



[Artists Online](#)

[Current Exhibitions](#)

[Past Exhibitions](#)

[Permanent Collection](#)

[About the Gallery](#)
[Education Programs](#)
[Exhibitions and Collections](#)

[Gift Shop](#)
[Membership](#)
[Newsroom](#)

From Hands to Lips

an exhibition of clay and glass drinking vessels

August 5 to October 3, 2004

Connoisseurs of art and design collect and use handmade vessels with critical enthusiasm for the stem of a glass or the handle of a cup that fits the hand. They eulogise a rim that lips enjoy, or the wit of the maker who plays with a concept. In Japan tea bowls are contemplated, slowly turned in cupped hands to enjoy the potter's skill, then they pass it reverentially around for others to assess, before placing the tea bowl safely back in its signed wooden box.

A drinking vessel is an intimate object that is part of daily life. From breakfast fruit juices to watching the sun go down with a favourite tippie, we wrap our hands around an array of drinking vessels and place our lips to theirs. Potters and glass blowers begin their careers making coffee mugs and wine goblets. It is a standard exercise beloved by teachers because it demands skill and good ergonomic design. Those defeated by the task, become happy consumers, willing to pay high prices for hand made cups and glasses because they know how complex the task can be.

A visit to a craft persons' home will find kitchen cupboards filled with the vessels made by potters and glass blowers. The discussions are not as stately and formal as the Japanese but equally critical or effusively voluble with praise for a newly found gem.

With a comparatively short lead time, entries arrived via email and snail-mail from close to 100 artists in all parts of Canada. We hope that you will find the exhibition educational and entertaining, a chance to experience both functional vessels and creative conceptual works that push the boundaries of function.

-Ann Roberts, 2004

The Cup

Essay by Wendy Walgate

Let us drink. Why wait for the lighting of the lamps? Night is a hair's breadth away. Take down the ornate goblets from the shelf, dear friend, . . . give us wine to forget our pains, Mix two parts water, one part wine, and let us empty the dripping cup - urgently.(1)

- Greek poet, Alcaeus

Where did the concept of the cup begin? The tradition of hammering or casting of copper into objects was known in northeastern Iran before 3000 B.C. Man-made glass objects appeared in ancient Egypt between 1580 and 1358 B.C. Glass blowing came into existence in Egypt around the 1st century B.C.(2) The oldest presently known examples of 'ceramics' are potsherds from Paleolithic Kenya that reveal what may have been the accidental burning of a clay-lined basket. This most likely led to the remarkable discovery of vitrification: the chemical conversion of malleable clay into a durable, immutable shape and form.(3) The use of vitrified clay transformed the preparation and serving of food and allowed clay vessels to become a valuable gift item and export.

Early clay forms may have imitated other vessels we know to have been in use, including gourds, bladders, baskets and human skulls. The potter's wheel appears to have developed in the Near East before 3000 B.C. This invention led to the mass production of uniform, hand-sized functional pieces, including the drinking cup.

Some ancient societies we know largely as a result of the cups they left behind. Greek civilization is a good example of this. We can begin our look at the social history of drinking cups at the time of the Greeks because of the decoration they chose, the prevalence of the medium, and the

durability of the material.

Imagine that you are stretched out on a Greek couch after a sumptuous dinner. Suddenly dregs of wine from a two-handled cup go flying by. Insult? No. Accident? No. Just "kottobos", a game that the ancient Greeks enjoyed after dinner. You held the cup by one handle and threw the dregs at a saucer or small figurine floating in a nearby pool. The successful sinking of the object would impress your loved one.

The idea of the drinking cup for the Greeks went well beyond that of its mere utility as a vessel. The cup was a canvas for daily routines, heroic feats and celebrations of gods such as Dionysos. It was an object of real value, and Greek cup painters were respected as artists and often signed their work. There were many different kinds of cups in the Greek cabinet - covered cups with a small hole to drink from, figurative and animal cups that poured from secret places and cups shaped as male genitals. Given the variety of shapes and subject matter that have been discovered, it is now thought that viewing, holding and drinking from beautifully decorated cups was a valued experience for upper class Greek society.

Drinking vessels have also been fashioned from almost every natural material: stone, wood, bronze, iron, copper, pewter, brass, gold, silver, copper, ivory, semi-precious stones such as jasper, onyx, marble and alabaster as well as bone, skin and horn of animals. Many of these materials were chosen for or imbued with special properties that added to the value or utility of the cup. For example, an amber cup found at Hove, England in 1857, was probably prized by its owner for its alleged ability to detect or neutralize poisons.(4)

Around 1000 A.D. the church believed that only vessels made from rock crystal and translucent enamels on cloisonné gold possessed the purity to store some of its most precious relics.(5) Cloisonné was prized by the medieval Christian church for the production of monstrances, reliquaries and chalices. In private collections, the virtuosity of the handwork on inlaid and enameled objects conveyed the worth and social position of the owner. Many of these hierarchical values survive and apply to materials today.

