VESSELS AND ARCHITECTURE

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Vessels and architecture have had a rich association throughout history. They both are life supporting devices, are of ancient origin, and are pivotal in the development of civilization. Where we find people we find vessels and shelter. Over the centuries mankind has developed innumerable variations on the basic functions of vessels and architecture.

In present day architecture we find churches, houses, apartment complexes, schools, museums, stores, office buildings, industrial buildings, warehouses, and so forth. In all these we find vessels with an equally wide variety of functions. A few examples would be ashtrays, toilets, sinks, pots, pans, baskets, glasses, plates, pitchers, pails, bottles, boxes, buckets, vaults, and the list continues. In certain cases such as water towers and silos, the architecture and the vessel become one and the same. In a certain sense, any form of architecture could be looked at as a vessel. We speak of the walls of a vessel as we speak
of the walls of a building. Both share the quality of containment. Our technological advances have created more specific demands for vessels and architecture. But this wealth of specific functions is secondary to the original function of these ancient forms. Vessels are still containers and architecture still serves primarily as a protective shelter.

Vessels and architecture have been conceived not only in functional terms. They have also been subject to the aesthetic sensibilities of the designers of their particular periods and have often developed in parallel styles. An example of this is the Art Deco movement in which clean cut stylized lines were used in many aspects of industrial design, furniture, clothes, vessels and architecture. Similarly, the Greeks designed their buildings around a system of geometric proportion as they did their vases. In his book *Dynamic Symmetry*, Hambidge talks about this connection:

After an explanation of the fundamental principles of this method of proportioning spaces, [1] will attempt a complete exposition of its application in art through analyses of specific examples of Greek design. [I believe] that nothing better can be found for this purpose than Greek pottery, inasmuch as it is the only pottery which is absolutely architectural in all its elements. There is no essential difference between the plan of a Greek vase and the plan of a Greek temple or theater, either in general aspect, or in detail.
My original premise, at the start of the series of pieces on which I am now working, was to utilize vessel forms in conjunction with architectural forms in order to create installation pieces. As architecture I used my studio for the site of the installations. The problem then was to incorporate the vessel into the studio space.

For a number of reasons I felt these parameters which I had set for myself would generate interesting work. First I wanted to make work with familiar images in order to make it accessible to the viewer. The ancient and common image of a goblet, a glass, a bowl or a vase is familiar to everyone. I thought that shapes of both the vessel and architecture could be transformed and incorporated, yet still retain enough information to be recognizable. Secondly I liked the idea of taking something familiar and shifting its context, often just slightly, to make it somewhat unfamiliar. Therefore, by changing the traditional function of vessels and architecture I thought these elements could be seen in a new way. This conception is similar to Duchamp's *Ready Mades*, in which he took common objects and removed their original function. Placed in the context of art we can focus on their form rather than their use. In *The Bride and the Bachelors*, Calvin Tomkins quotes Duchamp in reference to his *Bicycle Wheel*:

> It came about as a pleasure... something to have in my room the way you have a fire or a pencil sharpener, except that there was no usefulness. It was a pleasant gadget, pleasant for the movement it gave.
Later, in reference to another Ready Made:

Pharmacy [was] a distortion of the visual idea to execute an intellectual idea, something wrenched arbitrarily out of one context and placed in a new and unfamiliar one. This is perhaps the key notion behind the ready mades, and it shows up even more clearly in the third example, the Bottle Rack of 1914.

I also had more personal reasons for selecting vessels as a sculptural medium. For the past fifteen years I have been making clay and glass vessels. I understand the forms, the volume, the proportions and the weight as well as the process of making vessels. The function of vessels and their beauty holds a great fascination for me.

In my first attempt to address the issue of vessels and architecture I created a scale model of my studio. I cut out windows through the walls in the shapes of various goblet forms. In the middle of the room I placed three cone-shaped cardboard goblets which appeared to serve as supporting columns for the roof. (Illus. 1)

The vessel shaped openings functioned well as windows. Even though their scale was greatly exaggerated, they seemed well integrated into the space; their placement on the wall suggested a row of glasses on a shelf. The two dimensional shapes of the windows were more recognizable as vessels than were the three dimensional columns. I thought the opposite would be true. The simplicity of this form apparently made the windows more readily recognizable to the viewer as
vessels. Once the viewer perceived the windows, he could then recognize the form of the columns.

