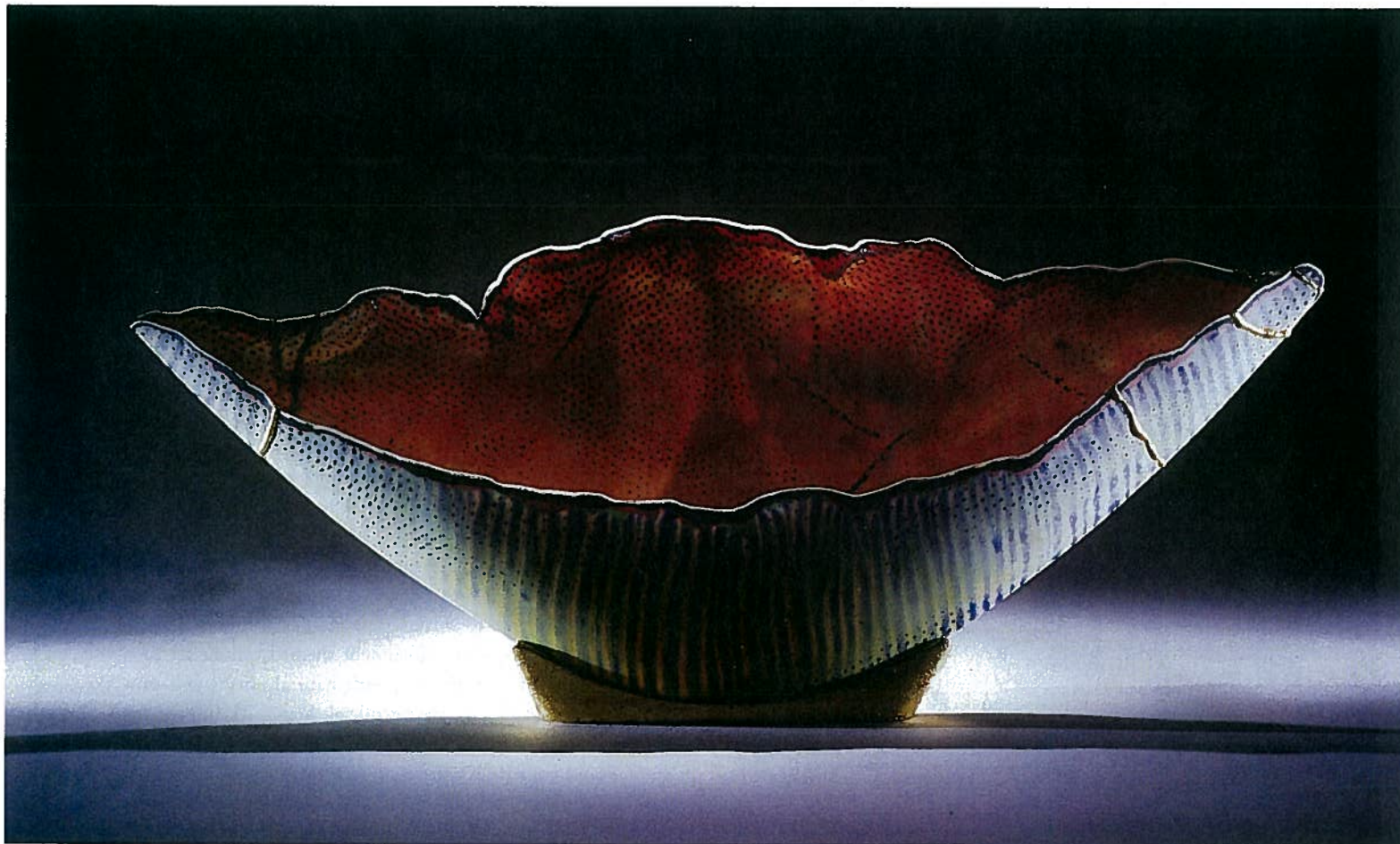


Bob

# THE PHOENIX LIVES

## *Curtis Benzle on Porcelain and Repairs*

Margaret M. Armbrust



"Celeste," 8 inches (20 centimeters) in height, inlaid colored porcelain fired to Cone 8, with cement and gold leaf base, and epoxy and gold-leaf repairs.

