



Warren MacKenzie

1999 Distinguished Artist Award



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Warren MacKenzie

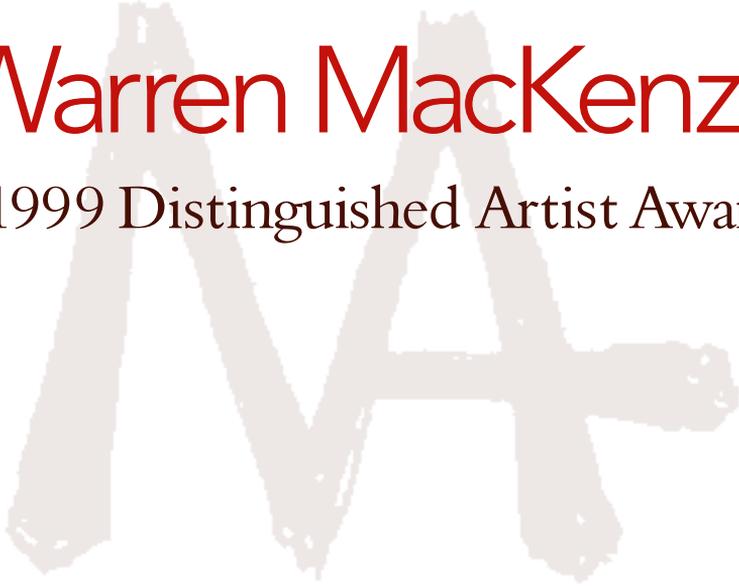
1999 Distinguished Artist Award

The McKnight Foundation

The McKnight Foundation • Minneapolis, Minnesota

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McKnight Distinguished Artists

Warren MacKenzie 1999

Dominick Argento 1998

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Introduction

The McKnight Foundation's arts program seeks to ensure access to the arts for all Minnesotans, whatever their community or income level. No artist has done more to make his own work accessible than Warren MacKenzie.

His pottery is collected and exhibited all over the world. In Japan, where he is especially beloved as a practitioner of the Japanese folk tradition, his shows routinely sell out within hours of opening. Yet success has not changed his working style nor elevated his prices. MacKenzie continues to make work every day and to sell it from a small showroom attached to his pottery studio near Stillwater. Recalling the early days of his studio, he once said, "All of our pots were utilitarian and made to be sold at modest prices so that people could use them without fear of breaking an expensive pot." They remain affordable today, bringing beauty into our daily lives.

As a teacher and a mentor, MacKenzie has had enormous influence on the ceramics community. Because of his generosity with his time and counsel, a network of younger artists shares his philosophy and creates work that is now found in households throughout the Midwest and beyond. He was a founding member of the Minnesota Crafts Council, which gave him its first Lifetime Achievement Award in 1997. In all that he has achieved personally and done for others, MacKenzie attests to one of The McKnight Foundation's most deeply held principles: that artists and their work enrich a community's life.

A belief in the importance of the arts to Minnesota is the primary reason behind the Foundation's 18-year-old arts program. Since 1981, McKnight has contributed more than \$80 million to the arts in Minnesota. We have seen how the arts bring people together; how they embrace tradition and also encourage innovation; how they give voice to the human spirit. Warren MacKenzie's work and the pleasure it gives to so many reflect these values. He is indeed one of Minnesota's most Distinguished Artists.

Noa Staryk
Chair
The McKnight Foundation



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Simply a Potter

**For Warren MacKenzie,
life and work are one.**

By Rob Silberman

Warren MacKenzie returned to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1946, after serving in the army during World War II. He was 22 years old. The painting classes he wanted to take were full, so he enrolled in a ceramics class—his first—instead. But he soon became frustrated by the purely technical nature of the instruction and the total lack of any discussion of aesthetics. Then a fellow student brought in a copy of Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book*. The rest, as they say, is history—that is, ceramics history.

The Art Institute course trained students as artist-designers by having them make prototypes suitable for mass production. Each piece was constructed through a long, deliberate process. In sharp contrast, Leach proposed that pottery be handmade by artist-craftspeople, working quickly, with immediacy and expressiveness.

His book was a practical “how-to,” an instruction



Mark Luinenburg



guide that included wheel design and kiln-building and advice about using local clays, an appeal to a kind of artistic regionalism MacKenzie liked.

Leach also included a history of ceramics, for he viewed ceramics as a cultural form with its own language, an international one, and a long history that was still alive. Most important for the young artist was that, as MacKenzie has written, "Leach defined the potter's life in philosophical terms in which life and work were inextricably intertwined, and the goal was to make objects of utility and simple beauty."

