

FROM THE EARTH:
The Ceramic Art of Brother Thomas



The Soufer Gallery
NEW YORK



TH 552

FROM THE EARTH: *The Ceramic Art of Brother Thomas*

From the earth, but surprising in their newness, their freshness and their delicacy, Brother Thomas' glazes reflect a unique balance of subtlety and power. Browns infused with reds, blues and hints of green, ochres with splashes of orange and yellow, deep crimsons heightened by even deeper blacks, help define the beauty of Brother Thomas' porcelain works. The brilliance of his color and the simplicity of form, together encourage a thought provoking experience, satisfying our craving for beauty both visually and cognitively. The spirit embedded in Brother Thomas' amazingly crafted works evokes a timeless and universal message of truth and hope. It is my great pleasure to bring to you, in association with Pucker Gallery, a selection of Brother Thomas' most beautiful porcelain work.

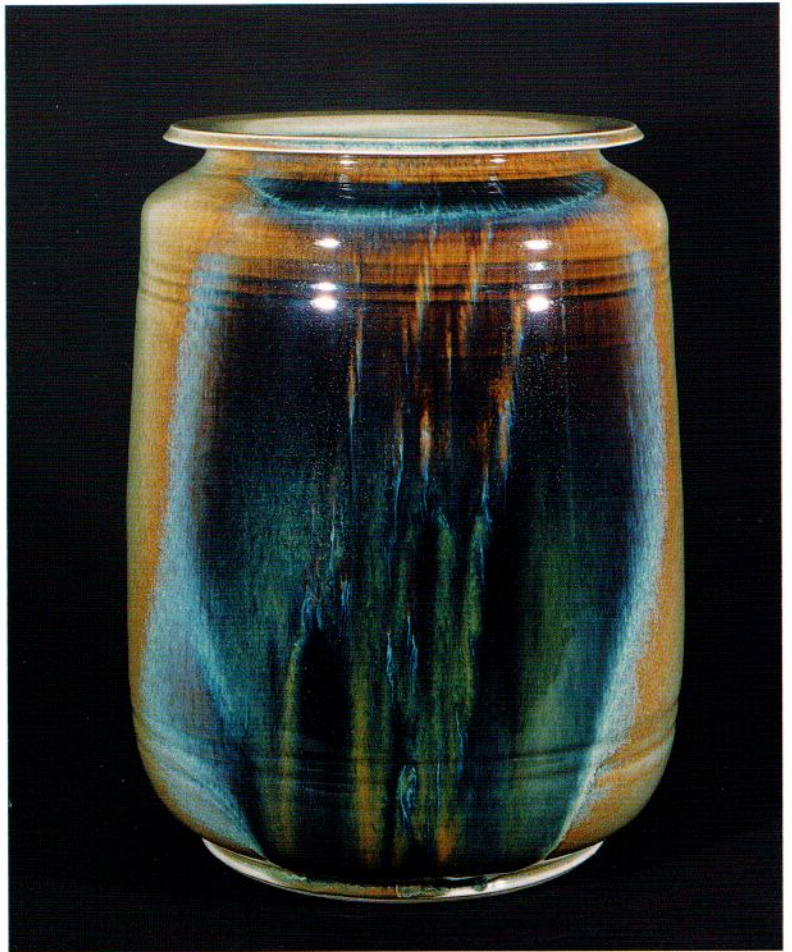
— Mabboubeh Soufer



TH1855



TH1758



TH497

THE TENMOKU GLAZE

The iron black glaze and its many variations originated in China during the Song dynasty (960-1279). It was Japanese Buddhist monks, not potters, who brought back samples of black glazed tea bowls to Japan where the bowls and the glaze acquired the name *tenmoku* and great popularity. "Tenmoku" is actually the Japanese pronunciation of the place where the monks encountered and acquired the bowls, i.e. on *tien-mu-shan*, eye of the heavenly mountain. This mountain in Chekiang province was the location of a Chinese Buddhist monastery.

