

Earth, Spirit, Fire:

The Ceramics of Brother Thomas Bezanson



Southern Vermont Arts Center  
Manchester, VT



## DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

It is a pleasure to welcome Brother Thomas back to the hills of Vermont. Many in the community remember his years at the Weston Priory. We all recall with special pleasure the work he produced, the beauty, exquisite lines and brilliant colors that distinguish his outstanding ceramics. Few artists combine the sensitive spirituality, technical knowledge and bold artistic vision of this unusual soul. I join with others in the community in looking forward to this exhibition of his recent work, and to seeing him among us again.

Christopher J. Madkour

Executive Director

Southern Vermont Arts Center

## CONTRIBUTORS

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Front Cover: TH1234  
Large Vase with Two Covers  
Iron Yellow Glaze  
25 x 15½ x 15½

*I did not do any research on this iron yellow glaze. I was not aware that it was even possible. It was just there one day when I opened the kiln — that happens from time to time in this work. It isn't really a discovery, I did no work for it, it just happened — a gift from the fire. Holding on to it, finding out why it happens, trying not to lose it because of material changes, kiln stacking, placement, and more reasons than I can list, is work however.*

*Re: the large size of this piece — it is very hard to throw porcelain this large. You have to be in your "tiger years," or think you are, to do them. It is partly technique, but mostly physical strength with a touch of no-mindedness.*

*I often make two covers for these vases, originally because people break lids and want replacements years later. That is not always possible because of the complex of changes that are part of the potter's work from year to year and sometimes from firing to firing. Later I began making a second lid because it changed the character of the piece, e.g. a different lid made it look different — an option.*

Commentaries by Brother Thomas



I don't produce pieces like this one — they happen to me. It is a complex form with one of the most fugitive glazes in the tradition of the potter's art.

Copper and iron are the oldest ceramic colorants. One of the most celebrated and most difficult of copper's colors is red.

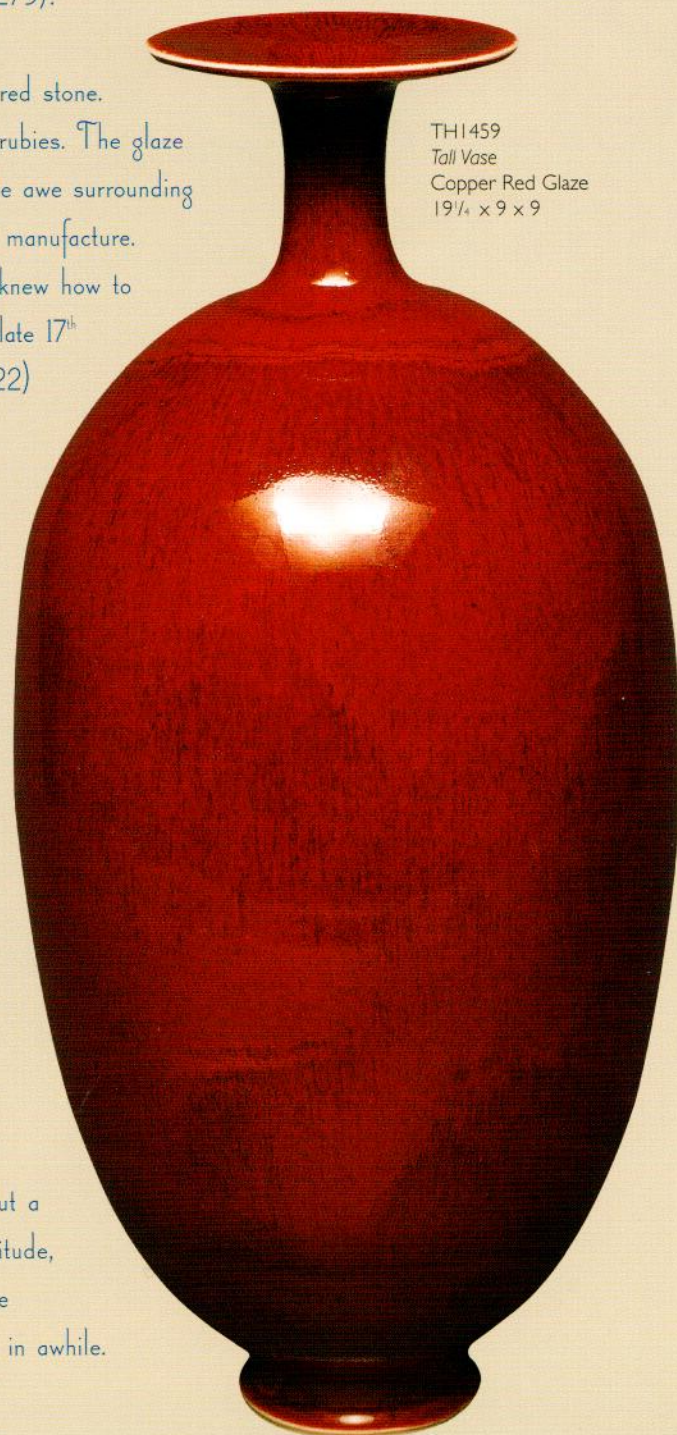
The copper red glaze was discovered by the Chinese and is seen on early Ming ware of the Hsüan-Te reign (1426-1435), although even earlier peasant pottery had flashes of it, e.g. Chün ware of the Sung Dynasty (960-1279).

