



**NEW CERAMICS**

# GAIL KENDALL

## MAKING HER MARK

Linda Hillman

*If I were making a list of often ceramic artists I would like to see more of, Gail Kendall would be on it. Right now she appears to be off the national radar screen. But why? ... It's great work and I wish I saw more of it.*

*Bruce Pepich, Direktor,  
Racine Art Museum*



### ILLUSTRATIONS

left - Tureen (2004) - w 56 cm  
right  
- Plate (2004) - d 46 cm  
- Fruit bowl (2002) w 53 cm

Studio potter, full professor of ceramics, Workshop presenter-demonstrator, avid reader, passionate traveler, pianist, wife and mom - Gail Kendall has a lot to juggle on her work table. In 1987, when she settled in Lincoln where she developed the ceramics program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Gail Kendall had abandoned the contemporary vessels she'd been making in North Dakota and Minnesota, and aligned herself with strictly functional pottery. A soup tureen was the first piece Kendall made as a utilitarian potter, and it has become Kendall's signature form. While at the Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina, she chose the tureen as a challenge, but she also sought to make something that presented food in a wonderful way. With that shift in direction, she could say: "I feel I have found my life's work."

After receiving an M.F.A. in ceramics from Eastern Michigan University in 1974, Gail Kendall spent ten years working alone as a Studio potter before entering academia. Now, over a thirty-five-year career as ceramicist and professor, she has taught at all levels at numerous schools, mentoring countless students while creating a distinctive body of work. She has been the recipient of an NEA Arts Midwest Fellowship and a residency at the Spode works in Stoke-on-Trent and the subject of a number of solo shows, most recently at the Huntington Museum of Art. The Sites of invitational or juried exhibitions in which she has participated have been as diverse as the Worcester Center for the Crafts, Santa Fe Clay, The Airstream NCECA Tour, and the Old Church Cultural Center at Demarest. These experiences have seasoned this artist and developed the critical abilities, high standards, and personal knowledge that make Kendall one of the most interesting potters working and teaching today.

Kendall's technique, hand-built slipware, or slipped terra cotta, has evolved into concentrating on the formal characteristics of the pot - decorative surface, volume, tactility, interior space, narrative decoration, process, as well as its place in ritual - primarily from the standpoint of

a designer. The importance of designed elements in her work stems from an unlikely source - haute couture. In 1973, Diana Vreeland, the eminent fashion editor of Vogue and Harper's Bazaar, was special consultant to the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and organized a series of popular exhibitions, the first of which was "The World of Balenciaga," chronicling the work of the great Spanish designer. When young Kendall saw the show, she was drawn to the high level of handwork obvious in each garment—carefully done and fully revealed to the viewer. "In my work," she says, "I do not carefully remove all evidence of the design process. Instead, lots of references—lines, textures and other details - remain. I like the way they add to the casualness of the finished object and refer to my creative process." Though her work is anything but crude and rustic or refined, Kendall likes to say that her hand-building process and her low-fire earthenware and glazes place her in the tradition of the "peasant-potter."

Kendall is attentive to the embedded metaphors in the pot form. The names we assign its parts, those we recognize in the archetypal vessel - the neck, the shoulder, the belly, the foot - refer directly to the human vessel. Kendall muses, "I take nourishment from the metaphorical vessel in order to reenergize my own body and mind."

### Influences

On a visit with Kendall to see potter Clary Illian at her home in Ely, Iowa, Kendall and Illian spoke about ideas and where they come from. "Find, steal, make," Illian said as she showed us the handsome book on the quilts of Gee's Bend that she had been looking at. We agreed that Student potters do the same thing with potters they admire. "In fact, ceramics would not have a field if there weren't a stream of ideas to build upon," Kendall said. "You could say 'appropriate' or 'borrow' if you want to dull it down, but it's really looking at a piece of work and saying, 'That's fantastic. I'm going to steal that idea.' However, young potters



need to go back several generations and start looking because otherwise their work just becomes a weak derivation of what the contemporary potter is making." Kendall herself is drawn to British and European slipware, to illuminated manuscripts, to Elizabethan needlework, and world architecture. She refers to these various groups of artifacts to fuel her studio work.

Kendall has also gained much in the way of source material from her travels. Time spent in Mexico, and parts of West Africa and Australia, and many trips to Europe since her residency at Spode in 1967 have left indelible marks that affect her work in the studio. She acknowledges several powerful notions from seeing very old things, mostly buildings such as Gothic cathedrals, which embody very high technical proficiency and still maintain the profound qualities of the handmade. These buildings, created by anonymous craftspeople for the most part, pay homage to a "big idea." While Kendall values the pluralism of living in America in this day and age, she acknowledges a sentimental attachment to the notion of a homogeneous culture where everyone believed the same things. "Like most twenty-first Century Americans," she muses, "I'm sure I would feel completely strangled by thirteenth-century life if I were suddenly tossed into it, but it feels calm looking back on it through rose-colored glasses while appreciating the craftsmanship of a doorway in England's Lincoln Cathedral."