On the Japanese tongue, black tea bowls from *tien-mu-shan* became "ten-mo-ku" tea bowls. Over the centuries, in the tea culture of Japan, *tenmoku* came to mean either the tea bowl or the black glaze. It is only the black glaze denotation that had come over to potters in the west—and the "black tea bowls from the mountain called *tien mu shan*" has long been forgotten. Those original Chinese tea bowls were probably Chien Yao and samples can be seen in museum collections or books on Chinese pottery.

The golden tea in a black tea bowl has a sensuous and aesthetic appeal for the Japanese. It remained for Japanese to make their own *tenmoku* tea bowls and for the tea connoisseur and especially the tea ceremony *sensei* to celebrate them.

Apart from the derivation and tea bowl association with the word "ten-moku", black glazes in other bowl forms, vases and other ware were made at many kilns throughout China during the Song dynasties. Some of these black glazes are historically unique and so regional that they remain phenomena of time and place. Some of the most celebrated bear the names of the towns and areas of their origin, e.g. Chi Chou, Chien yao, cizhou, yet others have descriptive names, e.g. Hare's fur, oil spot, and the inimitable and rare black bowls with real leaves fired in them.

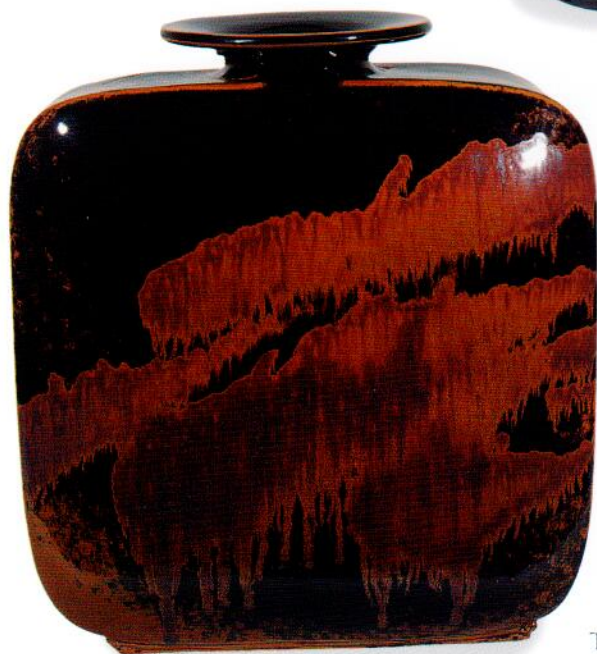
A variation on one of these regional black glazes, the *Honan Tenmoku*, happened in the course of my early work with saturated iron glazes. It has become something of a "signature tune" among my glazes over the years (cf. TH1127, TH1745, etc.)



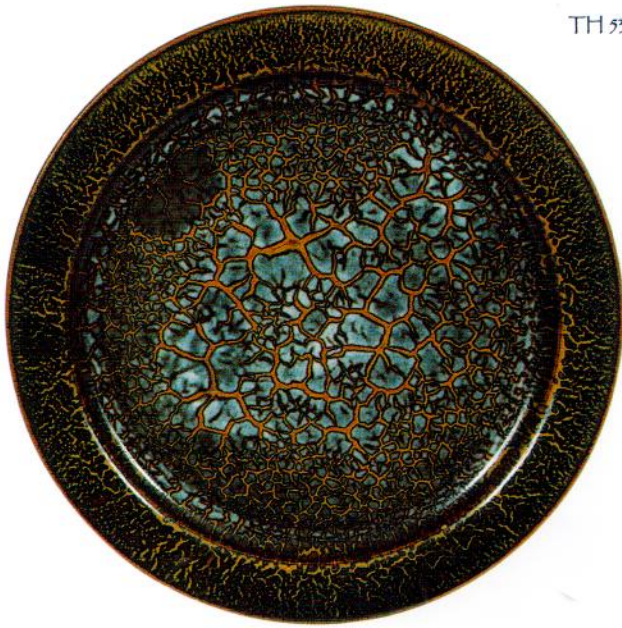
TH1745



TH1127



TH1626



TH 533



TH 1623

DECORATIVE PLATES

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.

