

Art, Influence and Culture

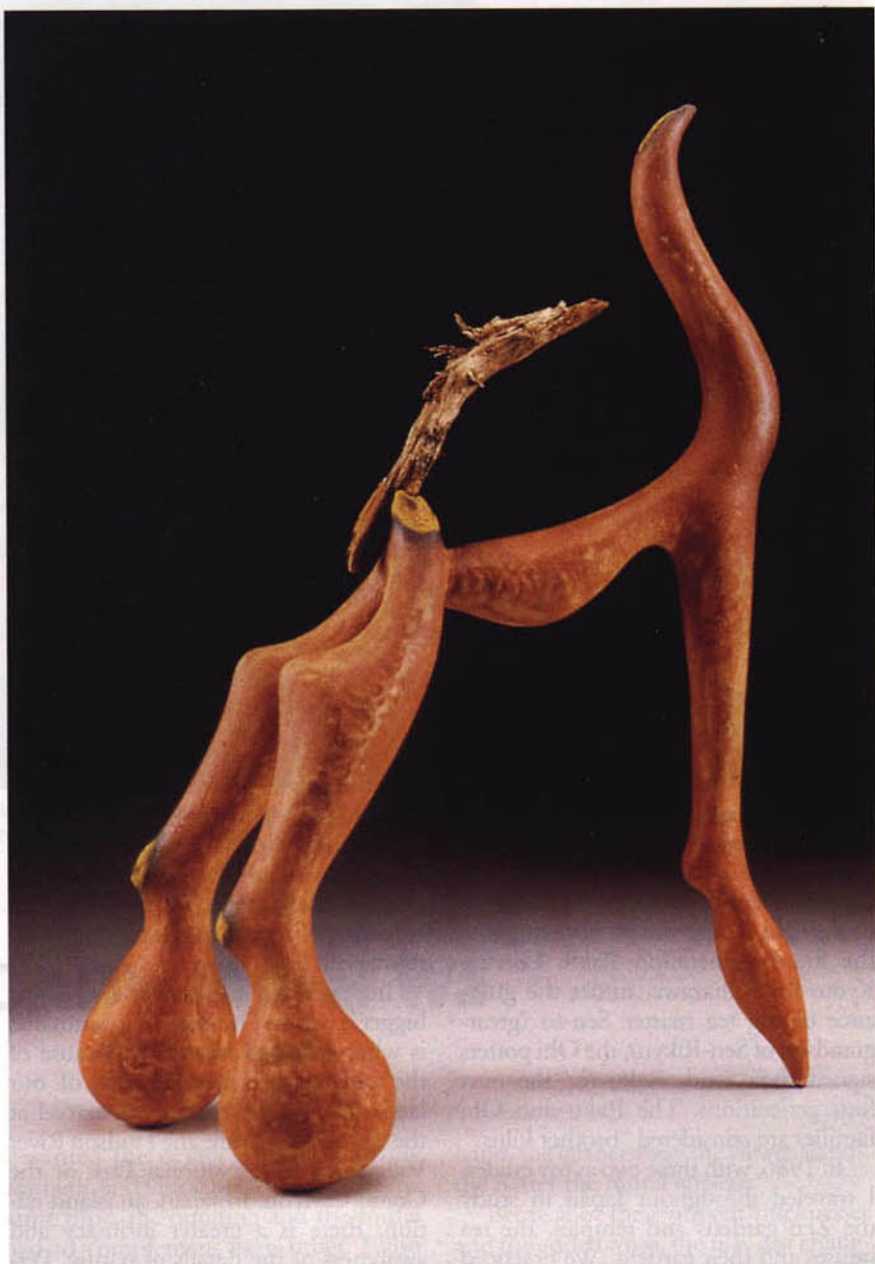
by Marvin Sweet

You can tell a lot about people by the choices they make. For an artist, there are no more important choices than those of the art and artists one chooses to be influenced by, and in particular, the mentor toward whom one gravitates. Sometimes these choices are conscience; sometimes they are intuitive; and sometimes we are imposed upon.

