

Peter Hayes—Memoir / Personal Essay

I once told a friend to take a hammer to her best work. She was a very good friend and an exceptional potter, but she'd come up against a problem.

"I made this wonderful piece, but I can't make it again," she said.

"I've been trying, but it's almost as though there's a knot—like a writer's block."

So, she asked me, "Peter, what do I do?"

My advice was not to put your work on a pedestal. She had, and now even she couldn't reach it. For my friend, this one piece had become too important, and so the easiest way to fix the problem was to break the piece. If she were able to, if she could bring herself to put a hammer right through its centre, then she'd have nothing to reach for—except another piece. It helps to believe that your best work is in the kiln rather than on the shelf behind you.

Broken, weathered and found objects have played a major role in my art; I intentionally break some pieces in order to create something new from their remains. There are also things I've made that, in retrospect, I wish I'd taken a hammer to. Not because they blocked me or because I want to create something from them, but because they still haunt me to this day.

They're pieces from my first studio in the early 1970s, an old converted cow barn down in St Mawes, Cornwall. At the time, I was eager to focus on making

art, but I first had to make ends meet—the art of survival. I’d taught myself how to throw on the wheel but didn’t much care for it. Truthfully, I wanted to be a sculptor, so making cups and saucers, ashtrays and the like just didn’t excite me, but they were a way to earn a living. It was around this time that ceramic wine goblets became all the rage—though I never understood why. I much preferred to drink my wine from a glass. Nonetheless, I started to throw them, to make for the market, but that was a mistake. It always is.

My goblets were too heavy, and I didn’t want to sell them, so instead, I gave the goblets away to friends and family. Never give your early work away to friends and family! Over 50 years later, every time I go to a friend’s house for a party, they say, “Hold on—I’ve got one of your goblets in my cupboard!” Next thing you know, there’s this thing on the mantelpiece, and I’m standing next to it, saying, “Hello, everybody. My name’s Peter, and *I made that!*”

I quickly stopped throwing the ceramic wine goblets, but continued to work from my St Mawes studio until 1972, when an opportunity came through the letterbox just as I was starting to make a name for myself. It was from the Commonwealth; they were looking for British potters to help set up studios in remote African villages. Normally my wife and I would have jumped at the chance; we’d always wanted to travel, but the project was to last 18 months, and at the time she was six months pregnant with our second child. We weighed everything up and thought about the potential challenges; ultimately, we knew we wanted to go for it. And so, we made a decision and submitted the application, which was accepted. Three months later our young family packed up the life we’d created in St Mawes, ready for something altogether new.

When we arrived in Africa, we were based in Lesotho, an independent country surrounded by South Africa. I’d swapped my converted old cow barn for a

converted old brewery, employing 20 or so people and training countless locals. The work was rewarding, and more importantly, it was a success, but after a while I started to get a niggling feeling. Working from my studio meant everyone had to travel to me. I realised that I'd be of much more use if I visited the villages instead. I wrote a letter to the Commonwealth Secretariat outlining my suggestion, to which they agreed and provided a Land Rover and two horses for my travels.

As I moved around, I became immersed in each area. I got to experience another world and see how the locals worked with clay, drawing from the land as they did. This was when something shifted for me—I'd been sent there as a teacher, but now I was also learning. I'd watch the women of Lesotho make pots with pure fascination. They'd make something as everyday as a beer cup, and I'd look on, amazed. Part of what interested me was the way they manipulated and fired clay with only minimal tools. They'd go down to the river, claw clay from the bank, pick up a flat stone, find a nearby twig, and on the way home collect cow dung for the firing. It was that simple.

What struck me most was what happened after they'd built the piece. These pots were intended purely for domestic use. Once functional, they had no reason to make them anything other than what they were meant to be—a cup, a bowl, etc.—but often they'd go the extra mile and make them beautiful, utilising the twig to carve patterns onto the outside of the cup. That's when it became more than a pot; it became their ability to decorate something.

The way they approached these otherwise humble pieces with care reminded me of a 4,000-year-old arrowhead that sits in The British Museum. If I were given the opportunity to take anything from the museum, it'd be this particular flint arrowhead because I'm so intrigued by the story behind it, by the process of

making it. Flint's naturally sharp, so all you really need to do to make an arrowhead is take a shard and attach it to the shaft. But someone took time on this; it has a wonderful knapping to the sides. Why did they do that? It has to be for more than just killing. We don't make in a vacuum; we make to take pleasure in it and to show others who we are.

Museums, much like travel, have had a profound influence on my work. As a child I'd spend hours in the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, and I remember being equally fascinated by another seemingly unassuming object. It was a small tile, made hundreds of years ago, and impressed into the clay was a cat's paw print from where it had walked over the tile before it dried. Was this imperfection, or was it history? Either way, it was no longer just a tile; it was a story.

My interest in an object's history and the concept of imperfection was cemented by the terracotta cups in the Tokyo National Museum in Japan. When visiting, I was amazed by the corridors and corridors of fantastic pottery; the collection seemed endless. There were pieces that had been fired over 40 times and artefacts of great importance dating back to the Ming Dynasty—it's a huge and impressive display, but what really caught my attention were these terracotta pots.

