

# Canada's Walter Dexter

## An Introduction

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WHILE HE IS ONE OF CANADA'S MOST ACCOMPLISHED potters and ceramic sculptors, Walter Dexter is less well known among ceramists, artists and the public outside of this country. This essay is an ambassadorial introduction to his life and art; it is divided into biography and a discussion of the development of his art, with his current work being the focal point.<sup>1</sup>

This essay claims that Walter Dexter is an artist, a ceramic sculptor specifically, more than a potter. Sometimes he even humorously characterizes himself as a frustrated painter. Though I do not work with clay, I am an artist and I share a certain empathy with Dexter's concerns. I know little about the apparent alchemy of clays, glazes heat and kilns. A technical essay would also be difficult because Dexter employs the technologies of his art as doorways into the aesthetics of colour, surface and form, rather than as expressions of conventional craft knowledge and skill. His art demands the subordination of craft concerns to ideation and the technical problems he regularly encounters in his studio often require precarious manipulations of particular pieces. This is essentially the opposite of the practice of a potter of practical, reliable, functional objects.

The story of Walter Dexter's discovery of ceramic sculpture and art and his subsequent career is an interesting example of serendipity. His father was a Nova Scotian of United Empire Loyalists roots (English-descendent refugees from the American Revolution). His mother, whose ancestors emigrated from England

or Scotland, was a third or fourth generation Albertan. In the early years of the 20th century, his father and uncle, both young men, travelled from Nova Scotia to Alberta to homestead on raw prairie land that they

purchased from the government. His parents met and married about 1920, and their first son, William (Bill), was born in 1922. Because of the Depression the homestead had to be sold in about 1930 and the family moved to Calgary. After finding a house to buy, Walter's father found employment selling Imperial Oil fuel to farmers. However, in 1931, the year that Walter was born, his father was laid off and he became one of the thousands of Canadian men who rode the rails seeking work. A chance conversation with another unemployed man about the importance of family and home in tough times convinced him to return to Calgary. He eventually found employment as an airport and post office guard and

later as a construction worker for the railway. Walter remembers that when he was a child, his mother regularly took him on the two-hour train ride to Banff so that he could wave to his father as they slowly passed through the construction site.

As a child and teenager Walter Dexter enjoyed drawing cartoons and his family encouraged this. Because his brother piloted de Havilland Mosquitoes high altitude night bombers during the Second World War, Walter sent him a cartoon of a pilot eating lots of carrots as he had learned that this vegetable improved night vision.



*Untitled Pot. 1954. Student work while studying with Luke Lindoe. Stoneware, reduction fired. 5.75 x 4.5 in. Collection of Walter Dexter.*

When William returned to Calgary after the war he entered university to study engineering. Walter Dexter's parents hoped that he too would become a professional, perhaps a lawyer. But Walter convinced them to allow him to attend the four-year diploma program in commercial art at the nearby Alberta Institute of Technology and Art.<sup>2</sup> He wanted to become a commercial artist because he liked to draw. In order to receive his parents' permission, he had to agree to a year of office administration study after he achieved his commercial art diploma. The fact that he mostly enjoyed the handwriting course suggests that he had little enthusiasm for business.

Walter Dexter discovered pottery at the Institute or, perhaps more accurately, clay and glaze were more or less thrust upon him by Luke Lindoe, one of his instructors.<sup>3</sup> Unsatisfied with his progress in his second year of study and questioning his commercial art ambitions, Dexter considered withdrawing from school. Lindoe suggested that he try pottery. Dexter had already attended drawing and painting courses under Lindoe and he had taken Lindoe's course in figure modelling. Apparently Lindoe had noticed that his student had a nascent empathy for clay. Dexter completed his studies in 1954 as a fine arts student majoring in ceramic art. Lindoe remained Dexter's most influential artistic mentor for many years.

At this time, Dexter's brother, William, had a positive and unexpected impact on his future life. After graduating Walter wanted either to enter a Masters program or to teach pottery.<sup>4</sup> With William's assistance, he wrote letters to all of the local Canadian and American colleges and universities with pottery programs. None

accepted his application to study or teach. However, the University of Manitoba offered him a scholarship for a year of study at the Swedish School of Art and

Craft in Stockholm. While he has described the teaching there as "repetitive patterning," he is still influenced by the rather formal and austere style of throwing forms that he learned in Sweden.<sup>5</sup> More relevant to his development as an artist, it is probable that his broader discovery of historic and contemporary art and culture, as well as the maturation of his self-image as an artist, began the day he arrived in Europe.

After completing his studies in Stockholm, Dexter travelled to England. After Sweden's long dark winter, he yearned for sunlight. He found employment at a pottery and farm and, though he spent more time farming than potting, he was content to stay in England. Gardening in the sun and fresh summer air in exchange for room-and-board was easy; as a youngster he had regularly helped in his parents' vegetable garden. However, eventually, at about age 23, he moved from the farm to London and found work peeling potatoes and dishwashing in Fulham Hospital.