The early Ming red was called *pao shih hung*, or precious red stone. The "precious stone" referred to was implied to be powdered rubies. The glaze was indeed a ruby red. This bit of disinformation furthered the awe surrounding a difficult and rare color and helped to keep the secret of its manufacture. So rigidly was it guarded that a hundred years later no one knew how to make it anymore. At least, that is part of the lore. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Emperor K'ang Hsi (1662-1722) of the Ching dynasty, an effort was made to recover the method of making the *pao shih hung*.

The royal porcelain factory at Ching-tê Chen (today's Jingdezhen) succeeded in producing a beautiful dark copper red. This was named by the French *Sang de Boeuf*, ox blood red. Its fame spread across China, Europe, the near East, and through succeeding centuries of collectors of Chinese porcelains. The K'ang Hsi effort reopened the fascination with the problematic color. It is still made today, in one venerable old kiln at Jingdezhen, and copper red glazes continue to challenge potters around the world.

There was a period in my work at Weston Priory when copper reds came so easily that I could almost put a cake mix in the kiln and expect it to come out red. But a change of location with all the attendant changes in water, altitude, barometric pressure and materials have made them much more difficult to do. A piece like this one only comes along once in awhile.

TH1459  
Tall Vase  
Copper Red Glaze  
19 1/4 x 9 x 9



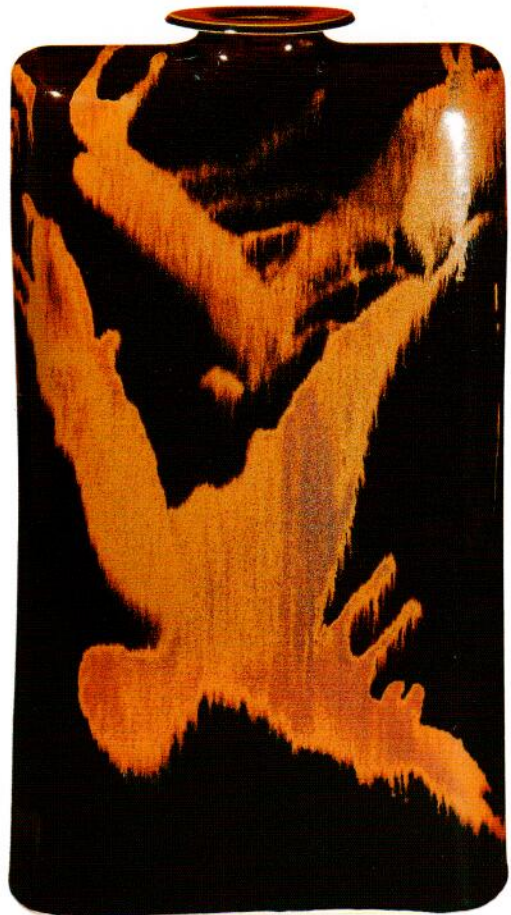


I do not draw on my work, or make specific designs. A deliberate design remains that forever. I leave the melting movement of the glaze in the fire to create whatever emerges. The Fire's abstract "brush" leaves room for others to see whatever they see and feel whatever they feel as we did with clouds when we were children.

