

It's all been done before...

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Something has been troubling me for some time.

I am almost constantly coming up with ideas for new works, ceramic or otherwise. My sketchbooks are full of yet to be realized forms, and scraps of paper covered in quick and free sketches litter my desk and studio. As time, energy, and skills permit, I am able to bring a few of these ideas to fruition, transforming the vague sketch into something concrete, something new and original, as yet unseen. Then darkness falls. Seemingly without fail, while innocently perusing the dusty and mouldering pages of some ancient tome, I find, there on a yellowed leaf, my pot. Though I conceived the idea in a relative vacuum, the product of my own mind and hands, there it is, taunting me; my pot, but made by other hands twenty or fifty or one thousand years ago.

When I first ventured into the ceramic arts my head was filled with visions of tall, graceful forms, but overly wet clay and unskilled hands conspired with a rough and rumbling wheel to endlessly spin out squat and dumpy pots. How to realize my vision when gravity's relentless crushing hand dictated only low and wide forms? The answer came in a flash; work with gravity rather than rail against it. I figured out how to throw enclosed, hollow rings flat on the wheel, which rings I then stood on edge once leather hard. My ring-form series was born; tall, elegant vessels, gracefully reaching up and out in sheer mockery of gravity's now impotent pull, standing with the power and presence of the Prahabha Mandala, dancing Shiva's ring of fire and water.

I thought my thrown, hollow rings were something new and original, and basked privately in my cleverness. Then the inevitable day came. While absently flipping through the pages of an old ceramics book pulled randomly from a library's shelves, a thrown, hollow ring-form vessel stared at me from the page. It was made nine hundred years ago in Persia by a now nameless potter. Over time I found other examples, some Italian canteens made several hundred years ago for vineyard workers, and even a gentleman who enjoyed brief fame some ten or twenty years past for cutting up such thrown rings and assembling the parts into teapots.

A similar story unfolded more recently. I had created a sculptural piece entitled Identity, which consisted of a series of vases placed rim to rim on a shelf, the negative space between which defined the profile of a human visage. The piece was based on the old Rubin's Vase, or Figure-Ground optical illusion. Much as Escher had given seeming existence to mathematician Roger Penrose' impossible triangle, I had given concrete form to Rubin's experiment in psychology. Some time later, a friend, having seen a photo of my piece, asked if I was aware of an art professor in Canada who had explored similar work. With deep foreboding, I began a Google search. Sure enough, there I found pieces quite similar to mine, also made of ceramic, but executed years before I had even begun to work in clay. The air went out of the balloon, and I was once more left pondering those leaden and humbling words from Ecclesiastes, "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun."

A couple of years ago during a discussion with Dick Lehman, a wise and gentle soul whom I am proud to call friend, Dick said something to the effect of, "Don't borrow someone else's idea, rather *steal it*

completely, make it your own.” I did not truly understand this statement at the time, and thought he was referring to folks like Warhol or Koons, those modern day pretenders to Duchamp who stole another’s ideas or work and sold it as something ostensibly greater.

A few short weeks ago I was perusing the website of Frederick Olsen, the ceramic sculptor and kiln builder. On one of his pages was a sculpture, a part of which was quite similar to an idea I had been nurturing for some time. While his form bore no similarity to those I had conceived, the construction method, which I had thought unique, was unmistakably the same. Though I did not know him, I wrote to tell him of what would now remain another of my stillborn ideas, as I saw that he had already explored this territory. I ended the letter with the line, “Back to the drawing board.” His response was; “Back to the drawing board is never an option. Follow through with your ideas and thoughts, since these are special, original, and the application can never be the same as someone else. ...Your ideas are your own. Continue on.”

During a recent sleepless night I began to reread Montaigne, who’s *Essais* were delightfully fresh and new after too long an absence. In book one, chapter 26, I came upon these words:

“For if he embraces the opinions of Xenophon and Plato by his own reasoning, they will no longer be theirs, but his. Who follows another follows nothing. He finds nothing, and indeed is seeking nothing. ...Let him know what he knows at least; he must imbibe their ways of thought, not learn their precepts; and he may boldly forget, if he will, where he has learnt his opinions, so long as he can make them his own. Truth and reason are common to all men, and no more belong to the man who first uttered them than to him that repeated them after him. It is no more a matter of Plato’s opinion than of mine, when he and I understand and see things alike. The bees steal from this flower and that, but afterward turn their pilferings into honey, which is their own; it is thyme and marjoram no longer. So the pupil will transform and fuse together the passages that he borrows from others, to make of them something entirely his own...”

Lehman, Olsen, and Montaigne, the latter separated from the former by 400 years, were all telling me the same thing. History is replete with examples of ideas and inventions appearing simultaneously on opposite sides of the globe. The Nobel Prize for physics has on numerous occasions been awarded to several scientists who had never met nor communicated, but who nonetheless made the same discovery at the same time. With billions of people on our proud but tiny planet, what are the odds that any thought one has is truly unique? Do not fret over where an idea came from. Do not worry about whether someone had said or done something similar. Cherish your ideas, your unique perspective, your unique execution, and go forth boldly. Rather than wallowing under the bleak thought in Ecclesiastes, it may perhaps be better to remember the words of Ambrose Bierce: “There is nothing new under the sun, but there are lots of old things we don’t know.” Perhaps our 900-year-old Persian copied his form from some even more ancient exemplar now lost to time. Whose ideas are they really? No one’s; and everyone’s.