

j.c. herman **ceramics**
10th anniversary **2011 - 2021**









series of stylized traditional amsterdam pottery shapes, made from clay dug up at the construction of the new amsterdam metro tunnel









after all, people want to hear a story...

here is a story by herman verhagen.

on april 1, 2011 i officially opened my pottery business, named **j.c. herman** at the sint janstraat in amsterdam. i had some ideas why making ceramics would be useful as well as fun and i was convinced of potential success. but you never know... in the end i just took the plunge.

i have now made at least ten thousand ceramic products and together with my pottery workshop, we are ten years older, wiser and richer. for this my *deep gratitude goes to my wonderful customers.*

because i myself have been inspired by various potters as well as other people, i want to share my own works and the ideas from which they arose and what has followed from them.

a publication for fun and perhaps for inspiration. because as it turned out my plunge was successful.



1. fun

what moves one to become a potter?

in my case this:

1. i had taken a course as a teenager, 16–17 years old, so i knew something of what the job entailed
2. i was looking for a pot (for a plant) that i couldn't find and decided to make one myself, because of point 1
3. i wanted to do work in which i and my qualities would come into their own

in 2009 i had been living in paris for some years, where i moved after graduating from the rietveld art academy in amsterdam. i had expected to be welcomed with open arms as an exotic (video-)artist and also to find a *nouvelle vague*, because i figured that berlin was on the decline as the art center of europe.

both assumptions turned out to be wrong.

in paris i was not considered an interesting artist because my education was not french, and i had very little network there. so my hoped-for flashy career turned out to be a meager star in an otherwise pretty empty sky. because artistically there was little of exception in paris. as a result, from 2006 i worked for an internet company, spending my modest income on post-graduate training (to *become* a french artist) and making video art, which was shown occasionally in an exhibition or film festival.

it brought neither name nor fame nor fortune and that began to frustrate me. i wanted to use my time better and had come up with this magic formula: *i want to monetize my creative abilities*. with the aim of doing fun (instead of stupid) work for my livelihood and so continue making un(der)paid video art.

in this same period i had been looking for a plant pot for about a year. i had a very specific idea about its shape and colour. after unsuccessfully going through flea markets, vide greniers and antique dealers, i happened upon a local potter around a corner on montmartre, called *affini'terre*. staring in the shop window, i thought: *ha! i will just make the pot myself!* once inside, waiting for the potter that was instructing his students in the back, the thought (or epiphany) suddenly dawned on me: *why would i be the only person on the lookout for a very specific ceramic item?* i also saw the unattractive products for sale that were made by the potter or his students, which confirmed my idea that here could be a gap in the market.

the next day i posted on facebook:

herman verhagen is considering pottery.as a profession.
5 likes.

fueled largely by despair about my future, both as an office clerk and an artist, i did everything i could to realise this *consideed* plan. i visited various pottery schools and chose the most suitable one. then i applied for a national retraining fund. with evidently irresistible arguments, because to my happy surprise, the application was awarded. that same year i started training as a potter.

in france, the name *artisan* (craftsman/woman/human) is protected; a number of hours, about a school year, of professional knowledge must have been acquired before one may use this designation. and so i had wheel throwing classes almost every day, learned about glazing, modeling and various decoration techniques.

since my visit to *affini'terre* my plan was to open a shop/workshop in a prominent location – so not some back alley in montmartre. because to sell well you have to be seen and i wanted to sell a lot, not to get rich, but to gain as much experience as possible.

accompanied by a fresh diploma, i moved back to amsterdam in 2010. actually i wanted to start in paris, but the retail rents in the center there are so high and my french was so mediocre that amsterdam seemed like a safer place to start.

i had also heard about *project 1012* that aimed to reduce crime in the red light district, through what i now would call *gentrification through planning*. but at the time i mainly saw it as an opportunity for an affordable space in the city centre.

i found a space (after half a year of annoying a *project 1012* manager with my daily calls) on the sint jansstraat, just around the corner from the dam.

j.c. herman pottery, now: **ceramics**, opened on april 1, 2011.

in the first three years i made hundreds of plates, bowls and vases on the sint jansstraat. the location was not bad, but i figured that if i had a more affluent location i would also sell more. that turned out to be a correct estimate, because when i moved to the classy herenstraat (between the 9 straatjes and haarlemmerstraat) in 2014, i finally had, in addition to doubled rent, an acceptable income.

however, it also meant a lot of work that was mostly benefitting the landlord, who earned more from it than i did. my biggest source of income came from selling to the catering industry and i didn't need a shop for that. after 3 years at the herenstraat i thought i had trained myself enough, at least in such a way that the goal of *selling as much as possible in order to gain experience* had become superfluous.

