

Making a Living in the 90s

by Ray Bub



Ray Bub showing Pam Dietze and Elisabeth Yesko, two private-class students, how to handbuild covered boxes.

Everything changed for my wife and business partner Susan Nykiel and me in October 1985 when our first daughter, Kelsey, was born. Before then, Susan and I were essentially independent artists, sharing studio space and collaborating on a range of wheel-thrown, reduction-fired, Cone 11 stoneware and porcelain pottery. Susan had her designs and I had mine; although we discussed each other's work quite a bit and agreed on a palette of glazes, we each made our own shapes independently.

From 1975 through 1985, all our income was derived from wholesale and retail sales, mainly through American Craft Enterprises' fairs. We were very frustrated, though, when shops and galleries that had ordered from us at an A.C.E. show one year would not reorder if they did not see us in person at the following event. So, in 1982, we started participating in the Rosen Agency's Buyers Market of American Craft wholesale fairs and, with tenured booth space in these, were able to achieve some consistency in marketing our work.

By 1984, we had opened a retail showroom in our home-studio in Pownal, Vermont, offering our work to the public (we do not buy other artists' work for our store), with limited hours of 1 to 5 P.M. Wednesday through Saturday year round, and expanded summer hours of 11 A.M. to 5 P.M. Wednesday through Sunday. Our showroom has been successful mainly as a summer-autumn tourist attraction, and has been a limited but steady supplement to our income. It has also freed us to experiment beyond our wholesale catalog, creating individual pieces, which is the reason we took up pottery making in the first place.

Kelsey's birth cut our work force in half, with Susan as primary caregiver; I also needed to take time from production to meet our baby's needs. At the same time, I had been increasingly inconvenienced by several work-related aches and pains, including tendinitis in my left wrist, a sore back, and aching feet and legs caused by standing all day on a concrete floor. I sought treatment

for and overcame these ailments, but it was clear that I was not going to become any younger or stronger as the years wore on.

My thoughts while working at the wheel one day convinced me I had to make some changes. I was making chowder mugs, daydreaming absentmindedly. I caught myself thinking, "I'm not making enough money. I ought to be making pots." But I *was* making pots at that very moment! My subconscious was telling me that I needed another me, an employee, or some other increase in earning power.

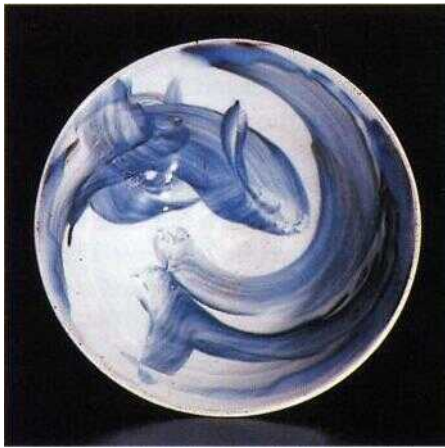
So I began to look into redirecting my income-producing energies, examining my skills and interests to find what new direction, independent of my pottery production, I should explore. I sought career counseling, and tried to mentally place myself in different job settings, including factory office and school environments.

Susan and I even discussed mechanizing our pottery, as many of our contemporaries in their late thirties and

early forties were doing. We thought about adding jigger and jolley machinery, hydraulic presses, slip-casting molds and/or a slab roller. These changes would have required investment in a larger work space, a new kiln, a larger vehicle, employees and more concentration on marketing a greater volume of pottery. But these changes in working methods and business structure did not feel right to us and we did not pursue the idea.

In early 1986, I decided to try a different approach, and began making abstract sculpture that combined ceramic shapes and rattan cane. Susan and I had based a good portion of our wholesale pottery line on clay baskets, teapots and vases with added cane handles we made in our studio (see the April 1986 CM article "Making Cane-Handles"), and I had been seeing abstract sculptural possibilities in the shapes drawn in the air by groups of cane-handled pots, in the ribbing of wooden ships, in spiders' legs and in dreams. I wanted to try to bring into existence a nonfunctional abstract design that could sell through craft and art galleries.

I sold my first ceramic/rattan sculpture in July 1987, and had a two-person show in August 1988. In the 1987-1991 period, I sold about 30 pieces in the \$100-\$400 price range privately and through galleries. The sculptures never generated sufficient sales, however, as they were terribly difficult and time-consuming to make. We decided in 1992 that I should suspend investing time and effort in them. The ideas would keep for a future time.