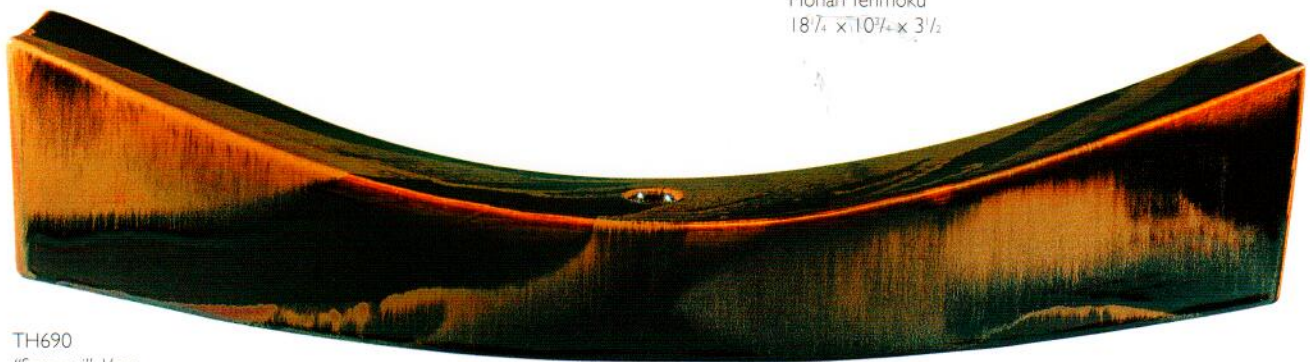
I myself tend to be blind to seeing anything in them, but others are not. One day someone saw "Icarus" falling from the sky in this particular piece. I don't see it - but that does not matter.

On the other hand, there is what the Japanese call, "nagashigaki" ie. painting with glazes. I never do that consciously but I allow the Fire room to do that. It is an old tradition as far back as Song times. Abstract expressionism is not new to the potter's art.

I, for my part, prepare the flat surface of some forms, like the decorative plates and these flasks form so the Fire will have the freedom to paint its pictures.



TH978  
Flask Form Vase  
Honan Tenmoku  
18 7/8 x 10 7/8 x 3 1/2



TH690  
"Samurai" Vase  
Honan Tenmoku  
4 1/2 x 4 x 3 1/4

The line and curve of this piece is a visual leitmotif all over Japan. It appears in roof lines, Torii gates, swords, packaging designs, etc. It made its imprint on me during an early trip to Japan in 1978 and has percolated in me ever since.

And, like most impressions in an artist's life, they come out somewhere, sometime, in some way. This piece was one of those fall-outs. There are very few pieces I feel inclined to name but I wanted to associate this one with Japan, so I called it "Samurai," a benign reference to the lovely curve of a samurai sword and not a celebration of its unlvely purpose.



I rarely name pieces, but this one was right in front of me when I opened the kiln. It struck me as a "prophet," Jeremiah perhaps, in a fiery lamentation, arms raised, robes flowing. One of the few times I have ever projected an image onto what is essentially a residual of the fire licking the pot on that side in that way.