While it is hard to match the domestic comfort of a simple ceramic cup with its soothing glazed surface and reassuring mass, you might not expect to see an earthenware or china wine glass in a formal table setting. A glass cup or wineglass, with its qualities of light and depth add a sense of luxury to the table setting. Various additions to the surface of glass such as cutwork, etching or gravure enhance its prestigious position and worth. Finally, metal and in particular, enamelware is such a valuable and enduring material that is more likely to be passed down from generation to generation as a family heirloom. The imbued significance of such a historical metal cup suggests use in a ritual or ceremonial context, even today.

Drinking vessels have taken almost every conceivable form: Greek rhytons represented drinking horns and could not be put down if full, medieval cups engaged the viewer's attention with hidden frogs, figurative Toby jugs conveyed the spirit of the middle class, Meissen and Sèvres porcelain cups and saucers graced the tables of the nobility, and post-industrial revolution commemorative and promotional vessels filled the bars and bric-a-brac shelves of the masses. In many cases the forms of these vessels became detached, sometimes completely, from their supposed function. Meret Oppenheim's fur-covered cup, saucer and spoon - originally called simply Tasse - was first exhibited in 1936. She said that what amused her was the disparity between the porcelain and the fur.(6) What she did not say, perhaps because it was so wonderfully obvious, was that her cup, saucer and spoon were completely impractical. Their forms, chosen as archetypal symbols of utility, were expressed in a material that contradicted any idea of functionality, making an unforgettable statement.

The modern drinking cup is purely functional and intimate in size, so that the hand forms around the handle, stem or the cup itself. Because the cup conveys nourishment or pleasure to our lips, it is easily associated with an emotional response to the cup itself. The cup is the only piece of china that we actually lift to our lips in Western society. Our table manners dictate that plates and bowls stay on the table. We are taught that it is 'bad manners' to raise a cup with a teaspoon in it. Similarly among Jains and devout Hindus, pressing one's lips to the edge of a cup is considered vulgar and unclean. The cup is held up and the contents are poured into the mouth.(7)

Commerce has also shaped and formed drinking vessels. Ceramic cups with saucers were first imported to Europe from China and mass marketed to the upper classes during the 18th century. Elegant porcelain teacups with saucers, bordering on the unusable as they could be lifted from saucer to lip with two fingers only (the 'pinkie' delicately extended), expressed prestige and refinement. European mass production of china vessels and tableware began with Meissen in Germany and Sèvres in France in the 1700's, about the same time as French law forced the populace to melt their gold and silver tableware for coinage. Affordable ceramic pieces often mimicked the style of unattainable gold and silver pieces. The rush to replace precious metal cups and plates with local faience encouraged a wave of new potteries, and so many kiln firings that it caused a fuel shortage.(8)

Two centuries later, it is not precious metals but ceramics themselves that are kept 'for good'. While an eighteenth-century picnic would have been on china instead of silver or gold, a twentieth-century picnic would have been on aluminum or plastic instead of china. Any child of the 1950's will remember meals served on Melmac, that ubiquitous, light as air, indestructible, pastel plastic.

We all have our favourite mug, teacup, or wine glass. We can have them etched to order, or glazed or enameled by ourselves and then fired by someone else, or even have a photo decal of a favourite person, place or pet glazed into the surface. This invests the commonplace with personality and special significance. It signals all would-be users that this vessel is yours and yours alone.

In contrast to personalized, useful cups, denial of function is now a significant part of contemporary craft practice. Form, colour and narrative content often replace utility and challenge the viewer to detach form from function. Contemporary cups may embody personal artistic vision, political and social commentary or observations on the tenuous position of the material arts within the art world. Using the materials of clay, glass and enamel, artists today express a wide spectrum of private and global statements and purposely put aside the practical considerations of holding and sipping from a cup. Today's craftsperson is capable of blending current issues with the immense history of the material itself, thereby creating contemporary craftworks that resonate within many different levels of meaning. Accordingly, this exhibition celebrates the handmade cup, in all its exhilarating forms and surfaces, in all its functional and symbolic embodiments.

About the Author:

Wendy Walgate is a practicing ceramic artist with a studio in the Distillery District in Toronto. She recently received a M.A. in History of Art at the University of Toronto, and holds a B.F.A. from University of Manitoba and a M.F.A. from Cranbrook Academy of Art.

Notes:

1. Françoise Lissarrague. *The Aesthetics of the Greek Banquet*. (Princeton University Press, 1990) 87.

2. "Glass" and "Metal", Compton's Encyclopedia. (University of Chicago, 1990) 161, 309.
3. **Hands to Lips Artist Information and Pictures**
4. David Barnett & J.W. Hoopes. The Emergence of Pottery. (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).
- Click on the name of an artist to download his/her Biography/Curriculum Vitae (pdf file).
5. Marie Madeleine Gauthier. Highways of the Faith. (Wellfleet Press, New Jersey, 1983) 115.
6. Meret Oppenheim. Object (Le Dejeuner en fourrure) 1936. (Musée de Paris, 1984) 16.
7. Margaret Visser. The Rituals of Dinner. (Grove Weidenfeld, 1991) 3
8. Harold Osborne, ed. The Oxford Companion to the Decorative Arts (Oxford U.P.) 1975) 12.