putting those two together (revenue mainly from outside the store + enough experience), it seemed sensible to me to concentrate on production only for the catering industry and for my webshop, which has been online since 2010. and so in 2017 i closed the store and moved the studio to *het veem*, still quite central. where it is to this day.

with the extra time i got by quitting my job as a shopassistant—that-had-to-produce-his-own-stock, i went to asia for half a year at the end of 2018 to learn everything i could about the ceramics tradition there. both historical (by visiting museums) and current (visiting potters, taking courses). my greatest inspiration in the ceramic field was and still is in asia, especially in the creative design and inventiveness of china.

the studio of **j.c. herman ceramics** now produces tableware for the catering industry (to order), private individuals (via the webshop) and shops (resellers of tableware and special editions).

i organize an open studio about every 3 months where unique items such as vases, watering cans, fruit bowls and lamps are sold. sometimes collaborations with other artists are presented. customers can pick up or place orders while viewing the workshop where the entire production process can be seen: from clay to kiln. there is ceramics, time, wine, sometimes a lost potter and it is always a joy to see old and new customers and friends together.



first anniversary
sint janstraat, 2012



transporting clay from
haarlem to amsterdam



shop at herenstraat

wheel throwing master in paris



porcelain master in jingdezhen



2. useful

besides this practical story, there is another answer to the question *what moves one to become a potter?*

after being an artist for several years, i didn't quite know why art was so important. and this wasn't just because i failed to generate an income from it. all my video art (see instagram *herman_verhagen*) is about the wish to disappear. i made a video of a pierrot drowning himself, a black and white 16mm film about anne frank disappearing into her own mental attic, a series of computer animations featuring self-destructing machines, including one pulling out its own plug, et cetera.

as an artist i eventually disappeared myself, namely in the online platform *second life*, where i started building virtual interactive installations (this was my post-academic research for the *e.n.s.a.d.* in paris). i disappeared digitally. and the platform with me.

this wish for a (dis)solution was partly personal, but it was also about art itself. i didn't think art had a right to exist, but it did exist. and it was fun too. or better: it delivers interesting people (artists). i frequently ended up reading about marcel duchamp. the man who stretched the playing field of art in such a way that everything could be art and therefore no longer had any meaning and i came to the conclusion that art is not so important. it brings pleasure. or artists do so. and then they don't even have to make anything.

but it doesn't quite work that way, because i'm basically an artist who doesn't make anything and before you know it i've become a potter.

besides the fact that as an artist, you are supposed to make things (or music, performances etc.) you also have to platform them. a diary may have literary qualities, but if no one but the writer reads it, it doesn't produce culture. look at anne frank.

so i thought that if i had a platform like that, i (and others, for that matter) should have something interesting to say. my message was *disappearance* so i actually had not much to say.

when i decided to start a pottery workshop, i considered it an artistic project for a while. because suddenly i had a platform on which i knew what to say about culture: globalism and industrialization lead to isolation and pollution! not good!

by showing that local and (therefore) environmentally friendly production can be done for a reasonable price, i was able to set an example for society. *my pottery workshop showed an alternative model.*

now i no longer think that my pottery is a work of art, nor that i make works of art. how meaningful my ceramics are is also doubtful (given the cumbersomeness of handicrafts compared to industrial production) but there is no denying that a plate is useful to eat from. because otherwise you have to eat from the floor, the table or your lap and that makes things messy.

the nice thing is that everyone enjoys it: both the maker and the user.





3. thoughts

a person does not become a potter because of the income (i guess).
i, in any case, have never been motivated by the desire to make money.
money is a means (not an end) that helps me shape life as i wish
and sometimes through my work i can even nudge culture in general
in the direction i see fit.

i combine the two –as already implied above– in my pottery business:
*fun work for me and proof that local, sustainable handmade products
can be affordable.*

in the course of these last ten years i have come to various ideas and
insights through my work. these –especially insights– are somewhat
random, so please read the following as an *unstructured list*
of the ones that i find important enough to share.



one of my most important insights is that it sometimes seems that, being
an entrepreneur, *you have to let go of your principles,*
in order not to lose your customers.

it's almost like contemporary politics; you have to serve your market.
but that's nonsense. the market is volatile and polymorphic.
as an entrepreneur (or prime minister) you shouldn't do that.
or to state it more subtle: *there is a problematic dialogue
between the entrepreneur and the market.*

that insight started with the discovery of the ephemeral nature of fashions:
in 2011, everyone wanted red ceramics. red is a difficult color in ceramics,
but after a year i nonetheless produced all kinds of red items.
meanwhile, hipsterism had gained such ground that by 2012, everyone was
looking for salmon pinks and sand tones (still in vogue by the way).

