

Sarah German

Serving Up Functional Conversations



Ceramics Monthly: Serving sets are made to gather people around food and conversation. Is this something that you consider when making sets?

Sarah German: The best gatherings consist of good friends, good food, and good conversations. If we're lucky, they also include great functional pottery to serve with and to talk about. It is this thought that inspires me to create my functional serving sets; the possibility that something I created might be a part of an incredibly memorable moment for someone.

CM: Do you consider the sizes of pieces, the number of pieces, and what they will be used to serve? What additional elements are central to your sets that add to this overall idea of function?

SG: When developing plans for a serving set, I consider the occasion and how many people might be using it. Will it be used at a large party or a smaller, more intimate event? Will it be a sit-down dinner or a casual evening of drinks?

I also believe that a beloved serving set can often influence the type of gathering being held. For example, a drinking set designed for two to four people, allows for a relaxed and small social gathering. The pieces chosen are determined by what is being served. Generally, my tumblers hold 12–20 ounces, allowing for water, tea, beer, or a mixed drink. A hard liquor or whiskey set might hold 7–8 ounces per cup to allow for mixing and the bottle holds enough for four people to drink all night long. A flask is made with one shot glass to make it an individual experience.

Something that is set out on a dining table will contain more pieces, generally six to eight, for a larger social event. These could include dinner sets (dinner plates, salad plates, bowls, and cups), a condiment set with handmade spoons, or something like my cob knob set (handles for serving corn on the cob).

Other sets can be found on the table on a daily basis: a sugar and creamer set in a tray that sits next to the coffee pot, and salt and pepper shakers—either paired with oil and vinegar ewers, or a centerpiece vase.

Most of my sets are for eight people or less, possibly because my own gatherings are small. I feel that you can't really have quality time with family or friends if there are too many people to divide your attention.

CM: When creating a stackable set, how do you design the pieces so that they work well together? For your stacking bowls or cups with



2

1 Cups and caddy, 8 in. (20 cm) height, wheel-thrown and altered Laguna B-Mix, Continental Clay's Mid-fire Graphite Black glaze, fired to cone 6 in an electric kiln, 2013. 2 Whiskey set, 14 in. (36 cm) in diameter, wheel-thrown and altered Laguna B-Mix, St. John's Black glaze, fired to cone 6 in an electric kiln, 2012.

caddy, what is your decision making process when dividing the surface between a solid color and patterned sections?

SG: The functionality of my pieces is very important to me. Surfaces must be smooth and nice to touch with both the hands and lips and be pleasant to use with other non-ceramic utensils. If the pieces or containers have handles, those handles must be comfortable to grip, whether it is with a small or large hand. If a set has a central container or caddy, the pieces must fit easily and the caddy must be safely transported with the pieces inside. Additionally, pieces need to be able to be stacked and stored securely. There is nothing worse than hearing clinking pottery from the cupboard or china hutch when you walk across the room.

When creating a set, I begin by working compositionally in a sketchbook. I consider what the piece will be serving, as well as how many people it will serve, and whether it needs a tray or caddy or any other additional pieces. Most of my pieces begin as a blank cylinder thrown on the wheel. The cylinder is then highly altered through ovaling, darting, removing sections, and building with slabs. This can make fitting sets together difficult, which is why the original sketching and



3



4

3 Condiment tray, 18 in. (46 cm) in length, wheel-thrown and altered Laguna B-Mix, Continental Clay's Mid-fire Graphite Black glaze, fired to cone 6 in an electric kiln, 2013. 4 Flask and shot glass set, to 4½ in height, wheel-thrown and altered Laguna B-Mix, St. John's Black glaze, fired to cone 6 in an electric kiln, 2012.

planning phase is so important. When making a set for the first time, many mistakes can be made with the altering. Once I find a form or specific cut that is successful, I make a paper template to use the next time I construct the set.

The surface of my work is generally decorated with an indirect screen-printed pattern and bright translucent glazes combined with areas of deep opaque glazes. The decorating and glazing process is definitely something I take into account during the initial design

ST. JOHN'S BLACK

Cone 6–10 Reduction/Oxidation

Nepheline Syenite	25 %
Albany/Alberta Slip.	75
	100 %

Add: Cobalt Carbonate 5 %

The St. John's Black glaze is intended for cone 9–10 reduction, although I have used it in various atmospheres and temperatures. At cone 10 reduction it has an opaque, almost metallic, semi-gloss quality. Fired in an electric kiln to cone 10, the glaze has a very high gloss, but shows variations in thickness. I currently fire it at cone 6 in an electric kiln and it is a nice opaque satin glaze.

and sketching phase. I find a balance of pattern and solid color through compositional consideration of the entire set. A solid black tray might be balanced out by a black printed pattern and the black interiors of the accompanying pieces, while the main bodies of the pieces have a brighter glaze. It is very important that the set looks good compositionally when all together as well as that the individual pieces be able to stand successfully on their own. This means that the individual pieces have both patterned sections and solid-color surfaces. The areas of solid color are most often found on the tray or caddy, as the liner, on the lid and/or foot of a piece, and on attachments such as handles or knobs. The main bodies of the pieces are almost always patterned.

the author Sarah German earned an Art: Studio degree from the University of Northern Iowa in 2006 with emphases in ceramics, sculpture, and printmaking. She is a part-time studio potter, producing work for galleries, art festivals, and exhibitions from her home studio in Austin, Texas. See more of her work at www.sarahgermanceramics.com.