



# Profile

## The Potter's Daughter

By Dede Eckels

Dede Eckels, age 8, showing her 3rd grade classmates how to make a pot

People often ask me “how long have you been making pots?” I walk them over to some pictures on my studio wall and show them a photo of my 8-year-old self demonstrating how to throw a pot for my 3rd grade class. Of course, I laugh and say my professional pottery career started in college.

I grew up in a studio surrounded by many potters and artists. I did not intend to take that path: the path formed around me. I studied music and played the flute for 15 years thinking that this was where my passion led. But by the time I got to college, I wasn't willing to take my musical career seriously enough to become professional. That's when I decided to take some art classes. Drawing, painting, glass blowing, and, of course, ceramics at **University of Wisconsin–River Falls**.

I use design principles such as line, shape, form, space, color, and texture while making my utilitarian pots. Watching someone feel the handle of a mug, put it to their lips, and embrace it to their chest reassures me that I am inspiring someone to sit down and enjoy a cup of coffee, tea, or brandy. My role as a handmade maker is to connect, inspire, and give moments of well-being and nourishment to the user. I saw this happen while growing up when mom invited friends and artists to our table. I watched her fill a plate with home-cooked food, and the room filled with conversation and joy.

During the first 20 years of my career, I worked on building an identity in clay. I watched and read everything I could about making and selling pots. I copied what I saw and experimented with making, glazing, and firing. My dad taught me that finding one's way with clay turns and twists you through many failures and successes. The goal is not the masterpiece; rather the process becomes the masterpiece. It's the journey and the multitude of works that reveal your voice.



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12-inch dragonfly bowl by Dede Eckels

“...Finding one's way with clay turns and twists you through many failures and successes. The goal is not the masterpiece; rather the process becomes the masterpiece. It's the journey and the multitude of works that reveal your voice.” —Dede Eckels

It was when I was invited to show my work at **NCECA (National Conference on the Education of Ceramic Arts)** in 1995 that this moment happened to me. I stained porcelain clay plates with rutile and then drew animal images. My print making background influenced the way I etched sgraffito lines into the clay and then glazed. When the pots came out of the kiln, I realized for the first time that here was something of my own! No one was doing this kind of decoration. These pots were sold at NCECA, and I received orders for more.

I was blessed to work with my dad, **Bob Eckels**, for twenty-five years before he passed. Bob operated the shop and managed dozens of apprentices who came to learn from him. During that time, I had the freedom to grow as a person and a potter. I was entering as many **American Craft Council Shows** as I could and traveled to Chicago, Minneapolis, Baltimore, and Philadelphia to show my work. I was accepted into the **Smithsonian Craft Show** in Washington, D.C., in 1997. I found myself in amongst the best Craftspeople in the country.

I worked with dad and his apprentices until he passed in 2004. I was crushed to lose the man who had mentored and guided me through my career. Was I supposed to carry on his



Recent work in progress, Dede returns to her '90s style from the Smithsonian show.



Raven mug, "Key to the Mystery," by Dede Eckels



Dede teaching the Washburn High School art class about Raku pottery



(Above) Dede Eckels and her husband Peter Skoro, preparing for Raku pottery demonstrations. (Below left) Dede with her summer intern Sophie Pope.



**Dede Eckels** is a full-time potter and owner of **Eckels Pottery and Fine Craft Gallery** in Bayfield, Wisc.

legacy? After discussing this with my mom, she and I decided to continue what dad started in 1960. The building needed lots of work: re-wiring, removing a kiln, purchasing a new kiln, adding lighting, and updating the gallery space. Now a single mother, I forged ahead to make the **Pot Shop** my own.

I had to learn what makes a self-sustainable functional pottery studio. I created a new business plan. Having seen the remarkable American Craft movement at its finest, my new connections became part of the plan. I had a lot to learn about running a business: overhead costs, material costs, employee costs, and taxes. I still wanted to maintain the work I had started, but it became much harder to have time for both. I stopped traveling and focused solely on creating a retail shop in Bayfield that reflects my artistic view of Fine Craft today.

My own pots never stop changing. About the time I feel I understand where I'm at, I find something new to learn. Most recently I have focused on the interaction of colorful glazes. The depth this brings to my simple drawings is exciting. The animals that I live with here in the north woods still appear, the function is still important, and the depth of a glaze that reminds me of the Northern Lights is like the icing on a cake.

My husband **Pete Skoro** joined me in 2008. He throws and glazes his pots with the same recipes my dad created in the 1960's. We now rely on technology like Hyperglaze and the Ceramics Art network, but my roots remain firmly planted in what came before me.

**Eckels Pottery and Fine Craft Gallery** now supports 30 artists as well as myself and my husband Pete. We are 62 years here making pots and the oldest operating studio pottery in Wisconsin. Eckels Pottery and Fine Craft Gallery is located at 85205 Hwy. 13 in Bayfield, Wisc., and is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. ☺