

Nina Malterud  
**Use and Art**

Ceramic utility-objects - plates, bowls, vessels, jars, jugs, cups, basins, pots - have been made for at least the last ten thousand years. They have been made by hand, and to a higher or lesser degree with the help of mechanised tools, in production lines spanning from individual persons, to family enterprise, and to large organised businesses.

Within this history we find a vast object-and use-repertoire, spanning from the extremely practical to the extremely symbolic - and it is not unusual to find these different functions within the same object. One can find the most amazing transitions and hybrids bridging the functional and sculptural forms. It is not always obvious, from the object's appearance, what their main purpose in life has been. In some cases visual scrutiny simply isn't enough, without some knowledge of history and of the relevant society. More often than not, one must hold some expertise to distinguish a cooking vessel from a burial object. A plate created for religious practices has not necessarily been treated differently, or more extensively, than a plate for everyday domestic use. Relationships between the daily and the hereafter are often complex and manifold, and appear to have followed quite different guidelines than we know today.

Significant in the development of my work was the study of ceramic objects found, for example, in museums of folk art, ethnography and history - objects from places and times way back, long before they had heard of Art or Design. Many of the so-called "primitive" cultures strike me as not in the least primitive, rather very advanced, especially where creating to combine practical and spiritual content is concerned. The connection between these different aspects of function can perhaps be exactly what provides them with such beauty and dignity. For me, it is an experience of reality, not romance, when a many thousand years old object in a glass case hits me right in the middle of my own time. It provides me with a feeling of kinship, despite its origins in a society far away from my own in time and place. When one looks at these objects, their common cultural expression appears as a principle force, a force strongly expressed through the creation of the society's objects. They provide an impression of great confidence on the part of the individual maker, a confidence where even although one maker perhaps overshadowed those of lesser ability, each individual position lay within a community and was part of a tradition.

Nowadays, in the field of ceramics, there are industrial products that probably cover every physical, functional demand. The industrial product is reputed to be rational, timely, available and inexpensive - although in practise, these qualities apply to only a few of the objects. Today's industrial production of ceramics is technically of a high quality. The production's character of rationality, efficiency and anonymity however, could also have been applied to the visual quality. Unfortunately, a prospective design strategy is not prevalent. The majority of production is run on short-term commercial consideration, and does not meet the requirements of any significant development or innovation.

"Use" is a word that to many primarily infers physical action, and hence the utility article is understood as a physical aid. However, included in our lives there are also the daily tasks with their respective material accessories, within our daily tasks we enter into relations that include more than just the purely physical action. Everyday pleasures, habits and feelings surround the things we use, however, due to their private nature, these relations are almost invisible. In the public sphere the thing's presence is tightly tied to commercial interest. An extremely, material prosperity reflects, in a

way of great complexity, on our relationship to objects. Our society seems to be both amazingly rich and amazingly poor. All things considered, it is perhaps due to a diffused lack that makes many people look towards something spiritual, something outside of the material, which widens the way for a new meaning in art.

The hand-made (ceramic) utility-object in our society has an opponent in the industrial product. The pre-industrial object had no knowledge of the industry, and therefore did not exist in this duality. The hand-made object can be parallel to the industrial commodity by object type (plate/plate), but different in identity. The craft artist's one-to-one process with the individual object provides a form of expression, which stems from entirely different sources and processes than those of the industrial product. That craft artists define themselves as artists declares the absorption, examination, boldness and invention, which must guide the work. Seen as such, today's field can seem to constitute a particular arena for artistic expression, and a contrast to the industrial product.

The role of the contemporary artist is personal and specified. It is not anonymous within the community. It can play with identity, but always with the individual as presupposition and backdrop. Within this framework, the practitioner occupies a different position than those who have gone before.

The basis for the creation of the individual object is in perpetual change. A radical and experimental creative practise must result in new types of objects and expression relative to the time. Work with utility-objects contains general artistic approaches, both in relation to formal and contextual questions, and when it concerns what lies beneath the whole: if the motive to make this work is strong enough.