When I suggest being imposed upon, I am thinking about living environment, family and points in time. I grew up in Newark, New Jersey, during the 1950s. At that time, Newark was composed of friendly neighborhoods. These were generally racial or ethnic enclaves of hardworking families, in well-maintained two-, three- or four-family homes. I was raised by parents whose values were forged in the Great Depression, then tempered by World War II. My grandparents, who lived in the same house with us, retold tearful, painful accounts of the Holocaust. My older cousins were part of the Beat Generation and were Freedom Riders.

When I was 10 years old, the innocence ended. I was confronted with and impacted by the assassinations of President Kennedy, then Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy. There were race riots and looting in Newark in 1967. There were student strikes and protests against our government's action in Vietnam. Young people were questioning our national leaders. That was unheard of, unthinkable.

In 1970, I left my urban New Jersey home to attend college in rural New Hampshire. I graduated, thinking that I would become a school teacher. But in 1975, after moving to Boston, I was "found by clay." I spent the next five years as a "self-taught" potter, making functional ware. By 1980, believing my claywork would benefit from formal training, I made the decision to enroll in the Master of Fine Arts program at the Program in Artisanry, Boston University. That is where I had the good fortune to study with Rick Hirsch (now a faculty artist at the Rochester Institute of Technology School for American Craftsmen), and I got to know fellow student Toshio Ohi. These two have



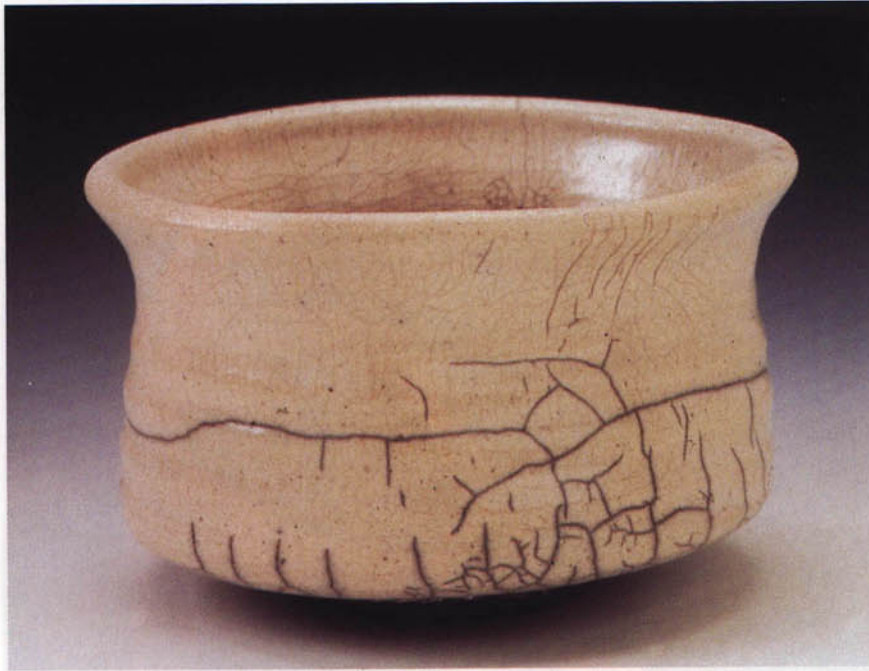
"Guardian of Memory," 26 inches in height, handbuilt, surfaced with low-fire glazes, accented with wood addition.

been the driving forces behind my aesthetic appreciation and artistic attitudes.

Rick Hirsch's knowledge of art, artists and techniques spans all periods and cultures, historic to contemporary, and is reflected in the level of his artistic and professional achievements. He disseminates this knowledge with enthusiasm, insight, humor and aesthetic

sensibility. His work and work ethic have always served me well as a model.

