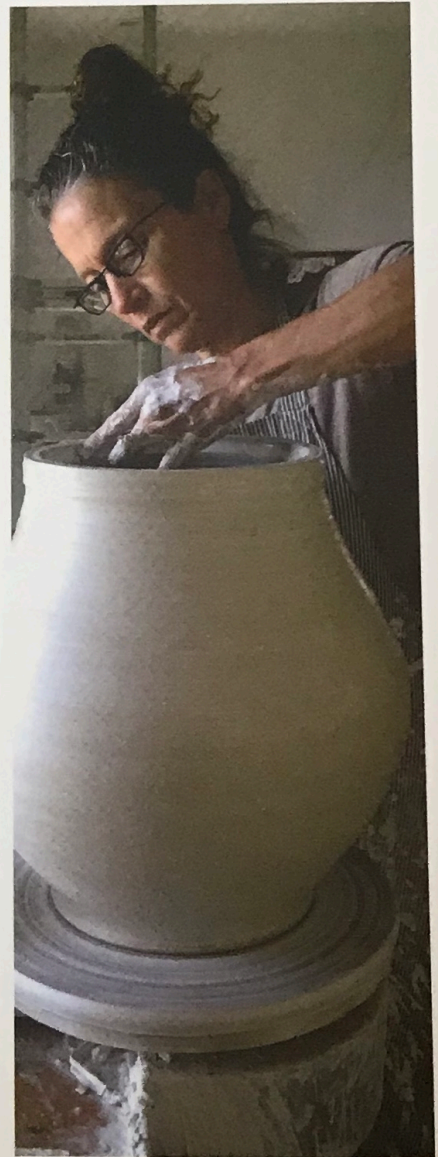
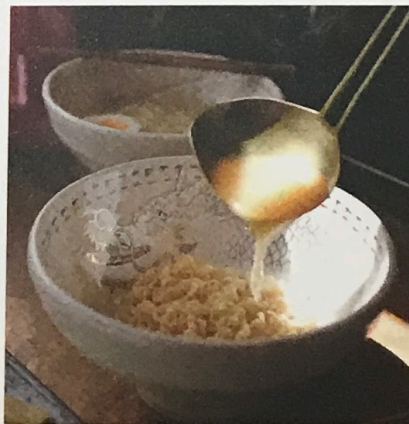
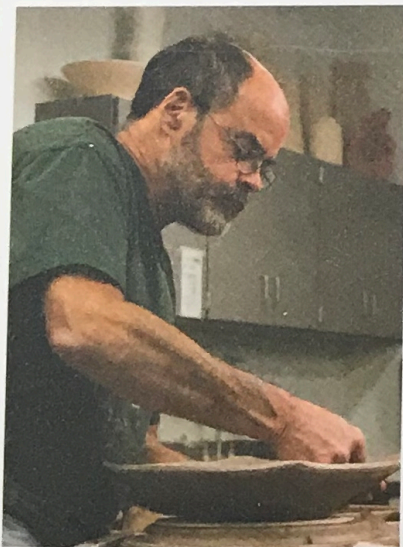
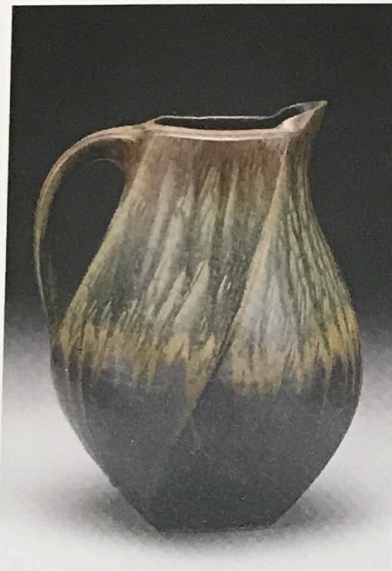


Janet Koplos

# WHAT MAKES A **POTTER**



Functional Pottery in America Today



ELLEN SHANKIN

## *In Love with the Life*

Ellen Shankin in her studio, Floyd, Virginia, 2018

*See photos in color section following p. 216*



Ellen Shankin, with her woodworker husband, Brad Warstler, lives and works in rural Virginia and raised two children there. And that's exactly as she wished: she says that the pottery process and the life were what initially drew her to clay, rather than love of the resulting objects. That came later.