I liked the idea of juggling the placement and scale of the vessel in an architectural space. I thought it might be interesting to play with elements of architecture in the model in the same way. I chose the Greek column as an easily recognizable architectural element. In this way I was blending different styles of architecture, the ancient as well as the modern (my studio). I looked for examples of Greek temples so that I would be able to reproduce the columns easily. I found in my collection a photo of the temple of Hera at Paestum ca 460 B.C. (Illus. 2)

Upon seeing the structure I saw the negative space between rather than the columns themselves. These, surprisingly enough, appeared to look like tall vases. I made a long wall down the middle of the studio model. On one end of the wall I cut holes in the shapes of the columns and on the other end holes shaped like the space between the columns. (Illus. 3) It seemed that because I had been working with the silhouettes of vessel forms, I had trained myself to see symmetrical negative space as having volume and, more specifically, perceiving that volume as a vessel. This seemed to relate to Lichtenstein's bronze sculpture of the 70's, many of which were pitchers, cups and vases. Jack Cowart says of Lichtenstein's work of this period:
The sculptures are drawings in bronze, which raise other significant issues. They refer to his 1960s ceramics where he applied two-dimensional reflections to three-dimensional objects. In the 1970s sculptures he makes three-dimensional reflections within forms that are actually three-dimensional but which simultaneously appear to be two-dimensional. The intentional absurdity of these switches highlights Lichtenstein's proposition concerning our perception of sculpture: that our literal view is always two-dimensional. Sculpture is organized in two dimensions and is viewed in two-dimensional sequences which then compound to establish, mentally, a third dimension.

The wall of columns was also a wall of vessels. This created a tension between positive and negative space and our perception of both. The column and the vessels have a resemblance because of their similar form. The Egyptians recognized this connection, as well, making a whole group of vases in the shapes of columns.

I made books from cardboard by cutting into their pages the many vessel silhouettes I had been drawing. In one of the books I cut out the shapes of goblets. Overlaid together, the pages created a cavity which suggested a composite vessel. (Illus. 4) The cutout spaces seemed to suggest the idea of transparency. I liked the idea of starting with a three-dimensional object, translating it into two-dimensions and then fitting that translation into a new system to create a new three-dimensional object. In another book I used the goblet silhouettes as studies of form and color. Though this was the main emphasis, the thickness of the cardboard pages gave them a small but significant depth. The silhouette of a vessel is the format
that glass designers use to communicate their ideas to master craftsmen. It is a design which is understood by both to signify volume. Therefore the vessel books could be used for a practical purpose. Books are functional objects, yet by treating them sculpturally I was taking them out of their normal context. Again a connection can be made here to Duchamp's Ready Mades. The books and the Ready Mades are both common objects removed from their original context.

Vessels have often been described in terms of the human body. We speak of the foot of a bowl, the body, the shoulder and the neck of a vase, or the lip of a glass. Similarly, Renaissance architects designed their buildings around the proportions of the human body. The distinguished art historian Rudolf Wittkower writes:

The conviction that architecture is a science, and that each part of a building, inside as well as outside, has to be integrated into one and the same system of mathematical ratios, may be called the basic axiom of Renaissance architects. We have already seen that the architect is by no means free to apply to a building a system of ratios of his own choosing, that the ratios have to comply with conceptions of a higher order and that a building should mirror the proportions of the human body; a demand which became universally accepted on Vitruvius' authority. As man is the image of God and the proportions of his body are produced by divine will, so the proportions in architecture have to embrace and express the cosmic order.

I combined the vessel with the architecture since they are both used by people and can both be talked about in terms of the human body. The central vase shaped doorway (Illus. 5) reminded me of an Egyptian mummy case, which is
clearly derived from human proportions. The doorway itself seemed an excellent architectural element on which to impose the image of the vessel. This made it possible to enter the vessel as well as the architecture. Traditionally Greek vases are decorated with human figures. The audiences' participation would complete the work; the people passing under the doorway become, for the moment, the decorative figures found on Greek vases.

Hoping to more fully integrate the form of the vessel and architecture, I made a model which from the outside looked like my studio, i.e., rectangular building with goblet-shaped windows. On the inside the walls were the shape of a molding whose curve was derived from the curve of a bowl. (Illus. 6) I made another model from the curve of a vase. The goblet windows, cut through the thickness of the model's walls, appeared as passage ways. When viewed from the exterior they were easily recognizable, but when viewed from the interior the form of the walls created a distortion in the shapes of these goblet-like passage ways. The presence of the vessel was viewable only from certain vantage points. Its incorporation into the space had at this point become more subtle.

Previously my installation models had used the vessel to alter only one or two aspects of the architecture at a time: windows and doorways, windows and walls, window and columns. Having experimented with these ideas separately, I
thought it would be interesting to create a room in which every form was derived from the vessel, i.e., the architecture as well as the objects within the space. This idea inspired me to make furniture whose design was based on the vessel. I thought at this point of making lamps, tables, chairs, sofas, shelves, molding, and so forth. I made my customary models of many of these things but was tiring of the three-dimensional sketches. I wanted to make finished objects and full scale installations.

