

Mark Issenberg

by Dave Finkelnburg



Vase, 15 inches (38 centimeters) in height, wheel-thrown stoneware, with ash glaze (50% wood ash and 50% Cedar Heights Redart), fired to Cone 10 in reduction.

The soft hum of a pottery wheel accompanies the crackle of the freshly stoked wood stove. There are also sharp snapping sounds emanating from the beak of a large, green parrot feeding in its tall wire cage.

A ware rack is filled with loaded boards. The most recent additions look like inverted, bottomless bowls. Paunchy, jowly cylinders lined other boards.

Melding functional pottery and fine-art ceramics is always a daunting task, one that Georgia potter Mark Issenberg does not take lightly. First and foremost, he is a functional potter. His ware is sturdy, stable, balanced and practical. The elements of good function are apparent in any closely examined piece, whether it is a bowl, platter, planter or mug.

Yet the appearance of his pots is clear evidence that function is not his only goal. "I really believe functional ware should look good and work well," said Issenberg.

Florida grown, Issenberg now lives and works in north Georgia. His Lookout Mountain Pottery (www.lookoutmountainpottery.com) is in a newly constructed studio only yards from the workshop/home where he once apprenticed. While the physical distance may be scant, the path between that apprenticeship and Issenberg's current work has been neither short, nor direct.

Issenberg became hooked on clay in a 1960s high-school art class. He was just a sophomore when his natural aptitude and energy caught the eye of a visiting workshop presenter. Charles Counts, then operating his own north Georgia pottery, was impressed.

The summer after he graduated from high school, Issenberg spent two months attending a workshop with Counts at his studio. Afterward, Issenberg earned in quick succession an A.F.A. at Miami-Dade Junior College and a B.F.A. at the University of South Florida in Tampa.

As he was finishing his degree in Tampa, Counts invited him to come north one more time to work as an "intern production potter." Issenberg would spend six months during 1971 with his mentor.

Counts was nationally known by then. His classic book, *Pottery Workshop*, was in process at Macmillan Publishing, following close on the heels of his first book, *Common Clay*. Counts had studied ceramics at

Berea College, then Southern Illinois University, then worked with Susan Peterson and Carlton Ball at the University of Southern California. He had also spent several summers with Marguerite Wildenhain at her Pond Farm Workshop studio in California.

Counts set very specific tasks for his apprentice, tasks to be done in very specific ways. "It used to make Charles mad," chuckled Issenberg, "when I would get something done faster than he thought I would. I would just find a faster way to do something, and do it."

And then he would likely go off for a walk in the woods. Issenberg was nurturing a growing love of plants that has paralleled his love for pottery. Back in the studio, Issenberg continued to assert his independence, while absorbing from Counts a solid foundation in pottery production.

Watching Issenberg throw parts for his assembled vases today, one can't help but compare his basic methods to those of Counts. Those methods, particularly the throwing fundamentals, are well-documented in a series of photos in Counts' second book.

Issenberg works with two pans of throwing water, one at each hand. He opens the centered ball of clay with two hands, one supporting the other, then recenters the opened clay with a "claw" movement. Before pulling up a cylinder, using rapid, economical movement, he undercuts the thick base of the wall with his thumbnail. You can see the movement in a photograph on page 70 in *Pottery Workshop*.

Watching Issenberg throw is like watching the photos in Counts' book come to life; however, the results would never be mistaken for Counts' work.

In the 30 intervening years since that summer apprenticeship, Issenberg has found his own way with clay. While Counts favored controlled forms, Issenberg's current work is marked by a looser style of both form and decoration.

Make no mistake, though, Issenberg works with a high degree of control. He uses ribs both inside and



Sake set, to approximately 5 inches (13 centimeters) in height, ash-glazed stoneware.



Platter, 20 inches (51 centimeters) in diameter, stoneware, with ash glaze (50% wood ash and 50% Cedar Heights Redart) and cobalt ash glaze (50% wood ash and 50% Plastic Vitrox with 3% cobalt carbonate), fired to Cone 10 in reduction.



Vase, 20 inches (51 centimeters) in height, stoneware, sprayed with ash glaze (50% wood ash and 50% Cedar Heights Redart), fired to Cone 10 in reduction.

out to maintain symmetry and refine the shape of his larger forms. He finishes throwing each vessel by applying pressure with either his fingers, sponges or ribs to create gestural grooves and ridges. These grooves and ridges are important because they will be accentuated later by ash glazes.

This morning, it was still dark out when Issenberg went to the studio. Winter heating dries clay quickly and he arose early to finish several thrown forms. A chubby cylinder was trimmed, inverted, and a small, bottomless bowl attached to form a foot. This combination was turned upright and a larger bottomless bowl joined to the top, forming a mouth for the vase.

Issenberg's assembly process was rapid and precise. The results, though, appear loose and casual. Additions of rolled, textured lugs to the throat of each vase, creating lifting handles, adds to the relaxed look of the ware.

He favors the simplest of recipes for his ash glazes. His basic glaze is half wood ash, and half Cedar Heights Redart clay. He also likes an equal-parts blend of wood ash and Plastic Vitrox clay, colored with cobalt oxide.

While the glaze recipes may be simple, Issenberg's application of them is not. He makes use of layering and spraying to obtain various decorative effects. He will set up several sprayers at the same time so that he can switch rapidly from one glaze to another.

Getting to this point with his work has not been a straight path for Issenberg. After apprenticing with Counts, Issenberg returned to Miami, where he had studio space at the Ceramic League of Miami. He made functional ware, taught pottery-making classes, and sold his work, mainly at shows and studio sales, for several years.

