

Comment

Cobalt Blues by Cliff Glover

Most studio potters piece together a livelihood from numerous strategies. I consign work at galleries, hazard the crowds at craft shows, squeeze in a few wholesale accounts if I'm desperate, and take the occasional special order. In this last category, one of my local patrons recently asked me to make some mugs for her.

"My husband agreed to buy me a set for Christmas," she said. "Do you have time to make them?"

I assured her I did, grateful for an easy order to knock out. Usually, "special order" is synonymous with "learning experience" or Murphys law.

"How many would you like?" I asked.

"Were thinking about 12," she replied. "And the glaze?"

"Well, our kitchen is blue, so we thought blue mugs would match the cabinets. Cobalt blue."

Even before she had spoken, I had had a premonition. Or, perhaps, I knew the odds were on blue. Still, I was hoping that she would ask for Shino or another yummy glaze.

There was a brief silence, as I tried to come up with a convincing argument in favor of other color schemes. I don't like losing an order on principle, but for the past few years I had been preaching about the dangers of getting addicted to blue. I drew together a pair of rapidly thinning eyebrows and exhaled a gentle response.

"Have you considered any other glazes? Something that might contrast with your blue kitchen and perhaps even enhance it? You know, the Japanese take advantage of many kinds of pots for serving a meal. On the table, they'll mix together porcelain, stoneware and earthenware, each pot special in itself. This way they are not trapped into a certain style, but can explore the full breadth of possibilities, enjoying the opportunity to serve food in a number of special ways."

"That's very interesting. I never knew that," she said.

"I'll tell you what," I continued, relieved that I had her attention, confident that she was boarding the other-than-blue bandwagon. "Why don't you go down to the gallery that sells my work and look at the glazes, then get back to me on color choice?"

She agreed, and we decided to put the mugs on hold.

Some might think it stupid to turn away such an easy order, for if there is any predictable glaze, it must be cobalt blue. But my feelings about blue have turned into a personal crusade; its roots started in 1992, during the annual Mendocino Art Center Thanksgiving fair—the second fair in my short career.

A fellow potter, a friend who often fired her work with wood and salt, was also selling at this fair. In fact, she had unloaded a kiln just that morning and I happened to be there when the door was

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unbricked. As always, I expected to see her standard reduction palette—celadons, copper reds, Shinos. However, to my amazement, she had filled the chamber full with cobalt blue. Why would she do such a thing? Why waste all that gas on a purely oxidation glaze?

Curious, I hung around as she pulled out the hot bowls, plates and mugs, and set them on a nearby table. I had never seen a load of such pristine beauty. They were as clear and blue as Lake Tahoe was before the algae settled in. I could see by the smile on her face that she was pleased. She knew the public had a visceral attraction to cobalt blue, and would come galloping to her wares like thirsty horses to a watering trough.

That fact soon became my own revelation or, rather, revulsion. I knew blue was popular, but I still imagined there were plenty of folks who liked other, less perfect glazes. When the opening bell rang and the first customers rushed in to examine our work, I expected my own pots to sell as well as my friend's, thereby relieving me of her knowing smile.

The first hour was tolerable, the second less so. By the third hour, while I hadn't sold a pot, she was strutting up and down the aisle, crowing, "Cobalt blue, cobalt blue." I wanted to strangle her, break all her pots, and quit pottery forever. Instead, I vowed to never, ever, use cobalt blue. I would go my own way and let the shards fall as they will.

Some might ask, "What's so bad about cobalt blue?" I'll tell you. Using cobalt blue is akin to insider trading. At first the returns are spectacular, but sooner or later you will pay. Unconsciously, a part of us knows this, and some potters are determined to stay away. We know that using cobalt blue to increase sales will lead to making more blue bowls, ad infinitum.

Joe Bennion, a well-known potter from Utah, learned the hard way. In the video, *The Potters Meal*, Bennion recounts how he lost his artistic bearings, pandering to a market that wanted cute country pottery decorated with blue.

"The more blue on them, the better they sold," he said, "and I woke up one morning to the fact that my kiln had been cooled for four or five days, but I wasn't interested in unloading it. It was

just another task, like, you know, we have to go shovel the snow today, or something. I think when that happens, a person's work has become spiritually dead or pretty close to it....So I went off and didn't make pots for a while; when I came back, I made pots that excited me."

