

I N

P R A I S E

So much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens

– William Carlos Williams
“The Red Wheelbarrow”

O F

CHANGE CAN BE ABRUPT AND TRANSFORMATIVE; the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius buried an entire civilization. Conversely, change can be incremental; evolutionary changes take place over the course of millennia. The mere fact that one species has adapted and evolved into another is transformative, but it is also fundamentally slow, like the movement of geological time. Incremental change exists within a frame of time too large – or perhaps too small – for humans to really grasp; our own fleeting existence marks so little time in comparison and yet, as the Williams poem so eloquently states, *so much depends upon it*.

It is perhaps the relative quickness of human existence that propels the artist toward the new. Newness implies adventure, risk: a break from what has come before, and sometimes its denial. Some artists, Picasso for example, revel in the new. He reinvented his artistic self many times during his career, never losing sight of what came before, but always pushing forward. His momentum was a force that rippled throughout the art world during his lifetime and continues as his legacy today.

In contrast, the Italian painter Giorgio Morandi was an *incrementalist*. For years he arranged, painted, and then rearranged the same set of objects. Viewing these paintings, one becomes familiar with the objects themselves. There again are the tall faceted bottle, the conical funnel and the quirky round, fluted form. The recognition promotes an intimacy that is like coming home, but not quite. The question of intent

remains. Why was Morandi so interested in, even obsessed with, these objects? The answer, in a word, is essence. Although Morandi painted the same objects many times, he never made the same painting twice. His vision developed slowly, incrementally. Color shifts are subtle and narrow in range: neutral colors and chromatic grays. The objects in his paintings quietly vibrate with life. As the years passed the edges that delineated each object began to blur. The images became increasingly minimal until, in the last paintings, the objects dissolved completely, leaving behind the pure apparition of essence.

Morandi's process was one of distillation, not unlike the process of making pots. Like the potter, he favored the humble forms of domestic existence: the private rather than the public realm. His paintings reveal not only the beauty of these forms but their transcendent qualities, a goal many potters also strive for. Though the practice of making functional pots is rule-governed and repetitive, the potter finds comfort in these static necessities and freedom within their confines. In fact, it is the *ratio* of stasis to change that is of the utmost importance, for the one provides the counterpoint to the other.

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Morandi in his time was often criticized for his narrow approach to painting. He addressed this criticism with a frankness that simultaneously acknowledged and dismissed the issue. In an interview with Edouard Roditi, he stated, "I have always concentrated on a far narrower field of subject than most other painters, so that the danger of repeating myself has been far greater. I think I have avoided this danger by devoting more time and thought to planning each one of my paintings as a variation on one or the other of these few themes."¹ Some critics similarly charge that

functional potters deliberately avoid contact with the main currents of contemporary ceramics in favor of something anachronistic and seemingly mundane. Those who make this claim fail to see an art process that parallels any other, equally ripe with questions and considerations. They fail to understand the complex opportunities that incrementalism can provide, the vast expanse between what is similar and what is the same.

The challenge of functional pottery can be found in the act of *containment*, something at which Morandi excelled. The double meaning of this word, in reference to vessels in particular, sets up an interesting conversation between form and surface, essence and necessity. So while containment can refer to the act of holding a substance, it also implies reserve or simplicity. One might say that objects made in the Shaker tradition are contained. Those made in some of the ancient kilns sites, such as Tamba or Shigaraki in Japan, exemplify a similar containment. These objects lack overt decoration; their simplicity is their beauty. Each piece embodies a distillation of the form's most essential qualities, one of which is function.

In the poem "The Red Wheelbarrow," we are given a snapshot, a perfect moment frozen in time, an image constructed with words. It is a spare poem, one which is contained. One might even suggest that its meaning relies upon this containment, the way a good pot relies upon just the right lip or foot, the generous curve of belly and shoulder, the marriage of surface and form. A really good pot is like a poem; each part is essential to the whole. Every detail must be carefully considered and yet it must exude ease. Writing a good poem is tricky business; so is making a really good pot. Most of us make many. Like Morandi, we persist in trying to get it just right. We are incrementalists, caught in the moment, wholly engaged in the act of digging for the essence of things. The kind of change that engages us is small, perhaps imperceptible to others, but it is the kind of change on which *so much depends*.

1. Edouard Roditi, *Dialogues: Conversations with European Artists at Mid-Century* (San Francisco: Bedford Arts Publishers, 1990), 107.