They'd been made in their thousands, if not millions, and they were used just like we use disposable paper cups today. Drank from once and then thrown away. They were worth next to nothing when they were whole, and as they were discarded, they were usually smashed into pieces. But here they were in pride of place, repaired by master craftsmen via a technique known as 'kintsugi', a method of reconstructing broken ceramics using lacquer mixed with gold, silver, or platinum. Two worlds had come together: the poor labourer and the high

artist. The terracotta and the gold. The imperfection and perfection. Which was the important part? Without the pot there'd be no crack, but the crack is worth more than the pot.

The 18 months I initially intended to spend in Africa turned into 10 years. I loved the way of life there, but after a decade away from focusing on my own work, I was keen to start applying all of the influences I'd been lucky enough to collect.

My family and I moved back to the UK in 1982, deciding to call Bath our new home. We found a beautiful Georgian townhouse to live in, and for a short while I had a small home studio, but soon realised I needed a dedicated space. One day while out for a walk, I came across a fantastic old toll house along the River Avon, and it seemed like the perfect spot for a studio. I approached the council, and they agreed to let me rent one for a decent rate. I was at last ready to start creating full-time.

Once I'd built up a body of work, I took aim at the top galleries, presenting the things I thought they'd be most likely to take. In my earlier days, despite how fascinated I was by the idea, I wasn't confident enough to show work that had been reconstructed from broken parts, fearing it might be perceived as flawed. The curator who changed my view on what the art world would be open to was Peter Dingley, a very powerful gallery owner based in Stratford-upon-Avon. Initially I'd gone to see Peter with three pots in tow; I'd selected what I thought he'd be interested in, and I had it at least somewhat right—he bought one. I was in.

A few months later I received a call from Peter; he was going to be in Bath visiting another artist and planned on stopping by my studio. When he came to

the studio, he looked around, casting a curator's eye over my work. To my surprise I saw him looking at my reconstructed sculptures. "What are those?" he asked. Ever the salesman, I replied, "Oh, don't worry about those; they're broken!"

I'd assumed that Peter Dingley wouldn't be interested in this kind of experimental work, and yet here he was—not only interested, he bought one! He took it back to his gallery, put it on display, and then came yet another surprise—he'd sold it, and to quite an important collector. "Can I have some more?" he asked.

Some 40-plus years later, I'm still based in the old toll house studio that Peter visited me in. It's a space that's served me well, mainly because the lower level gives me access to the riverbank, where, like the women of Lesotho, I have everything I need.

The river has played a huge role in my practice. When working with porcelain and bone china clays, I like to bisque fire the constructions and later submerge them into the river. I leave them for any length of time before rediscovering. This allows me to experiment with age, wear, and repair, seeing how the surfaces oxidise and change with the elements. Sometimes they're lost to the water, never to be found again. I don't mourn the lost ones. I'm always willing to lose a piece; another of the ways I stop any one thing from getting too important.

Around 15 years ago, my son Justin came to work with me. He finishes and polishes pieces, alongside organising everything to do with the website and the logistics of exhibitions. He also knows what my work sells for, which is particularly useful because if someone walks in, points to a sculpture and asks

me how much it costs, I'd have to tell them I don't really know.

Since working with Justin, I've preferred not to think about pricing. It's not something most artists have the opportunity to avoid, so I'm grateful that I have my wife and Justin to help with the financial and business side of things.

Focusing on the value of your work can put too much weight on the making process, even tempting you to make for the market, and I learnt my lesson about that from the wine goblets. Money can block you, and not just creatively; it can block you from enjoying the end result. I know of collectors who keep art locked away in a safe. I understand keeping gold, diamonds and money behind a steel door—but not art. Art is to be enjoyed. Putting it in a safe is similar to putting it on a pedestal, and I think one of my favourite artists, Ruth Duckworth, found the perfect spot for something she clearly treasured.

I was lucky enough to visit Ruth at her converted pickle factory studio in Chicago during the mid-90s. Ruth lived on the studio's mezzanine level, which gave her a fantastic view overlooking her work below. After Ruth gave me the tour, we stood chatting in her kitchen. That's when I noticed a Hans Coper pot on an otherwise empty shelf just above her cooker. This pot, made by someone who revolutionised modern ceramics, had a coating of grease and splatters of fat on its surface. It was unusual to see a pot like that in such a setting, so I asked why she kept it in that particular spot.

“Because I get up every morning, cook my breakfast, and get to look at this one pot.” I thought that was wonderful. Some people buy art to impress others with what they have, but Ruth wasn't trying to impress anyone. It would have been less likely to be damaged in a safe, more likely to retain its value—but at what cost?

It's always lovely when someone admires a piece you made as Ruth admired Hans' pot, but sometimes I find myself slightly deterring people from appreciating my work. This is why I've been banned by Justin and my wife from saying too much at exhibitions. When someone tells me they're interested in a sculpture, instead of simply nodding in agreement, I've been known to say, "If you like that one, you should see what I've got in the kiln!"