



THROWN / ALTERED 20" H 4/77 STONE WARE

↑ Harry Holl. Thrown and altered stoneware vase, 1977. Height: 20 in.

↓ Harry Holl. Thrown and altered stoneware vase, 1978. Height: 24 in.



THROWN / ALTERED STONE WARE

EKTACHROME

S-76 PORC 18" MADE IN U.S.A. BRUSHWORK



VIEW FROM THIS SIDE

Harry Holl. Porcelain Plate, 1976. Diameter: 18 in.  
All photographs this page by the artist.

BY Steven Kemp

# HARRY HOLL



1 Harry Holl. Porcelain plate, 1973. Diameter: 18 in.

2 Harry Holl. Stoneware vase with incised lines, 1976. Height 20 in.

## THE MAGIC OF SCARGO

I remember the first time I turned up the steep grade that leads to Scargo Pottery. Reaching the top of the hill, I immediately felt the traditional sequence of space and time vanish. I was greeted by a cathedral-like stand of lofty pines, which were enlivened by the sweetish calls of lively chickadees. A sign proclaimed, "PATH TO POTTERY." I followed the path past enchanted fantasy castles, full-size female torsos, deeply sculpted vessels, carved cubist reliefs, and gorgeously glazed porcelain floor-vases, to the sprawling compound that inhabits this serene pine grove.

The pied sound of classical music beckoned me to a greenhouse studio overflowing with orchids and bromeliads. Seated in this Eden was a potter at his wheel quietly throwing assured forms in quick succession. Taking a seat on a bench, I became mesmerized by the spinning clay mass being quickly transformed into cups, vases, and bowls. Before me was Harry Holl, patriarch of potters, sensei, unbearably virtuous and prolific. His pots personified skill, discipline, imagination, and the power of invention.

Like the mass of clay, I was transformed, from something amorphous into something with direction and purpose. I would become a potter! The search for my path was over. My wishes and desires had been validated; my realm of possibilities had expanded just because this place existed!

I asked Harry if I could work with him. He asked who I was and about my background. I told him I had taken only one undergraduate pottery class and was teaching a class but didn't know how to throw; he kindly sent me on my way. I changed my trajectory when I returned to school, taking every pottery class available so that I could come back to apprentice with Harry.

## PREACHING FROM THE POTTER'S WHEEL

Anyone who drove up that glacial hill and sat on that bench found himself transformed. Harry found out who you were, and from the pulpit of the potter's wheel, enlightened you to a better way of thinking. He told stories of his antiwar activities during the Vietnam War and his experiences at Black Mountain College, peppered with quotes from his favorite philosopher, Zorba the Greek. The world came to Harry's studio; there he interacted with people from all walks of life. He was especially interested in children. He said, "children always know where it's at." He valued people who worked with their hands, and was not so interested in establishment types. He built lifelong relationships with carpenters, fishermen, ministers, ceramic engineers, masons, and chefs.

Harry established his pottery in 1952 in the small Cape Cod village of Dennis, which sits on the Sandwich Moraine, formed by glaciers millennia ago. On this extended

## Harry

The wave that brought Harry  
To the Cape  
Was a Long, Strong, Leaping Wave.

Barreling through the Crucible of War.  
He emerged Ready, Eyes Fixed.

There is only Time to Create!  
There is only Time for Work!  
For Days Working with your Hands!  
For Spinning Clay!

Never asking any Questions of Why?  
Only How!!!  
There are Thousands of Visions to Fulfill!

Possessed With the Energy of Ten  
Those Hands  
Strong, Sure  
Dive into the Clay  
Pulling out Pot after Pot.

Beneath the sweet notes of Vivaldi  
His Eyes  
Which have known Humanity at its Nadir  
Caress the Curvaceous contours of the Female Nude.

His Arms gather us around.  
He Forces us to Pay Attention.  
"Try to Touch Greatness,  
It's very Fleeting!"

We ask him all the Questions  
But he Answers,  
"I am not a Prophet!!  
I am a Potter!"

But We're your Disciples!  
"Follow your own Wave!  
Ride that Swell as Long as you can!  
Use the Tools I've given You!  
Ride it Full and High!"  
When I'm Old and Bent over,

I hope that with my Time  
I've made the Wheel Sing!

