



John Glick: The Plum Tree Pottery

by TOM SHAFER

Photos: Robert Vigilliti

THE FORMS ARE BOLD, vigorous and forceful. The decoration is bright, lively and exuberant, sometimes flamboyant, but full of subtle nuances. The craftsmanship is always excellent. The pots have obviously been made swiftly, surely, naturally, almost effortlessly. They are the products of a man who works over six days a week, ten to twelve hours a day—a man who has carefully arranged his studio and his life for the efficient production of pottery. He is thoughtful and systematic, rigorously self-disciplined and dedicated to his work. And at the same time, he is full of excitement and enthusiasm—qualities that are revealed in every pot he makes. It is the combination of these qualities that has made John Glick, both artistically and financially, a highly successful professional potter.

John first studied ceramics with Bill Pitney at Wayne State University in Detroit, where he developed a solid technical foundation and a thoughtful, serious approach to making pottery. He received his B.F.A. from Wayne State in 1960 and his M.F.A. from Cranbrook Academy in 1962, where he studied with Maija Grotell. On graduation, he received a Tiffany grant of \$1,000 to help set up his own studio, but this project was delayed until 1964, since he was drafted soon after graduation. As a soldier in the Army, he spent a year and a half in Germany near Höhr-Grenzhausen, a salt-glaze center since 1300. He became acquainted with several studio potters there, and determined to try to make his living as a full-time potter. He returned to Detroit in 1964 and, after a three-week search, found a studio he could afford.

John set up and equipped his studio and began potting. Sales grew slowly, but within a year and a half sales had increased enough to make him confident of his ability to make a living as a potter. In 1965, he bought the house in Farmington, Michigan where he now lives, and converted an old farm building on the property into a studio. The name Plum Tree Pottery, and the stylized leaf design that is the studio mark, were inspired by the old orchard next to the studio.

The studio layout was rearranged and expanded several times as the need for work, storage and showroom space grew. An addition was built in 1970 to house a new kiln, the fourth that John has built. The new kiln is a walk-in of catenary arch construction, built with insulating firebrick and covered with a layer of insulating cement. There are 100 cubic feet of load space, sometimes holding as many as 300 pieces for a glaze firing. Because of the

John Glick looking into his 100 cubic foot catenary kiln.

size of the kiln, the firing cycle is rather long: twenty hours for bisque, twenty to thirty hours for a Cone 10 glaze firing using propane gas. The glaze firing could be shorter, but John feels that a long soaking reduction gives the most satisfactory results. The kiln room also houses a large pug mill in which John mixes his clay. He uses the same body for most of his pots except ovenware, which requires a different mixture. Recently, the showroom was moved from the studio building to a beautifully remodeled garage. This building also houses a studio for John's wife Ruby, who, in addition to doing her own ceramic work, handles sales. An upstairs storeroom is filled with pots from which John selects the pieces for exhibitions and one-man shows.

The studio is quite large (1,000 square feet), but seems smaller because it is broken up into several rooms. The largest of these is filled with many shelves of pottery in various stages of completion, along with the wheels, worktables, and other equipment. The work is done in cycles (about eight per year) with three to four weeks devoted to making the pots, then a week or more is used to bisque fire, glaze, and glaze fire the pots. The eight yearly bisque loads yield enough pots (three to four hundred in each) for twelve or thirteen glaze firings. The rest of the year is filled with teaching seminars, exhibiting at art fairs, and vacationing.

John has had several assistants since 1964. One of them, Jan Sadowski, worked with John for more than three years. In addition to helping with clay and glaze preparation, kiln loading, etc., Jan threw series repetitions of forms designed, finished and decorated by John. After Jan left in October, 1970, John worked alone for a year, enjoying the greater freedom and control of doing everything himself. Last October he started a new apprentice to help with studio jobs. The apprentice throws his own pots under John's guidance, but does not do the studio production throwing. John has always felt that jobs such as clay and glaze mixing, kiln loading and unloading, and cleaning and maintenance should be shared labors—not unpleasant tasks to be assigned to an assistant. John has another assistant who works in her own home. She cuts out and assembles basic slab forms, using slabs and patterns prepared by John. These pieces are then finished and decorated by John. Spouts, lids or handles may be added, or a shape may be altered, thus making each piece individual, and clearly a Glick pot. Some of the slab pots are made this way, but most are made by John.

John makes a large variety of pots, most of them functional. There are more than a dozen separate types



Ten-cup stoneware teapot, twelve inches high, thrown, with wire-cut handle and spout.

of ware. He produces teapots, casseroles, bowls, plates, mugs, covered jars, corked jars, pitchers, wine bottles, tureens, soap dishes, boxes and planters. These standard forms are repeated with numerous variations, continually changing and evolving. A basic shape may be made for a few months, or for several years, dependent upon how long it remains vital and alive for him. When a particular form no longer stimulates him to do new variations, he replaces it with another, even if the pot had been selling well. John knows that for his work to remain at its best, he must feel an excitement in making it, and in order for him to remain true to himself and, ultimately, to his customers, he must continue to develop new ideas and discard those that no longer interest him. I see a large representation of John's work once or twice a year, and each time is a new experience. There are familiar forms, but they are always changed in subtle ways. There are

some new forms, all with decoration that grows continually richer. Changes are rarely sudden and dramatic, but are, rather, the result of a gradual evolutionary process constantly building on past experience.

From the beginning, John has worked with both slab and thrown forms, and often combines the two methods. For several years he has been slab-building a variety of lidded boxes—rectangular, hexagonal, and other geometric shapes. Recently he has moved toward more organic shapes. One is a lobed form sometimes resembling a clover leaf. He also makes pairs of boxes that, singly, are functionally complete, but fit together to make a whole in form and decoration. There has been a series of faceted teapots with large handles and slab-constructed spouts, and large, fat jars with sculptural handles. Some of these new forms are jarring and disturbing; some, to me, rather unpleasant, but they have great vigor and

Right: Patterned sponges used for application of oxides and slips.