conclusion: *don't follow the market,*
because your pantry will be full of red crockery.

in addition, changing legislation also has an impact on the market. the store had paper bags, because plastic is bad for the environment and i don't want to leave a carbon footprint. at least half of my customers became terribly insecure about this, because paper could tear in the rain or in any case because of the weight of my albeit light ceramics.

after 3 years of lending an ear to complaints and fears, i gave in and ordered plastic bags. partly because i understood that some of the criticism was also about a kind of carelessness i had (and have) towards my product: it should be protected with care.

a week or so after i received the minimum order unit of 6,000 bags, european law came in, requiring retailers to sell and not give away plastic bags. suddenly everyone had their own bag, prestigious shops also switched to paper bags and i am still left with thousands of plastic bags...

a principle that was difficult to maintain was *working locally for a local community*.

our local clay results in brittle ceramics and for glaze most of the basic ingredients can only be found in germany or france.

in 2011 i peddled on my cargo bike to haarlem, where the nearest ceramic wholesaler is. this was to not harm the environment, which was naive or downright stupid of me, because that clay came to haarlem from all over the world by truck, boat or plane. i fear that my exhaustion from the cargo bike only made me suffer and that it did little for the environment.

and then the store in the center of amsterdam mainly attracted tourists instead of locals. my full king's day mini-edition (15 red-white-blue cups) went to japan and my first half-meter-high vase went with a collector to new york.

and there was the catering industry in paris, which was influenced by the danish *noma* (that held the position of best restaurant in the world at the time) and as such caused an excessive interest in scandinavian ceramics. and for france amsterdam is scandinavia.

not to mention *bistro rojiura* in tokyo, who also discovered me within a year and ordered plates, an honour and financially very welcome. but local it was not. admittedly, i could have kept those orders out, but keeping customers out of the store is more difficult. so another ideal wavered there.

affordability is another principle that i struggle to maintain.

i wanted handmade products to be accessible to everyone and that is feasible by excluding brokering and transport. but it does mean that you have to work endlessly for minimum wage. i found a low price not only important for accessibility, but also logical because the quality of my work (in the start) was not high enough to justify high prices. by now it has that quality and although i am still not expensive for a potter, the price-quality ratio is more in accordance with the market than in the beginning – although the prices have not changed since 2015.

two things played a role:

1. that i was approached repeatedly by colleagues, asking me to increase my prices, because i would negatively influence the market and
2. that people in my shop told me everything was way too cheap. that often sounded as if they were offended, but it must have been to make me appreciate my products more: apparently the price expresses the quality. or that i have always underestimated my work. which i recommend to everyone by the way, because it provides a lot of freedom. in any case, this also comes down to the struggle between one's own principles and adapting to the market.

an entirely different insight is that it is almost impossible to *modernize tradition*.

i mainly think of decoration here. renewing forms or shapes is simpler, because it comes down to styling (*less is more* still works, partly because minimalism is often confused with essentialism), but decorative patterns or images almost always seem meaningless.

once meaning is suggested, it becomes art. see grayson perry.

at first i thought it was because the medium no longer corresponds to our era: why paint flowers on ceramics, when you can just google flowers?

see walter benjamin.

royal delft tries to do something modern with old flower patterns, which results in a meaningless collage. see delft.

or meissen: same story (but slightly more charming).

in china i met a traditional blue–painter (someone who paints with cobalt blue on porcelain), huang fei, who tried to break free from tradition and to achieve abstraction through large sweeps on bowls and vases. but in the end he painted a very small fisherman in it somewhere. which turned the sweeps into mist. or landscapes.

he explained himself by pointing to the long chinese imagery tradition in which such a fisherman represents contemplation in solitude, for example.

i realized that it is not so much the *medium* that stands in the way of changing traditional decoration, but the *story told*.

as oswald spengler puts it in his books about the end of our culture: we can only repeat and reframe, but there are no new stories.

i must admit that i have been guilty of the opposite of modernizing:

historicising. i mean repeating old patterns but without

(the goal of) making a replica. but i had my reasons for it.

in the absence of contemporary idols (i am no longer a fan of *the genius* in art) i looked for them in the past and wanted to learn from old masters.

mainly in asia (where ceramics is by the way the *mother of arts*, not architecture as in the west) i found a source of mastery.

but 17th century delftware is also unparalleled.

by copying old shapes and -mea culpa- decorative patterns, i created a transhistorical master-student relationship, so as to learn to master the technique. much later i read *the unknown craftsman* by soetsu yanagi, which states that all art begins with craft. art is created through the experience that follows from repetition. *mastery*, i read.