Stoneware bowl, 9 1/2 inches in diameter, with brushed slip decoration, Cone 11 reduction fired, by Ray Bub, \$65.

The autumn of 1988, the year our second daughter, Linley Emma, was born, several students from nearby Williams College in Williams town, Massachusetts, approached me about teaching a 3-credit course on wheel-thrown pottery in our studio in Pownal. We found some old potters wheels, then agreed on payment and other arrangements for a 4-week course with 7 students. I found a Cone 5 glaze formula in John Conrad's *Ceramic Formulas: The Complete Compendium* and mixed up four color variations. The students' work was fired in the old electric kiln we had previously used only for bisque firing. Since then, I have twice replaced the kiln elements, and have developed a better palette of glazes in 21 colors in glossy opaque, glossy translucent and matt finishes.

From 1989 through 1992, I taught four consecutive Williams College winter study courses in our studio. They were well received, but in 1992 the Wil-

liams Art Department faculty expressed concern about any winter study offerings becoming a "regular thing," and told me they would not approve a 1993 course taught by me.

In 1989, our orders at the February Rosen Agency Valley Forge wholesale show had been \$12,000, including a \$3600 order in three shipments from an out-of-state craft gallery. Payment for the first \$1200 C.O.D. shipment was by a check that bounced. We eventually received a good replacement check, but we canceled the other \$2400 portion of the order.

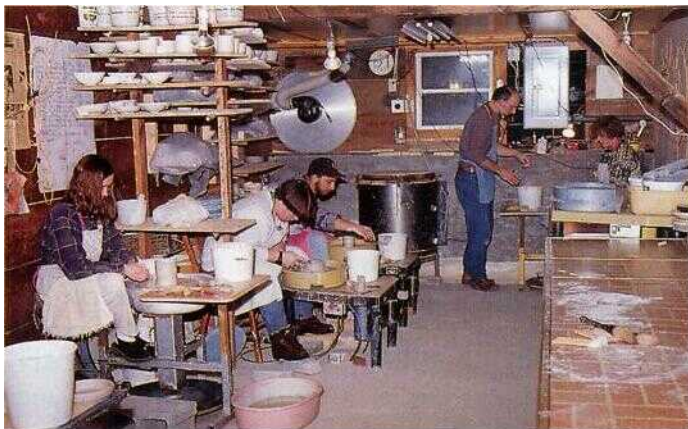
For 1990, we completely redesigned our wholesale offering with new shapes and glaze patterns, hoping to attract new buyers and stimulate enthusiasm among old customers. In February, our sales at the 1990 Atlantic City Rosen Agency wholesale market were only \$5000, however, and there was much talk of recession among the exhibitors.

Hoping to fill our production schedule, we applied and were admitted on short notice to the Rosen Agency June 1990 Boston show, but wrote only a very disappointing \$1700 in orders. Increased competition and the recession were pushing me to find some other way to use my skills to earn a living.

I decided to look into public-school teaching, and signed up to be a substitute teacher at two area high schools. I also filled out elaborate applications for Massachusetts and Vermont high-school English teacher certification. I had decided not to pursue an art-teacher certificate, as my art background is almost exclusively in claywork, and I thought there would be more job opportunities for a high-school English teacher.

Both the Vermont and Massachusetts teacher-certification boards responded by requiring me to return to college for two semesters of education courses, plus one semester of practice teaching. This would not assure me a teaching job, but merely qualify me to apply for openings as they occurred.

I was not enjoying substitute teaching, mainly because of frequent spectacularly disrespectful behavior by some students—oh, the stories I could tell. I also realized how much I cherish working with clay, and how important it is to my sense of self-worth to use my



Students from Southern Vermont College earn three credits for an evening class that Bub teaches at his own studio.

pottery skills and training. So I decided to set aside my pursuit of public high school teacher certification, and gave up substitute teaching.

During the summer of 1990, we were approached by a retiree who wanted instruction on the potter's wheel and a place to work. We agreed on a fee structure and welcomed him into our studio. He returned the next summer.