[Mindy Andrews](#)



[Linda Arbuckle](#)



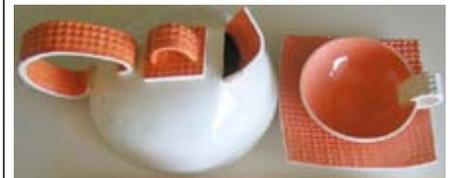
[Anne Armstrong](#)



[Eliza Au](#)



[Margaret Bailly](#)



[Joseph Bandi](#)



[Carolynn Bloomer](#)



[Diane Brouillette](#)

Mimi Cabri



[Keith Campbell](#)



[Susan Card](#)



[John Chalke](#)

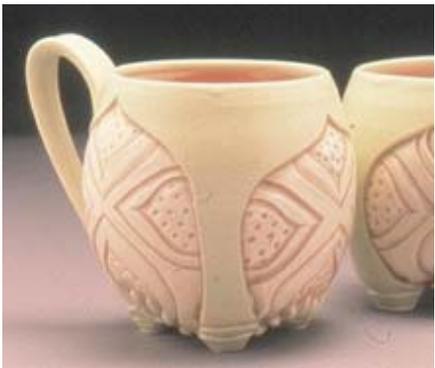


[Rachelle Chinery](#)

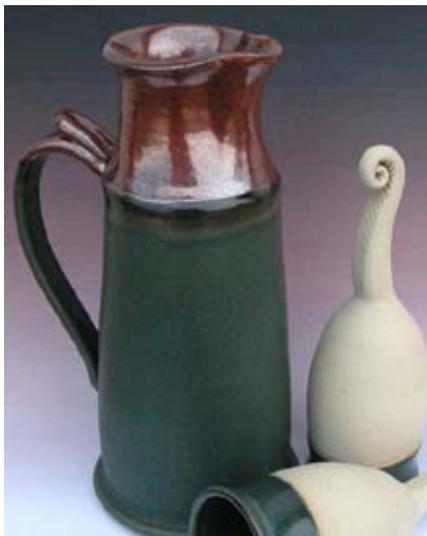
[Michael Collins](#)



[Paula Cooley](#)



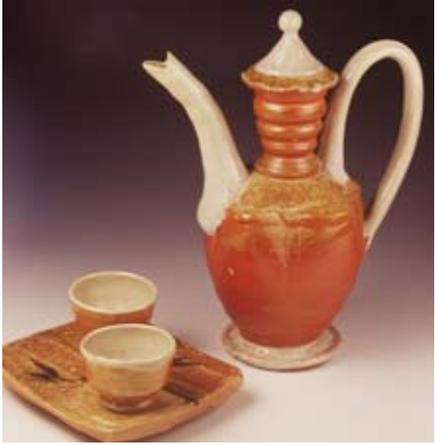
[Kimberly Davy](#)



[Linda Doherty](#)



[Robin DuPont](#)



[John Elder](#)



Jim Etzkorn



[Cathy Farwell](#)



[Jeanne Ferraro](#)



[Robert Geyer](#)



[Peta Hall](#)



[Carole Hanson](#)



[Kim Harcourt](#)

[Stephen Hawes](#)



[Sin-ying Ho](#)



[Michael Hofmann](#)



[Penelope Kokkinos](#)



[Kasumi Lampitoc](#)



[Isabel Landry](#)



Mary Lazier



[Keith Allen Lehman](#)



[Sarah Link](#)



[Glenys Marshall-Inman](#)



[Sally McCubbin](#)



[Barbara Murphy](#)



[Susie Osler](#)



[Kasia Piech](#)

[Carolynne Pynn-Trudeau](#)



[Sarah Raymond](#)



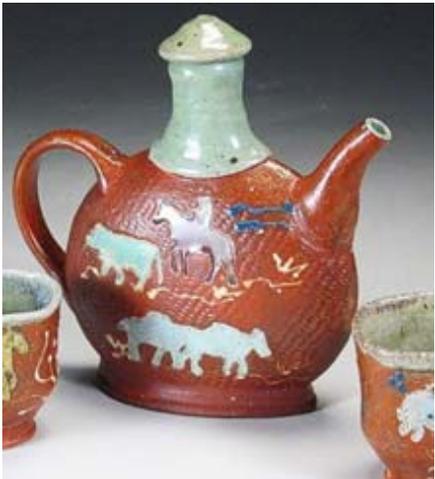
[Bill Reddick](#)



[Linda Rosen](#)



[Melissa Schooley](#)



[Carol & Richard Selfridge](#)



[Vanda Stanley](#)



[Chandler Swain](#)



[Cathy Terepocki](#)



Thorn Glass



[Barbara Tipton](#)



[Anne-Marie Tougas](#)



[Catherine Vamvakas Lay](#)



Jane Van Sickle



[Wendy Walgate](#)



[Eric Wong](#)



[Miguel Deras Zapata](#)



[Muriel Zimmer](#)

[Photographs of the installations](#)

Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery
25 Caroline St. N., Waterloo, ON N2L 2Y5 ☎ Phone: (519) 746-1882 ☎ Fax: (519) 746-6396
E-mail the Gallery ☎ Site map