But I was reminded that — "Pagans exalt sacred things, the prophets extol sacred deeds".



TH 1235  
"The Prophet"  
Large Vase with Cover  
Honan Tenmoku  
20 1/4 x 12 1/2 x 12 1/2



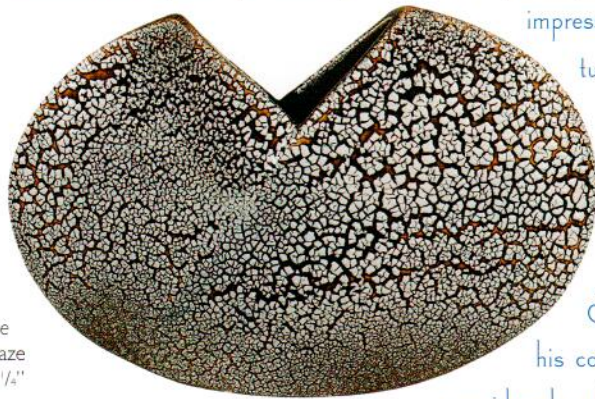
This heart shaped form with its brilliant blue glaze is one giant imponderable of the Fire e.g. I'm not sure how it happens so it's a now and again thing. It's really a black iron glaze that in the cooling process begins to transmute to blue - but sometimes it remains black. It fails more often than it succeeds. I tend to be both fascinated by the colour and frustrated by the unpredictability of it.



TH1601  
Large Vase  
Iron Blue Glaze  
12 1/2 x 13 1/2 x 13 1/2"

Here and there throughout my work are forms based on the ellipse. I know that some may see them as references to Arp or Brancusi who used it so aesthetically in their sculpture. But my reference comes from another source - *Cartesian Geometry*.

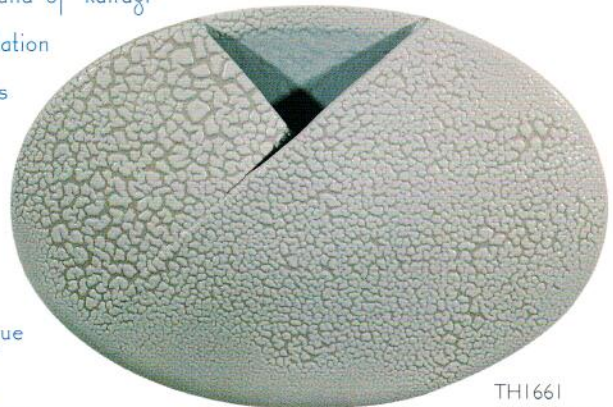
The aesthetic beauty of the ellipse impressed me during college years when I studied Analytic (Cartesian) Geometry which deals with the mathematics of conic sections of which the ellipse is one. The "moerbic curve" is another, the symbol for eternity, a twisted ellipse is yet another example. Out of that Cartesian geometry course, impressions for a ceramic form based on the ellipse remained tucked away in my memory until someday I could explore it in my work. It is such a simple form, a thing of cosmic beauty, that it impressed the intuitive imagination.



TH1660  
Elliptical Vase  
"Kairagi" Glaze  
11 x 17 x 3 1/4"

So, when you see my ellipse don't think Arp and Brancusi sculpture without adding, Rene Descartes and his conic sections. Re: the "kairagi" glaze - this effect is really considered a defect called "crawling." It is a problem in commercial fac-

tories and among the more science-minded potters. But artists in this medium of fire and clay since the Chinese, see beauty where others see defect. It's a paradigmatic shift of vision. The word "kairagi" itself, is from the Japanese for "lizard skin". I prefer the poetic sound of "kairagi" rather than the unpoetic "lizard skin" or the defective connotation of "crawl". Despite its place in the manuals of ceramics as a defect to be corrected, it is a very difficult glaze to handle and fire. It has a tendency "to crawl" right off the pot and end up on the kiln shelves.



