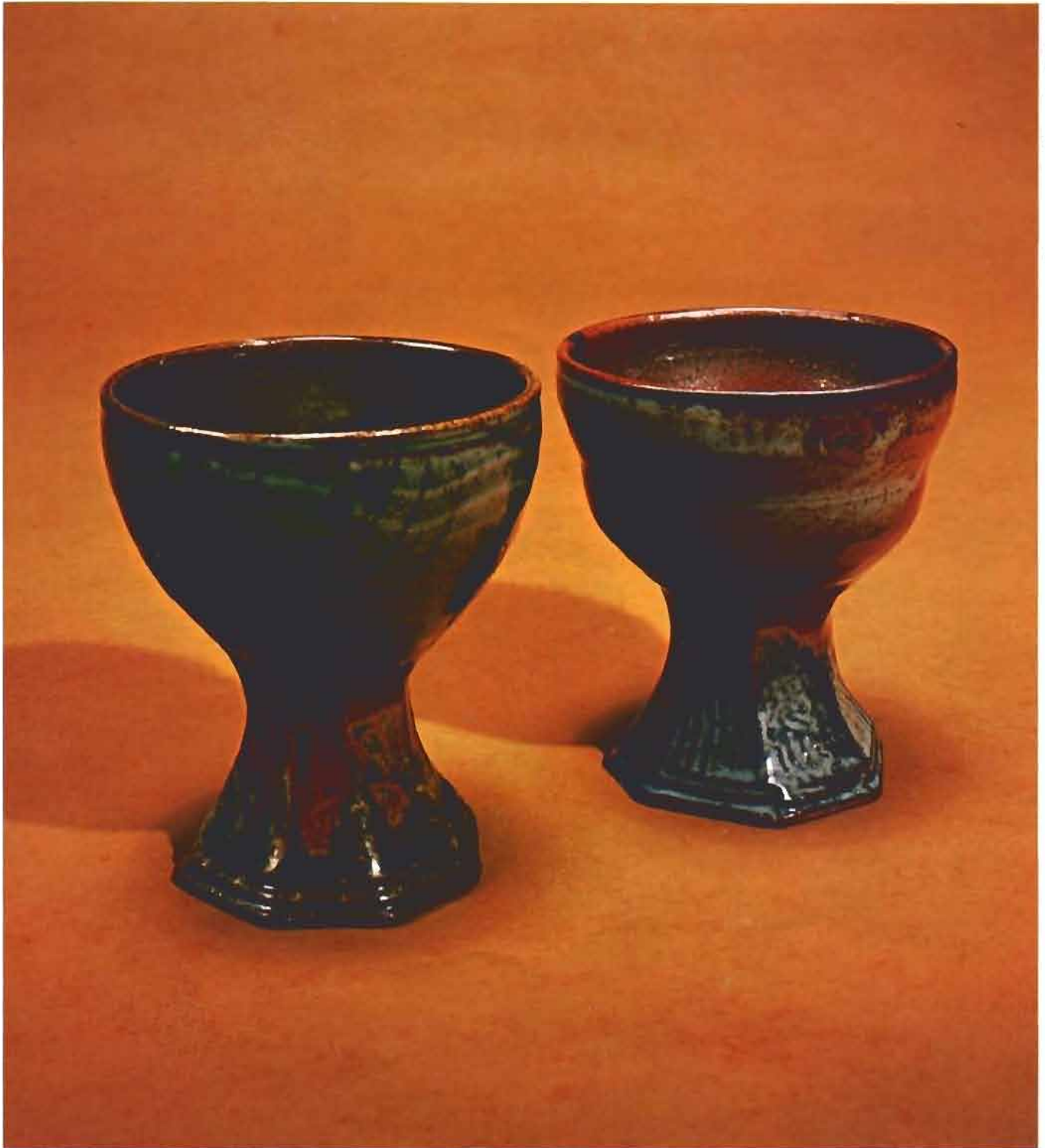


# Studio Dinnerware

A Ceramics Monthly Portfolio

by John Glick





*Portfolio cover* Glazed stoneware plate with slip and oxide washes, approximately 18 inches in diameter, reduction fired to Cone 10, by John Glick, 1978.

*Above* Thrown goblets, each approximately 6 inches in height, with faceted stems, reduction fired stoneware, 1977-78.



