

# Steve Nutt, Potter

By Cleve Overton

Two guitar players sang Mexican songs for the thousands of evening rush hour commuters waiting for the huge doors to open leading to the ferry boat that would take them across the lower bay. This voyage I had made many times, years ago, while living here. The few that listened to the music dropped coins and dollars into the guitar cases in front of them; the musicians nodded thanks. The loaded boat disconnected from its moorings and the engines below the main deck throbbed monotonously as the ferry veered out into the channel, passing the Statue of Liberty, the Robbins Reef lighthouse, the New Jersey shoreline on the right. Some passengers closed their eyes; some read newspapers; others folded their arms across their chests and stared vacantly ahead. We left Manhattan, the soaring buildings and the famous skyline. Evening lights began. The ferry moved toward the rolling, dark hills in the distance, twenty-five minutes away from Staten Island, where the thousands would disperse to waiting buses, cars, and trains—to vanish.

A few hours later I joined a number of people at a party in the home of an old friend. It was obvious that the Friday night fete was intended to shake off some of the drudgery of a drab work week. It was equally certain that the host paid special attention to the splendid trays of food and drink. The kitchen area was wall-to-wall, shoulder-to-shoulder bodies, both men and women. Some tried dancing, others, in tight clusters, appeared to be in deep conversation.

At one point, a man introduced himself. He said his name was Steve Nutt and that he had one of my "kick wheels." It had been more than ten years since I had manufactured pottery wheels or dug clay or made kilns here. Nutt was a tall, broad man, about fifty, with a salt-and-pepper beard, receding hairlines and rimmed glasses. He could be mistaken for an attorney, minister, or schoolteacher, which I found out later he was. Nutt is a member of the faculty at Wagner College and an active studio potter on Staten Island.

That piqued my interest: a studio potter still living in the congested snarl that Staten Island had become. Long ago, most potters left Staten Island, often for the bucolic retreats of the Catskills and the Berkshires. I wondered if anyone could really have a studio in the midst of all the chaos, have the peace and quiet and the time to be centered on making pots here. In the book, *Centering*, M.C. Richards devotes long chapters to the task of the teacher to remove the many obstacles that students face in order to center a ball of clay. It would seem almost impossible to do that here, amid the crowd. So, when Steve Nutt gave me his card and invited me out, I accepted his invitation immediately.

I had known most of Staten Island's streets for fifty years, but I had to buy a road map to find Ellicott Place. I had passed it hundreds of times, but I had never noticed the tiny street near the Goodhue Children's Center. Tall brick entrance columns on each side of the roadway guarded a two-lane cul-de-sac only two blocks long. A center median lined with 100-foot oak trees divided twenty or so houses.

Nutt's building is a stately, cedar-shingled, two-story colonial house with shuttered windows and red brick stairs, a screened-in porch with well cared for shrubbery, flowers and trimmed grass. The other building on the large property is a garage at the end of a long driveway. The doors were closed. There were no signs. I walked to the right of the building, peering into the backyard, where bright clothes flapped in the light breeze. Moving back to the main building, I knocked on the front door. No response, except the bark of a nearby dog. Beyond the clothesline and tall shrubs, I noticed the garage had an addition, and that in front of a large plate glass door a dozen plates on a bench were drying in the sun.

I stepped up on the deck and called out. Steve Nutt came to the door, his

full frame covering the entire doorway. He dried his hands on a towel and I guessed he was working on the wheel. Dressed in a blue cotton shirt and jeans, his glasses perched on the bridge of his nose, he smiled and said, "Hi. How are you?" I tried to make small talk, but I soon realized that he was not a person that entered into conversation easily. "Mind if I look around," I asked. "No," he replied and went back to his wheel.

Steve Nutt was working on one of my best wheels. I was proud of the sturdy design, the heavy steel shaft lubricated with grease fittings, the carefully shaped aluminum head, the steel-weighted disc. I had manufactured many of these in my own pottery shop on Holland Avenue, years ago. The name, "A Potter's Wheel," was still attached.

On a bench behind him were six freshly thrown red clay pitchers awaiting handles. His pottery is very straightforward and honest, very basic shapes and forms. The warm brown clay tones were not the current vogue at the shows I had seen before my visit with Nutt. Those ceramics were highly decorated sculptures and wall displays, rather than functional ware for a kitchen table.

Nutt's finished works resembled traditional American practical forms: large platters, plates, bowls, vases, candle holders and covered jars. The plate decorations were tailor-made for seasons—winter, spring, summer and fall sales. Nutt utilized a sensitive judgment of scale and placement of design

that he learned while doing Japanese ink painting. His colorful patterns and geometric combinations are prized wall decorations.