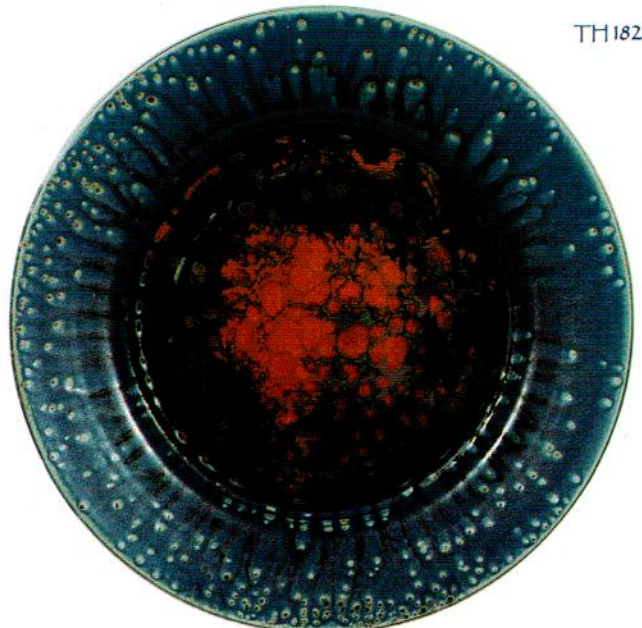
In a sense they are analogous to paintings and were hung or shown on stands for their visual imagery. But, the plate is not a canvas, it does not disappear under the design but retains its functionality – it is still capable of holding something. Its form and function are a unity. If the function is eliminated you are talking about something other than the potter's art. What it is used for, does not contradict function.

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.



TH 1821



TH 1820



TH1134



TH1851

IRON YELLOW GLAZE

I did not do any research on this iron yellow glaze. I was not aware that it was possible, there is no historical precedent for it. It was just there one day when I opened the kiln expecting something else—so like life itself. It is not discovery in the proper sense of a result of intentional work and research. But, it is discovery in the sense of recognizing it when it happens and “happenings” are a large part of the art of the potter.

Regarding the large size of this piece: (TH1851) it is very hard to throw porcelain this large. You have to be in your “tiger years”, or think you are, to do them physically or in another place, a place of *no-mindedness*. One of the unspoken, because unteachable, fundamentals of art is “unlearning”. *Art does not begin with thought*. When we are free of mind and trust our intuition, it often happens that we don’t know that something cannot be done. We go ahead and do it anyway. We stumble upon the awesome experience of discovery—a gift of intuition. Awe is the ultimate question because it has no answer—and needs none.

TEXTURED BLACK AND WHITE GLAZE

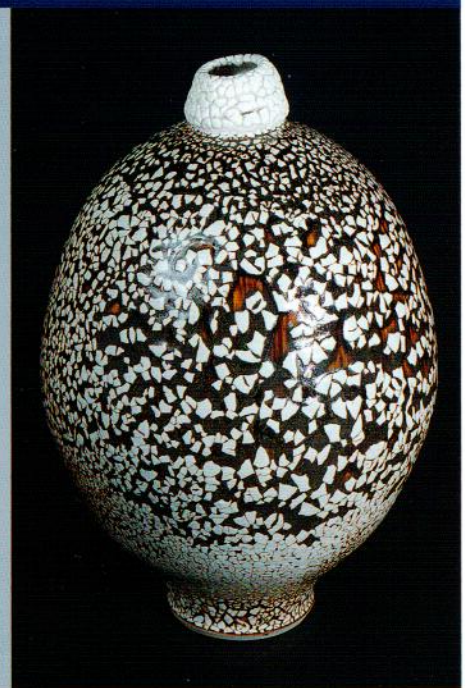
TH992

This little piece was a moment in my working that turned into a *dialogue* with clay.