Shankin was born in New York City in 1952 and grew up in suburban Mount Vernon. Her father was a doctor who loved lapidary and collected Chinese ivories and Japanese netsuke, which she also appreciated, although her attraction was more to painting. But an extraordinary experience opened another door for her.

*I was 13 and I went to probably what was the best summer camp in the world. It was a place called Buck's Rock, in New Milford, Connecticut. It was run by the Bulova family, and you had to be 13 to go there, 13 to 17. It was a place that completely changed my life. It was an art camp, and it was all camper driven, all about self-motivation and pursuing your own interest.*

*You woke up when you wanted to. If you woke up late, you missed breakfast. Too bad. There were live models, nudes to draw. I learned to weld; I*

*learned to carve wood; I learned macramé; I learned all kinds of things. The person that taught pottery was a RISD graduate student. He was really good. He just sort of sat on the wheel with me day in, day out, getting me through all of the difficult things. I ended up centering and making things pretty quickly because I had a lot of help. It was two months, all summer. There's something about mastering a skill, and throwing was way more compelling than carving wood or welding. It's so hard to imagine being able to do it, and then just getting an inkling into it was like candy for me. [Laughter]*

*Because I had had this Buck's Rock experience, of course it was also 1969–70, so that was a very hippie culture anyway, I chose Goddard College as a place to go to school. It's in northern Vermont, and it is exactly like Buck's Rock. You have maybe six people in your classes; you grade yourself. My*

first semester I wrote to my parents and said, "I'm taking one class you expected of me, and it's early childhood education (because I thought I would be a teacher), and then I'm taking pottery and revolutionary anarchy." [Laughter] Those were my three classes.

The first year that I was there, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, a potter from Australia—she worked with Cardew and Leach, this amazing woman who had a pottery in the center of France—came to Goddard College to teach. Gwyn had wanted to work with the Bread and Puppet Theater. She had seen them somewhere and fell in love with them, and they lived at Goddard. So the college said you can come and work with the Bread and Puppet Theater if you teach pottery for a year.

She and I became good friends. She is the reason I'm a potter, for sure. And we are like 100 percent different in our things that brought us to where we were. I loved clay, I loved trying to master that skill, and then I fell sort of in love with her and her life. It was seasonal; she was a woman by herself (her husband had died already and she lived alone), and she dug her clay, and she had a wood kiln and fired four times a year. There was something about this that was so much more meaningful than my parents' life.

But I couldn't care less about pottery. It took me years before I was really moved by what exists in the world or even what I could make. I don't find too many other potters that are like that. I was a really dull tool in allowing the language of clay to work its magic on me, for me to be able to have those feelings connected to the thousands of nuances that I have so much feeling about now. Now I'm so bereft when I rent a house at the beach and there are tin bowls to put your beautiful salad out in, how 90 percent of the world lives, and I have this richness of clay everywhere now.

In the beginning, I loved it as a material, unbelievably loved it. I would dream about moving it. It just completely filled me. You see your mark. You go like this, it goes like that, and it stays there forever. It's a powerful thing, and it got me that it's so ancient; people had been doing this for thousands of years—it came from the ground. It was just so real. That was very compelling to me.

After Pigott left, Shankin dropped out and apprenticed for a while to a Vermont potter who had

two daughters and a husband who also didn't have benefits or a salary, but she made this work. Being a mom was super important to me, I always knew that, and I was really glad to see that she managed all of that.

Then Shankin moved to Peters Valley, New Jersey. That was in the early days before Peters Valley really had any workshops. It was like an artist community. I knew enough to fire a kiln and make glazes and throw pots. It was the beginning of trying to sell things. It cost nothing to live there, like 60 bucks, so you didn't need to sell a lot. It was mostly to buy more materials. So I stayed there for a while and then I went to Penland. It was a Concentration session, and she found it rewarding. But more important, I met Brad, fell in love, had powerful stuff going on there too.