Below: An intricately shaped slab-built soap tray.



A slab box with overlying patterns, about fourteen inches long and ten inches wide. Note the bottom rim and undulating lid opening.





Detail of 18-inch stoneware plate, reduction-fired to Cone 10. Glick's several decorating techniques described in the text are illustrated here.

Two wheel-thrown and slab-built wine servers with threaded stoppers. The tallest is twelve inches high.



John Glick using patterned sponge blocks to apply oxides.

Kitchen shakers for cheese or flour. They are about seven inches tall.



excitement, and it is clear that they are the result of thought and conviction, never the result of aimless experiments. The numerous whimsical details, both in form and decoration, add to the vital exuberant character of his work, but never detract from the basic seriousness of the pots. It is John's serious approach, great technical facility and intimate knowledge of his materials that are responsible for the consistently high quality of his work.

John sells about 85 percent of his work directly to the customer: about 65 percent of these direct sales are made through his own studio showroom and 20 percent at art fairs. The remaining 15 percent is sold through galleries or shops. He believes that direct selling is an important factor in his financial success as a producing potter, as it enables him to keep his prices low and still make a good profit on each piece. Since he is not forced to produce a great quantity of pots in order to earn an adequate living, more care and thought go into each piece, and there is more time for developing new ideas.

John refuses all commissions except planters for architects, and dinnerware sets, as he found he could not keep up with the many and varied requests for his work. The dinnerware orders are handled in a very personal way, and even when he had a throwing assistant, John still made all dinnerware himself. The dinnerware is so much in demand that customers must normally wait up to a year after ordering, although John usually makes at least twelve sets a year (one in each glaze firing). Each set is made to order. Before the customer makes a choice, he spends an hour or so with John discussing needs and preferences. The customer is encouraged to take two or three samples home to use for several days before making a final decision. A customer may choose from many samples in the showroom—the samples are continually changing, since a decorative pattern is rarely repeated—or he may specify a particular decoration with a certain glaze. In case a specific combination not in the sample collection is desired by the customer, a prototype setting of three pieces is made for his approval. This means that considerable time is spent in consultation, but John wants people to be as pleased with their dinnerware after using it for years as when they ordered it. Any extra pieces made with the original set are stored, in case additional or replacement pieces are needed. For the same reason, complete records of pieces, sizes, glazes and decorative design are kept for each set.

One of the most interesting and exciting aspects of John's work is the decoration. Using only a limited number of glazes, slips, and oxides, he achieves amazing variety and richness through combinations of different decorative techniques. He decorates similar forms in many different ways—each variation enhancing the shape in subtle and unexpected ways. There are sculptural decorations (often in recent work in the form of fanciful, sometimes bizarre handles) and stamped or incised designs. White slip is applied on wet pots, then patterned with combs or other tools, while still wet. Finally, after glazing, overglaze decorations are applied. John uses mixtures of water with red iron oxide for red, iron and rutile for orange, and Albany slip with 5 percent cobalt carbonate for blue. These colorants are applied with

brushes and small patterned sponges. On some pieces, he may use only one or two of these techniques; on others he achieves a lavish richness by using all of his techniques. He has a wonderful ability to combine these different methods of execution into an integrated whole in ways that preserve the identity of each (stamping, slip, and overglaze). The decoration, like the forming of the piece, is always swift, sure and spontaneous. The plate and teapot shown in this article are good examples of this combination of techniques.

The ten-cup teapot began with a simple thrown form. Then the sides were faceted and the bottom edge grooved. Next, the four-sided spout was slab-built and the richly modeled wire-cut handle added. The overglaze decoration was brushed on, or printed with small patterned sponges dipped in the colorant.

The large plate is elaborately decorated, using several methods to achieve great depth and richness. While the plate was still wet, some lines were incised into the clay, and the inside of the plate coated with white slip. While still wet, the slip was patterned with fingers and incised with wooden tools. The faint checkered pattern was achieved by pressing a small square sponge onto the wet slip and lifting off some of the slip. The plate was then bisque-fired and glazed. Three transparent glazes (white, purple, and blue) were applied by pouring and overlapping. The overglaze decoration is orange, red-orange, and blue—ranging from bold, sponge-printed shapes and broad brush strokes—to tiny calligraphic squiggles and dots. The subtlety, depth, and richness of the interplay between overlapping colors and decorations are impossible to capture fully in the photograph.

It is the form and decoration that give John's pots their excitement and vitality, but functional considerations are never neglected. Lids always fit; pitchers, wine bottles and teapots pour smoothly and cleanly; handles are well-balanced and comfortable to hold. The pots are a joy to use as well as to look at. John feels he has a responsibility to please his customers, but his first responsibility is to himself. "I listen to me first—emotionally, aesthetically, then do what pleases me—market considerations are secondary."

Although he has no desire to teach for extended periods, John is an eloquent and persuasive speaker, and leads two or three workshops per year. These are three to five days in length and are usually held at colleges or universities. In 1971, he taught for three weeks at Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina, which he found to be a very satisfying experience. He takes teaching very seriously and devotes himself completely to it for these brief periods. He believes quite strongly in the work he is doing as a producing potter, and he believes in the importance of the potter as a maker of functional ware that is also aesthetically stimulating. He does not, however, deny the validity of the current pop-funk, non-pot objects, and believes "they have a place in the scene, but not at the expense of more traditional or functional considerations, especially where the education of potters is concerned."

For John, the real challenge is in making functional pottery that is exciting to see and a pleasure to use.