I hope as I ride  
Seaward on the wave leaving these Shores  
That I linger and Meet Face to Face

And Say  
"Thank-you for my life, Harry!  
I Love You!!!"



↑ *Harry Holl  
in his studio,  
2005. Photo  
courtesy of  
Louis Cormier.*

sandy ridge, pitch pines send their branches crookedly skyward. Buffeted by the salt winds, they possess the look of Methuselah. Harry's neighbors were woodland fauna: deer, crows, fox, and skunks. The raccoons did nighttime raids on his birdfeeders; all day the same feeders were full of chickadees, cardinals, nuthatches, and finches.

Only a few hundred yards from Scargo Lake, a deep kettle pond shaped like a fish, the pottery looks out over the whole inner arm of Cape Cod, a thin strip of exposed and vulnerable headland jutting thirty-five miles into the open Atlantic. Harry belonged to this landscape. He was well grounded there and in who he was.

Like Lewis and Clark exploring unknown territory, Harry was a true pioneer, forging his path to pottery with little guidance. With only rudimentary clay materials and tools, a few recipes, and a month-long pottery workshop to give him direction and skill, he had the au-

dacity to start a pottery. He negotiated a maze of problems with an inborn ability, just like the bushy-tail fox bounds across a stone wall, painlessly navigating through the catbrier and viburnum jungle outside.

Harry said that the locals had no idea what he was doing and called him "the pots-and-pans man." Yet he always found connections and solutions through his interactions with people, and his interests seemed to expand because of it. He gained knowledge in the building trades from a post-and-beam carpenter who later built him a barn. He learned about horticulture from a retired minister. He set up a forge with a blacksmith; a retired ceramic engineer helped him develop clay and glazes; and a gas man developed his burner system. Whenever he needed something, someone would walk through the door with the expertise to solve that problem that day!

With characteristic generosity of spirit, he helped establish the Cape Cod Pottery Co-op. He loved potters. He created an environment where we – and other potters – could thrive. He found a beautiful barn where we stored ceramic materials, kiln shelves from Norton, and a clay mixer. On Saturdays we would sell pottery supplies to the general public and to other potters who came from as far away as Boston and New Bedford. (After the barn burnt down, we discontinued the clay mixing and storage collective. Now known as the Cape Cod Potters, Inc., we offer workshops and community education grants and put on Soup Bowls for Hunger, a charitable event for the local food pantry).

Harry started work at 10 a.m. and worked late, sometimes until nine or ten at night, seven days a week, for more than forty years. He was always knee-deep in community projects. He was involved in the establishment of many educational and cultural institutions, including the Cape Cod Conservatory of Music and Art, Cape Cod Community College, the Cape Cod Museum of Natural History, and the

Cape Cod Museum of Art.

His source of creativity was the figure. Possessing a phenomenal visual memory, he was able to paint and sculpt freehand, without any reference materials. On freshly thrown pots, he'd paint cubist-style faces, sculpt sensuous female figures, and create stylized patterns of all manner of flora and fauna. He mastered all techniques, all types of clays, glazes, and firings. He developed clay formulas in stoneware, porcelain, raku, earthenware, and flameware. His glaze palette included flambé, copper reds, chuns, shinos, and crystalline, all superbly applied. He invented decorating techniques such as the "push-pull" sculpture-forming technique.

When we would run up against an obstacle, Harry would say, "I'll dream about it tonight and work it out." Before he went to bed, he would set his mind to the problem. Sure enough, the next day he would come to the studio all keyed up with a solution that had come to him in a dream.

**HORSESHOE HARRY**

Harry's pedigree was the stuff of myth. Growing up in the Bronx, he went to the newly formed LaGuardia School for the Arts in the late 1930s and continued his studies at the Art Students League. He won the Tiffany award for Sculpture in 1941. Drafted into the armed forces in World War II, he served as a rear gunner on the B-17 Flying Fortress out of England, dropping bombs over Europe. After the liberation of France, he decommissioned unexploded ordinance. He said that he was one of three men out of sixty who survived. This is how he got the moniker "Horseshoe Harry." Always unbelievably lucky, he felt that with that luck came an obligation to live a life of purpose, to make the world a better place, to live life fully and in service to those men who had lost their chance for life.