As I was pulling up the neck, the thin porcelain collapsed around my finger, crumpling into what looked like a little turban. Normally my critical neo-cortex would register "failure"; I would break down the piece on the spot. But there was something limbic, something serendipitous about the "failure". The slumping clay hung around my finger. I thought of a survivor hanging on to a vestige of hope; I thought of Hecuba clinging to the doorposts of Troy. I was in a dialogue with this little glob of slumping porcelain. I became aware that it had slumped in the first place because I had drifted away. I had lost contact with the sensuous dialogue of the fingers with the clay. I removed my finger expecting it to collapse but it didn't; its little turban-like form hung-on.

Our world of experience with nature has been so colonized by technology that this kind of a dialogue with the sensuous has been lost. The deep mysteries of nature were to our ancestors what now are to us only scenery.

When it came time to glaze this piece I reserved the turban in white to remind myself, and perhaps you, that art is as much visceral as visual.



ARMENIAN BOLE GLAZE

The glaze on this lidded vase is made of only one material called *Armenian Bole*.

Bole is a generic term for a multitude of friable earthy iron bearing secondary clays. There are many boles varying in composition as evidenced by the variety of names: Armenian Bole, Antwerp Red, Armoniac bole, oriental bole, terra Lennia, terra pozzuoli, Venice red and on and on. I know this from trying unsuccessfully to replace the small amount of Armenian bole given to me to "try".

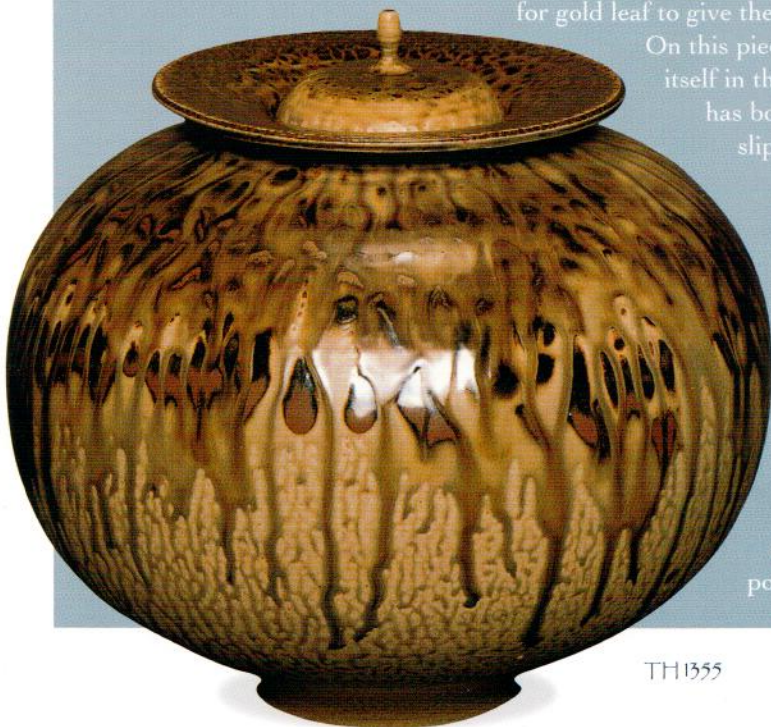
While my modest supply of bole came from a violin maker, it is more commonly used by gilders as a ground for gold leaf to give the gilded surface a warm undertone.

On this piece, I have superimposed the Armenian bole upon itself in three layers giving some indication that this material has both the characteristics of wood ash glazes and clay slip glazes.

Since boles are secondary clays they are probably river borne deposits, eg. levigated mixes of woods, clays, minerals and therefore they are unique local substances.

One of the appeals for me is that Armenian bole makes a one material glaze, unlike the multi-materials of most glaze compositions. It is the potter's equivalent of a cake mix—just add water.

But, another more important appeal is its beauty, a no-thing reality locked up in a substance of nature, foamed into existence by the transforming power of fire, and the alchemy of the potter's art.



TH1355



TH1644



TH1627

BLUE ELM ASH GLAZE

"This glaze looks like a forest of trees", she said. And therein lies its story.

The white Elm Ash of North Dakota is dying, another victim of environmental pollution. A potter friend from North Dakota sent me the ashes of one of those fallen Elms, not for burial but for transformation into a wood ash glaze.

