

# Contemporary Clay in India-Rise of the Non-Functional

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## Brief Overview of Traditional Pottery in India

India has a rich and ancient tradition of unglazed terracotta pottery, and over a million working potters. However there is no history of functional glazed ceramics in the country. Although architectural monuments of the Mughal period were clad with Persian-blue glazed earthenware tiles, the techniques of glazing did not take roots in the country. On the one hand, the traditional Indian village potter focuses on creating functional water and grain storage jars; on the other, he follows a tradition of votive sculpture created primarily for purposes of consecration.

It is important to try to understand the reasons why the village potter in India has continued to work in unglazed terracotta. Potter communities are mostly economically backward. They work with natural clays to which they have free access, and these are mostly low temperature terracotta clays. They fire with fuel that they collect themselves—wood from the forest floor along with cow dung patties. It is not easy to reach high temperatures with these materials. Further, most kilns used are very basic variations on a bonfire-style firing where losses can be high, and potters have neither access to modern kiln building technology nor the financial means to upgrade.

It is also pertinent to note that in India traditionally people have been using metal utensils to cook in and eat from. Glazed ceramic ware has never been used to eat from. Therefore traditional pottery has been limited to storage vessels, toys and idols dedicated to the various Gods and village deities.

## Beginning of Studio Pottery in India

The beginnings of Studio pottery in India can be traced to the twentieth century, specifically the 1920s. Sardar Gurcharan Singh, the founder of the Delhi Blue Pottery Trust, went to Japan to study industrial ceramics but happened to meet up with Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada, among others. He came back to India to start possibly the first individual pottery studio in the country, making glazed functional pottery as well as architectural tiles and lattice blocks. Another pioneer potter, Deviprasad, helped to set up a pottery studio at the prestigious art school at Santiniketan in West Bengal, and later established a studio in Delhi where he trained several students in the techniques of wheel throwing and high temperature glazing. In the 1960s government funded Garhi studios was set up as an artist centre.

However, integral to this story, a big boost to high temperature stoneware ceramics in the country came in the early seventies with the establishment of the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, South India, by Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith. In addition to teaching scores of individuals, including several of the artists featured in this paper, they have set the benchmark for technical innovation and aesthetic endeavor both with the functional work produced at the pottery, hand painted by Deborah, and lately with Ray Meeker's massive environmental stoneware sculptures.

## Evolution of Studio Pottery

Before commenting on the current scenario, it is important to mention a few more individuals who gave a voice to the early years of the Indian studio-pottery movement. While both Gurcharan Singh and Deviprasad had been inspired and influenced by the Leach - Hamada school of aesthetics, other artists brought diverse influences to enrich the widening spectrum of Indian ceramics. The late Nirmala Patwardhan had trained in Germany and was the first Indian to publish a book

on glaze recipes with Indian materials. Ira Chaudhuri, influenced by tribal decorative motifs, frequently held exhibitions of her distinctive work: robust forms with a modernist calligraphic style of decoration. Jyotsna Bhatt was an influential teacher and maker at the M S University in Baroda. Mansimran Singh, son of Gurcharan Singh, set up the Andretta Pottery and Craft Society in Himachal Pradesh in the 1980s. B R Pandit, born in a traditional potters' family, started his studio in Maharashtra, which is today run successfully by him along with his two sons, exploring both the functional and the sculptural. In the south, two of the early apprentices at the Golden Bridge Pottery, Michel Hutin and Angad Vohra, set up their own studios in Auroville, from where they have been working for close to thirty years.

While most of the above potters were consumed by a passion for the functional object, it is important to mention the name of Gauri Khosla, who worked at the Garhi studios and in her brief career explored the sculptural with a great degree of sophistication. Leena Batra, of Russian descent but settled in Delhi, also made a mark with her continual explorations of the non-functional.

## **Rise of the Non- Functional**

In the eighties and nineties most artists working with clay were grappling with sorting out technical issues involving clay bodies, glazes and kiln and firing methods. With at least a part of their energy being consumed by these issues, individual explorations in clay were mostly limited to the wheel-thrown vessel. Inspired by the writings of Bernard Leach, they were fired by a passion for the finely crafted functional object.

In the past two decades however, a new generation of individuals has started working with clay. Although most of them have learnt by making pots on the potters wheel, they often come from diverse backgrounds, such as architecture or design, and their work is no longer limited by the functional aspect of ceramics. Coming primarily from urban areas, they neither have a link to the village-potter tradition, nor do they see themselves as inheritors of the Leach tradition. Perhaps this non identification with any particular philosophy of making has given them the freedom to search for their own individual voices in clay. Moreover with the opening up of the Indian economy as well as new channels of communication like the internet, it has become much easier to tackle the technical aspects of working with this demanding material.

Before going on to the work of some individual voices in the field of contemporary Indian clay, it is important to recap and elucidate the possible factors for the rise of the non-functional in Indian ceramics, despite the fact that most current practitioners have had their roots in functional work.