TH1661  
Elliptical Vase  
"Kairagi" Glaze  
11 3/4 x 16 3/4 x 3 1/4"

It is a misery when it doesn't work, but beautiful and unique when it does.



## Decorative Plates



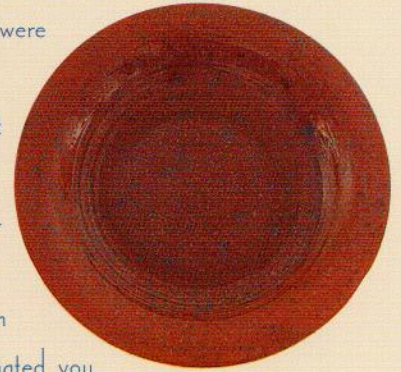
TH831  
Large Decorative Plate  
"Oil Spot" Glaze  
2 1/2 x 18 1/2 x 18 1/2"

Historically this is a very old but rare saturated iron glaze type, Chinese in origin. It first appeared on Chinese tea bowls during the Song dynasty. They were prized then, as they are now.

There is a special aesthetic appeal to this celebrated glaze. It is one of the Fire's most wonderful but fugitive effects. Its name "oil spot" is an attempt by westerners to describe it as looking like oil spreading and breaking across a dark sea. Perhaps not a good image in our days of massive oil spills.

Technically the Chinese oil spot probably developed by thermal reduction in a neutral or oxidizing atmosphere. My contemporary version on this decorative plate, is based on phase separation of materials in a reduction atmosphere. I don't know about the Chinese, but it is a difficult glaze for me, one I cannot always count on. I've had it and lost it several times over the years.

We do not have a tradition of the decorative plate in the West (those commercial commemorative plates don't count). But the great basins, plates and chargers of the East have long been regarded as aesthetic objects of a high order. In a sense they are analogous to paintings and were hung or shown on stands for their visual imagery. But, the plate is not a canvas, it does not disappear under the design but retains its functionality - it is still capable of holding something. Its form and function are a unity. If the function is eliminated you are talking about something other than the potter's art. What it is used for, does not contradict function.



TH699  
Decorative Round Plate  
Rose Red Copper Glaze  
2 x 19 x 19"

Since I "came over" to pottery from painting, as many American potters have done, the surface of the plate is as much a painter's challenge as a potter's. The abstract gestures on my plates are not news to the potter. They have been using glazes that way for centuries. The Japanese call it "nagashigaki" e.g. painting with glazes to which I would add - painting with glaze and fire. I avoid any preconceived designs for my plates, I subscribe to the "Yohen" principle - allowing room for the Spirit of the fire to make its changes and not to push control so far as to eliminate accidents, surprise, discovery. I do what my skills allow, step back and wait for the no-mind source of art to materialize and say, this is good, this is very good.



TH1341  
Decorative Round Plate  
Opalescent Copper Glaze  
2 x 19 1/2 x 19 1/2"

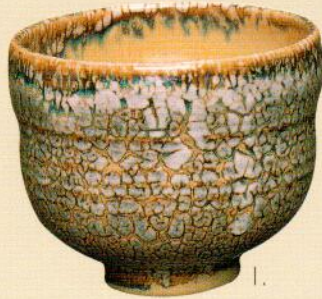
TH1621  
Decorative Round Plate  
Tenmoku with Kaki  
2 3/4 x 17 1/2 x 17 1/2"





## The Tea Bowl

I had not been familiar with tea bowls, much less the tea ceremony, before my first visit to Japan in 1978. America does not have a tea culture and in my native land of Nova Scotia, where tea drinking was more common, the only ritual was whether the milk went into the cup before or after the tea. And, we customarily drank tea out of those bone china teacups by Wedgwood and Spode or their imitations for kitchen-level use. It is an odd evolution since English teacups were originally imitations of Chinese tea bowls that had acquired a little handle and English bone china was an attempt to imitate oriental porcelain.