The Phoenix was an ancient mythological bird that would live for 500 years and die by self-immolation, only to rise from the ashes with renewed beauty. When Curtis Benzle [Bens-lee] spoke of his art and its repair, I was struck by the parallels presented between his concepts and the legendary spiritual creature associated with life, death and renewal.

Benzle's unique approach evolved over the 30 years he has devoted to his métier. Struggles with clay mixtures and test tiles were followed by initially resisting, then accepting and finally embracing effects produced by nature and life that appear in his

work. His honesty and openness are as rare as the joy with which he imbues his work. When asked about his clay and his preference for working in delicate porcelain, Benzle replied, "In graduate school, in 1978, my passion for glass had been tweaked, but glass isn't malleable. So I thought, 'I need to go back and work with ceramics,' but didn't want to abandon my fascination for light and translucency. I thought, 'Well, there is translucent porcelain.' So I started looking around to see where I could get some. Had there been a mixture already out there, I probably would have used it. None existed.

"I knew of one person who was doing translucent pieces at that time: Rudy Staffel. I asked him for tips and he said, 'Take almost all the clay out, and that'll help. But once you take the clay out, it's not going to be plastic, so you have to put plasticizers in it.' I asked, 'What should I put in?' He suggested something organic. So I began to experiment. I mixed potato starch into a batch of clay and thought, 'I'm in. I've got it!' I left the clay in my studio—a type of quonset hut with no air conditioning, so it was very hot in there. When I came back, I was greeted by a terrible stench. When I was a kid, my dad had a potato-packing factory. Occasionally, in the summer, we would go in to find a sea of rotten potatoes. They would literally melt into goo—potato slop. My brother and I would have to clean it out, so I was really familiar with, and not at all fond of, that aroma. It was hideous, so I threw that batch out and continued to experiment until I found another plasticizer that wouldn't decompose.



**"Life Flutters By," 7 inches (18 centimeters) in height, inlaid colored porcelain, fired to Cone 8, with epoxy and gold-leaf repairs.**

"After constant experimentation for about a year, I had my clay body. And I tweak the recipe every now and then. I have hundreds of test tiles, almost all of which are either flattened like a pancake because they melted completely, or totally vertical because they didn't soften at all. My clay has to soften a little during final vitrification to maximize translucency."

Benzle is fascinated by cracks as part of the working process, and has tended to reinforce, even emphasize them, in his work over the past few years. "Clay can move, shrink, shift and make some decisions on its own. It's saying, 'Ah, this feels stiff.' It's like

when you stretch your back and it cracks, and you think, 'that's better, the pressure's off.' All of a sudden, the clay can just pop. It opens a gap and alleviates stress. If it had a brain, it might be thinking, 'ah, that's better now.'

"For the most part, initial cracking occurs as part of the firing process. My work is handbuilt; stresses are always there, but most are invisible. You can't normally identify internal structural stress on a finished surface unless a crack appears. I think cracks add character, and I find them especially intriguing as visual evidence of clay experiencing the kiln's fire. Some of my pieces have virtually no evidence of physical stress. I can almost guess where a crack might occur, but I can't pinpoint it.

"At least 50%, perhaps even 75%, of my works exhibit stress cracks as they emerge from the kiln. That's relatively unique to my work, because my clay body is glassy, with extremely thin walls; about a millimeter or less. The clay's properties change in the kiln. Shrinkage takes place and the clay softens, and that's when it's normally going to crack. From the beginning, there were often small cracks. And in the past, I would throw away pieces with significant cracks. When pieces appear with significant cracks today, I think, 'Excellent! Better! It's a better piece.' On a new piece, I fill the cracks and leaf them with gold. I don't do anything else, because I am essentially interested in documenting natural phenomena. If I were to deviate from pure documentation, it would alter the situation and change everything. It's part of the history and life of the piece. Amplifying it would not be consistent with my sense of creative and aesthetic morality. I have resisted the temptation to encourage cracks, even though I think they are so interesting that I document them. I cannot set up a situation to deliberately interfere with natural effects and processes. That would be excessive, artificial, bogus. To impose my will on natural events would not only be aesthetically inconsistent, it would constitute a big lie by incorporating poor craftsmanship. Cracks remind you that imperfections happen, which is only too apparent, in life. But it also depends on balance. If imperfections exceed balance and aesthetic harmony, I've got to try to fix it or start over. I want the end result to be a combination of my best craftsmanship and the clay's response to unavoidable natural circumstances."