After surviving the war, Harry enrolled in Black Mountain College on the GI Bill. At that experimental college in North Carolina, where the lines between student and teacher didn't exist, the core philosophy was "learn by doing." Success was achieved only by embracing failure, and knowledge of art was equal to all other areas of knowledge. Harry told me that he had built the original geodesic dome with Buckminster Fuller at Black Mountain. Black Mountain was also where he met his wife, Mirande. Mirande's father, Arnold, was a sculptor who had studied in Paris during the 1920s alongside Alberto Giacometti, apprenticing with Antoine Bourdelle, who had studied with Rodin. The "Who's Who" goes on from there.

Harry and Mirande moved to Oregon to start a commune and a family (Tina was the first-born, followed by Kim, Mary, and Sarah). Harry enrolled in a month-long workshop with Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada. Of the experience, Harry said, "Once I put my hands on the spinning clay, that was it!" Peter Voulkos and Rudy Autio were in the workshop, too. This was the beginning of the American studio pottery movement.

That workshop laid down the foundation for his pottery on Cape Cod. Hamada was Harry's sensei. Scargo was modeled after the structured life of a Japanese pottery village. Using the techniques and philosophy Harry gained in the workshop, he set up a self-contained pottery production community.

**NATURAL WAY TO THROW**

When I apprenticed with Harry, I learned the Eastern way to throw off the hump. He taught me to work efficiently, putting minimal stress on my body, which he called the natural way to throw. Harry invented a wheel

that was intentionally underpowered so that he could move the clay without force and thus lessen stress on the joints, mainly on the wrists and back. With the option of brute strength taken away, the potter has to develop skill and finesse. He taught me how to spiral-wedge using my legs mostly rather than my arms. With this technique, he could wedge twenty-five to thirty pounds of clay into a beautiful spiral.

Harry's wheel-throwing was like a finely choreographed dance in which each move was crisp, fluid, and done with maximum flair. Harry was an entertainer; he said the bench audience made him a better potter. Harry threw quickly and efficiently; every move had a purpose. Throwing mainly off the hump, he created one form after another with only a few pulls of the clay. He used as much water as he needed, and he didn't worry about the clay slumping because he worked so quickly.

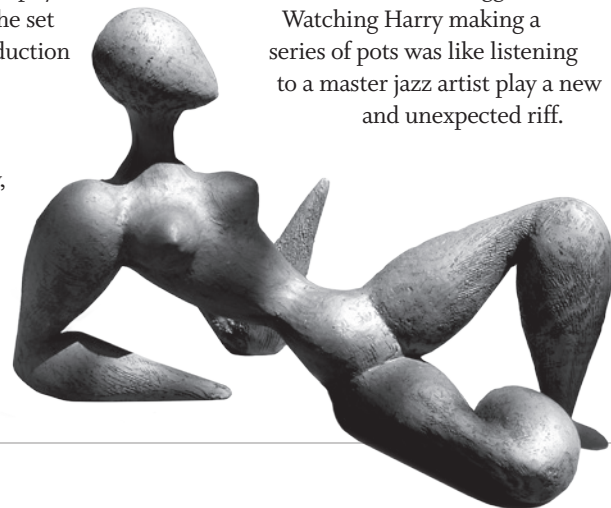
His belief was that when a pot is made assuredly and efficiently, it has integrity. He hated pots that were "fussed over" and could spot them a mile away. "The clay never lies," he said. Having Harry as a mentor was sort of like having God watching over me. I knew I could never get away with trying to save a poorly made pot through trimming or overworking it.

He could tell when I struggled.

Watching Harry making a series of pots was like listening to a master jazz artist play a new and unexpected riff.

"Harry's need to work hard came out of the crucible of war. He had seen many lives lost. He needed to make his life count, to share his experience and knowledge with others."

← Harry Holl. *Thrown and assembled stoneware figure, 1970. Width: 54 in. Photograph by the artist.*



His process was remarkably free of limits. At any moment, a bowl, a pitcher, a jar, a wine decanter would happen. In the moment, I always felt compelled to witness and observe; when I sat down and threw on the wheel, I felt obliged to recreate what I had seen. I feel obliged to this day.