1.

But, during that early exposure to Japan, the tea bowl, teacup, (*yu no mi*) and tea drinking were omnipresent. A cup of tea was a standard welcome. In fact, there was often no charge in a restaurant for Ocha, ordinary green tea. I was especially struck by the ritual tea bowls, the Chawan. They were beautiful and important to Japanese art and lifestyle. I was moved also that individual artists and regions were recognized and celebrated for their tea bowls.

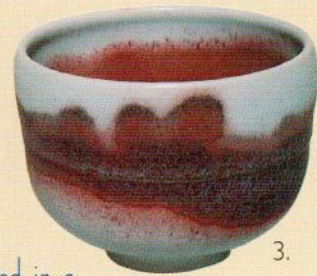


2.

As a potter, those twenty and some years ago I was drawn to the tea bowls but I was also present to the Zen dimension of their use in the tea ceremony,

*i.e.*, that bond between art and religion. It was an old experience rediscovered in a new way. I tucked it away in my spirit because it was a spiritual experience.

As the temperature of cultural and religious meeting had been rising during those years it was not entirely surprising to find westerners on a spiritual quest studying Zen in Japan. Nor was it surprising that young westerners were there studying pottery with Japanese masters, *sensei*. And, in the way of things it is not surprising that these separate quests should return home to give root and reason in this country for tea bowls, tea ceremony, and Zen values. It hasn't revolutionized art or religion in America but it has enriched them.



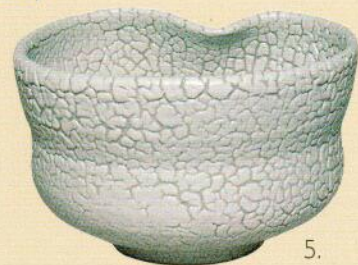
3.

When in the course of my own events, I was asked to make tea bowls, the spiritual resonance I had with tea bowls so many years before was still there. I knew I had to grow into them, not technically, but interiorly - *na'a sheh v'nishma* (let us do it and we will understand).



4.

These bowls are like a chalice, a kiddish cup — they are symbols of something beyond them. They are not run out by the dozens, not made exactly, but born of a person's spirit. They have to be about something beyond



5.



but added to function. That is why a tea bowl is called by a name in Japan, often poetic names, more often by the name of the artist who made it, e.g., an Arakawa, a Shimaoka, a Hamada, a Fujiwara.... When that meeting of spirits happens, perhaps some tea master calls a special

bowl to celebrate the tea ceremony or some ordinary person simply loves it, makes tea and quietly celebrates a moment. For every moment of life is worthy of celebration, just to live is holy. It is the



reality of interiority meeting interiority, an encounter of two spirits that is important. In any lesser meeting that bowl may just end up with peanuts in it.



That is art and the spirit of the tea bowl. Harmony, tranquility, prayer, respect will not come out of them if they do not go into them. It is an ongoing vision quest to make a spirit-filled tea bowl because it is an ongoing vision quest to make a spirit-filled person — a spirit-filled world.

Excerpts from article, *Reflections on the Cup in Celebrate the Days* – A Book of Days, published by Pucker Gallery

1. TH1379 Textured Iron Glaze, 3 1/2 x 4 1/2 x 4 1/2"
2. TH1391 Iron Yellow Glaze with Black, 3 1/2 x 5 1/4 x 5 1/4"
3. TH1553 Copper Red Matt Glaze, 3 1/2 x 4 1/4 x 4 1/4"
4. TH1572 Square Form "Hare's Fur" Glaze, 3 x 4 1/4 x 4 1/4"

5. TH1576 "Kairagi" Glaze, 3 1/4 x 5 1/4 x 5"
6. TH1609 Tenmoku with Crystal Rutile, 3 1/4 x 6 x 6"
7. TH1618 Molybdenum Glaze, 3 1/4 x 4 1/2 x 4 1/2"