## **Possible reasons for the rise of the Non-Functional Object:**

1. Studio pottery in India is primarily an urban phenomenon. The contemporary potter has no links to the traditional village potter, and, since he is not defined by nor tied down by any rules or traditions, he gravitates towards individual self-expression. Since there is no reverence for the functional object, as there is in other south-east Asian countries, once an individual becomes comfortable with the basics of wheel throwing, he quickly gravitates towards more playful interpretations of forms.
2. In India there has been no tradition of glazed functional ceramics for use at the table. This makes it very difficult to find a discerning market for functional hand made ceramics. Most buyers compare hand made work to mass produced factory-made ceramics and are not willing to pay a premium for such work.
3. The "ceramics for use" model often works best economically on a scale where several people are involved in the production of the work. Several throwers may be working to produce the designs of a certain artist. This model work in India at the Golden Bridge Pottery, and several other

potteries around Golden Bridge, most of them located in the township of Auroville. However, for the individual urban artist studio space is expensive and unavailable, and functional pottery makes little economic sense.

4. Due to the relatively small number of the studio potters and the large distances overland in the country, there are no well-defined networks connecting potters working in various parts of the country. Ceramics is still a poor cousin of the Fine Arts, and there has been little development of a separate infrastructure for ceramics in terms of galleries and museums that are dedicated towards showcasing ceramic artists. Only two or three academic institutions in the entire country offer a degree course in ceramics, and in fact these courses are out of sync with current international trends in clay. In order to survive, the "Studio Potter" finds it more plausible to morph into a "Ceramic Artist" to increase his chances of exhibiting with fine art galleries.
5. Better connectivity, thanks to the internet and increased opportunities to travel abroad have led contemporary artists to widen their perspectives towards their art. While earlier exposure to international work was limited to viewing the odd issue of Ceramics Monthly, artists are now connected through the web and aware of contemporary trends in the medium the world over. Further there are online forums to sort out technical issues and assimilate technical advances, and it is easier for current artists to extend the limits of the materials with which they work. During the last decade or so the Golden Bridge Pottery has organized several workshops with well known international artists such as Betty Woodman, Sandy Brown, Walter Keeler, Mike Dodd, as well as a masterful workshop on glaze-making by the late Susan Peterson, well-known author of several books including "The Art and Craft of Clay". Several young artists have benefited immensely with these interactions, and this has quickened the pace of explorations in their personal work. There has also been a rise in the scholarships offered to go and study abroad for short periods of time, and opportunities for residency programs and participation in international symposiums is on the rise. The Delhi Blue Pottery Trust has been organizing large international exhibitions every two years, and these events have contributed to forging new connections between the Indian ceramists and those in other parts of the world. All this exposure has helped Indian artists to break out of old mindsets and adopt a more experimental approach in their work.
6. Finally it is important to note that the Indian Art Market has grown exponentially in the past 10 years. There is more awareness in society about contemporary art, and several young fine artists who have made their mark on a global scale are treated as celebrities by the Indian media. New art galleries have mushroomed all over the country, leading to a new group of art collectors. While ceramic art continues to be the poor cousin of the fine arts such as painting, sculpture, new media, the effects of this financial boom have percolated down to artists working with clay. Non-functional and sculptural work opens doors to new galleries and increases exhibiting options and viewer-ship for the work. With this change it is easier for the contemporary ceramists to earn a living from their work. Consequently more young people are drawn towards working with clay, bringing a new energy to the ceramic scene.

## **Pioneers and Current Practitioners of the Sculptural**

At present there are several ceramic artists with individual voices and concerns exhibiting frequently in India. While some of them continue non-functional explorations of essentially functional forms, there are others who have whole-heartedly embraced the sculptural, often through large scale environment artwork as well as gallery based installations. Several of these artists are inspired by aspects of Indian cosmology, questioning and updating ancient myths through points of view relevant to a fast changing urban landscape. This re-examination of the old, together with the forging of a new vocabulary drawing from Indian sources, yet expressing concepts through a contemporary mindset conversant with current world views gives great relevance to the work being

done by several Indian ceramists working at present. We now look at a personal selection of eight artists who have contributed to the growth of the sculptural in contemporary Indian ceramics.

## P R Daroz

For over three decades now Daroz has drawn on his lineage from a family of goldsmiths and his early experience in industrial pottery production methods to make work which is meticulously crafted and very often done at a challenging architectural scale. Daroz has been a pioneer in erasing the contentious lines between the craft of the studio potter and the art of the sculptor. While his helmet-headed large urns successfully update the tradition of vessels, his large installations of gateways and numerable ceramic wall murals engage with both the natural and the built landscape.



