

Ceramics

Art and Perception

2014
ISSUE 97

INTERNATIONAL
US\$20 UK £10 CAN\$22 €17



Lou Pierozzi

One Man's Junk is Another Man's Treasure: Inspiration

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THERE IS A FORGOTTEN ROMANCE BURIED IN THE industrial revolution. This significant period in world history started somewhere in the late 1800s, lasted for about a century and changed the world forever when production by machines replaced the human hand of artists and crafters. It had a severe effect on potters. Eventually, inexpensive, mass produced pottery took the place of handmade crafts. As industrial machinery moved in and took over the production of necessary and artistic objects for households, artists and handymen who provided

in the many years before could not compete against the much cheaper products that flooded the market. Not only did they lose their function and their importance as producers, but in the social hierarchy of their communities they became unimportant. Just another gear in the operation of the iron monsters, they found themselves a part of the endless repetition of production work, poverty and often deteriorating health.

As is so often the case, people responded. The period of Romanticism developed towards the end



of the 18th century. Several distinct groups of artists, poets, writers, musicians, political, philosophical and social thinkers expressed their intellectual and artistic hostility towards this turn of civilisation and revolted against the social and political elite. Prior to this period, visual artists imitated the external world around them, but as part of their reaction against circumstances, they pushed back against intellectualising life and rationalising nature and became known to stress the importance of intuition and emotion in the arts.

The machinery used in those early days of the industrial revolution was ridiculously large and grotesque and while it caused the direct results of the dehumanising of many people, others thrived and became successful from new opportunities. Some became handy men or mechanical engineers, developing untold passions for these comical iron monster and these metal intruders became household items which were handled and touched on a personal and daily basis. As it goes with mankind, it was also just the beginning of the development of these machines. Ironically, as sufficient as it was for mass production, good became better and soon smaller, more efficient machines replaced the large, clumsy ones. In the meantime the Arts and Craft movement flourished between 1860 and 1910. The goal was among others aimed against mass-produced cheap ornaments and to embrace durable, handmade objects. Through this, it served its goals to let the arts and crafts find its rightful place in the world and thrive again. On the other hand the wheel of time took revenge and those early noisy iron invaders of mankind's activity became silent, abandoned and forgotten.

Two centuries later, American artist, Lou Pierozzi builds his portfolio of ceramic art, reacting instinctively on the human emotions of people of the industrial revolution, for whom life had shifted from the peaceful, serene country side living towards chaotic cities and the total transformation of their natural order.

Reaching deep into the artistic elements of the Romantic time period,

Pierozzi gently brings it to the forefront of modern history. Focusing with sensitively, but a touch of humour on the emotional roller coasters of history, he breaks away from rigid and preconceived structures and places objects of the time into the natural places where one will find them today.

At first glance, Pierozzi's creations are small scale imitations of brick buildings and partial landscapes, railway tracks, with different types of engines so typically found during the industrial revolution, sometimes with a suggestion of green vegetation on hill-like mounts. On closer inspection the engines become sculpted teapots, ewers and cups, sized disproportionately to the elements around them. Soon one realises there is a deeper meaning behind these arrangements and the imitation of iron and brick takes on a significance of its own, which raises questions to the viewer.

Heavily covered with metal and brick coloured glazes and standing in front of or on top of the different backdrops of sculptural landscapes, these household objects, normally associated with

Facing page: Landscape Detail of Cups, Teapots and Household Items.

Below: The Lone Ewer on Mount Rathen. 2012. Wheel thrown and handbuilt ceramic and glaze. 13 x 14 x 9 in. Photo by Lou Pierozzi.



warmth and homeliness, take on the appearance of battleships, boilers and train locomotives, which, during operation, are also warm and steaming, but now appear cold and grotesque, out of place in their environments.

A LIFETIME OF PREPARATION

Pierozzi's story started in the late 20th century and spilled over into the 21st century, when his life became one long experience in which he was prepared for the day that he would comment through his art on those forgotten times of centuries ago. His grandfather made a living from collecting and selling scrap metal in the small alleys of Chicago, long before Pierozzi was born. With an eye for precious and unusual objects, in his basement he collected artefacts from the World's Fair of 1893 and other machines or parts thereof from that era. Pierozzi played there as a boy; spending his days inspecting and observing machines that were stacked and preserved among cobwebs and dust. Unknowingly his grandfather left a treasury behind from which the young Pierozzi could build an inspiration to feed his creative soul.