### *Making the Ordinary Extraordinary*

Busing a dish at a dinner party at Kendall's house is absolutely forbidden—"a guest is the jewel in the crown of hospitality," she says. She and her husband Kent Miller are blessed with interesting and fun friends; conversation is typically enthusiastic and gregarious with its typical focus on art and politics. Kendall and Miller have created a vision of life that is involved with a reverence for handwork. It is a way of life they want to pass on to their daughter Helen—the idea of making food,

making gardens, and making objects. Part of the impetus is due to the influence and appreciation of William Morris' writings and the way his views were embodied in the Arts and Crafts Movement. Morris believed that on the domestic level, the objects with which a person surrounds herself—"the lesser arts"—should augment the rest of her life, though Kendall differs with his (and Bernard Leach's) opinion that an aesthetic way of life creates better human nature.

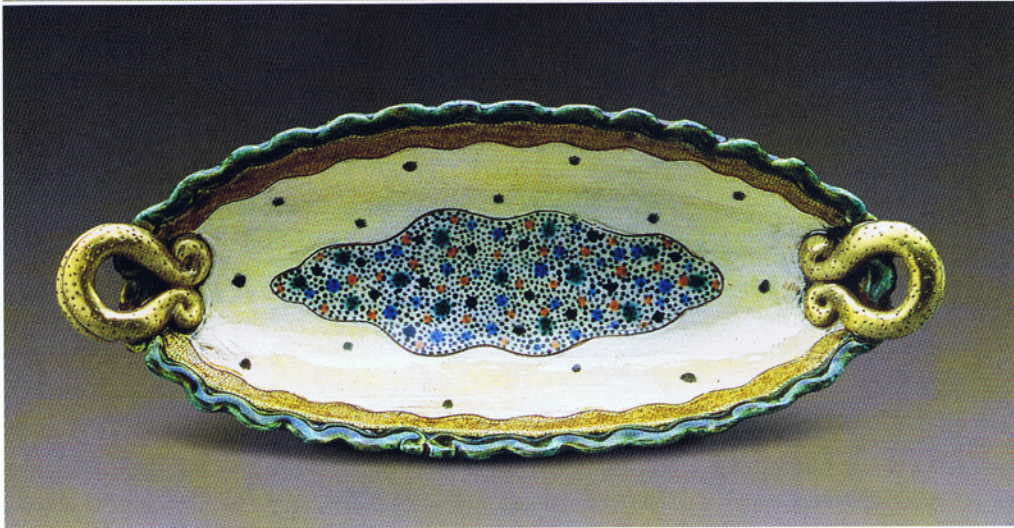
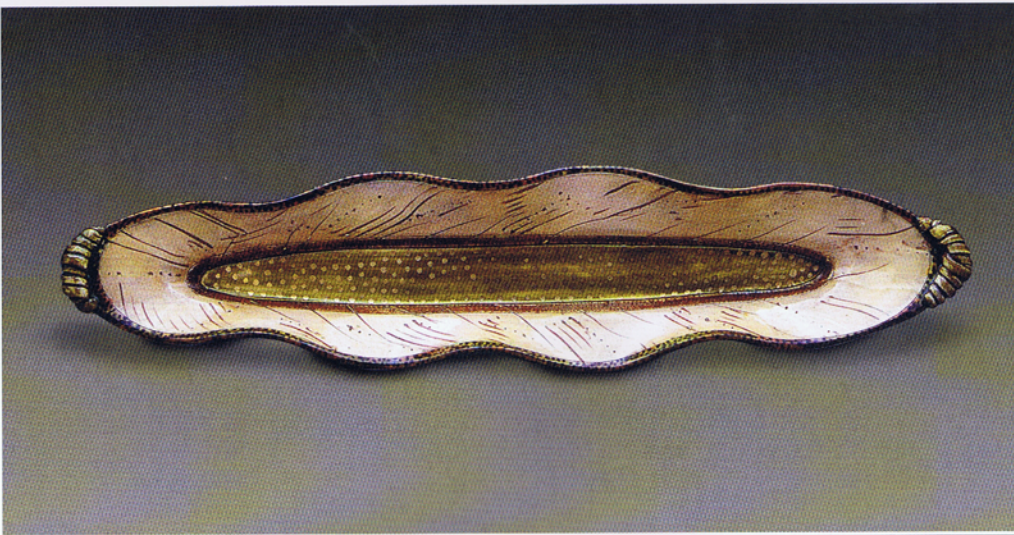
Kendall believes that using pottery for eating and drinking adds a touch of grace to life; that in the best of all worlds, beautiful handmade objects at the dining table make the whole experience more enjoyable. Independent scholar Ellen Dissanayake would say that Kendall believes in "making the ordinary extraordinary."