*Thrown stoneware soup tureens. The largest is approximately 1 foot in diameter; Cone 10 glaze, slip and oxide decoration with surface drawing, reduction fired, 1976.*



*Glazed stoneware goblet, 8 inches in height with slip and oxide decoration, 1977.*



*Dinner plates from 1968 to 1974 (top to bottom, respectively) exhibit a progression from restrained decoration to beginnings in the application of overlapping glazes, oxide brushwork and patterned sponge stamping.*



MY EARLIEST CONCERN for functionalism surfaced at Wayne State University somewhere around 1959. I studied there under William Pitney, who had been an Alfred student; he had an interest in the thoughtful making of objects and the design of functional aspects that couldn't help but come through. Every detail of a pot had to be considered under his teaching — the spout, the handle, the lid, and so on.

I became aware of caring a great deal about functional pottery and began devoting myself to exploration of that subject. How I would like to see pots made certainly evolved as the years passed, but the tone was set.

In January of 1960 I arrived at Cranbrook as a candidate for a Master's degree in metalsmithing and ceramics and moved along that course for a short time before devoting all my studies to clay. What happened during that first year at Cranbrook was a widening of viewpoint—exposure to diverse views from other parts of the country through the graduate students who were there (perhaps ten at the time). Certainly technical influence was one type of exposure from all the backgrounds represented; but more so there was a flow of ideas from student to student and also from Maija Grotell, who had a vital creative force. Her attitudes toward exploring ideas were a primary goal in her dealings with students. It was never the idea of productivity that one came away with from any discussion or encounter with her, but more a sense of encouragement towards exploring, questioning, pushing the limits of ideas. So I certainly think her gift to me was one of the spirit of inquiry and it's been a vital force for me ever since.

My graduate thesis grew out of the general concern that I have for functionalism, and was a record of my understanding of how interchange between maker and user would come about. It was illustrated with efforts speaking to that issue — a variety of

functional pots that dealt with specific considerations about proportion and weight and lip design and so on that had to do with making the pot work well.

Among these was a dinnerware set — very conservative, sparsely decorated, but the beginning of a major interest in dinnerware. A quote from the thesis: "Out of the countless number of possible solutions to any given problem, it is always necessary to choose just one. The solution must embody a synthesis with form, line, color, volume. The work of tomorrow must be done with different references because tomorrow will bring new information regarding the problem and this too must be considered and utilized. There is no stopping the growth process. It is by its very nature self-perpetuating. A potter must come to terms with it, understand it, live with it and always hope to be equal to it." Possibly a bit heady sounding, but the essentials of that comment turned out to be the model or approach that I've evolved in the studio.

I was drafted right after graduation from Cranbrook in January of 1962 and after training was sent to West Germany, fortunately not too far away from the salt-glaze center of Höhr-Grenzhausen which CERAMICS MONTHLY has dealt with on several occasions, most recently with Charlie Blosser's article (October 1978). Having the opportunity to be around that area for over eighteen months, I spent a great deal of time visiting potteries and keeping myself sane during the army experience. Really, it turned out to be ideal. It was a time of soul-searching, of measuring myself against what the future might hold; watching German studio potters at work, looking at their apprenticeship system, their approach to work, and questioning all the time — really evaluating how I might feel about having others working in my own studio. The apprenticeship question became very serious to me at that point because I had admired certain aspects of the Bernard Leach system and the apprenticeship concept in general, although I had never been an apprentice myself.

I returned to the United States in 1964, immediately found a building to rent in Farmington

(Detroit area), and began potting. My wife Ruby taught in the art department of the local high school for several years while the beginning was made, and I settled down to a year and a half of very serious six-and-a-half, sometimes seven days a week potting, and grounded myself firmly in the thrill of producing full time at last.

In 1965 we sensed that it was desirable and timely to go ahead and commit ourselves to a full-time location of our own. We found a barn and a home on an old farm site in the Farmington community, and founded Plum Tree Pottery. (The name comes about because of the surrounding remnants of a large fruit orchard; the tree that gently leans over and touches the studio is an Italian prune plum tree.)

Work in the studio began as soon as the building was made ready — it took several months with my father's help to convert it from an empty barn into a year-round functioning studio. Almost immediately, as soon as the showroom was set up, I began exhibiting examples from the plates that I had done for the Master's thesis dinnerware set — the first real presentation made to the public visiting my studio with increasing regularity. We had a separate little area set aside just to display the placesettings, with a card discussing prices and some of the things we would be able to do for people.

Our beginning with dinnerware was not particularly spectacular. I had occasional inquiries and began in 1965 to do one set maybe every two or three months as someone would be interested. The work was quite conservative — based on the very understated approach that I had begun at Cranbrook — a carryover from my upbringing when I thought that dinnerware was very simple, undecorated. Gradually the requests on through 1966 began to be more frequent and I began with some regularity to do a dinner set during each work cycle.