At the same time, he spent many of his childhood vacations visiting family in the US Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The fields around the old copper mines (where old discarded machinery stood guilelessly as if it has been part of the landscape

since beginning of time) became the playgrounds for the neighbourhood's children. They played where smokestacks once heated the earth, but now stand in cold shadows of abandoned buildings and land slopes. This was probably where his interest and awareness of steamships, iron clad warships and other heavy steel machinery started to develop.

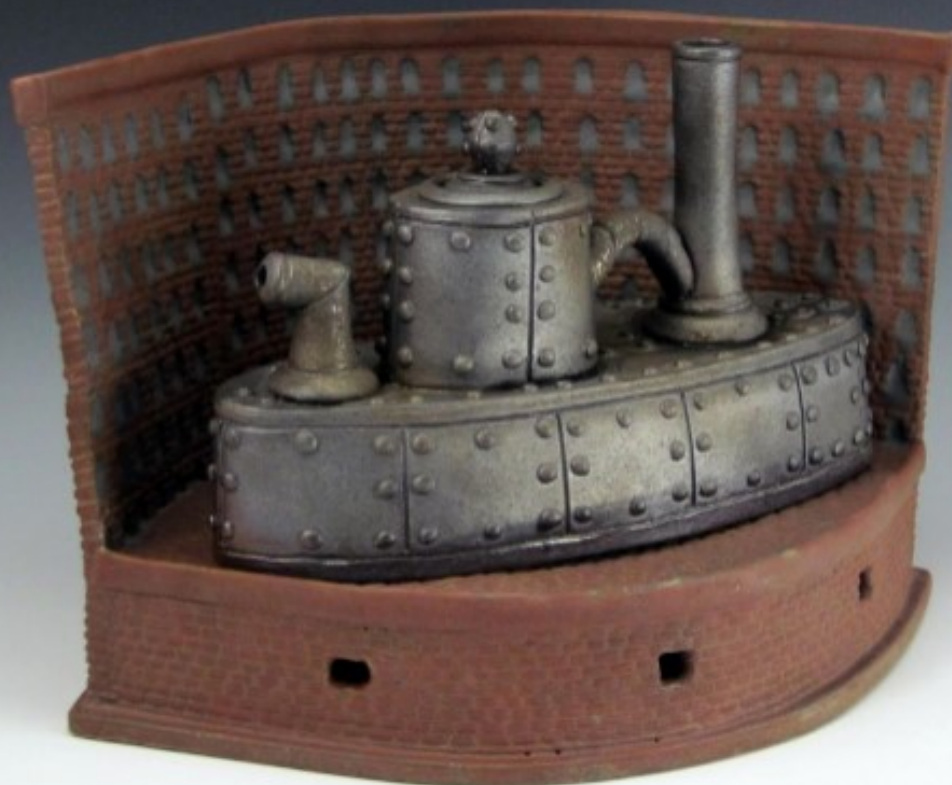
Interestingly enough, this fascination and awareness of machinery never sparked a mechanical interest but, instead, he became more and more fascinated with the appearance and the mute representation of these metal creatures. On the contrary, his interest for clay started after school, during his years in college. Unknowingly the young Pierozzi developed an odd connection with dehumanised people, the human gears of the industrial revolution and him as a production potter. Enthusiastically learning and working under the watchful eye of Nicolas Bernard, he became part of the production process that inevitably seasoned him as a potter. Here he obtained an elevated awareness of the hard discipline of repetition and perfection of reproducing clay objects on the wheel, only paid for pieces that matched exact specifications. Maybe that, in combination with his childhood experiences, became the strength of his expression, allowing him to preserve the fantasy and to eventually present his own interpretations thereof.

FULL CIRCLE

Putting a fast spin on his life, Pierozzi's art work has come full circle. With ceramic art works named

Below: Fillmore Teapot and Stand. Stoneware, glazed with sandblasted after firing to cone 10. 10 x 16 x 8 in.

Facing page and inset: Coal Miner's Delight (Teapot with Stand and Two Cups). Stoneware and glaze, fired to cone 10. 16 x 26 x 10 in.



as *The Outpost*, *The Double Boilers* and *The lone-ewer-on-mount-Rathan*, my curiosity forced me to explore this capable artist further, so when I visited his ceramics classroom at Oakton Community College in Des Plaines, Illinois, where he is the Professor of Art, he generously shared his philosophy, inspiration and his techniques with me.

