

The Evolution of an Idea

RAY BUB'S REASSEMBLED RING TEAPOTS

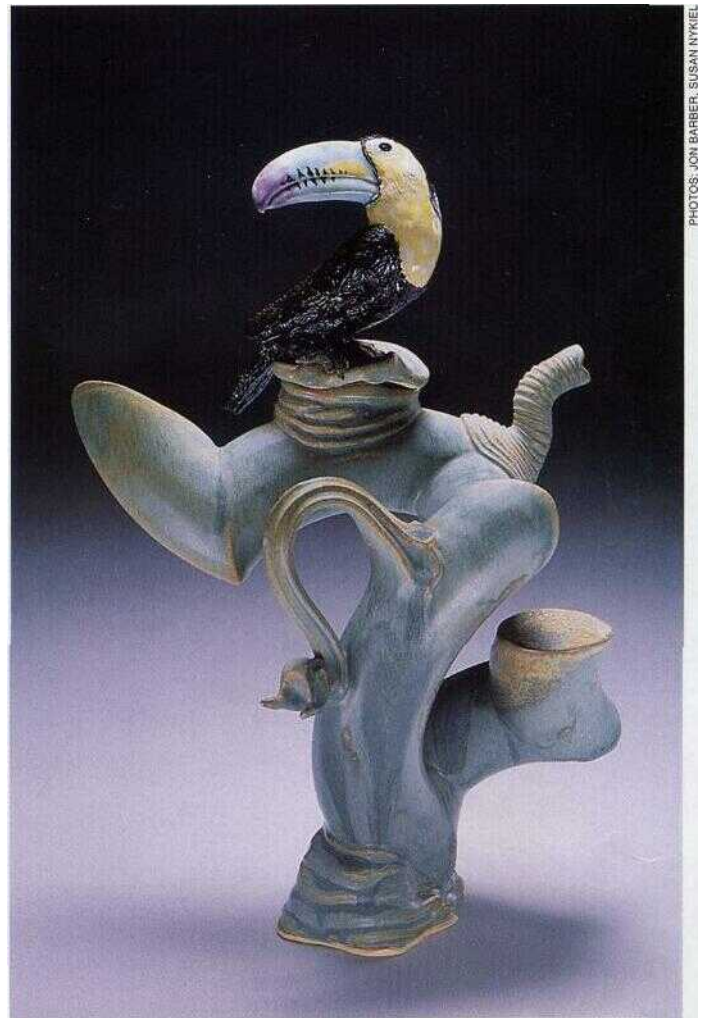
by Paul Park

The teapot has fascinated ceramics artists in both the East and the West for the past 600 years. It is the queen of pottery shapes, a formal puzzle with limitless solutions. As a result, the challenge of making something new, a unique and compelling functional teapot, is a demanding one.

Ray Bub has been making pottery and teaching students at his Studio in Pownal, Vermont, for 34 years (see "Teaching in the Studio" in the November 1995 CM). He had been intrigued with the teapot format for some time before he took his Southern Vermont College class to the Bennington Museum to see the pottery collection in the spring of 1995. After that study trip, one student, Dylan Lawson, mentioned that he would like to make a ring vase similar to the 18th-century ring flask (made to fit around a man's forearm) in the museum's American folk pottery display. Bub showed him how to throw a hollow ring, then attached an oval base and a bottle neck. Afterward, the demo remained in the studio.

Soon, Bub started thinking about adding a spout, handle and lid to this traditional ring vase shape. The resulting teapot had an elegant and pleasing form, but was almost mute in its completeness. Bub's first instinct was to give it a voice by adding some of the hand-sculpted animal figures he'd been putting on boxes since 1992. So he added a spotted jaguar to the lid, and perched another on the inside surface of the upright ring. He then made several upright ring teapots with different animals.

It was in the fall of 1995 that he made his first reassembled ring teapot. Again, there was nothing planned about the process: when the hollow ring was at the leather-hard stage, he had cut it apart with a bow saw, planning to reverse a couple of sections to create a zigzag profile to the upright ring. But the open ends of the cut-apart sections were unmatching trapezoid shapes that would not reassemble into a symmetrical closed form. Unhappy that he'd ruined the ring and wasted the time he'd spent on it he decided to try to salvage his investment, and began rearranging the arc sections in different ways. Immediately, he was intrigued by the visual possibilities. He joined the arc sections together end to end and out of order, then put flat slabs on the two open ends. Then he added an oval base, a spout, a handle, a neck opening and a lid, embellished with a keel-billed toucan.