The encounter with Leach's classic book, only just published in America, set MacKenzie on a path he has followed to this day. It led to his apprenticeship at the Leach Pottery in St. Ives, Cornwall, a lifelong commitment to a utilitarian approach to pottery, and ultimately his becoming one of the most respected potters in the world today. Among many honors, he was named in 1981 by readers of *Ceramics Monthly* magazine as one of the 12 greatest potters in the world, and in 1998 received the American Crafts Council Gold Medal for Lifetime Achievement, the most prestigious recognition that can be given an American craftsperson.

f course, the story of MacKenzie's climb to success is not so simple. Outside of Hollywood, such stories rarely are. In retrospect, the uncertainties, struggles, and disappointments tend to disappear. And the choice of a career, especially one that seems to have appeared almost by happenstance, does not inevitably lead to the kind of achievement that has been MacKenzie's.

Yet the story of this potter's beginnings does have a certain drama, especially since in that ceramics class Warren not only learned about Leach but

When MacKenzie talks about pottery, there is no mistaking his pleasure in the physical process, the direct engagement with the clay.

also met his first wife, Alix. She too became a potter and apprenticed with Leach, and she collaborated with her husband until her death from cancer in 1962.

The MacKenzies were united in admiring the virtues of traditional functional pots rather than fine art sculptural ceramics or expensive showpieces aimed at an exclusive, wealthy clientele. The Art Institute has a notable collection of ceramics, including pieces from



Asia, but MacKenzie says they made “no major impression” on the young artists. It was in the collection of Chicago’s Field Museum of Natural History that Warren and Alix found their model, for there pottery was presented not in a fine arts context but in a broadly cultural one. Displays representing life in Greece, Egypt, and other countries included large numbers of pots, not just a single masterpiece spotlighted on a pedestal.

The young potters immediately felt a sympathy for inexpensive pottery created for everyday use by ordinary people. From that time to this, and throughout the world in workshops and exhibitions, that vision of pottery’s social role has been at the center of MacKenzie’s work.

But MacKenzie’s pottery reflects something else, too, something far simpler: his love of making pots. When MacKenzie talks about pottery, there is no mistaking his pleasure in the physical process, the direct engagement with the clay. In fact, it is the treatment of clay as a physical, sensuous material that has always appealed to him so much in the pots of Shoji Hamada, the great Japanese potter whose work he first saw in Leach’s book. He encountered Hamada’s actual pots at Leach’s home and studio, and finally met him in 1952 at a conference in England. Later that same year, Alix MacKenzie arranged for Leach, Hamada, and Soetsu Yanagi, the leader of the Japanese folk craft (*mingei*) movement, to tour the United States, stopping in St. Paul for a lecture-discussion.

For MacKenzie, pottery, unlike painting, is primarily about touch. That is one reason why the “Don’t touch” attitude of the art museum presentation of ceramics disturbs him so. MacKenzie has a sharp eye, to be sure, but he believes the ultimate test of a pot is physical and tactile. When he talks about a pot, he likes to take it and handle it, turn it round in his hands, set it down, look at it, rub a finger along an edge or contour, then look at it some more.

During a recent trip to Japan MacKenzie was able to hold a famous pot he had long admired, one featured on a poster on his studio wall. To hold this treasure was a dream realized, but it was also a learning experience. The pot was bigger than MacKenzie thought it would be, and heavier. So his direct experience with the pot taught him once again about scale, and about the relationship between how heavy a pot looks and how heavy it really is—two of the many concerns that fuel his endless fascination with pots.

Beyond MacKenzie's enjoyment of the physicality of the pottery-making process, there is his love of exploring the inexhaustible forms possible within the basic formats: plates and platters, vases and vessels, storage jars and boxes, mugs, cups, and teapots. He rarely makes pieces that are not wheel-thrown; he has no interest in making abstract or sculptural pieces. Functional pottery is a large enough universe for him, and the one suited to his ideas about the social role of pottery.

In addition to form, there are all the possibilities for decoration—color, pattern, ornamentation. In this respect, MacKenzie's pots reveal his warmth, subtlety, and humor, as well as a love of experimentation that has led him to try all sorts of things, such as using a bottle top to make an ornamental design.

Finally, there is the element of chance introduced by the kiln, for whatever efforts the potter makes to control all the variables, the outcome is never certain. And that is a good thing, even if it means unhappy surprises as well as happy ones.

All pots must survive trial by fire, and all potters must learn to live with that. Being a potter can be heartbreaking as well as backbreaking work. But the last time I saw Warren he showed me a pot that had been blessed by the fire. For once the carbon trapping had worked just right. The linear pattern incised on the surface received carbon from the flames and achieved perfect definition, in part because what was actually intended to have been a salmon color turned out white. Sometimes the pottery gods do smile.

MacKenzie benefited from the companionship and artistic skill of his first wife, Alix, who in the early years when he was not as widely recognized was beside him sharing his views of life and art.