I think it was because of my time at Penland that I realized forms were starting to feel like they were doing things that I was wanting them to do. But glazes were just like, you know, there were six buckets and you dunk it in this or this or this. I had no idea what was in there, the science of it. It is such a deep field, ceramics. It was wanting more control over that end result that made me want to go to school. She went to RISD and was completely unhappy because it seemed too regimented. After a summer session and fall classes, she wanted to work with Cynthia Bringle over the January intersession (extra motivated by the fact that Warstler was living in North Carolina). But she butted heads with Norm Schulman, who insisted that she stay at RISD and take his winter session class. I just lost it. I said, "I quit; I'm going to North Carolina and not coming back." Now I think: What if my kids just quit college? [Laughter]

She went back to North Carolina but then transferred to Alfred. And that place was very much more flexible. Absolutely. They let me take graduate classes even though I was an undergraduate. I took Val [Cushing]'s glaze class, which is one of the most awesome classes ever taught. Alfred opened up my world to seeing pottery and loving pottery, for sure. That library in Alfred was the first place I spent a lot of time looking at books. That was like 1975, and I had started five years before. If I hadn't been opened up to the language of clay—I mean, I can be moved to tears in front of Jomon pots—I don't know that I could have gone on making functional pots, because



*I think it would have gotten boring. Because it became this deeper thing for me, I don't tire of it.*

Alfred teachers urged her to go on for an MFA, but she declined. *I wanted to move to the country—this all did happen—live in a rural place, have a rural life with some of the primal feeling that Gwyn imparted to me that she had about her life, and find people to buy this stuff so that I could keep doing it and raise children and have a good and meaningful and productive life. Graduate school was unnecessary for that. Now, the way my life has gone, maybe a graduate degree would have been a beneficial thing. I've had surgery on both hands. This is a hard practice on your body. But let's say the hand surgeries hadn't worked and I was really compromised, then teaching would have been my only option to stay connected to this life. I'm so powerfully a thrower that it would take completely useless wrists for me to explore whether handbuilding could take on that same thing for me. An MFA would have made college teaching an option. But that was never her goal. I don't want to teach at a university. I just want to be in the studio making pots. But I have really come to like going off different places four times a year and teaching in a workshop kind of way.*

Another change point in her life was receiving a \$20,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1990. She had been urged to apply by someone convinced that the NEA never gave grants to potters. *I sat down with myself and said this is really a nice honor. It lasts for like 15 minutes, and it's a lot of money, but things will come to you because of this and you have to say yes or that's all it is. I made myself do that, and it was very hard for me. The first was to give a presentation to NCECA. I had never been to an NCECA conference, but I knew what they were, and knew there would be hundreds of people watching me, and I had never demonstrated or spoken or shown slides or done anything, because I was just sitting here making pottery and trying to sell it. I had five slides; that's what I needed to get into a craft fair. And so I said yes, and I was just a nervous wreck. And then because I did that, I got asked to do a lot of workshops. And I had to force myself to say yes because it was so unsettling to me. I was not nervous to throw in front of people, not at all; I just didn't want to talk.*

The money went to several purposes. *We graveled this road and made it passable, because I wanted*

*people to be able to come here and buy pottery. That seemed important to me. I bought an electric kiln. I started saving money for the first time in my life, which we continued to do every year, which was great, because I had two young children and that was not easy. And we took our very first vacation. A friend had a boat in the Bahamas, so they flew down and stayed with him, cheaply. At the end of the year I called the NEA and said, "I have to account for everything. Do you want to know that the electric kiln is \$487, or do you just want to me to say electric kiln, road development?" She said, "Honey, we just want to know you didn't go to the Bahamas." [Laughter] I said, "You didn't say that." [Laughter] Needless to say, I did leave that \$1,000 off my NEA report.*

Shankin started with direct selling at craft fairs. *It's a big life of rejection when you do that. It was really hard and very discouraging because I had such a desire to make and make and make. If you couldn't sell what you had, what are you doing with this? It was really costly, and if you didn't make money then you couldn't fire the kiln. I started going to the Baltimore Craft Fair, which was a wholesale fair, and not the first year maybe but by the second year I could take orders for the whole year. So for me, that was perfect. I got to stay home with my children. I worked for three weeks, I glazed, I fired the kiln, I took a day off. I worked for three weeks, I glazed, I fired, I took a day off. Every month I sent work off. I felt like I had super control over what I made in the studio. If you go to Baltimore in February, whatever you show is what your next year is going to be about. There were always at least five galleries who I sold to. Their orders were like, "Just send me \$1,000 in the spring and \$1,000 in the fall; send whatever you want."*

