

Steeped In

 abqjournal.com/79070/north/steeped-in.html

Kathaleen Roberts / Journal Staff Writer

Short and stout was just the beginning.

The teapot is a model of domesticity that artists have liberated from kitchen drudgery.

Humble or elegant, quirky and abstract, the investigation of the teapot as an art form has reached an inventive peak. Artists have produced the most exotic teapots ever to grace the Mad Hatter's party. They have impersonated animals, vegetables and borne portraits of everyone from Queen Elizabeth to Oscar Wilde. From lighthearted whimsy to political satire, they've worn it all. "Good taste" is sometimes an option.

Both collectors and lovers of that fragrant brew can trace the curve of a handle or the sculpted grace of a contemporary vessel tonight at Santa Fe Clay's semi-annual national invitational exhibition "Tea for Two." Featuring works by 34 artists, inspiration ranges from the Day of the Dead to R. Crumb. Many of the potters have led workshops at the gallery.

If you go

WHAT: "Tea for Two"

WHEN: Reception 5-7 p.m. tonight. Through Feb. 18

WHERE: Santa Fe Clay, 545 Camino de la Familia

CONTACT: 984-1122

With a heritage dating to the Ming Dynasty, the teapot comes steeped in the past as it steams into the present. The

traditional teapot design, complete with that graceful spout, was developed in England during the mid-1600s. Teapots impart the comfort of ritual through the formal tea ceremony as well as a mother's hands "putting the kettle on."

Whether utilitarian objects or non-functioning works of art, teapots test both the skills and the imaginations of the most inventive ceramist. Fragile parts must be separately sculpted before joining the vessel, gallery owner Avra Leodas said.

Some climb like city blocks, subtly demanding to be viewed as architectural towers; others draw the viewer to contemplate a dusting of glaze or the curve of a belly. Some tell stories through painterly imagery; others sprout three-dimensional faces or vines. Prices can range from \$100 to \$3,000.

Carefree, Ariz., artist Les Lawrence pieced together a pot using nails and images of the dollar bill and the Mona Lisa, along with a woman in a bikini. Chuck Aydlett's stoneware teapot wears a crown above the sculpted portrait of a king.

Santa Fe's Francis Bliven spins teapots from a tiny studio in the back caverns of Santa Fe Clay. He turned to the teapot's symmetry of form out of physical necessity.

"I was throwing bowls and plates and I hurt my back because of the quantity of clay," he explained.

Making teapots brought him to a calmer place. A sketch of various hand-drawn forms hangs taped to his studio wall.

"I just like the amount of character they have," he said. "They really take on some expression."

Bliven's vessels are eminently practical. The lid fits snugly beneath the top of the handle to keep it from tumbling onto the table. A built-in infuser filters the tea. Bliven's best sales come from The Herb Store at Albuquerque's Nob Hill. He recently completed an order of dishes for Cafe Pasqual's restaurant in Santa Fe.

California's Michael Corney makes sculptural teapots inspired by Cubism and comic books. His current piece features an Uncle Sam on one side of the teapot with a mushroom cloud on its opposite.

Corney has been working in ceramics for 20 years.

"I have a central idea of an image – like the government and war," he said. "Quite often I'll do the positive on one side and the negative on the other. The images are all kind of related in this abstract idea. It's like contemporary society; it's like sensory overload. I love comic books, and my painting style is similar. It's a little chaotic and a little bit off-kilter."

A onetime Albuquerque resident, Comey is also inspired by petroglyphs. Although scientists guess at their meaning, viewers can piece together their own story from the recognizable forms.

"I put pictures on functional work," he added. "I love the ritual of dinner and talking. I also like that humbler form; it's not high art."

Ted Saupe views his ceramics as a series of architectural drawings.

"I was just thinking of it being a three-dimensional drawing of the teapot," he said.

The result is a hodgepodge of angular shapes stripped into an architectural skeleton scribbled with a spider's web of lines. You have to search to find a lid and/or a spout.

"After I made it, I thought it was like a diptych," said Saupe, who teaches ceramics at the University of Georgia.

"One thing I love about the teapot is the tradition of the tea ceremony in Japan," he continued. "It makes it kind of a ritual object."

The artist started making teapots about three years ago.

"As I was drawing them, I thought, 'Why not do it in clay?'" he said.

Santa Fe's John Sapienza made a flattened, geometric teapot with a green glaze that fades into black along the corners.

"It starts as a cylinder and then I create lines and flatten the sides with a paddle," he said.

"Every couple of months I'll make a batch," he continued. "It's easier to make a few at a time."

He produces separate groupings of spouts, handles and lids to start the process. "It's like an assembly line once you get going," he said.

Sapienza regularly sells his teapots at the annual Contemporary Clay Fair at the Santa Fe Women's Club.

"There's a lot of tea drinkers in Santa Fe, you know," he added. "And I think people like to have teapots just to look at the shape."