Harry taught me how to analyze a form for function. He said the perfect mug shape has a spherical bottom, which holds the heat longer, and a ridge from which the handle “grows.” The neck is collared in to retain the heat, and the rim is slightly curved out to fit over one’s bottom lip, which facilitates drinking. The base of the handle is planted at the bottom, leaving enough space for the knuckles that they won’t get burned, but not so far out from the form that the mug is unbalanced.

From such lessons, I have built a whole way of working. Developing my ability to analyze each form for function opened a new way of producing pots of integrity. A pitcher needs to pour well; it needs a stable foot so that it isn’t easily knocked over; and it needs a handle that can take the weight of a full pitcher and that visually fits the form. Customers may not know about each step of the potter’s analysis, but they know when a mug or pitcher works.

### **WILLING WORKER**

Harry’s need to work hard came out of the crucible of war. He had seen many lives lost. He needed to make his life count, to share his experience and knowledge with others. Harry had no secrets. His clay and glaze formula file box was open to all. He wasn’t interested in being famous, he was interested in what compels someone to spend endless hours on this kind of work, and in the question, what makes work meaningful?

Harry believed that being fully engaged in one’s work is what makes it meaningful.

When a potter is fully focused on shaping a series of bowls, his hands take over, with the mind out of the way. His skill takes over, and his mind focuses on the present; time flies by, and hours seem to pass in minutes. Once a rhythm is achieved, the bowls just flow from the potter’s hands. Being a potter means being a willing worker who loves the physicality of the work. And the work is about gaining a rhythm that takes him outside the dialogue in his head, losing himself in a task.

### **MAN FOR ALL SEASONS**

My apprenticeship with Harry started in the fall of 1976 and ended when I got my own shop in April 1978. For Harry, making pottery was done in rhythm with the seasons. On a typical Scargo winter day, the sun would barely penetrate the snow-covered boughs of the pine canopy and was quickly followed by the gloom of gray. Rain dripped off the eaves of the studio. Snow and rain, snow and rain, the snow was never able to build up.

I learned that this was the time for trying out ideas. The shop was quiet, there was time and space to explore ideas we’d put on the back burner, time to make sculpture, to try new themes and ways of saying things, time to be composed in our private moments, to uncover something deep within ourselves.

In spring, the alewives (a type of river herring) came up from the sea by the thousands to spawn in the Cape’s freshwater ponds. As they came up the rushing waters of the tidal creeks to reach their goal, they were greeted by a gauntlet of gulls, osprey, and people. When the green forest wall began to rebuild itself, a wave of woodland birds flitted from branch to branch, accompanied by the calls of chickadees, who were searching for early insects and grubs among the embryonic

leaves. This was the time to perfect newly germinated ideas, industriously eliminating all the excesses and superfluous elements to achieve a unified whole – nothing fancy, rather, humble. This was the time for telling a story that connects energy and good nature to the things that are important.

The pace accelerated exponentially in summer. For ten weeks, late June through August, we were in high gear. As soon as school was out, the Cape burst into noise and nonstop activity. SELL! SELL! SELL! was the mantra. No time for new ideas, only the tried and true! Keep the firings coming! No pots, no money!

Routine was key, starting with a swim in Scargo Lake in the morning. Connecting with nature was important, especially through a visit to the beach every day; it centered us. We’d work all day making whatever was needed to keep the shelves full. At the end of the day, we would head down Dr. Lord’s Way to the bay to clean off the day and watch the sunset. Sometimes after dinner, Harry would head back to the shop to work uninterrupted.

It was work, work, work, only to have the kiln load disappear into the hands of customers the day it came out. Unloading day saw a feeding frenzy of people fighting over the pots. The work cycle was exhausting, requiring everything we had physically and spiritually, but it was still not enough. Harry would say, “Your summer is only as good as your winter.” He measured his income not by how much money he made on a certain day, but by how productive he had been, because he knew everything would sell. The tourists would buy it all.

In the fall came migration. The summer people left, the birds gathered for their trip south. September brought a brief cold spell, a foretaste of autumn. Hundreds of tree swallows dipped over the dunes. By October,

the foliage began to thin, and the skeletons of the trees reasserted themselves. The capitalistic world receded, and we regained a sense of ourselves. The early darkness slowed us down, allowing us to give in to our exhaustion and to live by a more humane schedule.