## Yu No Mi

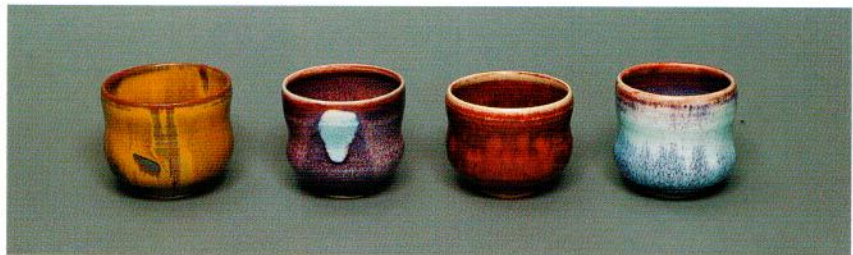
The Yu No Mi or chanomijawan, literally "tea-drinking-cup," differs from the Chawan, in that the latter is a ceremonial tea

bowl used in the Tea Ceremony while the former is the everyday equivalent of our tea cup or coffee mug. It has no grand purpose, just a simple vessel for ocha, tea.

Yu No Mi run the gamut from humble and disposable to elaborate and personal. Often one has a tea cup that no one else uses, or a seasonal one, or a special one for a special reason. I have one given to me by a Japanese potter in Okawachi 25 years ago. I use it daily, it's the only one I use. It is a chanomijawan with memories. If I lost it, I would still drink tea, but it would be tea without memories.

I sometimes make them with seasonal references ie. Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter — the Spirit of the Seasons. And sometimes 12 of them for the months of the year, or to celebrate things we don't usually celebrate - rain, snow, fog, sunshine with glazes and shapes to conjure-up the daily.

A Yu No Mi can be more than just a thing.

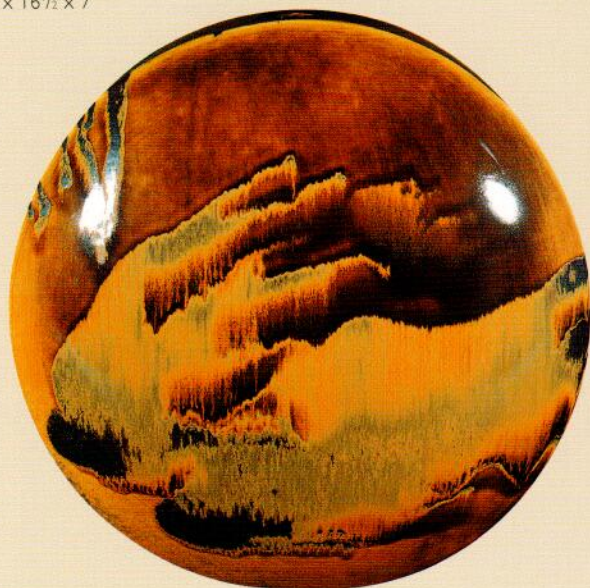


TH1537  
Set of 4 Yunomi  
Iron Yellow  
Copper Purple  
Copper Red  
Copper Purple  
3"

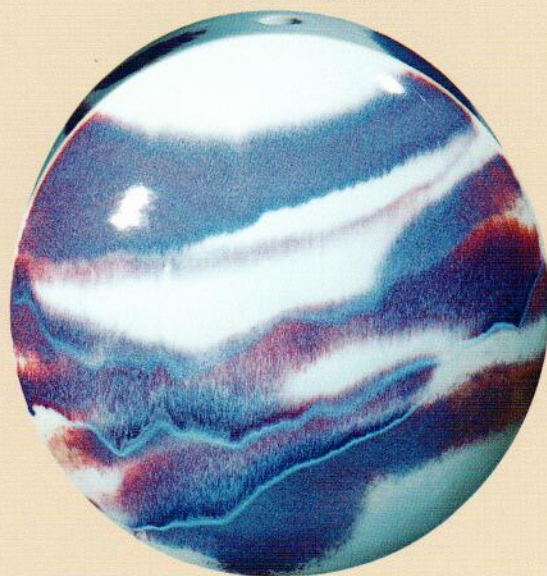


## Wheel Form Vases

TH1078  
Wheel Form Vase  
Northern Celadon Glaze with  
Iron Yellow  
15 1/2 x 16 1/2 x 7"



