some of the things I've taken on while still somehow making new, and hopefully fresh, work. I enjoy being involved in things I see as important rather than passively benefitting from the actions of others.

Most of what I have done in the field thus far can be related directly back to my role as a lifelong student of the material, and to my very social motivations to attempt to pay back the community that has shaped who I am. I am a social learner; if I put myself in situations where I can regularly interact with my peers, students, gallerists, and the people who I admire most in the field—including the administrators, critics, and patrons who are the scaffold that support the arts—I will be better positioned to make decisions that benefit myself and the others who shape the direction we are all moving in.

How intentional have you been in the planning of your career path, and how has your perspective on making a living changed over time?

I rarely apply to exhibitions and competitions; and I don't often approach people or organizations about teaching or exhibiting. However, clay has been a part of my life since a very young age and that has been very intentional. I've never once taken for







granted how fortunate I am to have found a calling at such a young age, or that I have learned from some pretty amazing people. Other than my family, there are very few people who don't first identify me as a ceramic artist. It is what I know, and because of that I am very comfortable advocating for the medium and that has created a certain level of success for me. I rarely question what the next step is; I simply look for ways that I can benefit the community, make my work better, and continue to be happy doing both.

Place has also greatly shaped how I make a living. Since I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, my business decisions have become more intentional. Living here means a constant hustle to keep up with the cost of living. Staying busy, and current, is now as much necessity as it is a choice.

What has been the biggest challenge in starting a primarily commercial tile endeavor based on your studio work?

I'm still in the early stages of this endeavor, and without a doubt, the two biggest challenges are having to be dependent on others while setting up a production studio, and being expected to deliver a consistent product to clientele with very specific needs. "Why isn't it the same color it was in the magazine?" is something I've heard more than once! I hit the ground running and have been up against a myriad of issues in the new studio; electrical needs beyond the load limitations of the rented space, and contractors and a landlord who were unable to deliver what was outlined ahead of time are just a few examples. As a product of the arts-and-crafts movement, I am used to having control of each step in the process. It is hard to let go of my instinct to be in control and hand off certain responsibilities to others who may not have the same schedule or interest that I do in the final outcome.

How do you research and choose the patterns for the surfaces of your work, and why do you look where you do?

There are three primary things I consider when choosing patterns. First, I ask if the pattern is historically significant. I use patterns that represent glimpses of early intercontinental commerce that existed along the Silk Road. From early examples of Asian, Middle Eastern and North African, European, and Scandinavian designs, these patterns represent a global interdependence that feeds the growth of an insincere comfort indicative of our modern allergy toward any level of uneasiness.

Second, can the pattern work with the surface, form, and color palette to subtly comment on our culture's view of regional and global security, which is often achieved through a means of oppression that perpetuates our thirst for greed and comfort often ending in war, famine, and inequality?



Third, and finally, do the pattern and its scale somehow work with the form I am making? Busy patterns overwhelm the pots they are on and, when scaled too large, patterns can feel insignificant for their lack of repetition. This point may be the most simple yet significant in that the intrinsic beauty of the pattern may lure the viewer/user into a place where through contemplation they may arrive at a place where they may begin to ponder the first two concerns.

How has your identity as a maker changed over time?

Nothing pleases me more than walking into the studio of a potter who has fallen into the daily rhythm of making. I wanted this for myself from a very young age. It is what I thought I would do. I am learning that it is not, however, in my nature to be that person. It's a liberating and somewhat disheartening realization. Liberating in the relief that I no longer have to question my professional motivations, and disheartening to let go of the vision I've had for myself. Now my day doesn't only revolve around the act of making a final product, but instead it revolves around a complex mix of things that allow me to use the pots or tile to speak about my interests beyond just the object.

If you haven't already covered it above, what's your best advice for those aspiring to make a living in the ceramic arts?

On one hand I feel very qualified to give advice, and on the other hand it is still something that I revisit on a daily basis.

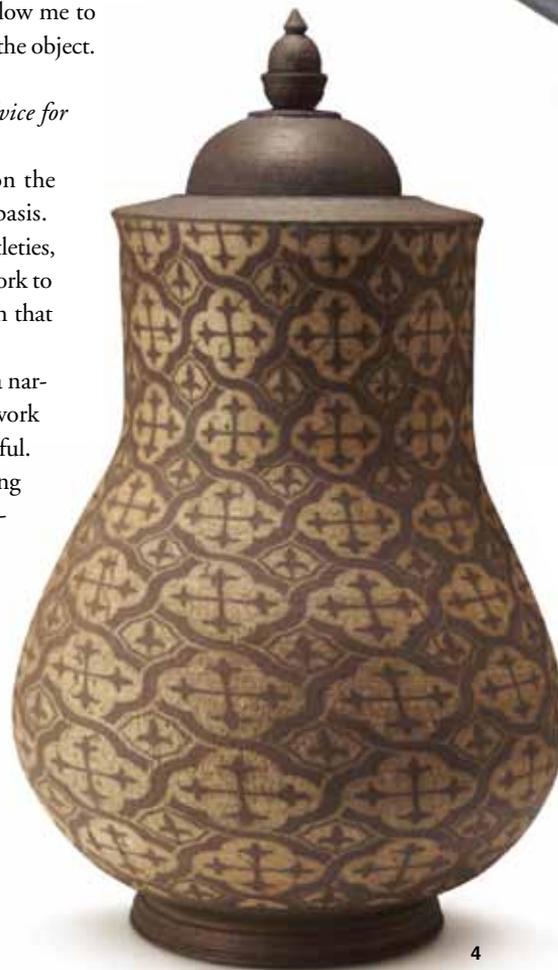
Take the time to learn your craft, its history and subtleties, and develop your skills around those things. Do the hard work to define what truly interests you at your core and work from that place. If you do this, your work may be successful.

In the midst of all of that, know that most artists have a narrow vision of success. I am still learning that although my work is successful it does not mean that I am financially successful. Success is not simply making great work, but also supporting your lifestyle while doing so. There is an attitude in academics that makes the conversation about earning a living as an artist taboo. That attitude must be done away with. If this is done thoughtfully, we can preserve the ideals of the artist, and the integrity of the person who is fortunate to make a living doing what they love. By rallying against our dependence on the market, we simply define the inextricable link. Turn this idea on its head and embrace the market's craving for quality work that connects the object to the hand of the maker. Find someone who runs a successful business and take notes. The lessons they can teach you may free you up to make your best work.

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- 1 Yunomi, 4½ in. (11 cm) in height, Rafah pattern, reduction-cooled stoneware, 2012.
- 2 Teapot, 8½ in. (22 cm) in length, combination of Turkish and Japanese patterns, oxidation-fired porcelain with cobalt transfer, 2013.
- 3 Large platter with pierced rim, 17 in. (43 cm) in diameter, Kimono pattern, reduction-cooled stoneware, 2013.
- 4 Ginger jar, 15 in. (38) in height, Rafah pattern, reduction-cooled stoneware, 2013.

