

Carl Sheehan

by Judy Kinnaman

Visitors to Yellowstone National Park have an opportunity to take hand-made clay mementos home with them. Working only a few hundred yards away from Old Faithful, the park's most famous geyser, resident artist Carl Sheehan produces pots that reflect the beauty and unique qualities of this crown jewel of the U.S. national park system.

"I moved out here for the mountains," Sheehan explains, "and the mountains continue to influence my decorative motifs."

Sheehan became interested in pottery during high school in Rochester, Michigan. After a three-year stint in the Marines, he returned to Michigan to continue his education at Grand Valley State College. "I had a good instructor and saw my first Japanese potter," he says. "It was the first time I'd seen someone throw production style."

He completed his undergraduate degree in fine arts and art education at Montana State University, then taught in Lander, Wyoming, and Bozeman, Montana. Eventually, he acquired studio space at a Bozeman art center in exchange for teaching classes.

During his second year displaying work at the local "Holiday Festival of the Arts," he met a representative from TW Services, the Yellowstone National Park concessionaire at that time. It had been suggested that a local craftsman be featured in the park to enhance the visitor's regional experience. Sheehan was interested.

"At that point I was up for any option," he says. "I told him what materials were needed to build a kiln and what kind of space and equipment were necessary for operation."

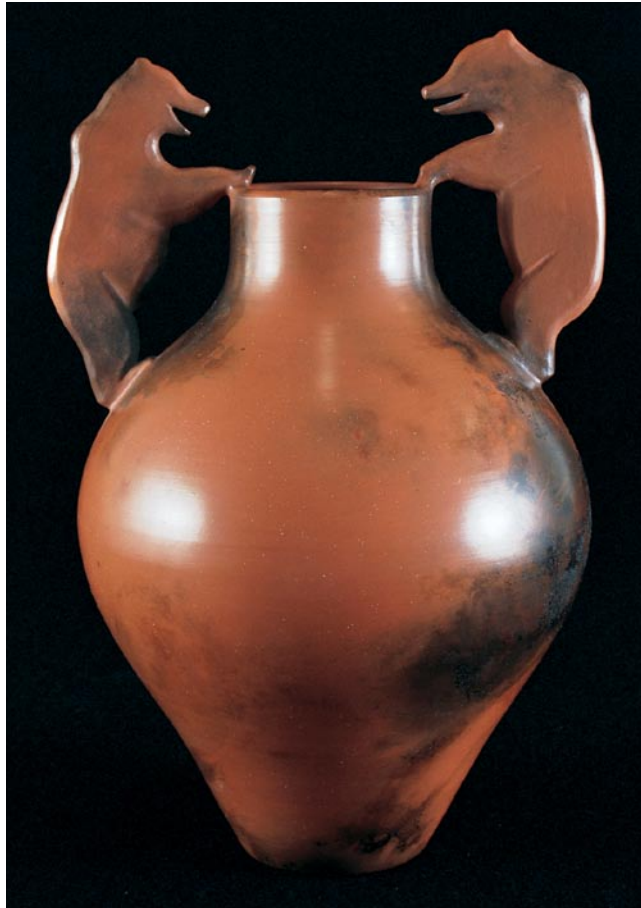
The concessionaire agreed to purchase the kiln materials, and Sheehan drew up plans for the space. The next year, 1980, he went to Yellowstone, spending the first month in the studio and building the kiln. By mid July it was up and working.

"My space is set up in the back part of the gift shop in Old Faithful Lodge, which was built in the 1930s," Sheehan says. "I have a display in the windows of the hallway, then I'm at one end of the shop, in a space about 20x20. I have a potter's wheel, electric kiln, shelving—along the back wall is all the work that's in progress."

He sits in a raised area, complete with a sink and railings to keep the curious at bay. Visitors can watch, close up and personal, as Sheehan works.



Bread bowl, 9 inches in height, wheel-thrown stoneware, with dipped and trailed glazes, fired to Cone 10 in reduction.



"Bear Vase," pit-fired terra cotta, 14 inches high.

"I meet people from all over the world," he says. "Potters from Korea, Thailand, Denmark, Norway, England and Japan. And the pots have gone everywhere, too, including Russia. Pretty much to every country in the world."

Sheehan makes about 50 items, starting with spoon rests priced at about \$12, to one-of-a-kind vessels ranging to \$350. "My high-end pieces are those like the buffalo vase with raised, sprigged buffalo on the side," he explains.

"Evolution of design is hands-on. If it's a specific design such as an animal or a pattern, sometimes I'll work it out on paper, but most of the time I'll do prototypes on the wheel and work the patterns on the pot.



"Bison Vase," 11 inches in height, wheel-thrown and carved stoneware.

I find it easier to do it out of clay rather than paper.

"I feel a good artist will reflect his environment," Sheehan says. "I see a lot of people move here and they're doing what I call city art, out in the mountains. It just doesn't make sense to me."

For Sheehan, the season in the park begins May 18 and ends September 30. "When I get to Yellowstone, I usually do some different things. Last year, I did some bison on top, as a handle for a casserole. It's more stylized than things I have done in the past. Most pieces are done with a multicolored glazing technique that looks like landscape, or impressionistic landscape.

"The landscape is a very powerful influence," he says. "It's why I'm here. So I try to get it on the pots. It takes longer to glaze and get everything done the way I like it, but the result is more distinctive.

"It's taken me 20 years to get to that point. I used to carve a lot of designs in the pots, then I'd end up putting a glaze on it and losing the definition, so that evolved into glazing the mountains on them. The product is a combination of what I want plus what the kiln enhances through the melting of the colors.

"In the beginning, I was doing three or four different styles with each load—some carved, some raised slip-trail patterns. As time went on, I did fewer and fewer combinations, and focused on this one theme of landscapes. I call it Montana Sunset."

He generally applies a blue slip to the upper half of the pot while he has it on the wheel. That supplies a background color for a sky blue. After it's bisque fired, he uses five



Carl Sheehan working at Yellowstone's Old Faithful Lodge.

different glazes in a combination of dipping and trailing to create the landscape. Then a copper red glaze is sparingly added, as a highlight for the sunset. A Cone 10 reduction firing in a 60-cubic-foot downdraft gas kiln sets the image.

"It takes about two to three days of glazing and a day to fire," Sheehan says. "About ten hours to Cone 10."

While at the park, he works daily from 9–5, and some evenings, for about ten days in a row, taking a weekend off after the kiln is fired.

Sheehan makes between 3000 to 3500 pots a year, starting in January at his home studio in Bozeman, to keep up with the demand. His primary market is the shop at Old Faithful, where 12,000 people might visit on a busy day. He sells out every year.

"I do pretty good through July," Sheehan says, "then in August I start getting behind and that's the way it stays."

The park is satisfying not only for the location, but for the opportunity to educate the public.

"The biggest thrill I get is watching the kids. Kids are amazed to see something appear before their eyes, growing from a mound of clay," he says. "I like them to see that not everything involves a computer. I think it's important to show people that tradition lives on—that people do make things with their hands and it's not all designed on a computer keyboard. Not that I'm antitechnology, but I think it's important for people to do things with their hands, to create things with their hands. It does more than just use their muscle skills, it exercises their brains." ▲



Curious visitors have an opportunity to see how the pots on display in the gift shop were produced.