TH985  
Wheel Form Vase  
Blue and Purple on  
Opalescent White Glaze  
16 x 16 x 7 1/2"



*I made this wheel form at one time for no reason and no reference to whatever it may look like now. I don't know what I'm doing until I've done it. Art does not begin with thought. Something arises out of no-mind; thought may need consciousness but consciousness does not need thought. Thinking plays only a sub-ordinate role in the creative act itself.*

*Now that they are materialized, I can think about the pieces and project something on them eg., their planet-like imagery, their abstract gestures, their mood and feeling, etc. I can be critical.*

*I made 5 or 6 of these wheel forms, 10 years ago, and have never made them again, I wouldn't and probably couldn't, not for technical reasons but because it would be artificial to try to call back the moment. It would show. There is the mystery of the "kairos," that once and never again time. Miss it and it never returns - this is never so real as in art.*

*The petal-like flow of this glaze reminds me of a flower, but not literally. It's a post-factum response since I never set-out to make such a glaze nor do I know of a precedent. It is essentially a flowing glaze and one of the things I appreciate about it, is that it doesn't flow right off the pot.*

*I have used it off and on over the years, on different forms, large and small. It has changes, "reblooming" in different configurations, different tones of reds, blues, purples and with "petals" large or small. It seems to have a "life" of its own.*



TH 1683  
Vase  
Red Chrysanthemum Glaze  
10 x 9 1/4 x 9 1/2"



## Brother Thomas Bezanson

Brother Thomas Bezanson, an American citizen, was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1929. He was a Benedictine monk at Weston Priory, Weston, VT, for twenty-five years and has worked as an artist-in-residence with the Benedictine sisters of Erie since 1985. Thomas' porcelains can be found in over fifty national and international public collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C., the Osaka Municipal Museum, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The work is also in numerous private collections in the US and abroad. Brother Thomas is represented by the Pucker Gallery, Boston.

A full list of Brother Thomas' exhibitions and collections is available.

As surely as we are driven to live,  
we are driven to serve spiritual ends that surpass our own interests

-A.J. Heschel

Working together with Brother Thomas for two decades has awakened, encouraged and nurtured our commitment to the Spirit, to Beauty, to Art and to Life.

We have shared in his continuing journey and search. The works of art are a physical manifestation of an inner spirit and source of energy that we are privileged to experience.

Tom Fels, curator for the Southern Vermont Arts Center, visited our Gallery to begin the process of reviewing nearly 20 years of work.

As we moved from piece to piece, we realized how special each work is. The form, the glaze, the exterior and interior beauty — all sang out and excited our vision of this exhibition. Gradually we found ourselves elevated by the sheer splendor of the art.

Together with Tom, and David Winkler, Art Director of our Gallery, this collection has been assembled. Our goal was to create a selection of the finest representations of form and glaze with the underlying awareness that we were formulating Brother Thomas' vision of the Pure, the Beautiful, the Honest.

We are grateful to the Southern Vermont Arts Center for sharing the work of Brother Thomas with old and new friends.

View, see, experience, learn and be enriched.

— Bernard H. Pucker, 2003



# Earth, Spirit, Fire:



TH1660

## The Ceramics of Brother Thomas Bezanson

13 September through 30 November 2003

Opening Reception: 13 September 2003: 2 to 4 pm

Elizabeth de C. Wilson Museum — Southern Vermont Arts Center  
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