This was the season for feeling burnt out and evaluating the summer. What had worked? What hadn't worked? And who did you see? Some of Harry's relationships with customers had developed over decades. They wanted to know what was new? How was the family? These relationships were among the most important outcomes of his having a shop. They grew out of the customers' commitment to his story, to who he was, to his talent and values.

### THE CHALK BOARD

Talent is the coin of the realm, and Harry had more talent in his little finger than the rest of us had put together. But hard work and how well one works are what make great art. Harry's workday always began at the chalkboard over the wedging table. On the chalkboard, Harry would plot his day of production. With beautiful clean lines, he would work out his ideas for a new design, surface decoration, or major piece of sculpture. He said it was always easier to work out an idea on the board than on the wheel. The chalkboard catalogued his production, thoughts, and creativity for more than fifty years. His pots are the legacy of that process.

My lessons began at that chalkboard. I remember a moment when I was struggling with a vase. I kept making the same dumpy shape. Harry drew three shapes: a cylinder, a sphere, and a cone. He said that all thrown pottery is derived from these three basic shapes and instructed me to draw fifty different vase forms using one, two, or all three of the shapes for each. I spent the morning

covering the chalkboard with various combinations: cylinder on sphere, sphere on cone, cone on sphere . . . Then I spent the rest of the day throwing what I had drawn. This exercise gave me a great repertoire that I could re-create anytime I was on the wheel.

### THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE

Having always made a point of seeking new challenges, Harry eventually faced the ultimate challenge of Parkinson's disease. He suffered its debilitating tremors for twenty years. No longer able to throw, he took up painting and marshaled all his knowledge, strength, and abilities for his new love. Harry had taught drawing and sculpture classes all through his career, and he had always had a deep connection to the human figure as a source of inspiration. During this stage of his life, his source continued to be the figure; he worked with endless combinations of techniques and styles. In his last two decades of life, he also practiced Buddhism, which aligned with his idea that in making art one imparts a spirit that resides in the work. He felt that process was everything and must be honored with true intentions.

I've struggled to distance myself from the gravitational pull of his influence. It has taken me many years to find my own path, but I still have Harry's voice in my head as I throw a mug or sculpt an eight-foot monolith. I feel his presence every day. I've shaped my way of working around his teachings: a mix of semi-production and one-of-a-kind pieces keeps me engaged.

Some of Harry's maxims were: "If something becomes too popular, drop it. You'll be wasting valuable time." And "One year of teaching robs you of two years of development as an artist. It takes that long to get back on track." Like the old Johnny Cash

song "Get Rhythm," a potter needs to feel the rhythm of life before he can have a good rhythm on the wheel. I've passed on many of Harry's teachings to my apprentices and to my son, Matthew, and I love hearing them use the same words when they're explaining the work to others. A student of Harry's through high school and college, Matthew developed a strong relationship with him. Harry cherished the concept of his legacy continuing with the next generation.

When Harry died in 2015, I felt a great loss, the loss of his presence. But as time has passed, I have been filled with his presence again. Through the work my dialogue with him continues. When I get serious and ask myself a series of interlocking questions, which moves me into the realm of art, there's Harry. One of my greatest honors was reading a poem I had written about him at the celebration of his life (see page 16).

I think, "Wouldn't it be a grand thing to watch Harry throw again, to listen to his stories?" Then I realize we are in the here and now, and what could be grander than being part of Harry's legacy? Scargo Pottery is a living entity, shaped and run by his daughters Tina and Kim, with the indispensable help of Meden Parker, in faithfulness to his beliefs. His daughter Sarah is making her mark on the community through painting and teaching, and daughter Mary's beautiful figurative decorations grace many Scargo pots. Harry has passed on the tools of his trade to his apprentices, including me, Matthew, Meden, Kevin Nolen, Janet Burner, Clay Calderwood, Gail Turner, and hundreds of others. We all hope that we will have made the wheel sing before we too ride seaward, leaving these shores!



### BIO

Steven Kemp apprenticed with Harry Holl in the mid 70s and working with his son Matthew, has been a potter on Cape Cod for over forty years. His recent love is wood firing sand pattern vessels from plaster castings of Cape Cod Bay. He has recently completed a commission for downtown Hyannis of a permanent eight-foot stoneware monolith incorporating the grooved sand patterns on a geometric shape called the Vesica Picis.

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