A work in porcelain can be cracked or even seriously damaged after leaving the studio. When this happens, is it simply a goner? Who is generally held responsible? What kinds of repairs are possible, and how are these situations handled? This sort of crack has "nothing to do with craftsmanship. It happens by chance. For example, the anonymous, but ubiquitous, 'cleaning lady' knocks a piece off the shelf. Physical damage, as evidence of ongoing life, fascinates me as much as kiln fissures. Occasionally, I'm contacted for replacement or repair, either by an insurance company or the owner. My favorite case involved a piece in a private collection. The owner contacted me for a repair. I can fill a crack with the



original porcelain mixture and refire a piece to fuse it, but this particular crack torqued a little bit, and I couldn't realign the surface plane. I repaired it as best I could, refired it, sent it back, and I assume the collector still has it. I still remember that crack, because I would prefer to repair it the way I'm working now.

"I feel that I can enhance the piece's value rather than simply patching it together as I did in the past. While I used to patch a cracked piece with porcelain, trying to hide the scar, I now fill the gap with adhesive to reinforce the piece, and then apply gold leaf. The merest addition of gold on the surface changes the character of the piece substantially. A different piece emerges, despite the fact that, to an untrained eye, it might look the same. The body of the original piece remains primarily intact, but my current approach adds visual reference, documenting a new memory, a life-altering experience (having been broken)."

Museums always prefer repairs for original work rather than replacement. Joined fragments and even small shards are exhibited and treasured as singular surviving artifacts from a given

historical period, a particular artist's hand, or a rare indicator of a technical leap in processes. In almost every case, museum repairs are made after the author has disappeared, perhaps because so many of these pieces are archaeological, or discovered in broken shards that restoration specialists reassemble like the parts of a jigsaw puzzle. Benzle's personal approach to this situation has changed dramatically during the past few years. "Broken, repaired, documented pieces have always interested me, and my current approach is indebted to this tradition. One of the joys of working in a durable material is that you know in your heart that piece is going to outlive you. They dig up old pots a thousand years later. The edges may be rounded slightly from use . . . there can be subtle deterioration, perhaps abrasions in the glaze or the surface. If they've used low-temperature slips, then those could deteriorate or disappear completely. The work that I do is impervious to most kinds of natural deterioration. In my case, none of that's going to happen, because the color is integrated into the clay, as opposed to being laid on top of it, so it's probably not



"Break on Through," 8 inches (20 centimeters) in height, inlaid colored porcelain fired to Cone 8, with epoxy and gold-leaf repairs.



**"Untouched," 10 inches (25 centimeters) in height, Iniaid colored porcelain fired to Cone 8, with gold-leafed porcelain base, and epoxy and gold-leaf repairs.**

going to change much. This is about the most durable material that I can make. But it can still be broken.

"Everything changes. I believe that age and experience can define, alter, even enhance artworks in a similar manner to the way they affect human beings. A person is just not the same at 50 as at 20, and is hopefully improved."

So how much damage can work endure, and how many times can a given work be broken, repaired, and survive? It is a pity that, in the past, former collectors may have discarded work or accepted an insurance payment, not knowing that repairs were possible, and are presently considered desirable by Benzle. "One

of my works, 'Celeste,' has been broken twice. It was initially broken in the Ohio governor's mansion during Richard Celeste's administration (1983–91). A visiting dignitary backed into it during a reception and knocked it over. Because it was on loan, it was returned with an insurance payment. During the autumn of 2002, I scheduled the same piece for an exhibition in Lancaster, Ohio, at the Decorative Arts Center. I got a frantic call from the curator saying it was broken during installation. I executed another repair, making it my most storied piece to date, because it now has two documentations of survival. Curiously, I had talked to the curator prior to the accident about repairs and I have never, to my knowledge, had any piece broken twice. So when he called, I teased him, asking, 'So are you just testing me now? Are you seeing if I'm serious about this?'"

By contrast, one of Benzle's works in the Saxe Collection, now at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco, survived the 1994 Northridge earthquake, near Los Angeles, totally unscathed. Contrary to expectation, Benzle discovered that his work didn't even topple. Consequently, no mark of this particular cataclysmic and geographic event appears on its surface. To Benzle's way of thinking, the lack of physical evidence documenting a literally earth-shattering experience was unfortunate.