Locked-up in trees are compounds of minerals, those minerals are the very substance of its being. They draw them from the soils they grow-in, the air they breathe. They are what they eat, the good and the bad of it. When those trees are burned, transformed into ashes, their minerals remain, like some immortal dimension of their existence.

Those minerals are the same minerals ancient potters had discovered could make a glaze. How they ever discovered such a thing is less about science and more about intuition. They were closer to nature and heard the language of the world around them, language without words of the anguish of a fallen tree:

*Tired of all who come with words but no language
I went to the snow-covered island.
The wild does not have words.*

*The unwritten pages spread themselves out in all
directions!
I came across the marks of roe deer's hooves in the snow.
Language, but no words.
(Tomas Tranströmer)*

The glaze on this pot is made with the ashes of a fallen tree from North Dakota. Should it be a surprize then that the characteristic runs and rivulets of wood ash glazes, so often look like trees and forests of trees? From trees that are transformed into ashes and from ashes they are transformed into a glaze that looks like trees. Locked-up in the trees are ashes and locked-up in those ashes is the mystery of something that cannot be measured by our instruments or equations—the tree's inner beauty. It changes, it remains. *We are born with eyes but we have to acquire vision.*

TEXTURED IRON GLAZE

There is more to this piece than the tradition of its form, the technology of its glaze, or the measure of a potter's skills.

This piece has *spiritual presence* and I have no objective information on that except to say that it is unpredictable. I open the kiln on two pieces objectively the same, the same form, the same glaze; one has "it" the other doesn't. Art is as much visceral as it is visual. We feel it as well as see it.

In this way, some pieces of the potter's art are as much vehicles as vessels, e.g. they transport us into an awareness of the spiritual. We recognize it in a thing only because it is in us first.

There are few things in our culture that can save us from the overwhelming nonsense of materialism. Art is one of them. Its essential message is that we are not material beings on a spiritual journey but spiritual beings on a material journey.