Similarly, he has been helped in later years by the companionship, support, and artistic interests of his second wife, Nancy Stevens MacKenzie, a fiber artist. There is no way to overestimate the value of living with another artist, someone whose own artwork and ideas about art stimulate a deeper engagement not only with one's chosen medium but with all kinds of art. Nancy's beautiful dyed silk scarves are displayed in the sales shop next to the



studio along with Warren's pots and the work of other potters. Her wearable art and wall pieces have been shown along with Warren's ceramics in a series of recent exhibitions that demonstrate a wonderfully complementary relationship, in both human and artistic terms.

Born in Kansas City and raised and educated in Chicago, MacKenzie has lived in Minnesota for nearly half a century now. An adopted son of the state, he nevertheless embodies some classic Minnesotan values: He is straightforward, hard-working, modest, and softspoken—except when pots are at issue. Then his enthusiasm and passion emerge, and it seems as if he would just as soon discuss pots forever, if only talking didn't get in the way of making some more.

Trendiness and fashion mean nothing to MacKenzie. He holds to the Arts and Crafts movement's philosophy that the beautiful and the useful should be one; and he obviously holds little truck with rarity or price as a guide to value. He prices his pots inexpensively, so that anybody and everybody can afford them and use them in daily life rather than treat them as precious works of art. The studio shop is run on the honor system.

MacKenzie holds a democratic view of pots. I suspect that, after the right to vote, MacKenzie would next uphold the right of all citizens to have good, affordable, handmade pots, with their most important civic duty being to use them.

Given MacKenzie's populist, anti-elitist point of view, it is appropriate that virtually his entire teaching career was spent at a public land grant school, the University of Minnesota. If, by the time of his retirement, he had ascended to a Regent's Professorship, the most prestigious position the University can offer a teacher, that was an appropriately

democratic recognition by his peers of his outstanding ability and achievement. As a teacher, MacKenzie has played a central role in the flourishing ceramics community in Minnesota and the Upper Midwest. Potters such as Randy Johnston and Wayne Branum continue to be especially close to Warren and sell their work in the MacKenzie shop. There are many others in the area who may not have studied with MacKenzie yet have been affected by his example and generous support of many kinds.

MacKenzie's influence extends well beyond the Upper Midwest. He continues to participate directly in the international community of potters by doing workshops around the world, in South America and Scandinavia and Japan. In Japan, where ceramics are regarded as a major art form, he is particularly revered. A sellout crowd attended a MacKenzie appearance at the Folk Craft Museum (founded by Soetsu Yanagi), and an exhibition of his work at a Tokyo gallery sold out in an hour.

MacKenzie's reputation in Japan and his friendship with Tatsuzo Shimaoka, one of the great contemporary Japanese potters and a one-time apprentice of Hamada's, recalls the friendship between Hamada and Leach, pottery masters linking the East and the West. Among the many things Warren learned from

these men was a dedication to pottery as a cultural expression not bounded by time and space. Both Leach and Hamada were great students of pottery from many cultures, committed to seeking out great examples from the past and from countries around the globe.

MacKenzie, too, regards all of ceramic history as a world to be explored and a source of inspiration. In a recent series of teapots he incorporated a formal element borrowed from

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an American Indian pot given to him by a friend, and he continues regularly to produce pots that draw upon Asian traditions.

When Alix and Warren viewed the pots in the Field Museum, they admired the relationship between the cultures and the ceramics and wondered how they could do something similar for contemporary America. That has always been the challenge. Leach, in a notorious statement, said that America had no great tradition in pottery. Warren, who soon developed a clear sense of where he and Leach agreed and disagreed, thinks that notion is simply not true. He is a great admirer of what he describes as the “blunt, Puritan, no-nonsense” functionalism of the whisky jugs and pickle crocks and other vessels made in the days long before M.F.A. ceramic programs.

But MacKenzie, in an age when whisky jugs and pickle crocks are mainly curios, has tried to create pots “that make sense in the contemporary world”—such as other kinds of storage vessels and vase forms. For him to directly imitate old-fashioned, unembellished American pottery would be forced and out of character. MacKenzie is a modern man and a complex artist, though one dedicated to achieving a special kind of simplicity.

In some recent pots, he has surprised himself by returning to elements related to his early artistic interest in hard-edged geometric painting, when he was trying to become the American Mondrian or a Bauhaus-style artist-designer. When he felt the need to move away from the kind of Japanese-style decoration that features calligraphic lines or stylized motifs from nature, he turned to what he calls “monoprinting,” working with a straight edge like a piece of cardboard to introduce lines into the surface design that will play off the curves of the clay form. He has also recently made some large vessels that exploit a long-term interest in having a large “body” rest on a relatively small “foot,” thus introducing a basic tension into the piece, a quality MacKenzie has always liked.

