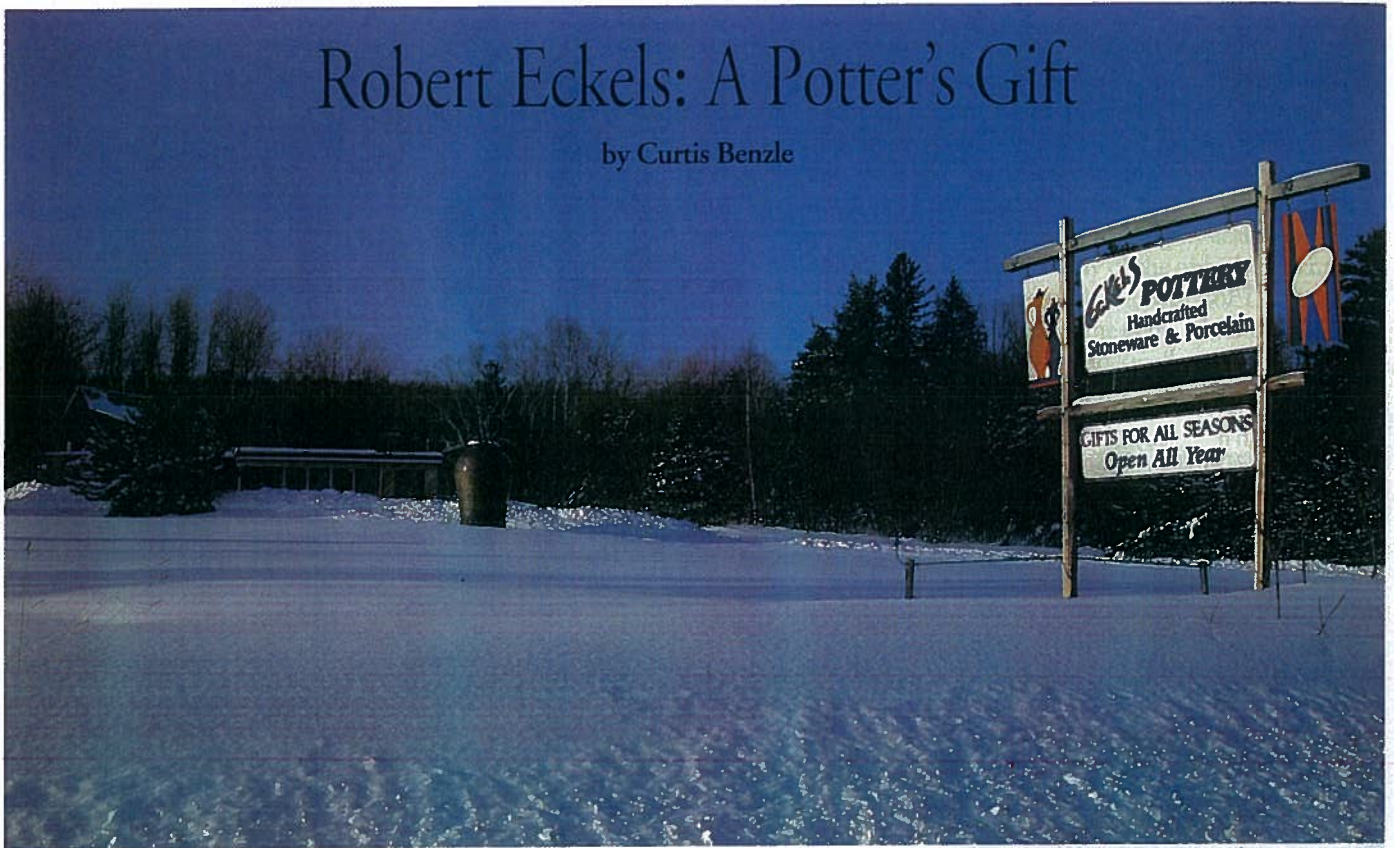


# Robert Eckels: A Potter's Gift

by Curtis Benzle



Working with Robert Eckels was a great experience, but only for the stout-hearted lover of clay. During the summer of 1971, I spent my days in the pottery and my nights in a clay storage shed. I had come to Bayfield, Wisconsin, to serve as his apprentice, arriving fresh out of the Ohio State University with a B.F.A. and lots of big ideas. After showing me around, Bob asked where I would prefer to live for the summer—in town at a rooming house or next to pottery in the clay shed. No choice! I would have slept strapped to the wheel had he let me—the closer to clay, the better. I had 300 pounds of Cedar Heights Goldart as a nightstand.