And there are other public enemies besides cobalt blue. We've lost whole communities of fine potters to rutile blue. They saw a particular guy getting rich off it, his sales were rumored to be in the six figures, and they wanted in on the action. Now you see the glaze everywhere, and it's boring.

One of my best friends has been trying to get off the stuff for years, but she just can't. It's not her fault. Gallery owners are also stuck on blue.

Recently, this same friend was taken aside by a proprietor who needed to point out that all her work had sold except for one temmoku coffee mug—a mug that my friend loved for its rich, almost black color that broke into rusty browns across a body cut into swirled facets. Never mind changing the display to show off the mug's beauty, or perhaps even encouraging my friend to use the temmoku with a contrasting color or on a different form. No, give me blue, or else kiss your sweet consignment deal good-bye.

It's not that earth tones don't sell. When they are displayed well, they sell as fast as anything else—probably because they are in short supply. But gallery owners worry about their incomes as much as potters, so we're all big blue dependent.

There is, of course, a lot of middle ground. Indeed, I must admit I have had my own flirtations with cobalt blue. I once made a dazzling blue teapot, with gold luster on the rim. "You want cobalt blue?" I had questioned to no one in particular. "I'll give you cobalt blue!" It was my best-selling, highest-priced teapot—until recently when I made the one of my dreams.

This dream teapot was glazed matt black, with two rich splashes of green that cascaded down the sides like liquid emeralds. It sold in just a few days to a couple who had been searching two-and-a-half years for a teapot. I know it will be used until it breaks. I can't tell you how much confidence that sale gave me in continuing to go my own way.

Besides the selling of your soul, the trouble with blue is it makes you dodge

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the glaze problem. Every potter knows what I'm talking about. Early in our careers, we use school glazes, workshop glazes, dozens of recipes that work well if we can put them on the right clay body and fire them to the right cone. But sooner or later, we have to decide whether we really like those glazes, whether we have a natural affinity for their colors, their textures. Quite often the answer is no.

The glazes we like most are often troublesome. They pinhole, crawl and/or are sensitive to application, temperature and atmosphere. They throw us into a depression or lift us into the clouds.

My favorite glaze, Rufus Rust, is a tricky devil that I got from Pennsylvania potter Jack Troy, who mixed it by the garbage-cans full for his pottery classes. When that baby comes out right, nothing can touch its warmth. But I've been firing it for ten years, and it still causes me trouble. Maybe one day I'll be able to make it settle down and behave properly.

If you're lucky, someone notices when you've gone astray. One of the best workshops I ever took was on once-firing tech-

niques with Missouri potter Stephen Hill. The experience was so good and the glazes so predictable that I used them long after the workshop had ended.

A couple of years later, I ran into Hill again and invited him to see the new work I had just fired. He didn't know I was still using the workshop glazes—the Blue Ash, Stony Blue and 232 Clear. (It had taken Hill 232 tests to get this one right.) I was proud of my forms, and how much I'd progressed since we had last met. I thought he might even be flattered that I was using his glazes with so much success. To his credit, Hill was kind, but emphatic. "Cliff," he said, "you've got to find your own glazes."

As with any craft, we all run into spiritual roadblocks trying to make art and ends meet, and we compromise. I throw anywhere from 40 to 60 vases at a time—all the same shape, all the same glaze—to pay the bills. And I make my share of American rice bowls, even though the whole idea is stupid. I mean, why ruin a nice rim for a pair of chopsticks? I have even committed the worst sacrilege and made cobalt blue rice bowls, solely at the behest of a friend.

Last year, I even fired a whole kiln

load of vases with a particular bronze glaze because it was such a good seller. I learned my lesson, though. The glaze overfired, underfired and bloated everywhere except in one particular zone in the kiln. It was a good lesson—not only about becoming dependent or infatuated with one glaze to the exclusion of all others, but also about maintaining some balance while facing the marketplace. Even if your bills pile up, you should always have something in the kiln you care about. There has got to be something, no matter how small, that you look forward to seeing.

These days I'll slip some blue into the glazing process as a highlight, as a necessary ingredient for, say, a landscape. As for selling the work, the market will find us when we give it a chance; the only problem is hanging in there long enough without becoming dispirited. Taking the high road is always hard—that customer who wanted me to make a set of blue mugs never called back.

The author *A previous contributor to Ceramics Monthly* (see "Mud, Sweat and Tears" in the September 1999 issue). *Cliff Glover resides in Albion, California.*

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