

## Stephen Earp



A lot of artists struggle to get their work noticed and to find a time and place where their creative vision can edge into the spotlight. Shelburne potter and coop member Steve Earp has the opposite problem — his work has garnered enough attention that he is (almost) getting fatigued in the spotlights. But never-ceasing household bills provide a handy and helpful correction for this feeling, and a deep love of his craft keeps him going.

Steve offers interpretive, historically inspired pottery made with brick red clay and glazes that are based on various lead based ones used in the past. Lead based glazes are “way too toxic” for Steve to work with, but they were used for many centuries and can achieve a superlative color range and gloss that is hard to match using other materials.

When he worked in the pottery at Old Sturbridge Village, a common question from visitors about lead glazing was, “Didn’t they know about the health hazards back then?” Steve tries to put this in historical perspective: “Each generation makes it’s own risk assessment—look at nuclear waste, for instance. We know the hazards. We proceed anyway. They are different issues, but, it’s the same general template.”

The redware that Steve produces is inspired by the forms of the early 1700s to 1800s. At Old Sturbridge Village, the focus was village life in the year 1838, but Steve saw this as a window into a



whole range of possibilities from which to work.

The red clay he works with is dipped into glaze, and sometimes left plain; other times random elements are introduced that leave splotches of color. Other colors of clay were sometimes found in small quantities in New England, and were commonly used to make designs on the clay, either by applying a slip in thin raised lines like icing on a cake, or by dipping and carving designs in the colored slip, a method called *scraffito*.

Three years ago, Steve attended a three day symposium at Old Deerfield on Delftware. A craze for Delftware began in Europe in the 1600s as trade increased with the Orient and consumers became enamored with porcelain wares. Such clay was not available to Europeans; the desire to imitate porcelain led to the discovery of a new white glaze made from tin and lead. Blue designs were then applied on top of the white, something that was not possible to do on a darker base.

Initially, only the wealthy could afford this new Delftware. "At first, this was a cheap local alternative to expensive Chinese imports," explains Steve. "And now, it's an expensive local alternative to cheap Chinese imports!" he laughs.



It's taken him a couple of years working with the white glaze and blue motifs to feel really comfortable with it. He learns new techniques by copying historical designs, and then figuring out what his own personal interpretation within a particular style will be. "I play with the vocabulary, the symmetry, the techniques. A lot of people don't understand that I work within a style, making choices, just as any artist does." He does do replica work but on a special order basis for people who request particular items.

"I am an accidental potter," he likes to say of how he got behind the wheel in the first place. "I was a screen printer, a T-shirt designer selling at Grateful Dead concerts" after high school in Colorado. He decided to upgrade his skills with a few college courses in photo silk screen, so he enrolled at the

University of Iowa. The silkscreen courses he had signed up for were cancelled, and he ended up staying on to receive a BFA in ceramics in 1986, and then apprenticing with a ceramicist who had studied in Japan.

He joined a “peace corps for pottery” and spent time in Nicaragua as their first paid technician. It was there that he met his wife Cindy. Between studying African pottery in college, learning about Japanese techniques and then time in Central America, by the time he got to New England he felt he wanted to learn about the traditions of “my own backyard.” To that end, he ended up at Old Sturbridge Village for seven years, most of the time in a small research and production crew away



from the public, making wares for sale at the gift shop there.

The couple relocated to Shelburne Falls to raise their family, and Steve finally became an independent potter with an initial order from Old Deerfield — before he even owned his own studio equipment. He went there with photos of his work done at the Village and they immediately placed an order with him., becoming “my first and most loyal customers.”

About 2006 or so, Christine Conniff and Jane Chang walked up the hill from town to his Masonic Street studio to invite him to join the coop. Although he hasn’t been a working member, Steve says sales are very consistent and he likes the coop model of management very much. “As long as I continually circulate my inventory, it sells! That’s key to maintaining sales. You have to pay attention to your display.”

In addition to working in the studio, Steve has an online presence in his blog, *This Day in Pottery History*, and he is consistently featured in publications such as *Early American Life*.

As for advice for others who would like to achieve similar level of success in their craft, Steve has this to say: “I’ve made tons of mistakes along the way...but, if you do something, anything, every day to advance the cause, you’ll get there.”