As one of his apprentices, I worked 7 days a week, 12 hours a day. Realizing, I suppose, that some of us might not have his own insatiable drive, Bob did grant us every other Sunday off (after a month with this guy, that biweekly hiatus was as anticipated as a head cold).

So what did I learn in that all-too-brief four months? I learned how to throw! After four years of university training, I still handled clay like a brick mason. Centering B.B. (before Bob) was a chore, labored and unloved. He taught me to look beyond centering. In fact, he taught me to look beyond the entire

process of throwing. With him the process was assimilated. I was taught to know where I was going, where I started and to travel the road of throwing with all the ease and grace of an afternoon walk to the beach. Watching Bob, I realized that throwing could be as automatic as walking—but for him that walk became a dance.

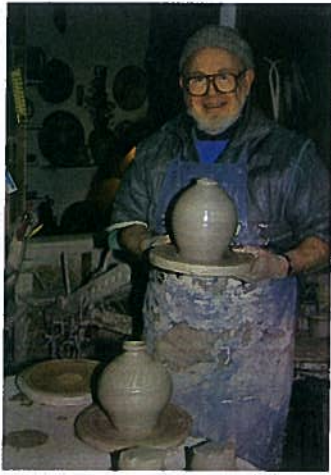
He taught me how to scratch and stretch a static clay surface into a skin so full of tension that you half expected to see many of the pots breathe. An old comb came alive in his hands as it hopped across the surface, leaving nicks and marks that sang about the touch of a wet pot in a master's hand.

I learned how to coax sensual color from metals and minerals that, for lesser men, would yield only a predictable pallidness. I watched in awe as Bob applied glaze to a clay surface already so rich and alive that I hated to see it covered, only to see that surface reborn in fire, alive again three days later.

Bob Eckels was the first person in my five years of clay study to mention that this magical material could not only excite me, it could support me as well. Tucked into every corner of every kiln were pendants, miniature pots, trinkets and knickknacks.

Appalled at the presence of such commerce in the studio, a fellow apprentice objected. With patience, Bob explained that all summer long the kilns would be firing, the lights would be on long into the night, and much of our time as apprentices would be spent learning—learning by throwing back many of the pots we had labored too hard to make. His time, on the other hand, would be spent pursuing that perfect pot—the one only he could see and the one that, try as he might, was often in the *next* kiln. It would be those tiny bits of commerce, tucked into corners of the kiln far too small for substance, that would support our education and Bob's dream. We were expected to not only tolerate these small creations, we were to treat them with kindness and respect, for it was to them that we would all owe much of what we sought to learn.

