

Joe Bruhin:

Gifts from the Temple

by Charles A. Blim Jr.



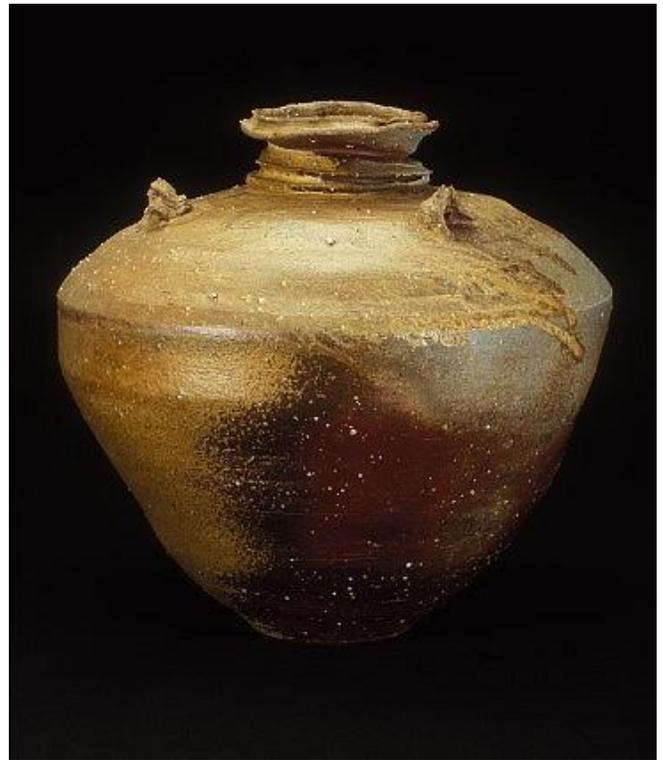
In Stone County, Arkansas, there is a potter working very hard to create the best pots of his life. He has spent many years to get to this point, where he has earned some economic freedom to concentrate on his work. Even with some of these glimpses of freedom, life has not always been a “bed of roses.” Nothing is sure in this life and he knows this fact, but there is something deep inside driving him to discover the next offering from his soul. While in his studio, there is a spiritual presence, which fills the air and his desire to honor those before him, but with his own edge. Just in an hour telephone interview, Joe Bruhin’s complexity as an American Studio Potter was being witnessed by this Vasefinder and here is our exchange.



Joe Bruhin was born and reared in Saint Louis, Missouri. He graduated from Parkway West High School. Before joining the military, his only real connection to art was his love of music. His high school years were marked by a desire to be an athlete. After high school, he married and together he and his wife wanted to travel around the world, especially to India. To be able to afford this dream of travel, Joe joined the military. He was stationed in Germany, where he worked as a chaplain's assistant, which he believed was the "least military" position he could find. After his service, he and his wife purchased a Volkswagen van, which they used to travel through Europe, Morocco, Africa, Afghanistan and India to just mention a few places. Joe enjoyed the architecture and the terraced landscape that decorated the hillsides of several countries he visited; some of this is evidenced in his pots today. Arriving in the United States about a year later after his travels, he enrolled at Meramec Community College in Saint Louis, where he studied several subjects, such as pottery, drawing and English with the support of his GI Bill. His interest in pottery making was piqued through a friend's ownership of a potter's wheel and his desire to want to learn more about the medium. After a couple years of study at Meramec, he attended Maryville College, where he continued to work on his pots before ultimately moving to Idaho to study at the Sun Valley Center of the Arts & Humanities. While at Sun Valley, he assisted with the rebuilding of a wood fired kiln. The construction of this kiln was taken from a David Shaner design. Up to this point in his life, he considered some of his real mentors in clay to be David Shaner, Shoji Hamada and Warren Mackenzie, but of course, this was from a far. After one year in Sun Valley, he made contact with an important Canadian artist he greatly admired, Wayne Ngan and approached him with the idea of becoming his apprentice, which unfortunately never culminated.



A couple years in Sun Valley were followed by a move back to Saint Louis, where Joe started his search for an ideal property to build his studio and home. He worked in a factory for approximately 5 years, as he sought a location. At first, he spent sometime researching Oregon, but the cost was just prohibitive. This was followed by further research of a good location in Arkansas. Finally after a few years, he found a property in Fox, Arkansas, which included forty acres and a natural spring. He spent one year clearing the property before moving to the location in 1986. At first, the Bruhin family lived in a “teepee” structure, which had a maximum diameter of 18 feet. Years of economic struggle came from this move, where the building of their home and studio was followed by working on tree farms in the Southeastern part of the United States to supplement their income, when funds ran low. Always working toward the goal of the completion of his home/studio and building of his original wood fired kilns, Joe was finally able after many years to start forging an income to pay and maintain his life’s work from the sale of his pottery. In 1993, he was honored with an Arkansas Arts Council Award, which included \$5,000 to go toward further construction and updating of his pottery studio. This updating of the pottery continues today with the building of an anagama kiln in the last couple years, which was inspired by another mentor Shiho Kanzaki.



Over the years, Joe has produced strictly functional pottery made of porcelain and stoneware. With just a few firings a year, his annual production sometimes numbers only a couple hundred pots. His “offerings” to the kiln or what he likes to term the “temple” go through a difficult decision process of seeking the best work with the limited space in the chamber. The color and richness he achieves through the wood firing process combined with the textured surfaces and desired asymmetry are the essence of what makes his pots outstanding. It is these “Gifts from the Temple” which I am certain will provide the collector with an intimate connection to this potter and the powerful work he strives to create.

