

## **In Ceramics, “Handmade” Still Means “Hand” Made**

By David Hendley (This article appeared in Ceramics Monthly in 1999)

What exactly does it mean, in 1999, to call a piece of pottery handmade? At first glance, it might seem obvious; it's either handmade or it isn't. Well, in taking a look around craft shows and talking to potters, I've found that the definition of “handmade” mostly depends on who is doing the talking. Of course any potter you talk to at a craft show considers their work handmade; what they consider not handmade is any work that uses more advanced or automated technologies than they use.

This has probably gone on for millennia. The potters in ancient Egypt were probably pretty hacked off when some guy built the first potter's wheel and started turning out pots ten times faster than the handbuilders. They probably considered these pots “machine made” and less valuable than their truly handmade pots. Thousands of years later, the wheel-throwing potters were probably none too happy when some mechanical wizard figured out a way to make a motor turn his wheel, and was able to increase production while doing less work. “Not really handmade,” they probably argued, because a machine was taking over what the potter used to do. Of course, it wasn't long before someone else added an arm and a mold head to the motor-driven wheel, and the jiggering wheel came into being. The throwers argued, I'm sure, that their work was far superior because it took more skill to make each piece without a jigger mold and it was thus “authentically handmade.”

Recently a potter friend came by to visit and showed me one of his mugs. It had been slip-cast in a mold. The mold was made from a wheel-thrown cup with a pulled handle, and, I'll tell you, that mug sure looked hand-thrown with a pulled handle, right down to the finger wipes that attached the lower end of the handle. Since I had this “What is handmade?” question on my mind, I asked him if he considers his mugs handmade. Well, he does, and he started telling me about all the time and effort required to cast the mug, clean up the mold lines, glaze and decorate it, and fire and finish it.

So, are there any absolutes? Is there a line that can't be crossed if a piece is still to be called “handmade?” Does process matter? I say “yes” to all these questions. First, let me make it perfectly clear that “handmade” does not mean “good” and “not handmade” does not mean “bad.” We've all seen examples of horrendous handmade pottery, like those lop-sided boat anchors that somehow made it past the critique in Ceramics 101. Likewise, there are many examples of elegantly designed and beautifully crafted factory-made pottery. In fact, many artistic and talented people working in ceramics are not even concerned with the process of pottery making. To them, the ceramic form is just a “canvas” for painting.

Unlike most art and craft media, the potter's hands are the primary tools used to make pottery. The wood-worker needs a saw and a drill, the stone sculptor needs a hammer and a chisel, and the metalworker needs a torch and a file to shape his work. The potter does his shaping with his hands, and the clay records everything the hands do. This suggests a logical standard for judging whether or not a pot is “handmade;” namely, did a hand shape it? Once any kind of mold or template determines the final shape of the piece, it's not “hand” made, or “handmade” in the literal sense.

There are other criteria that are useful for judging a piece of pottery as handmade or not. One is to question how much skill, or training, was required to make the piece. Workers in ceramics factories can be trained in a few days to pour molds or press pottery. On the other hand, learning to skillfully manipulate plastic clay into desired shapes takes years of practice. Yes, I know that great skill and experience was required to make that mold. Well, the mold itself is handmade. Another useful question is, "What would be involved if the design of the piece were changed slightly, say made a half inch wider?" For mass produced pottery this would require a complete retooling, while for a potter shaping plastic clay by hand it would simply mean that she would start with a little more clay and remember to make the form a little wider. It is this quick and easy evolution of form that allows an accomplished potter to grow and to breathe life into her continuously refined work.

Like so many terms used in business and government, and indicative of the times, the word "handmade," as applied to pottery, has been ever more broadly and inclusively used. This makes the word meaningless at best, and downright misleading at worst. I say it's time buck the trend of the 90's and narrowly define the word. "Handmade" means shaped with the hands, period. Jiggered work is not handmade, pressed work is not handmade, and slip cast work is not handmade, no matter how well designed and well made. The exception would be in the case where pressed or cast pieces are twisted, cut apart, or re-assembled, in which case they are really being used as building components.

So, what about that slip-cast platter that has been so elegantly and meticulously decorated with hours of hand labor? It's certainly not mass produced or the product of a factory assembly line. Well, it can most definitely be labeled as "limited production," "individually hand-finished," or "hand painted," but, sorry, it's still not "handmade."