During the two years he lived in Europe Dexter discovered art. On a school trip he was deeply impressed by an exhibition of Etruscan art in Oslo. In London he read Vincent van Gogh's letters to Theo. He attended classical music concerts at the Royal Albert Hall and he visited every museum and art gallery. Post-war London was exciting and its cultural impact on the young impressionable artist from Alberta, Canada was profound. Two friends visited from home;

they drove around Europe, visiting all of the museums, art galleries and tourist places.



Top: *Bottle with Face - Bill*. 2008. Rubbed with iron and copper and once-fired. 24.25 x 16 x 16.5 in.

Above: *Bright Blue*. 2008. 17 x 12.5 x 4 in.

Collection of Walter Dexter.



Dexter enjoyed his London life. He made no art and he earned only about 10£ per week but after rent and food, he had about 2£ per week to spend on books, movies and being a tourist. Though he was sometimes lonely, he definitely did not want to return to Canada. However, this idyllic expatriate life unravelled when Luke Lindoe offered him employment in his studio in Calgary. Dexter resisted, blaming his lack of travel money. He would not accept a loan but when his parents learned of his financial situation they sent money and he had to return to Canada.

Beginning in 1956, Dexter spent about two years making utilitarian objects in Luke Lindoe's studio, Ceramic Arts, in Calgary.<sup>6</sup> Following this period he also worked as a manager and designer for Medalta Ceramics in Medicine Hat, Alberta. Eventually he left in frustration because none of his designs was used.<sup>7</sup> He continued to be influenced by his former instructor, then his employer; under Lindoe's guidance he learned production throwing techniques and he absorbed the discipline of hours of exact production work. He learned to work as a craftsman and these habits gave him the foundation to become an artist. Though an employee rather than a collaborator, he was already a natural experimenter. With Lindoe's permission, he engaged in endless weekend experiments. As he describes it, he tried everything. As early as 1957, before most potters in Canada had heard of this 16th century Japanese craft, he read about *Raku* in Bernard Leach's book, *A Potter's Book*. However, not understanding what he was doing – apparently the book is not precise in its instructions – his pots kept exploding in the kiln.<sup>8</sup>

Between about 1960 and 1974, Dexter taught pottery, mostly part-time, at several colleges and universities in Western Canada. Between 1963 and 1967 he operated his own studio in Kelowna, British Columbia

where his practice continued its division into two paths, production pottery (ashtrays even) and experimentation. But with a family to support, he could not earn enough money as an independent potter. The marriage ended in 1967, and he moved to Nelson, BC, where he became the Head of the Clay Department at the Kootenay School of Art until 1974. In the late 1960s

he began making *Raku* again, this time without so many explosions. He also developed his well-known copper-red bowls and plates. While in Nelson, he met Canadian poet Rona Murray and they married.<sup>9</sup> After 1974 he and Rona moved to Surrey, South of Vancouver and in 1975 they moved to Metchosin, a beautifully forested coastal peninsula facing south across the Strait of Juan de Fuca about 30 minutes from Victoria, British Columbia.<sup>11</sup> With greater financial security, he and Rona were able to travel abroad fairly often. Until recently he taught a summer course in the Art Education

Department of the University of Victoria. Since Rona's death five years ago, he has lived in Victoria, BC. Since retiring from teaching about seven years ago he spends his days in his studio.

Dexter's art can be loosely divided into about five broad themes, though only two of these conform to specific periods. Probably influenced by Luke Lindoe's spectrum of interests and in loose chronological order, Dexter has made functional objects, non-functional decorated plates, figurative sculptures, *Raku* ware and his current 'bottle' sculptures and their variants. The sources of these works can be related to specific encounters such as his training with Luke Lindoe, the school in Sweden, his later employment with Lindoe and other and other artists and craftspersons.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding the meaning of these and other influences, Dexter provides a practical insight hinting of a manifesto regarding his creativity and his position relative to the on-going rivalry



Top: *Quiet Landscape*. 2008. Goblet form. 8.5 x 9.25 in.

Above: *Untitled*. 2008. Goblet form. 8.5 x 9.25 in.