I learnt about his passion for awkward machinery that found its way into teapots and how it helped to shape his artistic life. I saw how; almost as a means of meditation, opposing production processes, his fingers linger on every part of his clay work, reliving the beliefs of the Arts and Crafts movement of the 19th century in a way, in which the human touch in artwork was so emphasised. The personal touch that he brings to every stone wall and every segment of a handle or spout also imitates the personal handing and maintaining of some early machinists and their passions.

Somewhere in my conversation with him, teapots became as alive as boilers and heated engines that, to me as an observer, became more than just objects

of beauty. I found a connection between the warm content of Pierozzi's teapots and the passions and despair of people living during the industrial revolution. The coldness of brick walls and heat of boilers, steamships and teapots opposites of each other all became symbols of happiness and sadness, poverty and wealth.

TEAPOTS

True communication through the arts comes by learning the full language of a medium. Once someone has mastered a specific medium and knows how to manipulate it to its fullest, expression comes alive. Pierozzi is no exception to the rule. Understanding the clay medium, the science thereof and the techniques required to manipulate it, he works and plans his end results.

There is a quiet ease and unpretentiousness in the way he throws, but he unmistakably reveals how the discipline he learnt in those years of production, affects his current work. He spent significant time to get the shape and form of objects just right. He does not work towards perfection as one so often times



find in production, but he is precise in preparing fine details of positive and negative spaces, form and line, that will allow the next steps to build on the previous ones.

The body of his teapots is often thrown in two parts, while all other parts of his teapots are also wheel thrown. The long thin pipe-like spouts and handles could be pushed through an extruder but, somehow, referring back to the human touch, Pierozzi prefers all elements to be wheel thrown. He manipulates these clay cylinders and cut them in short segments at different angles; altering and re-assembling them to balance the rest of his teapot. Despite their strong sculptural reference, Pierozzi makes sure they function correctly, connecting the working machinery of early days with the working properties of his teapots. As he builds small nuances in a handle or finishes a spout tilted somewhat comically to one side, he becomes a child, expressing views and experiences of his young days.

Below: Charleston Station (Two Ewers and a Tray). 2012. Stoneware and glaze, wheel-thrown and handbuilt. 9 x 14 x 6 in. Photo by Lou Pierozzi.

Facing page, above: Lou Pierozzi Placing a Spout.

Photo by Koos Badenhorst.

Facing page, below: Biltmore Teapot. 2012. Stoneware and glaze, wheel-thrown and handbuilt. 10 x 10 x 8 in. Photo by Brian Franczyk.

The endless repetition of producing the same shapes again and again on wheel in the 1990s, trained his eye for line and balance. In contrast with his production years, he now works slowly and meticulously, in many instances literally building landscapes or locomotives and steamships over long periods of time, made up from ewers, teapots and cups, always juxtaposing the functionality and beauty of clay. He plays his way through pots with tiny balls of clay that he lines up and that become rivets holding simulated iron plates on his teapot spouts and handles or building railroad tracks and installations with much detail.

THE BACKDROP

If teapots and mugs, often times embedded somewhere in the belly of a machine, form the focal point of machinery in Pierozzi's displays, then brick walls, railroad tracks and other manmade landscapes becomes the backdrop for these objects. As serene and peaceful country life was disturbed by the new normal of the time, landscapes were also changed to accommodate the industry. Pierozzi comments on it by building wall structures that cast symbolic shadows, representing the tribulation of the time, but take it as a background for hot smoke stacks and other machines hot during operation; he brings the



positive and negative outcomes of the industrial revolution parallel to each other.

I watched as he prepared balls of clay, slammed them down to prepare sheets of clay from which he built walls and perches. To imitate brick walls he uses a textured template that he created from latex. After he impresses the latex into the soft clay, he works his way through the pattern with a tool, making sure that he transferred the textured pattern flawlessly to the clay sheet. As I watched him, his passion for the subject matter found its way into the craft process as he paid attention to every detail and it carried me away to the days when every brick was made by hand and, after they went through the firing process, builders stacked them one by one as they built landmarks.

In the same way, Pierozzi builds his landscapes; piece by piece, using as the inspiration for his sculptures the era that put so many people out of work. Clay objects become the machines of the early industrialisation period, abandoned and then scattered against the background of the landscape where they were once used. Instead of leaving them guileless in their current position, Lou Pierozzi organises them in sculptural landscapes. Through careful placement, balance and overall attention to visual elements, he succeeds in pulling the viewer

into that world and tells success stories of a time in history that people struggled to find their way, but he also manages to transform this forlorn struggle in romantic tales of mystery and nostalgia with an outcome that influences and transforms the world for the better.

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