I was reminded of what Henry Varnum Poor said about his own work: that he tried to achieve a conscious rebirth or reaffirmation of old forms. The outward form might seem a repetition, but the inward spirit was a re-creation and continuation of a rich tradition. To command attention the new work of art should not have to express itself in exotic new forms any more than a new baby has to have four arms in order to become an individual.

Here, I thought, was a relatively unknown craftsman whose only new mechanical tool was the digitally controlled electric kiln. There was a wedging and weighing table with a small scale and shelves that held dozens of drying ware. There was no machinery to work or shape the clay: no giant pug mills or slab rollers, no extruders or jiggers, books, or ball mills, or unnecessary furniture. The kick wheel table held a tray of water and three well-used trimming tools. Cone 6 clay was delivered in cartons.

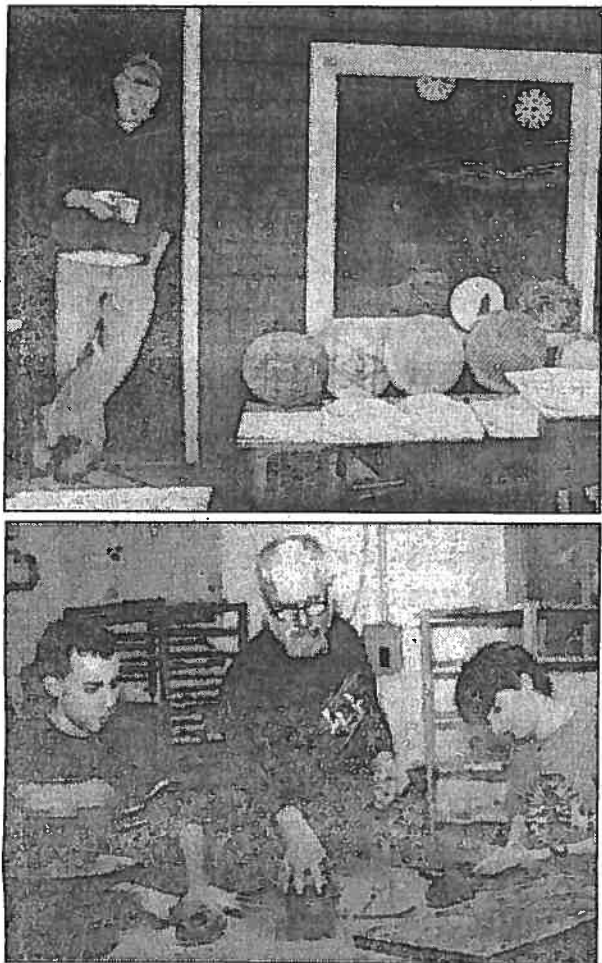
Next to this workspace was a packing area, which held a large bag of loose, insulating material beside collapsed cardboard cartons used for packing and pick-up by UPS. The office area had cupboard for order slips and a potter's communication newsletter describing Nutt's method of producing red ware plates. Also stored there were brochures and catalogs, other office papers, and a dozen plastic jars of honey produced by Nutt's two large beehives in the rear of the shop. Beside the doorway was a calendar and photos of his daughter, Molly, a sixteen-year-old freshman swim champion from Curtis High School.

Armed with my camera and a tape recorder, I returned a few days later. I asked Nutt the usual potter-to-potter questions about necks and spouts, wedging and throwing, centering, and trimming, and glazing. The simplicity of the entire operation comforted me. Nothing here was a secret or hidden. There was no present, just a quiet, intuitive feel.

I asked about his slip glazes. He said they were simply a lead-free fritt with ten percent china clay and two percent red iron oxide. I watched his glaze technique, swift, sure movements over greenware resulting in wonderful geometric patterns and design combinations.

He spoke about his study of Japanese ink painting, of being drawn to the Japanese aesthetic of good and solid. His later studies with Bennet Bean and Byron Temple reinforced this intuitive sense of remaining true to time-tested forms. He used this awareness in his classes at Wagner College and during his many years as the resident potter at Historic Richmond Town. His words brought me back to my own years as a potter. I had found what I was looking for in this quiet place, a sense of what I had left so many years ago.

Driving home that evening along roads that had once been horse-and-buggy trails, I was disheartened by the diesel fuel smells from the huge buses and trucks. Though it was only three miles from home, construction detours—to accommodate a population that had doubled since I left only fifteen years ago—made the trip over an hour. I recalled the commuters on the ferry and their frantic rush to buses and cars. Steve Nutt doesn't live in that world, though it is close enough. He has created a respite of beauty and simplicity. And I would not forget his gift.



Above; Steve Nutt at his studio — below; Steve with his students at Wagner College. Photos by Cleve Overton