

Otto Heino

A RENOWNED CALIFORNIA POTTER KNOWN FOR HIS UNIQUE GLAZES.



IT'S NOT EVEN 4 A.M., BUT THE workday has already begun for Otto Heino. In the same blue-striped apron he's worn for 50 years—he rinses it out each day but refuses to wash it—he will throw 15 or 20 pots or plates before breakfast. He'll eat, exercise, and perhaps fire a few pieces in one of the nine kilns that sit outside his ranch-style home in Ojai, California.

He might take a drive in one of his luxury cars—he owns a Rolls-Royce, a Bentley, and a Mercedes-Benz station wagon. Before day's end, he'll wedge 15 pieces of clay for the next day's work and trim pots, glaze them, and complete the other tasks of his craft.

Heino minces no words when he says he has been called the wealthiest potter in the world, making \$1 million a year. During an interview, he rapidly discloses the prices his works command: His advertised prices are \$25,000, but for some pieces, he's now asking, and getting, \$35,000. He also sells a \$150 paperweight.

"The clay's good to me and I'm good to the clay," Heino says, taking a break from a plate more than 18 inches wide that he's creating for a show in Europe. "It works for me, and I guide it. I am never too rough. You don't need to use that much

strength. Just bring it up in a cone and it centers itself."

Heino is most widely known for his glazes—in particular, a yellow glaze revered in Asia that no other potter, he says, has been able to reproduce in the modern world. In Asia, artists have been searching for 400 years for this high-temperature yellow glaze (low-fire, Heino says, is easy to create but less attractive and less durable). The formula for the yellow glaze has been lost to the Asians, Heino says. It was especially popular during China's Chin Dynasty from roughly A.D. 265 to 420. The problem is that at higher temperatures, the ingredients in yellow glazes typically fire out or disappear. Heino's yellow glaze is a matte lemon yellow; the wood kiln he uses adds a random peach blush to the pots. Heino says the Chinese government has offered him \$1 billion for the "recipe," the details of which—ingredients and percentages—he's committed to memory but refuses to disclose. "I don't see the reason to do so," he says. "Most artists guard some part of their work,

for it is our livelihood."

Heino also is fond of a very bright blue slip and a white matte he created in recent months after years of work. And recently, he developed what he calls a mother-of-pearl glaze.



Otto Heino in his studio preparing to glaze his new work.

Other glazes bring rich colors into his palette: deep reds from copper pigment, cobalt blues, and pale, ancient-tradition celadons. Applewood ash gives a muted, speckled surface. "Whatever glazes are applied, the results are always honest, simple, and elegant, attesting to my sincerity as a working craftsman and artist," Heino says. He has also recently

perfected a matte/shiny "salt" glaze by adding sugar to the mix. Since 1950, when Heino began a 13-year stint working on nose cones for rockets as part of the NASA space program, he has been refining that particular glaze.

Heino was a waist gunner on a B-17 bomber and survived 40 bombing missions over Europe in World War II, with an extended enlistment of more than five years. The seeds for his career as an artist began during the war. During his U.S. Air Force years, he spent time in England at the studio of Bernard Leach, one of the avant-garde ceramists of the time. Heino's early work was heavily influenced by the studio craft movement, he says.

Many potters say they need water to throw their pots, but not Heino, who uses water only to center the clay. At 93, he says he has no plans to change the work style that has led him to international stardom, wealth, and prestige in the potting world.

"Pots are born, not made," Heino says. "And they'll try to get the best of you if you let them. I never let them."

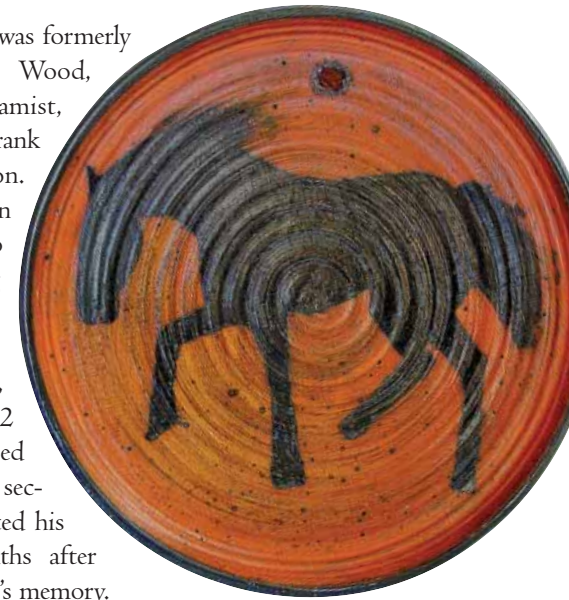
One of 12 children of Finnish parents, Otto met his late wife, Vivika, with whom he spent 47 years, when he was her student at the League of New Hampshire Arts and Crafts in Concord, now known as League of NH Craftsmen. The two settled in California in the early 1950s and made their home in the east end of

Ojai in a house that was formerly owned by Beatrice Wood, another local ceramist, and designed by Frank Lloyd Wright's son. Before Vivika died in 1995, she and Otto had been performing experiments to perfect a yellow glaze. Every Wednesday, they worked—for 12 years. Heino continued their work, adding a second day, and dedicated his discovery, two months after her death, to his wife's memory.

Though he is a slight man—5-foot-7 and 152 pounds—Heino can throw up to 100 pounds of clay at a time and can carry 50 pounds to the wheel at once. Such volumes of clay can yield a covered jar 27 inches wide by 22 inches high or a bowl as big as 30 inches by 20 inches.

Heino fires up his nine kilns: two wood, two salt, and five glaze-fired kilns. He goes through 50 cords of wood and 832 pounds of rock salt in a year to keep his kilns at the ready. He fires "hot" with temperatures reaching more than 2,500 degrees Fahrenheit. He uses a high-fire reduction process that shuts off air, and hence oxygen, into the kiln so oxygen is pulled out of the clay instead.

"Consistency is the trick when firing kilns because there are so many var-



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ibles," Heino says. "What temperature, what changes are made and when, which type of kiln to use, when to reduce clay, where the pots sit in the kiln, what they sit next to...It's a lot to figure out. But I love to do it."

Indeed, chemistry is at the heart of much of Heino's work. He likes to use clay from Missouri and can talk for hours about what portion of a potter's clay should be inert; 50 percent of the clay he uses has that quality. Heino uses 20 tons of the Missouri clay a year to make 10,000 pots.

His designs are often of Asian origin. He paints organic forms or Asian calligraphic images, which come from his early appreciation and study of Japanese master potters.

His works have won numerous accolades, among them the Gold Medal from the Sixth Biennale Internationale de Céramique D'Art in Vallauris, France, in 1978. His pottery has been displayed at the American Craft Museum in New York City, the Picasso Museum in Vallauris, and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., among many other prestigious venues.

Heino says he loves to talk at his outdoor theater about his art, especially to young graduate student ceramists, architects, and chemists. They come from California State University, Fullerton and from schools in Pasadena but also from across the country and even around the globe. He shows students how and where he throws—outside during the summer and inside during the winter—and he implores students, no matter their craft or career, to keep changing their styles. "I tell artists, 'Don't be a machine to the clay. Be an artist.'"

When they ask his philosophy about life and art, he says it's simple: "Never hurry, never worry, and leave something for the country you were born in. Live, laugh, learn, and be positive. Then, you'll make it."

For more information on Heino's work, visit www.ottospottery.com.

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