Of course, when he enlarges the scale of the piece it changes everything—the proportions, the sense of weight, the kind of surface coloring and design that might be appropriate. Variables and variations are unlimited, as is the artist’s fascination with the process. At 75, MacKenzie continues to make pots, explore forms and glazes, and draw out aspects of his own character as he communicates with others through his pots.

MacKenzie has had a long and productive career. At this stage, it seems fair to speak of his work in terms of a late style, characterized by a mastery and assurance that makes everything seem at once simple and refined, with a concentrated expressiveness. In retrospect, it is possible to identify different periods in his work, some marked

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by brief excursions and experiments—an intense interest in porcelain, a set of pieces inspired by the work of the German-English artist Hans Coper, a fascination with a particular family of decorative elements or glazes.

Yet what stands out even more is the essential continuity of MacKenzie's achievement in ceramics. There is an underlying consistency in approach that is immediately apparent when one examines a particular kind of piece—teapots or covered jars, for instance. For all the variations, the MacKenzie signature is unmistakable. In looking back, what emerges is a unique blend that combines not only Asian and Anglo-American ceramic traditions, but also the European modernism that influenced MacKenzie when he first set out to be an artist.

MacKenzie believes that the best pots do not come because someone is an artist trying to make a masterpiece, but because someone is “simply being a potter.” For him, there is no higher praise. Out of a stream of pots made with skill, discipline, and maturity can come forth a pot that displays a “gestural, sensuous treatment of plastic clay, a pot that almost disappears, that is just a pot.”

And with such good pots, communication is established between maker and user, and a community is formed. Know this, then: There is a very large community that extends around the world, and at its center is Warren MacKenzie at his wheel, doing what he loves, making pots, and “simply being a potter.”

Rob Silberman teaches art history and film studies at the University of Minnesota.

He is a regular contributor to American Craft magazine, where his article on Warren MacKenzie appeared in 1989. In 1996 his essay on Minnesota artists Christie Hawkins and Irve Dell won the Vanessa Lynn Prize, awarded for “an outstanding essay on contemporary American craft.”



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MacKenzie on his craft.

If I knew how
to make
wonderful pots,
I would never again
make a bad one.

Regis Master Series lecture,
St. Paul, 1997

In Chicago the best museum in which to study pots was not the Art Institute but the Field Museum of Natural History. . . . It was there that we discovered that the pots that excited us the most were the pots made for everyday use in households. There were many that were more spectacular and lovely, but the everyday pots were rich with expression and reflected the domestic culture of their time rather than the wealth and power of patrons and rulers. It was at that time that we decided to concentrate our own work on similar everyday pots.

Regis Master Series lecture,
St. Paul, 1997

When Alix and I came back from England, we could go anywhere in the United States to set up our workshop. And where did we go? We went back to St. Paul. I think that there was something about the way our sense of rhythm and form was evolving and our feeling of comfort with the pace of Midwestern living. . . . My pots are much better understood in the Midwest than they are on the East or West coast.

Interview with David Lewis
in *Warren MacKenzie:
An American Potter*
(Kodansha International, 1991)

The Potter's Voice



My favorite pots are those
that have allowed me
to discover their surprises and
hidden beauty only after many
years of daily use.

Regis Master Series lecture,
St. Paul, 1997



Every artist must find a form or subject that intrigues him or her. For some it has been landscapes, for others figures, abstract forms, interiors, geometric relationships, expressionistic gesture, or political statement. My option has been to work with utilitarian pots and to make pots in quantity to sell at reasonable prices. The choice of form or subject is relatively unimportant. What is important is that the creators must immerse themselves in it completely.

Regis Master Series lecture,
St. Paul, 1997

I want to reinforce the sense of traditional values in people. The sense that in our brief tenure on this earth, in spite of the great problems we face, there are larger themes, maybe even timeless themes which transcend us. At the same time, I want my pots to express those themes with immediacy and emotional spontaneity.

Recorded in the notebooks
of Randy Johnston

The most important thing
is communicating with the user.
It is only when the user feels
the presence of the hand
of the potter that
communication truly exists.

Warren MacKenzie: An American Potter,
video by Saint Michel Co.
and Kuroda Productions, 1994

Each time you fire the kiln, you get results out that indicate a minor directional change. Something is suggested by a form or a color or a glaze experiment.

My pots are different than they were even two years ago, not because I've tried to change them but just because I've changed.

Interview with Minnesota Monthly,
September 1997

I don't really like picking out my best work and sending it to some foreign area and shorting the local people who deserve something for being faithful customers. My work is not really meant for exhibitions anyway. It's meant for the home.

Interview with the Star Tribune,
May 1999

I feel craft works—fiber, glass, clay, metal—that surrender their love of form, rhythm, color, to social statements are weaker for that deviation. The social opinions and statements are important, but they have nothing to do with a soup bowl, pitcher, chair, or coverlet.