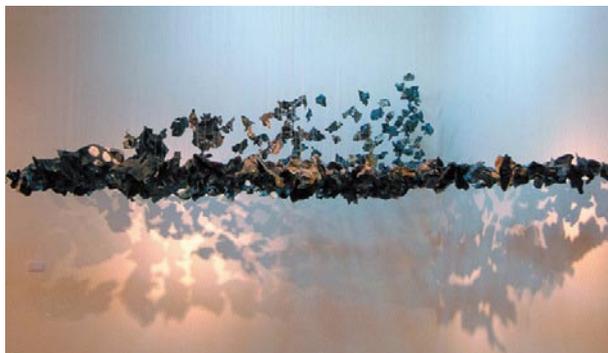
## Ray Meeker

In 1971 Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith set up the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, South India. With a background in architecture, Ray spent a good part of the eighties and nineties experimenting with and evolving the Fired House technology, where temporary large scale mud structures were built and effectively fired as kilns, then finished as potential low cost housing. It was not until 1996 that he had his first solo show of functional stoneware ceramics. In 2000 he was still making “pieces I’d like to have in my own house, to enliven domestic space”. His 2004 show at the Habitat Centre in New Delhi however marked a turning point in his career as he showcased large-scale ceramic sculpture and installations. The monumental “Kyoto Protocol” installation at that show married an apocalyptic post-industrial wasteland vision with the stark beauty of a dry rock zen garden. Since then he has not only continued to break new ground with his own large-scale sculptural work, but has also assumed the role of a mentor to several former students and young ceramic artists.



## Kristine Michael

With a background in design and various formative apprenticeships and residencies, Kristine brings a well informed outlook to her work as a ceramist. Her early work was marked by its playful altering of wheel-thrown forms to create objects drawn from nature—seeds, pods, stones, shells. In addition to her flair with the material, it was the conceptual rigueur with which she approached her exhibitions that set her work apart. In an essay in 1995 she had said “I return repeatedly to the tap root - the wheel-thrown vessel”. However by 2007, the piece put up by her entitled “Rites of Passage” at the World Ceramic Biennale Korea, was firmly in the realm of installation ar



## Trupti Patel

In contrast with several other artists featured here, Trupti had already acquired a degree in sculpture from the prestigious Baroda School of Art before she learnt how to work on the potters wheel. Later easy access to technology at the Royal College of Art in London had a liberating effect on her work, and she went on to execute several large scale commissions during her years in Essex. Her 5-sided columns with relief work poetically depicted the human condition “creating a world of feelings with a niche for every thought”. Now working from India, she continues to forge new paths in contemporary Indian art.



## Amrita Dhawan

Known for her beautifully crafted functional stoneware, Amrita made a complete departure with her 2004 Mumbai show of large organic rock forms, ritualistic stones and geological fragments. Her seminal work with textured and stretched clay slabs, subtly covered with clay slips and worked over by natural ash in wood firings was inspirational to several other artists, who have since experimented with similar techniques.



## Madhvi Subrahmanian

The ideas, materials and processes of Madhvi’s work have evolved in tandem with her mobility across nations, from India to the United States, to India and now Singapore. Wood-fired stoneware pots of the eighties changed to hand-built, smoke-fired work in the nineties, to a recent poetic installation in porcelain of “floating belly pods”. Her work evocatively explores concepts of migration and hybridization through forms such as seed pods and anthills. Links with the functional forms of her past seem to have been severed



in new works like “Cornucopia”.**Nidhi  
Jalan**

Working alternately from Calcutta and New York, Nidhi’s work explores notions of transformation and transmogrification through installations which create a magical world where the subjective and objective are indistinguishable. In the dream-like tableaux of recent works as “Abol Tabol”, childhood memories and myths are re-examined in a contemporary context. Unfettered by the functional aspects of clay, Nidhi seamlessly blends materials and media in her studio practice.



## Vineet Kacker

For several years now Vineet has been making work that playfully re-orders and re-contextualizes iconography and architecture that references the spiritual, creating works that are “exploratory and contemplative - visual koans marking the inner landscape”. He is unafraid to draw from an Indian vocabulary of forms, colors, and textures, often juxtaposing the reverential with elements of popular urban street kitsch. While earlier work sat at the edge of function, his current work uses sculptural form as a signifier of conceptual ideas.



## Concluding Thoughts

In the absence of a traditional reverence for the hand-made functional object, as exists in other Asian cultures of Japan, China and Korea, as well as the lack of a separate infrastructure of ceramic centers, galleries and guilds to support studio potters, the contemporary Indian ceramist has embraced the non-functional and the sculptural to express himself with this primordial material. Undeterred by the fact that understanding for this medium within the country is limited, government support lacking, and critical discourse virtually non-existent, a growing number of young ceramicists are taking up working with this material, unafraid to express themselves and interrogate earlier preconceptions about working with clay. At the same time, the current set of established ceramic artists have found support from a growing group of discerning private art collectors to facilitate further explorations of their vision. In an ever shrinking world several are now looking at avenues abroad, such as working and exhibiting in other countries. Whereas until a few years ago ceramists from our country were for the most part an isolated lot, there are several exponents today who are forging connections with the international clay community, and spreading awareness about the language of contemporary clay work from India.

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