*I would try to give them things that worked for them, but I tried to avoid them being horribly specific. I take a long time to work through a form. Maybe it will take me eight firings before I've resolved every part that I'm thinking of. And once I get to where I really like them, I really want to keep making them. So this worked for me in a lot of ways.*

*I got to control my creative time in the studio by losing money somewhere and making lots of money somewhere else. Salad bowls make a living for me. They're fast, they're easy; I guess I just could say I don't invest as much in those salad bowls as*



in other things, but it also suits my nature. There are days when I just don't want to have to agonize over every aspect of a pot. Some days I'm in a bad mood; I don't have patience; I just need something that works. And it's great that the somethings that work are the foundations of the income part of this.

I didn't need a lot of money. Our bills are really small. Our land was totally paid off in five years. That was the arrangement with the landlord. It was only \$15,000, that's all it cost, but it was hard, really hard, to come up with \$3,000 every year for five years to pay this off. But then it was done. And then we did have building costs, but I wasn't pressured the way other potters were to, say, keep making that casserole in a blue glaze because they knew they could sell it and they absolutely had to. What I wanted to do was salable enough that I got to do what I wanted to do and make a living. But I was creative about it.

The fact that Brad was also at home working had a slightly difficult aspect because neither of us had benefits. We always had healthcare. My dad was a doctor; I could never be a person without healthcare. But it allowed him to take care of the kids exactly half the time, so he had them every morning, and I got to be in the studio without a single interruption until noon, and then Brad goes to sleep every day after lunch and the kids would go to sleep with him, so sometimes I could work until 2 or 3, and then I was theirs and Brad was working. It made marriage hard for a bit, or just a little more distant, because when they would go to bed, both of us would be in the studio until midnight. And that was a lot of years, until they went to school.

I pretty much sold everything by wholesale when my children were young. When they got to be 11 or 12 and they would enjoy coming with me to a retail craft fair, I did the Smithsonian. Then she was part of starting 16 Hands. That involves two studio tours each year, and she also does Minnesota's St. Croix Valley Tour in May. The 16 Hands tour draws an audience mostly from North Carolina, plus people who have taken workshops with the 16 Hands participants. Shankin also maintains a gallery space on her property so that anyone can come any time and purchase pots by the honor system.

I did salt firing in Alfred. I'm not 100 percent sure how I got started. I did see Don Reitz's work and was just knocked over. Wow! And without even

knowing how much I had absorbed, things started getting bigger. It also owed a little bit to Gwyn. When we moved here, it's hard to have enough room to build a kiln, and it's a huge expense, so Alfred had shown me this way to build a castable kiln. It was actually cheaper than the electric kiln, \$400 or something. It was tiny, and I think I fired it 52 times before it caught a roof on fire. [Laughter] It got hauled to the dump, but it allowed me to get out of school and, without having any money, make the kind of pots I really wanted to be making. So for the first five years or something I did salt pots.

Even though I loved salt, everything was of one kind. Everything was noisy to me; the surfaces, they were runny and juicy and almost snotty, which for me was nice. I liked all of that stuff going on, and I liked that it felt kind of like rocks in a way. I would spray blasts of these washes that would make it modulated, but also more natural in a sense, without the hard line of a brush.

