

## Tea Break with Otto Heino

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Despite the value of the Canadian loonie plunging and El Nino raging on the coast of Southern California, two incautious Canadian potters decided to leave an unusually warm Canadian winter and go south. When Richard and I picked up our rental car in Los Angeles and blasted up the San Diego freeway toward Santa Barbara I began to feel myself shift into the California ease of cars, freeways, hills and balmy breezes. After a brief visit with family in Santa Barbara, during which the fierce rains were punctuated by moderate amounts of sunshine, we ventured south and east to Ojai in the now lush California hills. Half an hour from Santa Barbara, Ojai has a reputation as the Californian's escape from the urban urgency of Los Angeles. For two collaborative potters it had the attraction as the home of Beatrice Wood (the 105-year-old potter) not to be confused with Beatrix Potter (the bunny lady) and the home of Otto Heino of Otto and Vivika Heino, legends of American ceramics.



Otto's Studio showroom

Ojai has a very pleasant shopping street dotted with small galleries, cappuccino cafes, garden shops and a small European bakery. When we expressed a desire to visit Otto, the manager at one of the galleries

responded enthusiastically. "He opens at 1:00 P.M. I'll call him up for you." We arranged to drive up for a visit but not before stopping at that bakery for three cinnamon Danish. Passing beautiful orange groves that line McAndrew Road, we arrive at The Pottery and are greeted by two friendly Scottish border collies followed by Otto himself. A vigorous man with a ready smile, he ushers us into the studio showroom where we admire and handle the strong work produced by himself and Vivika. We are immediately drawn to an ovoid woodfired vase.



We can't leave it behind and discover it to be one of the few, which also has Vivika's signature. Otto says it must be one the collectors missed as he wraps it up and shows us the award for the gold medal he won in 1978 in the Vallauris Biennale. We gave him a postcard with the two majolica pieces we had in the 1994 show.

The next stop is the studio and glaze room, a marvel of organization with much ongoing work. Otto tells us that he tries to have glaze tests in every kiln load and devotes a full day to making glazes. Although the throwing is direct and spirited, it is obvious that his well-crafted pots are the result of years of care and consideration. We go through the garden and emerge in the kiln area. Much of the workshop in this climate is out of doors. Beyond the kiln there is a car under wraps. Otto informs us proudly that it is his 1995 Rolls Royce. I sensed in the way he expressed himself regarding the Rolls that there was a genuine regard not for the "high status visibility" of the car, but rather a quiet, proud respect. Otto confirmed this immediately by telling us about his career in WWII as a right gunner on B-17 aircraft in the American Air Force. "I wasn't always Otto. My name was Aho. I am Finnish. The Air Force thought it would go better for me if I was shot down if I had a German name, so I became Otto . . . dog tags and all. As a reward for several successful bombing missions I was given a month off in England where I volunteered to work in the Rolls Royce factory. I have always loved the care and consideration that go into the building of the car and its engine."



Carol, Otto and one of his border collies posing in front of his "old" Rolls Royce

While Otto was on leave in England during the war, he also visited many museums and potteries. Convinced that he would try pottery when he got back to the United States, Otto enrolled in the New Hampshire League of Arts and Crafts and met Vivika, who was then the teacher at the league. They were married in 1950 and spent more than forty years teaching and working collaboratively.

Although Vivika is no longer with Otto, having passed away in 1995, the feeling I had from his gentle manner, the care and respect he bestows on his visitors, pots, car and home was of a generous sharing. It comes from a strong humanist-based work ethic that they both shared. Although coming to pottery separately, they formed a life together of potting and teaching on both the East and West coasts. They count as students many successful artists and potters and they have willingly shared their knowledge and given encouragement to many young potters by pursuing a life as makers.

Today, Otto is in a denim work shirt with a smart shirt and tie underneath. As we sit down for tea and Danish at the long welcoming table, his border collies come to rest their heads in my lap. A string of softly glowing copper pots frames the upper part of the long kitchen window and a view to the courtyard garden. "We used to have peacocks, but their screeching bothered the neighbors." Says Otto.

From my viewpoint at the table, I can see the tulip magnolia in full flower. "We bought the house from Beatrice Wood and set up the studio here in 1972", said Otto. The surroundings suggested a natural elegance that was well thought out, and evolving over time. Beatrice Wood's original house was filled with the simple treasures of the Heino's life. Other potter's fine works, a large Imari bowl and an Apache grain jar adorned the dining/kitchen area. On the wall are mounted the simple household kitchen utensils from another era and another place, perhaps New Hampshire where Otto and Vivika originally met.

For Richard and me, who have worked collaboratively as ceramic artists for twenty-five years, this visit with Otto is a confirmation of our beliefs. Even though one of us will have to someday carry on without

the other, the pursuit of ceramics is honorable and worthy. We often joke about the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu's saying, "A day without working is a day without eating." Although we find each day filled with work, often demanding and challenging, it is work in which we find new discoveries and



deep satisfaction. Shoji Hamada said that at seventy he was only beginning to understand the complex nature of ceramics. As I sat in Otto's kitchen, I was reminded of a time in 1980 when Richard and I stayed with Harry Davis in Nelson, New Zealand. The things he cared about surrounded Harry, pots and the tools to make them for others. In the small hallway there was a large temmoku teapot, a wedding present from Michael Cardew. Harry and May also had spent most of a lifetime sharing their knowledge and helping others to have a life as makers.

Otto, with his warm welcome and ready smile, exudes vitality and energy. His showroom is bursting with vigorous pots and the studio is filled with large pots in process. "I am making murals for the Orient," he says, "And cheques always come in the mail." Another Rolls Royce is on order - a convertible. "Vivika and I never had children, and you can't take it with you," says Otto. Although Vivika is no longer with him, Otto has carried on with a dedication doing a thing he loves and shared with her for more

than forty years, living every day with a youthful exuberance, a model of the potter's life.