Regis Master Series lecture,
St. Paul, 1997





Nearly all functional pots are containers, but some enclose and protect the contents while others must open and offer the contents to the user.

Regis Master Series lecture,
St. Paul, 1997

One of the things which distinguishes handmade pots from mass-produced pots is the communication between the potter and the user. So I use other people's pots. The only time I use my own is when I have a new shape or a new glaze. Then I might decide to have it in the kitchen or on the table for a while, just to see how it performs. Or sometimes I like to have one or two of my own pots mixed

randomly in with the pots of other people that Nancy and I use every day about the house. Then the pots by the other people can tell me about my own—and maybe mine can take me by surprise.

Interview with David Lewis in
Warren MacKenzie: An American Potter, 1991

I don't find sticking to the utilitarian work limiting in any way.

Interview with
Mpls. St. Paul magazine
August 1999





There is a wonderful anecdote that it takes two people to make a work of art—the first to create the work, and the second to stand behind and hit the artist over the head when it is done. Since I married again, my wife, Nancy, who is not a potter but a fiber artist, has often shown me elements in my own work that I have not been aware of when working alone. I am eternally grateful to her, and even though I may reject her ideas at first, I often come to believe in them later on.

Regis Master Series lecture,
St. Paul, 1997



A few years after Warren MacKenzie established himself in Minnesota, John Szarkowski spent a day photographing MacKenzie's farm and pottery studio near Stillwater for *America Illustrated* magazine, published by the U.S. Information Agency to promote American culture abroad. Although neither can recall the date with certainty, it was probably in 1958 or 1959.

At the time, Szarkowski was a freelance photographer working out of Ashland, Wisconsin. He had traveled throughout Minnesota for *The Face of Minnesota*, a book of photographs commemorating Minnesota's centennial in 1958 that became a *New York Times* bestseller. Warren MacKenzie was teaching at the University of Minnesota.

Their paths crossed as each was on the way to achievement and renown. MacKenzie's pottery began to be widely exhibited and recognized in the 1960s and was included in USIA traveling exhibitions to Asia, South America, and Africa. Szarkowski received a Guggenheim Fellowship, his second, in 1961, and in 1962 became

Opposite page: Warren and Alix MacKenzie, his first wife, who died in 1962; daughters Tamsyn (left) and Shawn, and Gigi the poodle. Below, Warren and Alix, Tamsyn, and their mixed-breed dog Mechi.

director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, from which he is now retired. His 1956 book, *The Idea of Louis Sullivan*, is scheduled to be reissued in 2000.

The pictures, shown here courtesy of John Szarkowski, have not been published for 30 years.



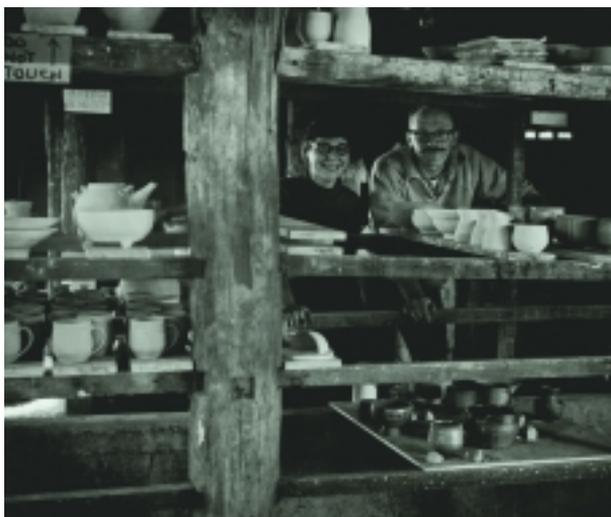


After returning from England, where they had studied with potter Bernard Leach, Warren and Alix built a kiln similar to Leach's. Here, Warren places pots in saggars that protect them from the direct effects of the fire (right); watches over the kiln as the fire heats up (opposite); and unloads the kiln (above).









In a section on artists in *The Face of Minnesota*, John Szarkowski quotes Warren and Alix MacKenzie (above): "We learned to produce in a natural and easy manner, a way of working which now permits us to make from 50 to 200 pots a day. This level of production is generally rejected by American potters who hold that. . . that amount of work will automatically lead to 'dead pots.' But our experience has been that. . . with the relaxation and ease of making comes a fluidity of expression which permits the pots to come closer to being 'born, not made.'" Left: Warren and a customer.

Mackenzie and Friends

Reminiscences about a master potter and his world.



Joan Adams Mondale
Minneapolis

Warren MacKenzie is widely regarded as one of the most important potters of our time. Not only is he the best in his field but he has conducted himself with honesty and integrity. His adherence to those high standards has brought him admirers from around the world, especially Japan, where his shows routinely sell out within hours after opening. Wherever I go, people say, "You're from Minnesota; you must know Warren MacKenzie!"