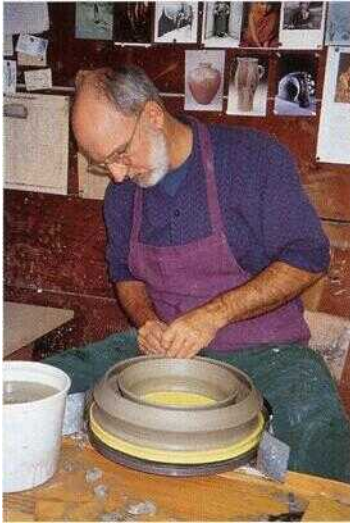


"Keel-Billed Toucan Reassembled Hollow-Ring Teapot," 15 inches (38 centimeters) in height, wheel-thrown, cut and assembled stoneware, fired to Cone 5 in oxidation.

From 1995 to 1998, he made numerous reassembled-ring teapots, all decorated with animal shapes—Madagascar chameleons, African elephants, African giraffes, king penguins, highland gorillas. Pacific puffins, ring-tailed lemurs, North American mountain goats, etc. He made some sales, but after paying corn-



**"Pink-Green Oval
Cross-Section Reassembled
Hollow-Ring Teapot," 14 inches
(36 centimeters) In height, thrown
and assembled stoneware, fired in
oxidation to Cone 5; \$1200.**



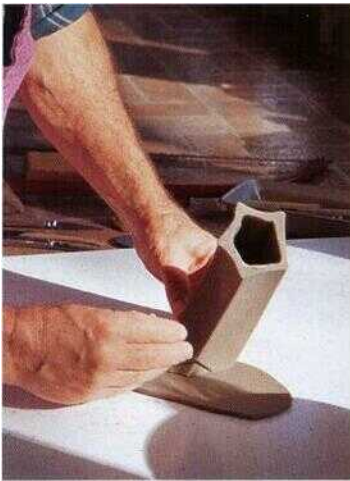
First, a ring is thrown by joining two walls at the top, trapping air inside.



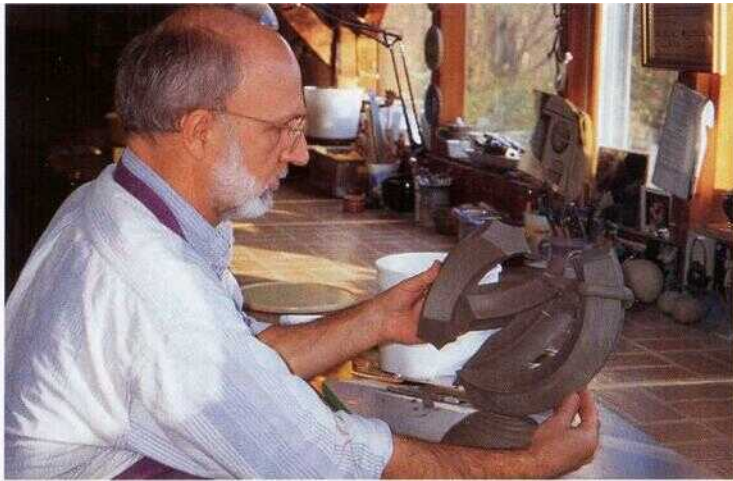
When the ring is leather hard, it is inverted and trimmed.



Sections are then cut at various angles using a bow saw.



The section is closed with slabs, traced and cut to fit each end.



When reassembly is complete, clay spacers and supports are added for stability during drying, then the form is positioned on a thrown oval base.



A handle is pulled from a lug attached to a ring section, then a thrown spout is shaped and attached.



The last step is to make a finial for the lid; several are made and the one that most successfully enhances the design is attached.

missions, there was not a great return on the time invested, so he continued to earn most of his income by teaching classes in the studio, and making and selling "conventional" functional ware.

During this period, he also submitted slides of his animal figure teapots to several prestigious national and international craft fairs and exhibitions, but was not accepted to the ones he most wanted to participate in. As time went by, he grew more dissatisfied. Did the animal figures he had been attaching to the upright-ring and reassembled-ring teapots somehow cause jurors not to choose his work? Put another way, did the embellishment distract from the integrity of the design? When discussing this work with customers, he found them referring not to the teapot composition itself, but to the animals, with such comments as, "I love the chameleons," or "Elephants are my favorite animal."

An artist frequently encodes ideas in some form to tell a story, but it was clear Bub's story wasn't coming through. He decided to put his trust in the intrinsic, undecorated eloquence of the ab-

stract forms, and in the spring of 1998 made his first reassembled ring teapot without animal figures. It was his "Pink Pentagon Cross-Section Teapot," and it was one of 112 works selected for the 1999 "Ceramics Monthly International Competition." The jury had chosen it from among 1549 slide entries from 45 countries. "Wow!" he thought. "No more animal figures for me."