I could build a reduction kiln and use either ash glazes or fake ash glazes or something that would give me this but would also allow me to have a lot more quiet surface. So I reinvested in building this. It's like a curse that we're handy. Brad can do anything; I can do a lot. We laid every tile, every stone in this house. So when it came to building the kiln, he can weld; we built this kiln together, and it certainly reduced the money we had to spend. But the curse of the handy is that it takes years. [Laughter]

One thing that I'm involved with when I'm making these pots is fullness. I'm always looking for that, sort of this feeling of breath in the pots. I'm driven by line. How lines develop out of rims. Tautness, pressure, often lift. I was involved in dance when I was young. People have called this to my attention; when I talk about the pots, I start to have better posture. [Laughter]

There's something very organic about it to me that's very chrysalis-like, and seed pod-like, and I think the glazes contribute to a sense of a natural and organic development of a form. But I really feel like the potters who love the process are happier than those who just love the outcome. My glazes need to be sprayed for lots of reasons, and I'm in a bad mood for four days out of every cycle of making pottery because I'm having to wear masks and I have to pay an insane amount of attention to something that's amazingly boring.

*I would say there are definitely some pots that are influenced by architecture. I love buildings. I probably would have been an architect if I hadn't been a potter. I learned to build buildings at Goddard College. As a student you had to work for the college, work study, and at the time they were building the art building and my work study was to swing the hammer, and I really liked it. And then I lived with a guy and we built a house in northern Vermont. And then building this.*

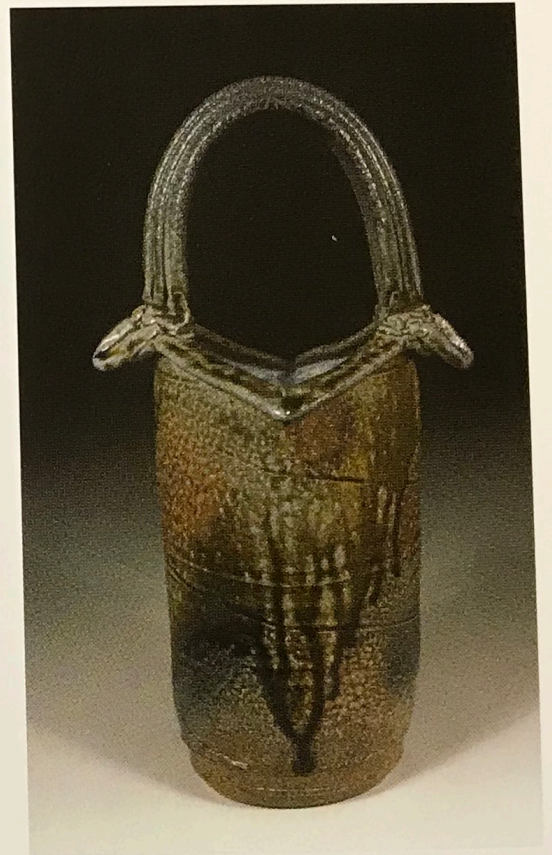
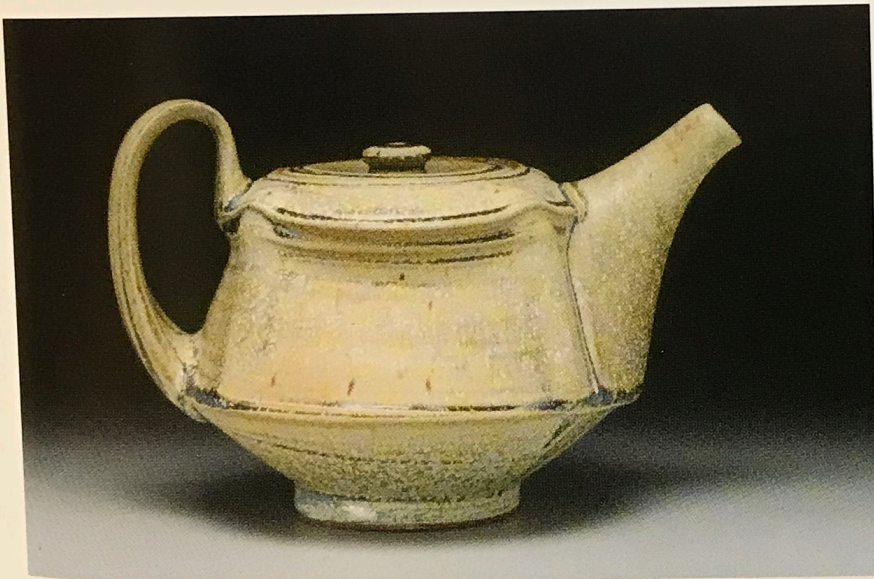
*I like those kinds of basic things. Even the kinds of shoes I wear. I have never worn a pair of high heels or a pointy-toed anything. [Laughter] Nothing about me is delicate or fragile. I'm big boned. A lot of people have asked me, like at those craft fairs, Where's the guy who made these? [Laughter] I look at this work, and I think it's the work of a tomboy. [Laughter] ■*