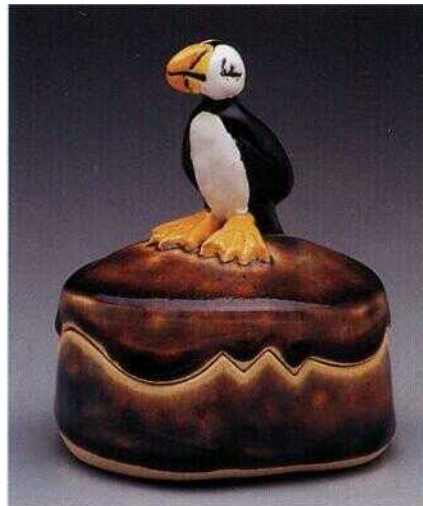
Between the college-age Williams students and our retirement-age student, I began to see that our 600-square-foot studio could be a teaching space, as well as a pottery-production space.

In January 1991, we put classified ads in local papers, offering evening classes on "Pottery Making on the Potter's Wheel" for adults. Instead of doing a wholesale fair that year, I began teaching my first eight-week evening class to eight students.

The eight-week format has remained pretty much as originally designed in 1991. Each student has a potter's wheel for the whole class. For the first seven classes (each class meets once a week for 2 1/2 hours), I show a new shape on the potter's wheel, as well as how to finish the previous week's shape. We start with cylinders (mugs) the first week, then pull handles and attach them to the leather-hard mugs the second week. The new shape the second week is a bowl. The third week they learn to trim the bowl, and I demonstrate pitchers. Between each class meeting I dry out the students' work to the proper leather-hard stage, then wrap their pieces in dry-cleaner plastic to hold them in readiness. The fourth or fifth week's shape, depending on the group's progress, is a plate, then come jars with lids. The seventh class is limited to making vases and tumblers, which don't need to be trimmed or have handles added. I smooth the bottoms of the students' pots the morning after the seventh class and write their initials on their pieces, then dry and bisque fire everything in time for the eighth and final meeting. I have all the glaze buckets set up in the studio for the last class, and the students wax and glaze their work with my instruction and advice on this final class night. I glaze fire their finished work soon after, and they pick it up at their convenience.

My current fee is \$160 per student, which includes materials and firing for all the pieces the student makes during the eight-week session. I have had many students take more than one session, and several have taken multiple sessions spaced out over the last several years. I work with these repeat students on refining their basic skills and producing more advanced projects, such as teapots and casseroles.

In the winter of 1991, Susan and I also decided to advertise Saturday morning classes for kids ages 7 to 12. Our



Puffin-handled box 5 1/2 inches high, stoneware with Cone 5 oxidation glazes, a handbuilding project by Ray Bub.

current fee is \$80 per student for a four-week session, meeting 9:30 A.M. to 11 A.M. Saturday mornings, and we have had some students who have taken six or seven sessions with us.

Our format for the kids' classes is shorter than the adult classes. We take eight or nine children per session, and work on both handbuilding and wheel throwing during each class. We demonstrate a handbuilding project and ask the kids to complete it; with that project finished, they can work on their own ideas in handbuilding.

As soon as the class gets started on handbuilding, Susan and I take the kids two at a time to the potter's wheels to make bowls the first week. We don't demonstrate, but rather coach each of them through the throwing process, often touching their hands and the clay to recenter their work. Some kids are quite coordinated, but many lack sufficient

muscle tone and concentration to make a piece independently, so it is usually a collaborative effort between student and teacher.

The first week the children make two bowls each, as well as at least one handbuilt piece. The second week they make cylinder mugs on the potter's wheel with Susan, and each takes a turn trimming last week's bowls with my help. The third week sees another handbuilding project, while two students at a time work on a plate shape with Susan and one student at a time works with me pulling handles for last week's mug.

The next day I trim the plates the students made (we haven't figured out how to have them finish their last projects themselves), dry and bisque fire everything in time for the fourth and final Saturday morning class. All the glaze buckets are set out and the students glaze their projects. I glaze fire soon after, and the kids and their parents pick up their finished pieces.

In March of 1991, I met with the academic dean of Southern Vermont College in Bennington. A private residential school (only a 15-minute drive from our home-studio), Southern Vermont has about 800 students enrolled full and part time. I offered to teach a 3-credit course as part of the college curriculum starting the following autumn. My application was approved and arrangements were made for a class to begin the next semester—fall of 1991.

Scheduled as an evening course, the class consists of a 2 1/2-hour session once a week for 15 weeks. I am paid the standard part-time Southern Vermont College adjunct instructor's salary, plus a studio rental fee of \$35 per student (there are 10 students in each class), and a materials, glaze-mixing, kiln-loading, firing fee of \$60 per student each semester.

