

Tom Clarkson, PVCC's Ceramic Professor

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"I create pieces people could relate to and use in their daily life," said Tom Clarkson, a professor of art at PVCC, when asked to describe his pottery. Clarkson graduated with a MFA in Ceramics from Ohio University. From there Clarkson opened up a small pottery studio with his wife. In 1983, he was offered a job as an adjunct professor for ceramics. Thirty-nine years later and he is the full-time professor of PVCC's ceramics program. As one of his students, I wanted to know why he chose this career and how he got here.

He said he chose ceramics over other mediums because of "The idea of making a functional item from mud." His whole philosophy towards his pottery is focused on the functionality of each item. Ceramics wasn't his first choice. During college he was exposed to numerous materials. He even took part in wood carving, but explained that his connection with the ceramics is beyond others. He couldn't explain otherwise.

His website states, "In addition to my ongoing commitment to produce fine, functional vessels, I try to capture the wet plastic nature of the wet clay in the finished piece. I use a runny, active wood ash glaze to enhance the textured surfaces. I seek a harmony between form, surface, and function." This is obvious in each piece of his.

I asked him how he was able to financially support himself during his freelance career, and he explained that being a production potter didn't leave much wiggle room for creativity. He further explained that the pottery he had to be what sold rather than what he wanted to make.

When I asked if he preferred throwing on a wheel he said, "I used to throw a lot when I was younger, but now I don't need to." He has said he had to throw literal tons of clay every year just to get by as a freelance potter. He described his years as an adjunct professor at PVCC as, "probably the best time in my ceramic career." Being an adjunct professor gave him more financial stability, while also having time to pursue ceramic shows.



Professor of Art Tom Clarkson.
Photo courtesy of PVCC Marketing & Media Relations

During his years as an adjunct professor, Clarkson would ideally get into 15-18 shows a year, but he was never guaranteed to come back the next year. He hasn't sold his pottery anywhere other than shows until recently due to COVID-19. As an adjunct professor, he had been able to get into big ceramic showcases, like the Smithsonian showcase and the American Museum of Ceramic Art (AMOCA), but five years later he was given the opportunity to become a full-time assistant professor at PVCC.

He was offered the opportunity to continue building the ceramics department as the main professor, but he wouldn't have had enough time to pursue art shows and freelance on the side. In the end, Clarkson became PVCC's main ceramics faculty. Fourteen years later, he was promoted to a professor.

His goal had always been to be a teacher, he said, "It was worth moving up and teaching, and enabled me to make pieces I was interested in making." He has stayed with PVCC for 39 years due to the unique student and professor relationship it offers, as well as his peaceful ceramic studio on the first floor of the Dickson Building.

He now says, "I make the best pots that I can make and hope others do too."