Is there "spirit" in the clay you work with?" I ask. "Absolutely not," is her emphatic answer. "I am the spirit and the potter. We have to hope the light that is in the artist comes through in the art object. The potter has the spirit and it is she who makes a vessel that is lively and has vitality. Whether pottery, gardens, or pieces of architecture, it is all locked on the sense of tactile, visual and hand work. It's the realm in which I'm most interested: sensing handwork—considered handwork—and a love of material. I like to give humans the credit for the vitality that's in certain pots. And the same is true of any artwork. When we look at an artwork, we are seeing the life of the artist—the spirit of the artist—in that work, not the spirit in the materials with which it was made. If I make a good piece, I want to get the credit for it. I can say, this time I was right on!" She wants things to be fluid and spontaneous and she wonders out loud if she extols this virtue because she is too impatient to do the ultra-meticulous work.

When we discussed the values represented in her work, Kendall reiterated a love of materials, a sense of hand, a sense of craftsmanship, and she feels that her work reflects all of these. "Most of the potters I know think deeply about pots and their place in contemporary life,"

**ILLUSTRATIONS**

top - *Fruit bowl* (2003) - w 56 cm  
below - *Serving dish* (2004) w 38 cm



*Linda Hillman is a studio potter and free-lance writer living in Chicago.*

**Gail Kendall**  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
Department of Art and Art History  
Lincoln, NE 68588-0114 - USA  
T +49-402 472 5548  
[gailmariekendall@gmail.com](mailto:gailmariekendall@gmail.com)



Kendall muses. "I believe we are drawn to this discourse since there is no essential utilitarian role for handmade pottery to play in today's world. Its role is an aesthetic one. The era of the "village potter" is largely over although there are village potters here and there who have educated a local population to value pottery and to perceive it as essential to life. That population is typically well-educated and middle- to upper-middle class. The village potter in the seventeenth century took care of the most basic needs of the lowest class of individuals in his realm making storage jars, cooking stoves, and basic utilitarian wares. Obviously, there has been a significant change in the meaning of pottery in our (middle-class) American world. It is radically different from the 'meaning' of pottery a few hundred years ago."

Kendall says that "stylish" contemporary art does not reflect the "love of materials" evident in much of the art from previous eras.

"A love of materials is not considered a strength in the art world today. It is the craftsman who is compelled by a love of materials. This probably accounts for the fact that the 'crafts' are still highly marginalized within the art world." Although Kendall confesses to a general lack of interest in some trends in contemporary art, every now and then she will come across someone whose work moves her. "Bill Viola is such an artist," she says. "And he is a consummate craftsman. The Metropolitan Museum of Art bought my favorite - *The Quintet of Remembrance* (2000) - it's a work of genius, a work of profound beauty and significance. That is how I see the best of pottery, the best of any artwork in any medium."

"The subject of utilitarian ceramics is," ceramist Bennett Bean writes, "the awareness of the act of use." It seems potters today have to accept the fact that much of what they produce may end up as a decorative object on a sideboard or bookshelf. People buy Kendall's work because they are attracted to its optimism and hand-built qualities. Kendall's pottery allows an individual to encounter something unique in the quotidian eating experience. There is a deliberate intent to make the ordinary special. Kendall's individual customer, with her imagination and desire for an alternative experience in serving a meal, is displaying artistic behavior herself by deciding which food looks beautiful on which plate, which course is embellished by a particular piece of pottery, and how the table itself should be thoughtfully arranged. Inherent in all of us is this possibility of celebration, which Kendall extols.

Though Bruce Pepich felt that Kendall is currently not well enough known, she is moving in the right direction. Many recognize her for her hard work in teaching and in her studio, for her discriminating eye, her humor and quick wit, her confidence and astute opinions—as someone whose pottery is at once extravagant, sensual, luxuriously ornate, sometimes imperfect, but, ultimately, entirely functional. Where Kendall stands now is squarely in the world of fine craft—made by hand, appreciated and sought out by collectors. Her contributions to her students, her university, her colleagues, and her collectors are beginning to take their rightful place.