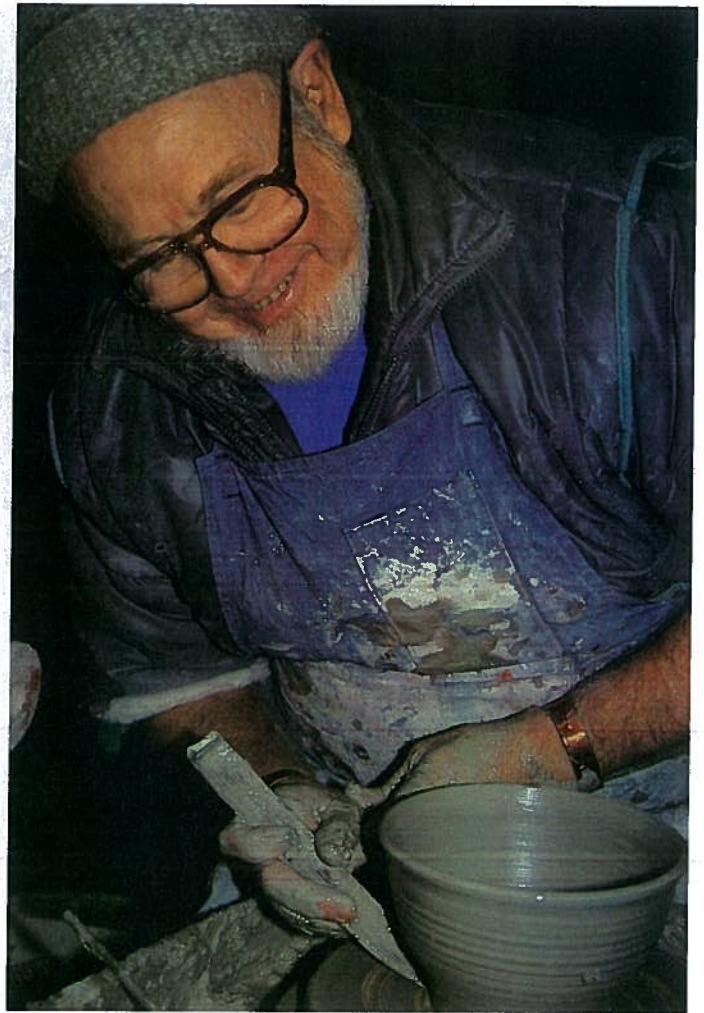
Bob was a patient teacher—usually. Just once that summer did I see his famed Irish temper erupt. Nestled in a corner by the front counter was a pot obviously there for display only. This pot did not carry with it the rhythm and refinement of the other Eckels' creations, so we wondered at its presence. Nancy, a fellow apprentice, asked Bob about it one day during cleanup. He

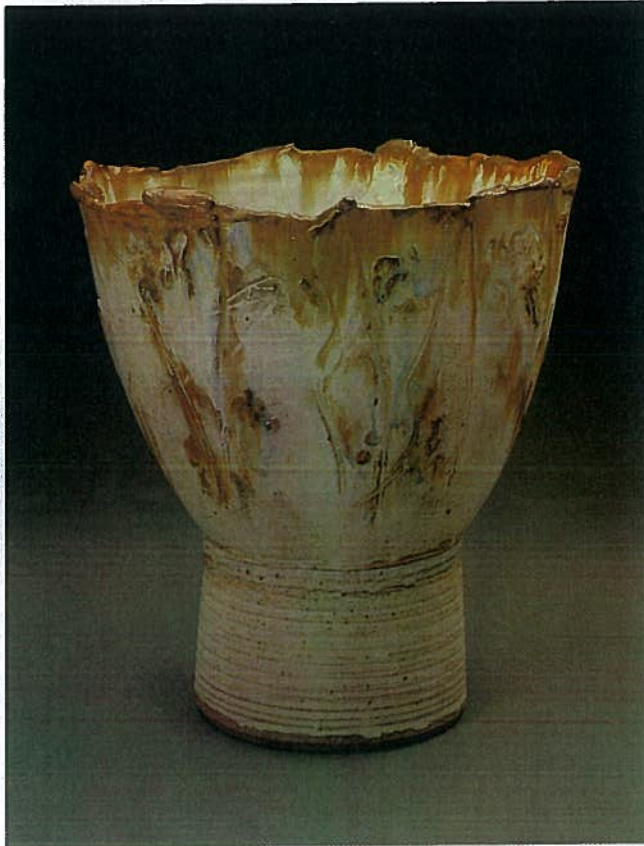


Left: Eckels' Pottery in Bayfield, Wisconsin.