The gilt work and gold bases weren't always part of the work. In addition, Benzle's previous works exhibit no apparent surface cracks. The gold bases date to 1992, predating the gilt-reinforced repairs that appeared around 2000.

"At first, I wanted a bit of visual distance between the base and the vessel. I tried porcelain bases and didn't like the way that looked, because the porcelain in the base had a totally different character from the piece. The base was very thick and heavy, but the porcelain vessel was very light and airy. I didn't like having the same material treated so differently in what was essentially one visual experience.

"For years, one of my concerns was that the gold was entirely housed at the bottom of the object. The base is intended to be integrated with the object, and I carve them to fit together like a hand and glove. But, because the two materials are different, there



is a fundamental disconnect that I have always been a little uncomfortable with. When I thought about repairing these cracked areas, I felt that if I carried this gold up into the object, it may tie these two things together visually. And I think it does.”

Benzle has been awarded several residencies, one of them at the Seto Center for Ceramics and Glass in Japan. “Seto is ancient, and the site of one of Japan’s original kilns. During my 2001 residency, there were difficulties acquiring specific brands and ingredients for the clay mixture I use at home. So, on this occasion, I acquired clay from a local miner. The purchase was preceded by tea and involved a presentation of little trays full of small porcelain bowls made from the whitest, most vitreous, dense, exquisite clays I have ever seen. If you could take snow, smash it into a dense format that was exquisitely translucent, like ice with the light flowing softly through it, that’s what it was like. If someone had shown me samples from that supplier 30 years ago, I would simply have picked one and saved myself a lot of development time. The Seto clay was whiter than mine, and perhaps a bit more translucent, but it also cracked more during firing.

“The agreement with the center was that I would do one open studio, one lecture to the community, and the rest of the time I’d work. They wanted three pieces of work to remain there. I ended up making four, and left all four. I was initially disappointed with one (“Untouched”). It came out with only a tiny crack near its base. The crack was almost invisible, although I really liked the piece. But the overall effect seemed like a baby’s face. It was too fresh and didn’t have much character. That crack was negligible, and I think the piece suffered from its near perfection. Sooner or later, someone will break it. Perhaps I should encourage the museum in Seto to have the piece travel to Ohio.

“One of the other Seto pieces (“Accidental Happiness”) was of enormous importance to me. It was the largest and most technically challenging one I attempted. When I opened the kiln, there were fissures everywhere. The Japanese assistant was petrified. We had the exhibition coming up very shortly. There was very little time left—certainly not enough to make another. He knew its significance, and could clearly see the large cracks in it. This was the most critical piece of the bunch in size and complexity. In my mind, it was the best. I had expressed this to him, so he knew it,

and he had watched the construction with its multitude of assembled parts. There were thousands of little bits, like fish scales, on the exterior. Each was individually made and placed in there by hand. And those are just part of it. There is a lot of imagery, too—birds in the background, and leaves on the interior. The intricacy and effort that went into it was humbling, even to me. My assistant expected one of two things to happen: either I was going to throw an incredible tantrum, or I was going to blame it on him. Neither would be out of character for a lot of master potters. He was the person in charge of firing kilns and the technical specialist at the facility—he was petrified.

“I don’t know if I could say I was ecstatic, but I was fine with this situation. By this time, I’d thoroughly developed my concepts and processes. I’d already repaired all three of the others—one



“Accidental Happiness,” 22 inches (56 centimeters) in length, Inlaid colored porcelain fired to Cone 8, with porcelain and gold-leaf base, and epoxy and gold-leaf repairs, by Curtis Benzle, Hilliard, Ohio.

very modestly, the other two pretty significantly. I was fine. But he said, ‘I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.’ And I said, ‘There’s nothing wrong.’ He was trying to figure out whether we were having a serious communication problem, or if I’d gone completely berserk. I assured him that, the next time he saw it, he would hopefully better understand why I wasn’t so concerned. It’s difficult to be sure whether he did or not. He was conditioned to expect things to come out of the kiln unmarred. He was working for me. He wasn’t going to say, ‘Well, that sucks.’ And I may never know his thoughts. But if this article is published, I’ll send him a copy. Maybe then he’ll say, ‘Ah, Benzle-san, I understand now. I see.’”

the author Margaret Armbrust is professor of art history at Columbus College of Art and Design in Ohio.