Linda Christianson
Lindstrom, Minnesota
Potter

As a young potter struggling in the 1970s, I was invited to be a part of MacKenzie's annual fall sale at his studio. The sale included work by pottery students of MacKenzie's as well as handmade paper, rugs, baskets, and cloth made by others.

Never having been a student of his, I was surprised to find myself welcomed into a group of potters who have come to be known as the "Mingei-sota" group. [*Mingei* is the Japanese folk pottery tradition that has inspired MacKenzie's work.] For years we would gather every few months at someone's home, eat fantastic food, and then argue for hours on end about pots. While the conversations often got out of hand, it was tremendously important to have a forum to critique pots with passion and conviction. Warren began organizing exhibitions of pots made by those of us working in this *mingei* manner. His support and encouragement laid the foundation for our own careers. While many recognized artists form a wall of privacy around themselves, Warren always has an open door and an extra place at the kitchen table.

Ken Ferguson
Shawnee, Kansas
Potter and former chair of the Ceramics Department
at Kansas City Art Institute

Warren MacKenzie makes about 7,000 pots a year. He does this alone. He is 75 years old and has been going at this pace for most of his working life. Warren is totally committed to his life's work. It's a simple thing: He loves his work, he works hard, and from this come very good pots. MacKenzie has inspired many to follow. The area where he works has been enriched by this bounty. There will be others who will keep this flame burning. But it will never burn as bright as it does now. There are few like him—damn few!

Marcia G. Anderson
St. Paul
Head of Museum Collections and Chief Curator
Minnesota Historical Society

When I began an intensive effort to fully document MacKenzie's oeuvre for the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society, I had the pleasure of spending concentrated time with Warren over a period of three years. Time spent in conversation with Warren about his favorite topic is as valuable an acquisition as an example of his work. Warren is the international emissary for the merger of the provocative qualities of clay with a functional pot.

Stewart Turnquist
Minneapolis
Program Coordinator,
Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program
Minneapolis Institute of Arts

The effects of Warren MacKenzie's talent as an artist and teacher reverberate throughout Minnesota, the Midwest, and the nation. There are few who have had such a significant impact on the art community of this region. If the United States were to assign the status of Living Treasure to its most significant contemporary artists, Warren MacKenzie would surely be among the first to receive such recognition.



Lyndel King
Minneapolis
Director, Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum
University of Minnesota

When one writes about artists as renowned as Warren MacKenzie, superlatives first come to mind, and I can think of many to describe my friend and colleague. But Warren, like his pottery, prefers to be admired in a different way. The MacKenzie house is an exquisite place to savor the calming effects of the green Minnesota countryside. It is filled with pottery, textiles, Warren, Nancy, and their friends. Together they create perfect harmony. It is not that the pottery, the textiles, or the people are not strong individuals. Each speaks with a steady, forceful voice, but without competition. MacKenzie's pots, like Warren himself, function by attraction, not advertisement. Warren's handmade pottery, functional and beautiful, is in the collection of art museums all over the world, including mine. It is also used every day at the MacKenzie house and at houses all over the world, including mine.

John Driscoll
New York City
Director, Babcock Galleries

MacKenzie's functional forms, whether vegetable dish, teapot, colander, storage jar, or plate, reveal an articulate expression deeply rooted in the technologies, culture, art, and life of everyday activity. Yet there is nothing everyday about the technical facility, tactile cultures, or intuitive art and life which inform MacKenzie's intimacy with the "terra firma" of daily activity. The earth with which he works, the forms and purposes which define a rich and diverse artistic heredity, and the symbolic meanings which flourish in the minds of maker, user, and admirer, all endow MacKenzie's work with a vital life in the eye, the hand, and the imagination. A MacKenzie pot may be venerable, but it is the baptism of use that makes it venerated.

Jim Melchert
Oakland, California
Ceramic artist and former Director of Visual Arts
at the National Endowment for the Arts

In the spring of 1973 I was at the University of Minnesota to conduct a two-day workshop in the Art Department. I engaged the group in improvisational exercises that weren't that different from things you might have done as a kid. I didn't expect any of the instructors to join the group, but, of all people, Warren MacKenzie came. It made me uneasy, because he was already a legendary figure in American ceramics.

Our first exercise was outdoors, where we imagined we were scattered on various floors of a building waiting for the elevator. When we got to Warren's floor, he pretended to be holding a caged parrot, stepping into our cage with a smaller cage of his own. From the way he stood holding it, you could tell that he knew exactly how heavy the bird was and how much room he needed to fit into our crowded elevator. I realized then that I didn't have to worry that this man had forgotten how to play.