Each student has a potter's wheel for every class, and we work through a progression of shapes and finishing processes similar to that taught in the private adult class for the first seven weeks. I bisque fire the completed classwork after the seventh class, and we have a glazing class the eighth week. I give short lectures at the beginning of each class session on the geology, history,

Recipes

Glossy Clear Base Glaze

(Cone 5)

Whiting.....	4.00%
Frit 3195 (Ferro).....	40.50
G-200 Feldspar.....	16.50
Bentonite.....	2.50
Edgar Plastic Kaolin	6.50
Flint (400 mesh).....	<u>30.00</u>
	100.00%

Color variations are possible with the following additions:

Opaque White:

Zircopax	15.00%
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Translucent Pink:

Whiting.....	10.00%
Mason Stain 6002	6.00%

Translucent Pale Purple:

Mason Stain 6332	4.00%
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Translucent Dark Red-Purple:

Whiting.....	10.00%
Mason Stain 6003	5.00%
Mason Stain 6338	0.50%

Opaque Pale Blue:

Zircopax	15.00%
Mason Stain 6364	3.00%

Translucent Pale Blue:

Cobalt Carbonate	0.75%
Iron Oxide	0.75 %

Translucent Dark Blue:

Cobalt Carbonate	2.00%
Iron Oxide.....	1.00%

Translucent Teal Blue:

Mason Stain 6371	0.75%
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Translucent Yellow:

Mason Stain 6450	6.00%
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Translucent Orange:

Mason Stain 6450	5.00%
Light Tone Rutile	10.00%

Translucent Pale Green:

Copper Carbonate.....	2.00%
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Translucent Dark Green:

Copper Carbonate.....	6.00%
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Translucent Pale Brown:

Manganese Dioxide.....	4.00%
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Translucent Dark Brown:

Manganese Dioxide.....	8.00%
Mason Stain 6600	0.50%

Black:

Mason Stain 6600	8.00 %
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Bronze Tan Matt

(Cone 5)

Whiting.....	21.51%
Zinc Oxide.....	9.14
G-200 Feldspar.....	50.54
Edgar Plastic Kaolin	12.90
Flint (400 Mesh).....	5.91
	100.00%
Add: Bentonite	2.15%
Light Rutile.....	5.38%

For Bronze Green Matt, add 0.5% cobalt oxide and 3% copper carbonate; for Bronze Blue Matt, add 1% cobalt oxide.

I use commercial stains to lessen the pitting and bubbling common to low-fire glazes colored with oxides and carbonates. The use of stains also widens the choice of colors. I opacify most of the Cone 06 glazes for true colors on the dark red earthenware clay we use, as its fired strength is superior to white or buff earthenware bodies. The red earthenware is also more plastic and forgiving, an important consideration for beginning potters.

Glossy Clear Base Glaze

(Cone 06)

Frit 3124 (Ferro)	85.0%
Edgar Plastic Kaolin	<u>15.0</u>
	100.0%

Color variations are possible with the following additions:

Opaque White:

Zircopax.....	16.0%
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Opaque Pink:

Zircopax	11.0%
Mason Stain 6001	6.0%

Opaque Purple:

Zircopax	11.0%
Mason Stain 6331	5.0%

Opaque Red-Crimson:

Zircopax	11.0%
Mason Stain 6003	5.0%

Opaque Yellow:

Zircopax.....	11.0%
Mason Stain #6450	5.0%

Translucent Oranye-Mustard:

Mason Stain 6450	5.0%
Light Tone Rutile	10.0%

Opaque Light Green:

Zircopax	11.0%
Mason Stain 6271	1.0%

Translucent Dark Green:

Mason Stain 6271	2.0%
Black Mason Stain #6600	0.5%

Opaque Pale Blue:

Zircopax	11.0%
Mason Stain 6364	3.0%

Opaque Medium Blue:

Zircopax	11.0%
Mason Stain 6313	1.0%

Translucent Dark Blue:

Mason Stain 6386	1.0%
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Translucent Brown:

Iron Oxide.....	2.0%
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Black:

Mason Stain 6600	8.0%
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Stoneware vase with cane handle, 10 inches tall, \$25, and stoneware coffee mug, 4 inches tall, \$12, by Susan Nykiel; stoneware vase, 9 inches tall, \$75, by Ray Bub.