Toshio was also a graduate student, arriving a year after me. I had come to study with Rick because I simply needed all the help I could get. Toshio, on the other hand, was looking to bring fresh ideas and attitudes to traditional Japan. He is the eleventh generation of the



"Tea Bowl," 3 inches in height, wheel thrown, raku fired, by Marvin Sweet, Merrimac, Massachusetts.

Ohi family of Kanazawa to make utensils for the tea ceremony. His family is directly linked to the 400-year-old tradition of the Urasenke Tea Society and the Raku family—the first generation of the Ohi family was an apprentice to the fourth generation Raku. Leaving Kyoto for Kanazawa, under the guidance of the tea master Sen-so (great-grandson of Sen-Rikyu), the Ohi potters signed their work Raku for the next four generations. The Raku and Ohi families are considered "brother kilns."

In 1986, with these two as my guides, I traveled throughout Japan to study the Zen gardens and temples, the tea houses and their gardens. We practiced the tea ceremony in Tokyo and Kyoto, visited the Raku family, and made pots combining American and traditional raku firing techniques. The ideals of simplicity, rusticity and humility are a part of the tea aesthetic. I learned that when I make a teabowl I should attempt to bring those feelings to the simple bowl shape. If I can do that, then perhaps I have a chance to transfer that sensibility to the other forms I make.

After my return, I began to incorporate my formal training and this em-

pirical research into my work. I began to make vessels that reflected the Japanese affinity with nature, along with the use of chance, inherent in the raku firing process. Zen tenets of frugality and economy of means suggest trying to do more with less.

In America, the general belief is that bigger is better. The sweeping panorama is what gets our attention. Because of the unbounded magnificence of our landscape, we have come to marvel at the vastness of nature: the Hudson River Valley, Yosemite National Park or the Grand Canyon. In Japan, an island nation, there is a greater intimacy and awareness of the details of nature. Perhaps that is why the Japanese have such a deep understanding, love and appreciation for ceramic art.

Art creates culture, even as it is a product of its culture. My vessels are informed by the Japanese aesthetic sensibility, but there are references from many diverse sources. Among those that I have felt a particularly strong kinship with are Cycladic art and Hans Coper, African sculpture and Constantin Brancusi, Chinese ceramics (especially neolithic and Yixing), Isamu Noguchi,

Jean Arp and Mark Rothko. Art has its own language, composed of a visual vocabulary. Those who cannot understand or appreciate abstract concepts in art lack the ability of really seeing and reading it. When understood, forms begin to make sense, become clear, become real. One's work becomes a personal dialogue between one's thoughts and the clay. The idea is not to make art from art, but to use the visual vocabulary of the language of art, with an eye toward nature. Brancusi, for example, devoted himself to the distillation of nature into its essences, pure form of primal origins.

In 1993, I moved from Boston to a rural Massachusetts setting. It is much easier to make the transition from urban to rural, I believe, than the other way around. The new environment has affected my work. I had been intertwining the vessel with the human form, but now the reference is to animal. Either way, they are analogous to the vessel form, by way of their compositional components; i.e., foot, body, shoulder, neck, lip.

The visual suggestion of my vessel forms is one of ritual. Religion and art, both with their spiritual and ritualistic aspects, are two areas where humankind have always applied their imagination. The spiritual need seems to be a search for the meaning of existence. It is a way of bringing order to chaos, meaning where there was none. Ritual perpetuates it.

For me, it is a visual investigation of forms, in conjunction with the things around me. That is why I find raku firing so appealing. Raku is about fragility and danger. There is personal danger from the intense heat and flame. And there is danger in the elemental forces of heat, fire and water conspiring to crack the clay. Each time a piece is removed from the kiln, it can be lost. Like life itself, it is here, then gone. But this firing technique is in total harmony with my forms, my ideals, my appreciation of the ephemeral in nature.

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