TH1174



TH1630

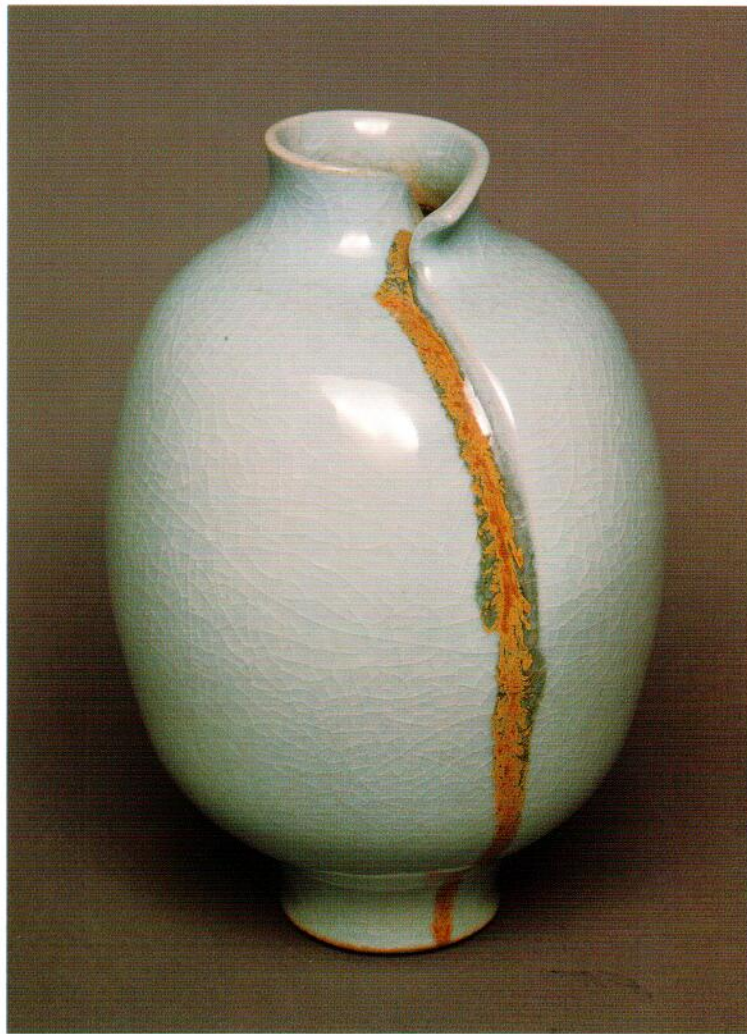
IRON BLUE GLAZE WITH FLAMBÉ COPPER

Like a multi-coloured waterfall this flambé copper glaze flows over the surface of this pot, covering and mixing with the iron blue underglaze. It creates colours and textures neither of them could effect alone.

In printing, mixing two colours together gives a new colour while superimposing rather than mixing them gives yet another colour. It is the same with glazes as this pot demonstrates. But there is this difference—the real painter is not the potter, the real painter is the Fire.

Fire is the *specific difference* of the potter's art. It sets it apart from all other arts. It is the only art in which the artist turns over the final results to an agency outside of his/herself, e.g. the Fire.

The painter puts on the last dab of paint, the sculptor chisels off the definitive chip of marble. The work is done. But the potter is left to wait anxiously for the kiln to cool down, days, weeks, to see what final changes the Fire's sweep has left up his work—the good and the bad of it. The Fire's power is mythical, it changes, it transforms what was into what is.



TH1448

BIOGRAPHY:

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.

CREDITS:

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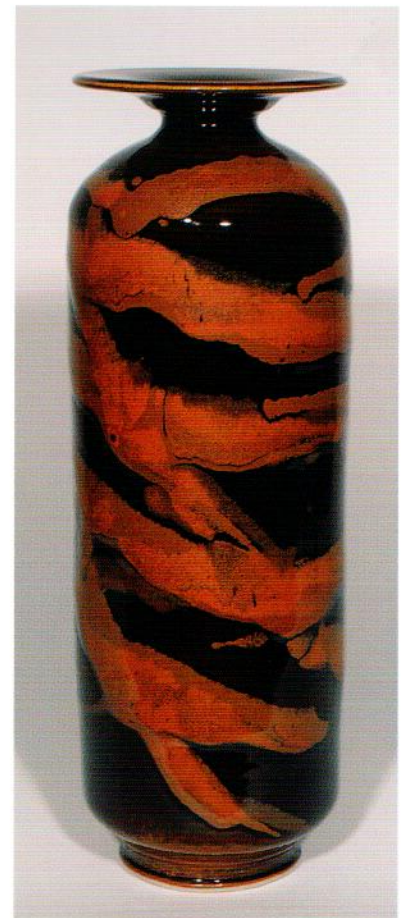
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LIST OF WORKS - All works are porcelain

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TH1758	Vase with Cut Rim, <i>Copper Red Glaze</i>	7 1/2 x 9 x 9"
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TH1127	Tall Oval Vase with Lugs, <i>Honan Tenmoku Glaze</i>	18 x 15 x 4 1/2"
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TH1821	Large Decorative Plate, <i>"Armenian Bole" Glaze with Kaki</i>	2 3/4 x 19 3/8 x 19 3/8"
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TH1709	Tea Bowl, <i>Elm Ash Glaze</i>	3 1/2 x 5"
TH1727	Tea Bowl, <i>Elm Ash Glaze</i>	3 1/2 x 5 3/4"
TH1861	Tea Bowl, <i>Celadon Glaze with Fissures</i>	3 1/4 x 6 x 6"
TH1788	Tea Bowl, <i>Celadon Glaze with Fissures</i>	3 x 6 1/4 x 6 1/4"
TH1856	Tea Bowl, <i>"Kairagi" Glaze</i>	3 1/2 x 5 x 5"



TH1798



TH1792



TH1782

FROM THE EARTH: *The Ceramic Art of Brother Thomas*

Dates: 15 April - 13 May, 2004



TH1765

Opening Reception: 15 April 2004, 5-8 p.m. The artist will be present.



TH1864



TH1721



TH1722



TH1709



TH1727



TH1861



TH1788



TH1856

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