A base matt glaze was adapted from a recipe given by Father Anthony Bellasor in the February 1994 CM.

chemistry and technology of working with ceramic materials; I also give homework assignments.

Between the eighth and ninth class meetings, I glaze fire the completed classwork, and we begin the ninth class with a critique of the students' finished pieces. They then start again at the potter's wheel, and I add handbuilding projects in the next four classes. We have another glazing class in the 14th week. The last class "final exam" is a one-day show of the students' best work in the Southern Vermont College art gallery. We also tour the marvelous collection of colonial and early American pottery at the Bennington Museum.

Another source of income is the artist residency. In May of 1991, I was artist-in-residence for two days at two Williamstown, Massachusetts, nursery schools. I have since been artist-in-residence for periods of two to four days in six different elementary schools in our area.

I break the four-day residency into two parts. For the first two days, I give demonstration-discussions at the potters wheel, taking successive groups of 15 to 25 students for 20- to 40-minute sessions. I see all the classes in the school, kindergarten through sixth grade, which can be 250 to 350 students. During each demonstration session, I usually make a vase, a bowl with a spout and a plate, as well as a hand-built frog or cat, adjusting my presentation for the different age levels. I tell them where clay is found, why it is sticky, what my typical day in the studio is like, and so forth, then answer lots of questions.

For the third day of my residency, the school principal chooses a focus group of three or four classes of 15 to 25 students. I bring clay into each classroom for one-hour sessions, demonstrate a hand building project (the voyager-in-a-canoe is a favorite of mine), then help the students do it with the assistance of the classroom teacher and a parent volunteer. We sign the kids' names on the bottom of each project with a classroom code number, and put them in

boxes. I transport the damp projects to our studio, dry them out, fire bisque fire them.

A week later, I return to the school with the bisque-fired projects, 10 bottles of acrylic paints and 30 plastic bowls. The schools always have lots of small paintbrushes. We set up three painting stations with 10 bowls each; the projects are distributed to the students, and they spend the one-hour session painting.

In addition, I usually try to arrange a showing or the painted works in the evening to give the kids an opportunity



Susan Nykiel gives one-on-one instruction to children working at the potter's wheel while husband, Ray Bub, helps others with handbuilding projects.

to receive praise for their accomplishments from the community. The sight of 80 to 100 colorful people-in-canoes paddling across the display tables is always quite remarkable, especially because of the tremendous variety of expression the kids achieve.

I charge \$125 per day for the residency, plus \$75 for materials and firing. I also try to bring back to our studio all the bowls, plates and vases I make during my throwing demonstrations, but am not always successful transporting the wet pots over our bumpy New England roads.

All during this period from 1990 to the present—since we stopped attending the wholesale fairs—Susan and I have sold our work retail through our showroom and wholesale to the small number of craft galleries who stayed with us.

In August of 1992, North Adams State College, in nearby North Adams, Massachusetts, approached me to offer

a part-time position teaching one 3-credit evening ceramics course. I accepted and have since taught one evening course per semester (two sections in autumn 1993) at the ceramics studio on campus. We use red earthenware and fire to Cone 06 because the North Adams kilns are only designed to reach 2000F.

The course structure is similar to that at Southern Vermont College, except that the North Adams State College ceramics studio only has 5 potter's wheels for 12 students. This has required a handbuilding project and a potter's wheel project for each class session. I am paid the standard part-time Massachusetts State College System stipend per course, plus an additional \$400 for mixing the glazes, as well as loading, firing and maintaining the kilns and other equipment.

Of course, the college teaching is only offered to me on a semester-to-semester basis, and there is no health care or other benefits. I want to emphasize that if younger potters think they will ever want to teach in a formal school

setting, they should seek a terminal degree, which in our field is a master of fine arts degree. I had thought that my four years of full-time apprenticeship training from 1970 through 1973 with well-known clay artists Kit Yin Tieng Snyder, Paul Soldner, Colin and Leslie Pearson, and Byron Temple (see "Apprenticing" in the April 1974 CM), would be equivalent to an M.F.A. degree, but I was wrong. Not many people outside our world of working with clay have ever heard of any of our leading figures, and since the academic world's product is certification and degrees, they want to be able to point to such certification when listing faculty credentials.

Sometimes patching together an income through teaching for two different colleges, residencies at elementary schools, and private classes for adults and children, along with sales of our pots, seems too scattered, but I am proud that I have found several ways to earn a living from functional pottery.