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Perhaps the major problem facing traditional potters in our society in the latter part of the 20th century is relevance. What kind of rationale, for example, can traditional potters put forward for continuing to make utilitarian objects in our highly technological and affluent society where inexpensive mass-produced alternatives abound.

In spite of the fact that the traditional role of pottery has been replaced in our contemporary society by these mass-produced alternatives, handmade pottery has remained enormously popular. We should not, however, confuse this popularity with significance or importance. Many contemporary potters seem to have taken for granted pottery's extraordinary ability to appeal to and affect people on a variety of different levels. In doing so they have trivialized pottery by treating it as just another commodity, ruled by the whims of fashion and the constantly shifting taste of popular culture. While there will always be work of this sort, we should not come to expect that it is the limit of this genre's ability to communicate. Pottery is capable of far more than that kind of superficial visual titillation. It has expressed for thousands of years numerous cultures' most profound feelings, ideas and concerns.

In trying to understand what separates truly significant pottery, full of meaning and nuance, from so much of the commercial craft that one sees today, one is forced to confront the shifting role of pottery and to examine what exactly it is that continues to make pottery relevant in our modern society. It no longer is enough, for example, for modern potters to merely reproduce traditional forms for functions long since made obsolete by industrial advances. The potter – to be relevant – to make work that has meaning beyond its mere function – has to not only understand why we respond to different aspects of traditional forms, but also how to make use of those forms to communicate contemporary concerns. Michael Cardew tells us that:

There is one more thing a potter must do if he is to do his work properly – to make useful pots which are at the same time humane works of contemporary art. He must not only trust his intuitions but he must also have the courage to bring them into the field of conscious thought, and to claim for them the same kind of validity as is enjoyed by the concepts and abstractions used in science. He must live on the frontiers of his art as the scientist lives on the frontiers of knowledge.

Cardew's challenge, to live on the frontiers of our art, implies that the search for relevance must be a continuing and exhaustive process. For those potters who desire to make more than meaningless trinkets and baubles for visually illiterate and fickle consumers, it is a search that must be undertaken.