for example: someone who has been painting bowls with fish for 20 years will be able to paint such a fish in one simple brush stroke, at least his hand will not falter.

here two interesting –in my opinion– asian views emerge:

- *art is control* (perhaps as opposed to expression)

- *if the copy exceeds the original, authenticity is irrelevant*

i subscribe to the latter, but not like in asia, where people are willing to pay a lot for a good copy (because that copy shows the mastery just as well as the original), but because i think that the individual and (its) authenticity in the west is overrated and i like to fight that.

mastery is worth something, but so is a child's drawing.

another insight fits the previous one: the *appreciation of tradition*.

i find innovation very interesting, especially when its meaning becomes problematic (as just mentioned: the meaning of patterns, but also for example in medical ethics or a.i.), because it shows the weaknesses of that new direction.

renewal does not necessarily mean destruction of the past. in the 70s and 80s in the art academies of the netherlands, the plaster replicas of classical statues (the glyptotheks) were thrown away en masse, because students were not supposed to copy old masters. art was the most individual expression of the most individual emotion, so copyism was excluded.

i think such a brutal change is too harsh.

by the way: i just pleaded (with regard to decoration) for a return to the old threesome *translatio-imitatio-aemulatio*, meaning: development by means of surpassing the master. *we should not erase history but surpass it*. one could freely apply this sentence to the current *cancel culture*.

in any case, in 2015 i considered expanding my business.

that meant: looking for staff. my training in france demanded, as mentioned, a certain number of hours of experience as the official criterion for certification. i thought at the time that i simply showed my skills or even talent by throwing a certain number of cups within half an hour; this was part of the exam. but it turned out to be a kind of assessment for the (artisanal) ceramic industry. *it wasn't about me!*

by the time i was looking for staff to produce my product lines, i discovered that production-potters were no longer trained in the netherlands.

the same for glass by the way. the professional pottery training in gouda focuses on the individual expression of the maker, not on production. there is a logic in that, because we can now produce industrial ceramics, the need to do this manually seems to have disappeared.

nevertheless, i suddenly saw the value of french conservatism. i could never have learned my efficient production method –which is now fortunately valued again– if tradition had been set aside by the (temporary) belief that the individual is the core of our society.

i in the meantime, couldn't find staff in the netherlands and had to train people myself, which is expensive. i postponed my expansion plans after a year of unprofitable investment. but it also dawned on me that *if we throw knowledge away it is not easily regained*.

you can understand my deep respect and gratitude for hu shifu xiao, who taught me in jingdezhen (china) all the methods of wheelthrown porcelain and thus transferred within a single month about 1,400 years of experience to me.

finally: *not an insight but a dilemma.*

something that has been extremely effectively for me is placing a stamp with **j.c. herman ceramics** on each item – since june 2020 accompanied by the production date. many private customers but above all restaurant chefs have found me by looking under their plate or bowl to track down the producer.

superficially there seems nothing wrong with it, but i have been ambivalent about it from the start. such a stamp is not only informative, it is also branding. and branding smells like *consumer lifestyle*.

both of which annoy me, because they incorrectly fill in what i described above: *the lack of a story*.

in any case, they are both elements that have nothing to do with the actual product. handmade ceramics already have an aura, which i find problematic (why should things be *animated*, have a *soul*?), but branding and certainly consumer lifestyle add something inappropriate to the product. it is by definition *eccentric value*.

perhaps it is of no value at all, though it is easily paid for.

in order to undo the branding aspect of my stamping somewhat, since 2020 i stopped displaying the company name in a standard font – because that was a *logo*.









herman verhagen and tableware stock in the studio in *het veem*, 2021



products before firing in the studio in het veem, 2020

in 10 years of pottery making i have thoroughly explored the ceramic domain and appropriated the necessary techniques to the best of my ability. i was led by the idea that *if i knew of nothing better to do with my life, at least i wouldn't harm anyone by ecologically producing useful products.*

in jingdezhen, the cradle of porcelain, in china, i made one of my last video works, that reads like a manifesto (two sequences of that video can be found on instagram *herman_verhagen* and a videostill is on the cover of this publication). i explicitly speak out against mass production and industrial perfection and claim a certain disinterest in ceramics and materialism in general. *i prefer to convey a message i claim in that manifesto.*

as i do, for example, in this publication.

meanwhile always yours sincerely,
j ohannes c ornelis **herman** verhagen

the title of this publication refers to a common misconception about the 'demands' of the market although i think local life is rich enough to not prefer globalism, i decided to publish this text in english, because we live in the year 2021
also i am aware that publishing produces waste and reeks like marketing, but –as you may understand after reading this text– i'd rather convey a message than disappear

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