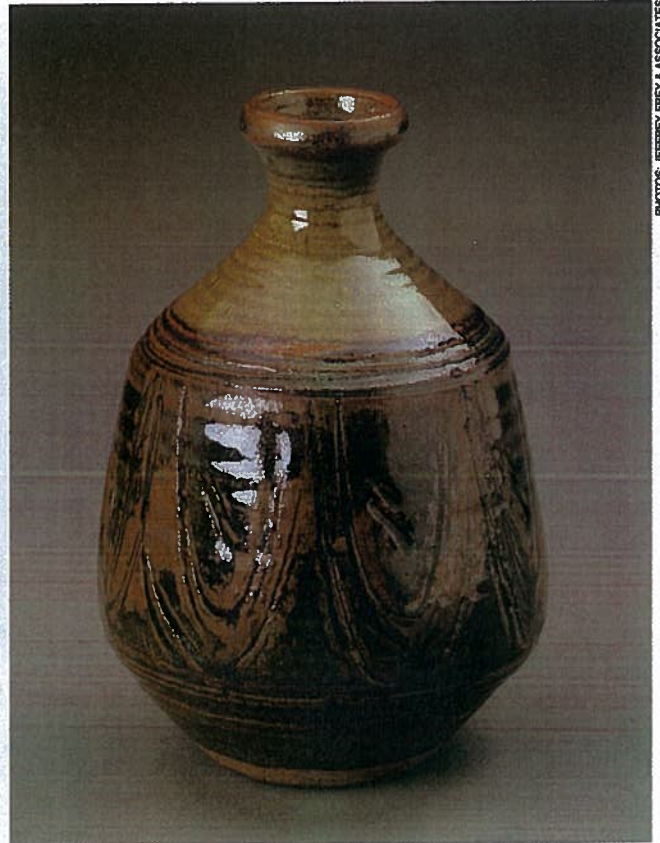
Above and right: Robert Eckels throwing in his studio. For more than 50 years, he has enjoyed making a living from working with clay.

Below: Salt-glazed planter, 11 inches in height, wheel-thrown stoneware, fired to Cone 10, \$150.





Planter, 16 inches in height, thrown and handbuilt stoneware, Cone 10 reduction fired, \$125.



Glazed stoneware vase, 8 inches in height, wheel thrown, paddled and incised, \$28, by Robert Eckels.

PHOTOS: JEFFREY FREY & ASSOCIATES

explained it had been a gift from his friend and cofounder of the Pot Shop, Glenn Nelson.

As I remember it, this humble pot was the first made after a successful move to the Bayfield location, and was a farewell gift from Glenn as he departed for a long and distinguished teaching and writing career in Duluth. It represented a friendship founded in clay—as well as the pursuit of a dream that all too often ends in disappointment. Contained within its walls were all those moments when a perfect pot was pitted by a tiny plaster “pop out,” all those lids that just wouldn’t come off, all the glazes that did, every bad batch of clay and kiln catastrophe. This little pot was 25% clay and 75% feelings.

Unfortunately, Nancy didn’t see feelings. Despite Bob’s kind explanation, she suggested that this pot was an “embarrassment.” That’s when Bob taught us about respect. Somewhere in the torrent of words that followed, I heard him mention things like commitment, sincerity, time, hard work, integrity—all issues that were given little attention in academia, but were essential in his world.

And, as we cleaned up the shards of pieces that had punctuated several important points, I think even Nancy started to learn that being a potter is about something more than making pretty pots.

As I think back now over all of Bob’s lessons, there is one that stands out above all the rest. The others have helped me earn a living, appreciate and understand the tradition and value of a potter’s life, and (I hope) make beautiful pots. But that one lesson, his greatest gift, has helped me to live each day of my life with a joy available to all, but known only to a few.

One of the best things about my storage-shed bedroom was the window. It was positioned perfectly so that the morning sun would enter across my pillow, waking me gently. During the summer in northern Wisconsin, morning comes early, and I found myself indoctrinated into the league of early risers. Each dawn was quiet, crisp and cool, a perfect time to appreciate nature’s special beauty in that part of the world.

As the summer wore on, I found myself waking earlier and earlier, hop-

ing that I would beat Bob, who somehow always seemed to be at work in the studio when I arrived. Finally, unable to best him through natural means, I resorted to buying an alarm clock and set it early enough to get up even before the roosters.

When the bell rang the next morning, I wondered, in a fog, about the wisdom of my contest. The sun had yet to rise, the studio was still dark, surely I could sneak in a few more seconds of sleep. But as I lay back down, I could hear Bob coming down the walk, singing some song, incongruously happy for the hour, decidedly excited by just the thought of doing the same seemingly simple job (that now has filled over 50 years of his life)—throwing a pot. That was the moment Robert Eckels taught me what all my previous or subsequent training never could—that the gift of working in clay is a joy so great that time, trial or tribulation will never diminish it.

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