# ELLEN SHANKIN

**FRONT COVER** Twisted pitcher, 1992. Stoneware, thrown and altered, cone 10 reduction fired, 11" × 6.5" × 6.5".  
*Photo: Tim Barnwell*

**RIGHT** Salt basket, 1974. Stoneware, thrown and altered, salt fired with slip glazes and oxide washes sprayed on, 13" × 5.5" × 5.5".



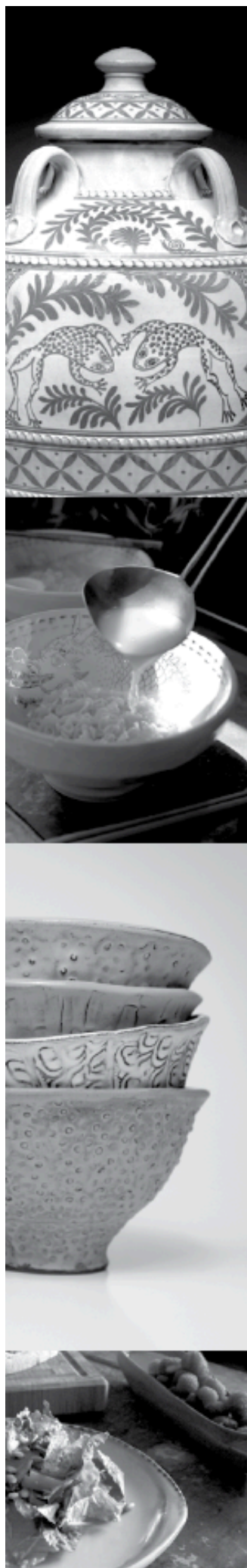
**LEFT** Teapot, 2005. Stoneware, thrown and altered, cone 10 reduction fired, crystal matte glaze, 5.5" × 8.5" × 6". *Photo: Tim Barnwell*

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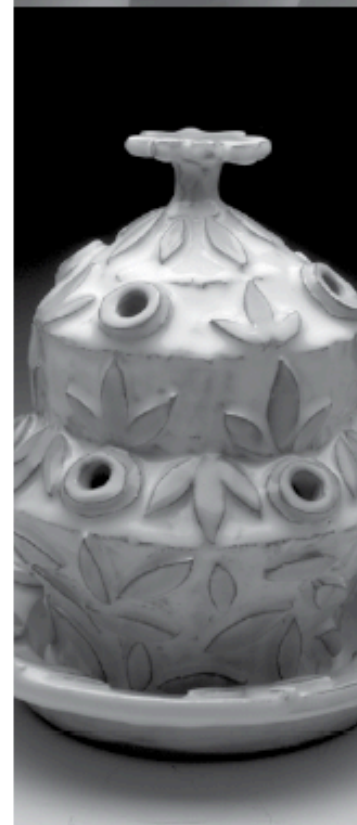
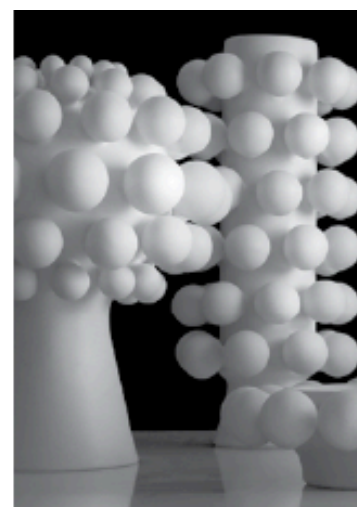






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In memory of Warren MacKenzie (1924–2018),  
indefatigable promoter of the philosophical, emotional,  
and practical values of functional pottery.

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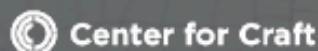
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