Success with his craft did not bring financial security, though. That, combined with what he calls a "commitment to serve," led Issenberg to find a "real job, with benefits," and he became a City of Hialeah fireman in 1978. For the next 18 years, Issenberg worked at the firehouse, but maintained his interest in making pottery and growing plants. Off the job, he found time to raise and sell exotic trees and plants, such as macadamias, mangoes, palms, cycads, aroids and drought-tolerant succulents. He also worked as a weekly volunteer at Fairchild Tropical Gardens, an 83-acre botanical garden and plant research facility in Miami.

Then, in 1996, he was sidelined by a disabling stroke. For the next year, Issenberg divided his time

between different forms of physical and speech therapy. Undaunted by the setback, he took up sailing. By the time he was declared fit to work again, he was a licensed sailboat captain.

Now, Issenberg seems to be continually rushing off in different directions, practically at the same time. He has an astonishing variety of interests, and an impressive amount of expertise in many of them. While relaxed and casual may describe his finished work, the artist himself is neither.

On a trip to Atlanta with Issenberg, I stopped in a Japanese stationery store to ask directions. The shop sold origami supplies, stamps and calligraphy brushes, and oriental-style flower vases. Soon Issenberg was deep in conversation with the shopkeeper, knowledgeably discussing ikebana arrangements.

Another of Issenberg's current interests is collecting antique Farmall tractors. "I just like old red tractors," he grinned. "Maybe it's because the color reminds me of fire engines."

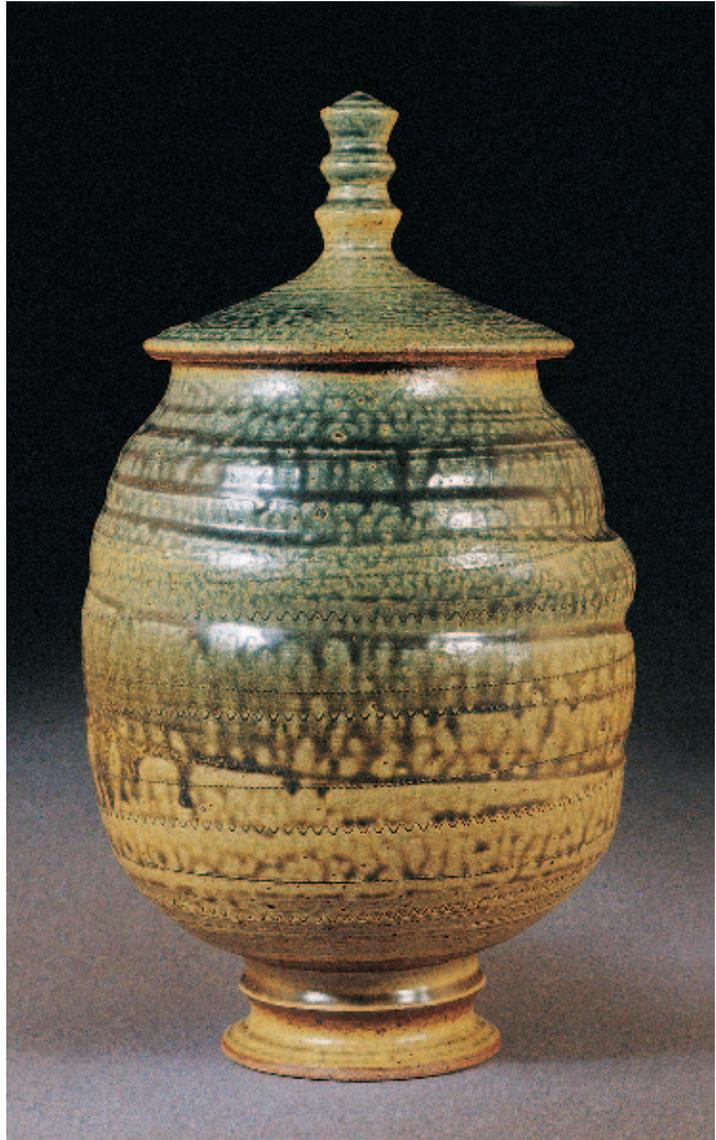
After two months of night and day work preparing for a one-man show at the Association for Visual Artists Gallery in Chattanooga last spring, Issenberg took a break from potting to rebuild the hydraulic unit in one of his tractors. Most mornings, he fires up one of his antique tractors and drives out to his mailbox on Plum Nelly Road to gather the mail and the daily newspaper.

He also enjoys riding gaited mules, and volunteers a half day a week to care for plants at the Tennessee Aquarium in Chattanooga. And, in part to get outdoors and hike, he volunteers time and effort to clean up litter at Cloudlands Canyon State Park. Cloudlands is located a convenient 2-mile drive from Issenberg's studio and showcases some of the most stunning scenery in north Georgia.

Reaching down to pick up a candy wrapper along a trail leading to one of the park's scenic waterfalls, Issenberg mused about his varied interests. "There's just a lot of things I like," he observed. In such a setting, it's easy to forget that the clay on his shoes came from the studio and not the soil above the hillside coal seam we have just passed.

Later on that day he admitted, "I know I have too many interests. I guess I just like to learn things." And off he goes.

There's compost waiting to be worked into the garden. He's heard about a tractor that may be for sale. And, of course, this morning's plans include throwing more pots.



Covered jar, 13 inches (33 centimeters) in height, stoneware, with a cobalt-stained ash glaze (50% wood ash and 50% Cedar Heights Redart with 3% cobalt carbonate) sprayed over the base ash glaze, fired to Cone 10 in reduction, by Mark Issenberg, Rising Fawn, Georgia; www.lookoutmountainpottery.com.