

DEPARTURES

LIFE AT ITS BEST

PUBLISHED BY AMERICAN EXPRESS FOR PLATINUM CARD AND CENTURION CARD MEMBERS • JAN/FEB 2005

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L i m i t e d E d i t i o n

Some artists work from well-laid plans. Others, like ceramist Bennett Bean, tend toward Pasteur's dictum that "chance favors the prepared mind." In ceramic circles Bean is known as a founding father of post-fire decoration, a reference to his pioneering an unorthodox process of painting the outside and gilding the interior of his earthenware after firing. Unlike most clay workers, who strive for perfect form, Bean fragments his surfaces and forms and applies layer on layer of color to create a surface dialogue between tightly controlled geometric motifs and archaic, fire-flashed random patterns.

Bean came upon the technique in the early 1980s, when the lip split on a clay vessel he'd thrown. "The cuts gradually became more extreme and the vessel completely opened up," recalls Bean. From that mishap came his first vessels exploiting the new method: flaring semibowl shapes like extended, overlapping butterfly wings. Now he divides his vessels into



two, three, or four elements, interlocking the pieces like puzzle parts. Calling his latest series doubles, triples, and quartets, he says, "I don't name my pieces—titles limit perception."

Bean's signature geometric configurations are the product of another chance encounter. He'd taken the elevator to the wrong floor of an artists' supply house, where he happened to spot a display of graphic-artist's tape. He now applies it to his pieces before the second firing to create the diagonal motifs that are a hallmark of their design.

All this was a major break for Bean, who had previously relied more on tradition than chance to guide his artistry. In 1970, while still pursuing an academic career, the Ohio-born and West Coast-trained Bean and his wife, Cathy Bao, left New York City for a 10-acre farm in northern New Jersey.



Ceramist Bennett Bean (below left, in front of the barn that serves as his studio) has literally broken the mold. He divides his vessels into geometric segments, fires them, and paints them in wild colors. The pieces are fired a second time, then gilded. Above, an untitled vessel from Bean's "double" series; below center, a member of his recent "triple" series, also untitled.

There he created pots influenced first by Japanese, then Native American forms. Today the farm continues as home and studio. Bean and a few assistants work in a huge barn next to his house. Vessels are shaped by hand, covered with slip (liquid clay), and fired in a kiln. After applying the tape, Bean paints on his colored glazes, which took him years to develop. Then the pieces are fired a second time in a brick-lined pit. Here timing is everything. The glazes must be heated enough to become permanent but must not reach the vitreous stage. Three coats of gesso and materials such as bole—a reddish-brown clay used to add depth of color—are brushed onto the interior before it is gilded.

Bean's ceramic vessels (examples of which reside at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the White House Craft Collection) are a study in controlled spontaneity. And there is no narrative. "I don't want to tell a story," Bean says. "In fact, if I find an image, I get rid of it."

At age 58, Bean is tall and graying; he has the physique of a man who works the land, but the speech of an urbane college professor. A passionate gardener, inventor, and collector—currently of Chinese scholar's rocks—he is an amateur of the purist sort. Presently he's designing rugs woven in Nepal, as well as stainless-steel trowels with sculpted exotic-wood handles. Says Bennett Bean, again courting chance, "I like to make things because I like to be surprised."

BOBBIE LEIGH
Bennett Bean is represented by several art galleries, including New York's Barry Friedman Ltd., 32 East 67th Street; 212-794-8950, and R. Duane Reed Gallery, 215 West Huron, Chicago; 312-932-9828. The current series of vessels range in price from approximately \$3,000 for a double to \$25,000 for a quartet. Bean's work can also be viewed at www.bennettbean.com.