Teiko Utsumi
Tokyo
Trustee, Nihon Mingeikan

In 1952, Warren MacKenzie, then 27, met Soetsu Yanagi when Warren was apprenticing with Bernard Leach in St. Ives, England. Yanagi was founder of the Nihon Mingeikan (Japan Folk Crafts Museum), philosopher, artist, and advocate for the *mingei* movement. In 1996, Warren, 72, lectured at the Nihon Mingeikan, where the leaders of the *mingei* movement—Yanagi, Leach, Kanjiro Kawai, Shoji Hamada, Keisuke Serizawa, Shiko Munakata—had talked, discussed, laughed, and shared the spirit of the anonymous craftsman. Although these artists have long gone, Warren told me that there are more than 200 kilns in Minnesota alone today—proof that the tradition has been inherited.

Emily Galusha
Minneapolis
Executive Director
Northern Clay Center



Gerry Williams
Goffstown, New Hampshire
Editor, *The Studio Potter Journal*

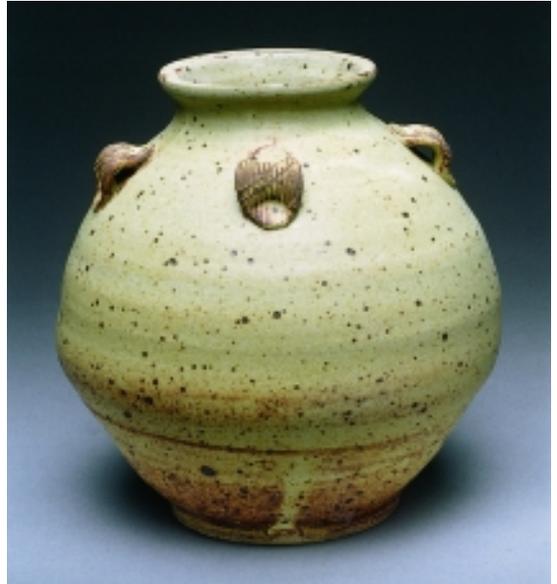
In the 1990 issue of *The Studio Potter Journal* there is a long interview with Warren MacKenzie. On the cover is a picture I took while he was teaching at Haystack School in Maine. Warren leans forward, peering quizzically through glasses at the camera with a small half-smile that seems to say, “This is much ado about nothing.” Warren’s famous modesty has dominated his life, especially in the professional integrity with which he makes and sells his pots. He told me once, “The challenge is to do the thing you have to do because you’re in love with it and can’t do anything else. Not because you want to become rich or famous but because you will be unhappy if you can’t do it.” Warren continues to be a role model for all of us, young or old, who aspire to make good pots. There is no one who has done them better and whom we would rather see honored in this way than Warren MacKenzie.

Over the course of a long career, Warren MacKenzie has developed a thoughtful and complete aesthetic, from which his own teaching and his instruction of others flowed naturally. His cogent philosophy formed the basis for the teaching, both formal and informal, which has influenced 40 years of American potters. His distinctive blend of eastern and western attitudes, along with an extraordinary mastery of the medium, has produced work that is both sophisticated and accessible—in this instance, not an oxymoron.

Randy Johnston
River Falls, Wisconsin
Potter and Professor
University of Wisconsin-River Falls

As MacKenzie's student in the *Mingei*-sota group, I felt strongly, and still do, that pots should be of use while still embodying a strong sense of aestheticism. Warren's pots have never pandered to novelty. They have never been outspoken, as he often is, and they are certainly not stylish. They are, however, comfortable and necessary additions to the homes and kitchens of us all. They are spiritual and often transcendental and always quite simple in their complexities. Warren is fun, laughs easily, loves gestures, and is totally obsessed with making pots—constantly. After our last wood firing, lasting 60 hours, at which Warren was present the whole time, we went to bed, and he went home. We later heard that he had gone straight to the studio to work on pots. His momentum has been the inspiration I have needed occasionally to get back to the studio. His message to us way back then was that if you want to make pots, “Just go do it.” It sounded so direct, so simple. It wasn't.

Lois Moran
New York City
Editor, *American Craft*



I met Warren MacKenzie for the first time in the 1970s in the idyllic Maine setting of Haystack, where, as I remember, there was a kind of throwing contest taking place on the deck in the sun. I have forgotten the other contenders, but I still recall the image of Warren commanding the clay, the wheel, the audience with a dazzling performance. After that introduction I paid him attention and still do. Just a year ago I had the chance to visit his studio in Stillwater. I was very happy to be there, rounding out my first impression of nearly 30 years ago. And wandering about, I thought of the fine pots he has sent out into the world in that interim, and of Warren the person, and I was dazzled once again.

Warren MacKenzie

A Potter's Life

1924

Born February 16 in Kansas City, Missouri.