The first two pieces were a goblet-shaped sofa and a goblet-shaped shelving unit. Again, as with the vessel books, I was working in a realm that embraced both sculpture and industrial design. I looked to the work of Scott Burton, knowing he had been making furniture for the past four years. Roberta Smith describes his work:

Burton's objects balance paradoxically on a fine line between art and furniture and experiencing them involves a process of moving back and forth over this line. These pieces don't lead the functionless, completely esthetic existence of Artschwager's or Kusama's or Samaras' variations on tables, couches, chairs, etc. They also lack the easy, slightly self-effacing elegance of the great 20th-century furniture classics like Breuer's Wassily chair or Le Corbusier's Grand Confort-next to which they seem mildly mannered, exaggerated, manipulated. And in comparison to the everyday household items most of us live with, Burton's furniture bristles with esthetic self-sufficiency-they almost dare you to use them (although the best, like the light maple 'lawn chairs,' are extremely comfortable).

In my first full scale installation I used only a section of a large gallery space. In this area I built two
walls, one of which had a shelf of blown glass vessels. On the other was a bowl-shaped doorway. The shelf held glass vessels painted white which served to remind the observer of the origin of the vessel forms. The installation also had a goblet shaped sofa and a standing goblet shaped shelving unit. (Illus. 7) By painting the entire installation white I hoped to draw attention to the forms rather than to the color or material. The rough brick and wood walls of the gallery distracted the viewer; he did not perceive it as a self-contained space and the effect I aimed for fell short.

For the second and latest installation I used a store front as a gallery. In the first pieces of furniture done for the previous show, the white goblet sofa and the white goblet shelf, I tried to disguise the materials and the construction process. My thinking about the objects in this piece had changed. I hoped to enrich the work by emphasizing the materials rather than denying them. I also thought that through the use of color and placement of vessel generated objects I could transform the space of the gallery. I wanted to create a sense of mystery, in which the familiar is made slightly unfamiliar. I enlarged the scale of the vessel and merged its form with objects commonly found in a living room.

I decided to make a lamp in the form of a vessel. Frequently glass is used for lampshades which often resemble vessels. The base and stand of a floor lamp reminded me of
a goblet whose shade resembled a cup raised on a stem and a foot. I made a 4 1/2 foot blown glass goblet in which I installed a lighting fixture. This became the lamp I used in the installation. I constructed a sofa from a screen-like metal in the shape of a goblet. It was laid on its side. I used perforated and expanded metal in this piece for its transparent qualities. I felt it related to the transparency of the glass from which it was generated. I also displayed tables made from the sections of an enlarged wood and plaster goblet. The entrance to the installation I cut in the shape of a classical vase. I fabricated glass molding which outlined the doorway. The cross-section of this molding was in the form of a vessel.

Later, I learned from Hambidge's *Dynamic Symmetry* that "the curves found in Greek pottery are identical with the curves of moldings found in Greek temples." This seemed to be a fortuitous coincidence and enriched the historical relationship between vessels and architecture.

As a finishing detail the glass molding articulated the doorway. This glass outline charged the space it enclosed and the empty space contained in this vase-shaped doorway became in a sense an object in itself.

The vessel entrance of this second installation opened into a square shaped room. (Illus. 8) On an adjacent wall I cut out a recessed area in the form of a goblet in which I inserted shelves. These were filled with a variety of blown
glass vessels. Again I wanted the furniture and architectural elements, the lamp, the sofa, the tables, the doorway and the shelf to have a connection with the actual forms from which they were abstracted.

Finally in an attempt to incorporate more fully the architecture with its contents, I painted a mural on the wall opposite the vessel shelves. I hoped to make it serve as both wallpaper and painting. As wallpaper it employed a repeated pattern of glasses that covered the entire wall. Each stencil was about a yard high. As painting it was removed from its traditional canvas. Yet its method of application and use of gesture and color conspired to make it painting.

This most recent show was the culmination of a year's work. Over the course of the past year I have become aware of a method of working which suits me. I feel it is this method which is of greater value than the individual objects which I created. I found that by working my intuitive ideas into a logical structure I could make conscious decisions which directed the work. It is the structure which enabled me to become conscious of my aesthetic sensibility. And it was this sensibility which enabled me to solve the problems posed by the structure. I asked myself how was I to work the vessel into the architectural space and vice versa.

By superimposing the images of the vessel and architecture, by altering the scale of these elements and by
interchanging their functions, I hoped to create an atmosphere which is at once familiar yet at the same time strangely unfamiliar. The viewer is confronted with the vessel in its traditional architectural context, but is forced to see these elements in a new way.

Initially my natural affinity for both architecture and vessels prompted me to explore them. But as the work developed it was the issue of context which began to fascinate me. By the use of these known quantities, architecture and the vessel, I felt that I was creating a new understanding of the context in which these elements were seen.
FOOTNOTES


3. Ibid., p. 27.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