Collection of Walter Dexter.

between art and craft: "When you are young and as you go along, you are influenced by everything. You go to a museum, see something in a book and get so turned on you have to rush home and try that. You see someone's work and you many need to try that. It is all part of reaching. You have to pick up those influences and work them through. You tend to fear copying someone else's work... It worried me too but I realized I couldn't resist it. I went through a stage of doing a lot of ceramic sculpture, of going absolutely mad about Henry Moore for a while. You know how you 'discover' artists."<sup>13</sup>

In the late 1960s or early 1970s Dexter discovered contemporary *Raku* technologies when he attended workshops conducted by American potters Hal Reigger and Paul Soldner, in Nelson.<sup>14</sup> Although he was an experienced potter and ceramic sculptor and had already participated in numerous regional, national and international solo and group exhibitions, he was eager to experiment with new technologies and aesthetics. He did *Raku* until the mid 1990s and recognizing the distinctly different styles and concerns of the more traditional Reigger and the much more adventurous Soldner,<sup>15</sup> he developed his own unique and eventually famous interpretations. This required endless experiments, some rather dangerous. Eventually making *Raku* pots too heavy and tall to lift from the hot kiln with tongs, he would dress up in layers of heat-resistant jackets, hoods and gloves to lift the red-hot pots out of the kiln with his hands.

Occasionally, Dexter still produces functional objects such as bowls. However, in the past several years the success of his current bottle theme has eliminated the need for saleable wheel-thrown pottery. On the other hand, his occasional return to the wheel is just as likely an expression of his commitment to the fundamental meaning of the traditional bowl; this

keeps him honest to simple craft traditions and aesthetics, despite the fact that in his *Raku* work and his

bottle forms he has deliberately pushed ceramics technologies far beyond conventional craftsmanship. As he explains: "There are times when I'm working that the work comes through me, as if I didn't do it. Sometimes I simply feel as if I'm one in a long line of peasant potters. Then, when I experiment, I feel so lucky because our attitude is different from the peasant potter. He did it without the joy of experimentation. It is different now, and I like the difference - but I still feel that link."<sup>16</sup>

Dexter's decorated plates are another interesting facet of his creativity. These plates are a complex synthesis of the practical, functional, experimental, personal and artistic. As long ago as his studies with Luke Lindoe, Dexter has periodically turned to the production and decoration of flat plates up to about 16 inches across that are designed and decorated for mounting on walls. He persists in this simple form in recognition of his continuing need for clay surfaces that function like a canvas or a sheet of paper for drawing, painting and sgraffito. These plates are probably the most direct representation of Dexter's interest in painterly ideas, an attitude he maintains today mostly as a focus for self-criticism to keep him open to challenges and changes. As well, they probably offer him his only opportunity to engage in representational drawing and painting. The most common subjects he depicts are gesture drawings of running or leaping nude female figures that are reminiscent of the dancing women of Etruscan or Minoan cultures, or the figure sketches of the whirling model that Augustus Rodin made. Just as often, he draws, paints or scratches portrait faces of fictional women, images that range from the coyness of a young woman depicted by Henri Matisse (these might be portraits of Rona)<sup>17</sup> to more wild



Top: **Untitled Raku Pot.** Late 1970s. Pot shows the influence of Hal Reigger. 12.25 x 5.5 in.

Above: **Untitled Raku Pot.** 1996. Terra Sigillata. 9 x 6.25 in.  
Collection of Walter Dexter.



archetypal visages.<sup>18</sup> As suggested by these plates, Dexter is aware of the fundamental cross-cultural and cross-time links of his art. As well as being a resolution between sculpture and painting, his various and complex goals are a constant struggle between the endlessness of art and the necessarily proscribed craft of functional clay objects.

About the mid 1980s Dexter decided to re-engage his early interest in figurative sculpture. However, he did not begin making formal free-standing, figurative sculptures again. Instead, conflating the idea of the figure as metaphoric container with his on-going search for large freestanding surfaces to paint, he developed the hand-built bottle form he mostly concentrates on today. Though these loosely resemble vases or bottles, they do not function aesthetically or practically as containers. They are mostly tall, rectangular torsos, ranging in height from 12 to 30 inches, with a front, narrower sides and back, with proportions reminiscent of the upper half of the human torso, with the neck of the bottle naturally becoming the neck of the figure. Though there are no head or arms, the energy of these bottles is as humanly alive as 15th century Italian portrait busts. At the same time, most of them are essentially only two-sided, front and back, reminiscent of Egyptian sculptures.

These bottles are a kind of two-sided canvas and in style, theme and composition they relate to the ethos of post-war European modernism, for example to the drawing and paintings of Alberto Burri and Antonia Tapies, two of Dexter's favourite

artists. Dexter's technique of roughly brushed glaze colour shapes over the hand-worked and textured surfaces parallels European Tachisme. On the other hand, sometimes the delicate brushwork and sgraffito of his *Raku* work dominates the highly coloured surfaces.