From the beginning I preferred to deal with each family on a one-to-one basis and find out their needs and evolve a set specifically for them. A dinner set usually consisted of six or eight placesettings of four parts: a

dinner plate, a salad plate, a salad bowl and perhaps a mug. During the 1965-66 period I managed to keep up quite well with requests. Also, long before this time I realized that selling examples of our dinnerware in the showroom or in craft galleries would only complicate our situation, so we never did that.

About 1968 I began to get seriously behind—if one could put it that way—in keeping up with these requests. I am sure that was due to wider awareness, the result of more exposure as people would visit friends and eat from their dinner sets, and so on.

I cared about keeping the balance in the studio output by not trying to do, for example, two dinner sets per work cycle, and trying to keep a sensation of equality among all the kinds of work that I wanted to be doing. This meant not getting dominated by the fact that there were unfilled requests.

From 1966-68 ideas for shapes and decoration on dinnerware continued to develop; many of the examples that we showed people were replaced with these new ideas, and I began to really steer people in their selections towards the freshest ideas and things that most excited me, rather than showing them samples that I had previously done.

In spite of my effort to inject some experimentation, I think there was a predominant conservatism in the work. Decorating was beginning to become more important, but matching of all parts still was a major emphasis—a carryover from my first inclinations about how a dinner set should look.

The rest of the studio work, especially the more singular plates, bowls and large-scale pieces, was much more adventurous and was perhaps the forefront of my experimentation. For some reason, the conservative attitude that geared itself to the dinnerware prevented the most adventurous decorative attempts from showing up there and began to have an effect on me, a background irritation or dissatisfaction.

One of the first boosts I had towards being more adventurous in dinnerware came from a friend, a weaver, Eileen Auvil. She and I were trading a large rug for a dinner set and she said,

“Just do anything you want; have fun.” It was as if someone had given me permission suddenly to really be natural and I did. I made all the parts different per group—all the dinner plates had their theme, all the salad plates had their own theme and so on. This was at least a start in moving towards a more enjoyable attitude.

So on through 1969, '70 and '71, I began being more and more assertive about having the dinnerware be exciting to me, with the freshest ideas and becoming progressively more decorative.

I continued to do examples of things that I thought should be included in the display selection. And in 1969 or so we discontinued showing the dinnerware in the showroom simply because we felt it was foolish to encourage further response. By that time we were two or three years behind our ability to supply the settings. We simply continued to deal with each family on an individual basis. When their turn came up on the waiting list, they were called several months in advance and asked to begin the selection procedure, to see all the current examples, all the shapes that had evolved. Clients would take four or five samples of various things to their home and look at bright colors or subdued colors, and take the time to eat from the ware, feel how it was in their home. Then they would bring it back and we would work out the details together; I would write—with a copy for the customer—a complete descriptive order form, which was a written version of all our discussions and my working outline.

At that time I would take a one-third deposit and specify a delivery date within one month or two, not being totally able to predict with accuracy. So throughout 1971-75 we continued showing only the newest work to each client as their turn came, and the waiting list continued to build ahead of our capacities until it became a fact of life. It was impossible to acceptably overcome that kind of backlog. We had very few complaints, only from people in a rush or from people who had perhaps been long-term customers and finally after maybe three years of thinking this over very carefully on their own without

my knowledge, would come in on a Saturday afternoon and announce that they were ready to buy a dinner set—the implication being that it was perhaps just a matter of form and in a few weeks or months they would have it. Those were difficult discussions for Ruby or for myself to acquaint people with the reality of by then a four- or five-year waiting list.

By 1973 or so we determined that there was no way to con-



tinue storing all of the accumulated extra parts to place settings that had been done for perhaps fifty or sixty families. We had kept all the reserves and extras that had been made up to that point. But there must have been 700 or 800 pieces in the storage area and in my attic above the showroom by then; it was becoming impossible to deal with. We decided to send a letter notifying owners that the extras were for sale and had to be cleared out. We got a positive response, and perhaps in eighty-five percent of the cases most of the pieces were purchased by the original owners. The rest I simply put in the showroom and sold after a sensible waiting period.

There was less need by the mid-'70s to keep a specific record of each setting. There had been so much more variety and looseness to each grouping that it simply ceased to be important to keep any particular setting as an example. I now maintain a very limited record collection of dinnerware that I'm doing—keeping the unusual, more exciting solutions as reminders and eventually they're marked with a date and so on. I've always kept records. Of course, the original order and all the written material are filed, and bills are kept indefinitely. Sometimes they are very useful for reference: when people ask for additional things, I can get a clue as to clay weights, glazes used, and then often ask them to bring in a piece for a