Soon he began experimenting with round, square, pentagonal, distorted, oval, trapezoidal and star shapes, cutting them into various-length arc sections and reassembling them into balanced compositions, positioning the assemblage on a thrown base, cutting out the lid, then adding spout, handle and finial. Since the summer of 1998 to September 2001, he has made 24 abstract reassembled hollow-ring teapots and two upright-ring teapots, all without animal figures. He has always used all the sections from one complete ring in each teapot's assemblage, and has added the same elephant-trunk spout and pulled handle, although their placement varies depending on the composition.



"Orange Five-Pointed Star Cross-Section Reassembled Hollow-Ring Teapot," 19 inches (48 centimeters) In length, wheel-thrown, sectioned and reassembled stoneware, glazed and fired to Cone 5 in oxidation; \$1200.



"Silverleaf Bonsai Tree Reassembled Hollow-Ring Teapot," 11 inches (28 centimeters) in height, fired to Cone 5 in oxidation; \$1200.

Twelve of these abstract reassembled-ring teapots have sold (through various venues) for \$1200 each, less an average 33% commission. One of the most interesting sales opportunities has been the Eziba website, which has sold five of his teapots since the spring of 2001 to collectors in Dallas, Texas; Aspen, Colorado; San Antonio, Texas; Williamstown, Massachusetts; and Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Meanwhile, Bub has continued sending out slides to competitions, with similarly positive results: His "Celery Green Reassembled Hollow-Ring Functional Teapot" was one of 151 pieces chosen by three international jurors and three Taiwanese jurors for the "Sixth Taiwan Golden Ceramic Awards Competition" in the spring of 2000. It was awarded the "Special Judge's Prize" from Taiwanese juror Bob Chen; and the Taipei County Yingko

Ceramics Museum, the host and one of the principal sponsors of the exhibition, purchased this teapot for its permanent collection.

During the winter of 2000, he also sent slides to the "First World Ceramic Biennale 2001 Korea International Competition." His "Lemon Yellow Triangular Cross-Section Reassembled Hollow-Ring Teapot" was one of 305 works by artists from 69 countries selected from 4206 entries. The exhibition was presented at the Ichon Ceramic Center as part of the "World Ceramic Exposition 2001 Korea," a massive, \$100 million ceramics world's fair, which drew an estimated five million visitors. This multi-event celebration of historical and contemporary ceramic art from around the world was the largest event of its kind to date.

This recognition is, of course, gratifying to someone who for more than three decades has been making functional pottery and

"Grasshopper Leaping Reassembled Hollow-Ring Teapot," 16 inches (41 centimeters) in height, \$1200, by Ray Bub, Pownal, Vermont; www.raybub.com.

teaching in relative obscurity. But it is also an object lesson in the creative process. The idea for these teapots came out of a chance visit to a museum, the chance interest of a single student, the desire to solve a purely technical problem, and a number of false starts and accidents.

The finished pieces can retain an unplanned quality that gives them tension and fluidity. Often the forms shift in firing, in ways that cannot be anticipated. Typically, Bub lives with the leather-hard reassembled ring composition for a while before he chooses the location of the base, the spout, the finial—all the details that will solidify the piece in the viewer's eye.

In the case of his "Orange Five-Pointed Star Cross-Section Reassembled Hollow-Ring Teapot," he "had originally imagined this was going to be a tall piece, but when I was unwrapping it, I thought immediately of the Taiwanese ceramist Ah Leon and a teapot he had made in the shape of a long tree branch, which is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Thinking of this Yixing-inspired teapot, I laid my reassembled ring composition on its side, then defined it by the location of the handle and spout. It needed no base, as it turned out. But to maintain functionality, I had to turn the spout upward."

Since Bub began working with this form, he has seen an earthenware ring vase with an oval base, made in Apulia in central Italy in 340 B.C. He has seen ring vase examples or pictures from the Japanese Kofun dynasty, the Chinese Tang, Song and Ming dynasties, ninth-century Moorish Spain, and twelfth-century Persia, as well as the colonial pilgrim flask in the Bennington Museum. Though geographically and chronologically widespread, the form is still a rarity, which makes it possible to deconstruct it and reinvent it for a long time and in myriad ways, without approaching anyone else's work. Bub believes there is boundless territory for him to explore with just this one vehicle. As for the next idea, he's preparing for another accident.

The author Paul Park is a free-lance writer living in North Adams, Massachusetts.