1941

Enters the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, intending to become a painter.

1943-46

Serves in U.S. Army as a silk-screen technician working on training charts and maps.

1946

Returns to Art Institute and, finding the painting classes full, takes ceramics instead.

1947

Graduates from Art Institute; marries Alix Kolesky, who shares his passion for pottery and with whom he will collaborate until her death in 1962.

1948

Moves to St. Paul to teach ceramics, sculpture, and design at the St. Paul Gallery and School of Art.

1950-52

Warren and Alix apprentice with renowned potter Bernard Leach at St. Ives, England. In 1952, they meet Shoji Hamada and other influential potters at an international conference in England.

1953

Purchases Stillwater farm to establish a pottery studio and begins teaching ceramics at the University of Minnesota.

1954

First exhibition of pottery from the new studio at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

1966

Promoted to full professor at the University of Minnesota.

1973

Included in American Craftsman's Council Traveling Show for the U.S. Information Agency, which tours for three years in Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa.

1979

Invited to show in "100 Years of American Ceramics" at the Smithsonian Museum, Washington, D.C., and Everson Museum, Syracuse, New York.



Decoration by
Alix MacKenzie

Selected Collections

1981

Chosen one of world's 12 best potters in a survey by *Ceramic Monthly* magazine.

1981-85

Chairs Department of Studio Arts at the university.

1982

Selected as honorary fellow by the National Council on Education in the Ceramic Arts.

1984

Named a Regent's Professor and a fellow of the International Academy of Ceramic Arts; marries Nancy Stevens, a fiber artist.

1986

First to receive the Minnesota Governor's Award in the Crafts.

1990

Retires from the university.

1991

Book *Warren MacKenzie: An American Potter*, by David Lewis, published by Kodansha Publishing, Tokyo, Japan. Solo exhibitions in Seattle; St. Louis; Chicago; Arvada, Colorado; and Pittsburgh; group exhibitions in Denver and New York.

1995

Another major year for exhibitions, showing in New York; Tokyo; Cleveland; Pittsburgh; Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Northfield, Minnesota; and LaCrosse, Wisconsin.

1997

Receives Lifetime Achievement Award from Minnesota Crafts Council.

1998

Receives Gold Medal from American Crafts Council.



Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

Museum of Applied Art, Helsinki, Finland

Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England

Smithsonian Museum, Washington, D.C.

Everson Museum, Syracuse, New York

Minnesota Museum of Art, St. Paul

Joslyn Museum, Omaha, Nebraska

Tokyo Folk Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan

Chunichi Shimbun Collection, Nagoya, Japan

Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis



About the Award

Minnesota is often cited as a special place to live because its citizens have access to such a wealth of cultural activities. Theaters, museums and galleries, dance programs, music, and films enliven our stages and concert halls, our storefronts and street corners. But we often forget who set all this activity in motion.

The Distinguished Artist Award, now in its second year, recognizes those who, individually and collectively, laid the foundation for what we enjoy today. Although they had opportunities to pursue their work elsewhere, they chose to stay, and by staying made a difference. These artists have founded and/or strengthened Minnesota's vibrant arts organizations, mentored and inspired younger artists, and attracted audiences and patrons who enable art to thrive. Most of all, they are working artists who have made the most of their formidable talents.

Many of these artists have received national or international honors. But, despite the state's rich cultural history, there was no appropriate tribute for them at home. The Distinguished Artist Award—a Minnesota award for Minnesota artists—seeks to fill that gap.

This year's Distinguished Artist, Warren MacKenzie, has had enormous influence on the arts in general, and on ceramic arts in particular, in Minnesota and beyond. Because of his work in his own studio and with students at the University of Minnesota, a large community of potters carries on the tradition of making functional, affordable pieces for people to enjoy in their homes every day. Although MacKenzie drew his primary inspirations from Japanese and Korean folk crafts, the tradition itself is as old as civilization. As more than one person said in nominating MacKenzie for the award, if the United States honored Living Treasures, as Japan does, he would surely be among them.

One artist each year receives the award, which includes a \$40,000 stipend. Anyone is welcome to nominate an artist. Nominations received by March 31 will be considered the same year. A panel of people appointed for their knowledge of Minnesota's cultural history reviews the nominations, may suggest others, and selects the Distinguished Artist.

The 1999 panelists considered more than 100 artists from all over the state before reaching a unanimous decision. Our thanks to Linda Hoeschler, executive director of the American Composers Forum, St. Paul; Linda Myers, executive director of The Loft, Minneapolis; Thomas O'Sullivan, curator, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; and Mike Steele, staff writer, *Star Tribune*, Minneapolis. They have set a high standard that makes the award all the more meaningful in documenting Minnesota's cultural history.

Neal Cuthbert
Program Officer/Arts
The McKnight Foundation



