

master and apprentice

by Daniel Garretson

Learning a craft through an apprenticeship, essentially immersion training, happens all around the world. Apprenticeships here in the US have evolved to reflect our particular individual and egalitarian ideology.

In the US, apprenticeships are no longer aimed at teaching a particular style of making to be passed down by successive generations. For better or worse, contemporary American culture values the new, the unique, and the individual. Successful apprenticeships not only teach the essential skills demanded of a particular craft, but also how to develop an individual voice as an artist, the ability to clearly articulate the meaning of one's work, and finally the separate skill set needed to succeed economically.

When I arrived in the hills of western Massachusetts in the fall of 2006 for my own apprenticeship with Mark Shapiro, I found the system he had developed over the past two decades to be loosely structured. There were no set times I was required to be there, nor any particular way I had to do things. There were, of course, expectations and responsibilities, though how to approach these tasks was left to my discretion. Having very little prior experience, never having mixed a glaze or fired a kiln, I found the learning curve steep. Initially I wanted Mark to just tell me the right way to do everything. He insisted that by doing things my own way I might discover a new way, whereas if he told me how to do everything my knowledge and experience would be limited.

The day-in and day-out rigor of maintaining a pottery workshop was an invaluable lesson in the realities of being a working artist: chopping wood and hauling water, mixing clay and sieving glazes, setting up photographic equipment, and packing and shipping work. Mark never asked me to do anything that he would not do himself. I often found him sweeping up or bringing in firewood. There were days when he would serve me tea in the studio, joking that something about the relationship between master and apprentice had gone awry. Though the idea of our country actually being democratic and egalitarian seems highly dubious, these founding ideals continue to influence how we view ourselves. Contemporary American apprenticeships reflect these ideals in the relationship between master and apprentice.

One of the biggest risks of working with a single artist over an extended period of time, I was told, is that the student will simply imitate the master's work rather than developing their own artistic vision. In other words, adopting a standard from outside oneself rather than learning to develop one's own. Mark almost never explicitly said, "This knob doesn't work," or "The lip on this cup is all wrong." Rather, he would provide hints that would lead me to discover not only what was not working, but also how to make it work. Sometimes I would realize them quickly, other times it would be months later. Six years after my apprenticeship began, I



1 Mark Shapiro and Daniel Garretson discussing work in Shapiro's studio.

2 Daniel Garretson's *The Whiteness of the Whale*, ceramic and mixed media, 2013.

am still discovering things from those early experiences. Similarly, conceptual ideas relating to the role of the artist in contemporary society were rarely discussed, though listening to *Democracy Now* on the radio every morning made self-reflection inevitable. Mark was not simply teaching me the things he thought I should learn, but rather, teaching me how to learn from everything around me.

I witnessed first hand the diverse methods that Mark employed to make a living, including sending pots to international and domestic galleries, traveling far and wide teaching workshops and giving lectures, engaging in writing and editing projects, and maintaining an online presence with websites and via social media. I learned that making pots is no longer enough; the demands of the marketplace mean that the contemporary potter may spend just as much time behind a computer screen as at the potter's wheel.

In the US, the apprenticeship system has evolved to match the demands of the job it intends to prepare people for. It is not possible to retreat to an earlier, perhaps simpler time; rather, it is necessary to synthesize essential elements of both old and new.

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