The dominant technical challenge of these bottles is the structurally dangerous processes that Dexter employs in his search for the right balance of colour, surface, image and form. Often unsatisfied with the result of the firing, he re-glazes and re-fires them up to six times. Sometimes the finished surface is so delicate it begins to crumble and he needs to re-glaze and re-fire it yet again to hold it together. At other times the glaze runs off the bottom and he is forced to make a new base. A large bottle I admired and thought was finished was subtly different when I saw it again a few days later. In their production, his bottles have incorporated the natural and magical precariousness of *Raku* applied to sculpted forms.<sup>19</sup>

Dexter's artistic and technical experiments with his bottles and their resultant aesthetic qualities, relate to both the form of the human figure as vessel and the human presence as surface – or skin, the *skin* of life – as well as the site of the artist's working through the meaning of self-identity. One of his latest bottles, one that deepens Dexter's re-engagement with figurative sculpture, includes a bas-relief human face pushing forward from the chest. It might be significant that the rather unique over all glaze of this new piece that is almost the colour of human skin,



Top: *Untitled Bowl*. 2008. Stoneware, copper-red glaze reduction fired to cone 9-10. 3.75 x 7.75 in.

Above: *Untitled Pot*. 1954. Student work while studying with Luke Lindoe. 5.75 x 4.5 in. Collection of Walter Dexter.

functions more as a subtle patina than as a colour, as if he has put painting aside, for the time being anyway. Whatever, we can only watch, speculate and admire. Relieved of the necessity to be concerned with pleasing an audience, Walter Dexter has immersed himself in the pursuit of a difficult set of ideas, ones that link personal and cultural memory of craft and art traditions, material sensuality, aesthetic independence and purity of self and means.

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Unless indicated otherwise, all of the material for this essay was gathered during several interviews with Walter Dexter.
2. Later, this school became the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary.
3. Luke Lindoe (1913-2001), was an important potter, ceramic sculptor and painter in Alberta who, through his teaching and his company, influenced a generation of Canadian potters and ceramic sculptors.
4. I have conflated two versions of this story, one from Walter Dexter, and the other related to Andre Gogol, Dexter's occasional studio assistant.
5. This is Andre Gogol's observation.
6. Walter Dexter eventually took over the studio and in later years the company was owned by other potters.
7. Walter Dexter left for more than one reason, with two reasons being that the company was poorly run and he was too young for his management responsibilities.
8. This is Andre Gogol's observation regarding the book. He points out that Leach's book was intended to be an account of techniques that he had encountered rather than an instructional manual.
9. This was the only time in his teaching career that he taught full-time.
10. Through her own strong aesthetics and knowledge, Rona Murray (1924-2003), an English teacher and poet, had a strong influence on Walter Dexter's art. She was teaching in Nelson when they met. When they moved to near Vancouver she taught at the University of British Columbia, and when they moved to Metchosin near Victoria, she taught at the University of Victoria.
11. Living In Metchosin, Walter Dexter became part of the ceramics community there. He was neighbours with Jan and Helga Grove, Sue and Robin Hopper and later, Judy Dyelle and others who joined the growing local pottery scene. He also became active in the larger art community, becoming a member of the Victoria-based

exhibiting group of 18 known as The Limners, which consisted of potters, weavers, painters, printmakers, collage artists and poets.

12. Dexter has always developed ideas that result from his encounters with other artists. He has even joined artists in painting groups, such as the one organized by Victoria artist, Phylis Serota.



**Untitled Plate.** 1980. Stoneware, reduction fired with underglaze pencil and glaze. 10.25 in. Collection of Walter Dexter.

13. Quoted from an article about Dexter by Christine Wardenburg in *Ceramics Monthly*, May 1982.

14. Some published Curriculum Vitae for Dexter claim that he studied at Notre Dame University. In fact, this is the name of the college in Nelson where he attended a workshop in *Raku* given by Hal Reigger.

15. Wardenburg. "...in the early 1970s, when I taught at the Kootney School of Art... was a time of tremendous experimentation for all of us. It was a fluke that people that strong

all came together at once. The students were very keen, confrontive, demanding. It was during that time ... when real experimentation came into my work. Every artist should have the chance to come together with a strong group. The energy was everywhere.... we had the overflow from the States... The influence from there was very strong: Daniel Rhodes's book *Clay and Glaze for the Potter and Kilns* came out. Paul Soldner had put out some pamphlets... on his kilns, his wheels and firing technique. The work at the Archie Bray Foundation and that of Peter Voulkas all were very influential."

16. Wardenburg.
17. This is Andre Gogol's observation.
18. This is Andre Gogol's observation. A further small story is that sometimes when he and Walter Dexter are unloading a kiln, one of these portrait plates will, according to Dexter, "look too wild", and after more work he will re-fire it.
19. In fact, his *Raku* pots, are earthenware fired to cone 6 and then cooled to cone 8, with commercial underglazes and glazes.

Brian Gison is an artist, university drawing instructor, art historian and art critic who lives in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. He has been familiar with Walter Dexter's ceramics for about 25 years. You may contact Brian Gison through the Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art web site ([www.ccca.ca](http://www.ccca.ca)). All photos by Bob Matheson, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.