

ceramics

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Heath Ceramics CLAY STUDIO

by Studio Staff

The Heath Clay Studio, located in San Francisco, California, is a division of Heath Ceramics, which began as a small pottery in 1948 run by Edith and Brian Heath and is now a small-scale production company with a factory making a variety of home goods, tile, and accessories, many based on the Heaths' original designs. The Clay Studio is an experimental space where the director, Tung Chiang, and the staff of artists and technicians explore ideas based on a central theme and create new prototypes, small collections, and one-of-a-kind pieces. We asked the staff to share their experience working in this unique environment.

—Eds.

Ceramics Monthly: Can you describe the creative cycle from idea and prototype development through to finalizing a design?

Tung Chiang: Each year, I decide a theme to explore in the design series and start to learn what that particular theme means to me. The theme of this year's *Design Series 7: Bold Interpretation* is the bowl. I wanted to understand what this particular product means to our studio and what Heath has already been doing in that area.

I was trained as a designer, and my process is similar to most designers. To express the initial idea, I usually draw on paper. A small doodle will quickly turn into a full-scale drawing. The sketch is useful to have and is an important step in the design, but when I start throwing on the wheel, I often pause and rethink. Sometimes I'll follow my sketch closely, but sometimes I may go in the





1 Tung Chiang, Clay Studio director, throwing on the wheel. 2 Experimental bud vases featured in *Design Series 7: Bold Interpretation*, to 3¾ in. (10 cm) in height, glaze and technique tests. 3 Tung Chiang looking over pieces in the studio. 4 Alexandra Corrin, Clay Studio assistant, throwing on the wheel.

opposite direction. I love that clay extends my creative process through all its steps from sketch, to thrown and trimmed form, to fired piece. I usually finish my work all the way to the bisque form.

Once my prototype forms are bisque fired, glazing may happen right away, but sometimes it may take days, and I still won't know how to glaze them. The glaze and the form must complement each other, which I often find to be the most time-consuming part.

After the glaze is selected, I measure and calculate the weight of the glaze, and decide how to apply it. I'll then work with Winnie Crittenden, our glaze specialist who has worked at Heath for over 45 years. Heath's glazes are usually applied by spraying them on. Spraying is a technique people can learn in months, but when it comes to mastering it and controlling the glaze on different surfaces, I don't think anyone does it better than Winnie. Once the pieces are glazed, I'll fire the works in my kiln. The kiln temperature is set slightly hotter or colder than the firings for Heath's dinnerware production, depending on the experimental result I'm looking for.

Throughout the time I spend working on *Design Series* pieces, one creation will lead to another. Sometimes the form stands out and I want to make more. Sometimes the glaze wants to lead and I'll create a new piece just to make it sing.

Sometimes my one-off designs go into larger production from our factory, like our candle holder. Usually, though, such designs will be made in small batches by the Clay Studio staff, like our nesting vases, matchbox holder, and more.





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CM: In applying them to your current role, what have been the most useful skills you learned in graphic design, advertising, and furniture design/industrial design?

TC: I believe that no matter the medium, a creation always starts from an idea. This is true especially in the advertising industry, which is the most powerful tool. I'm very glad I started my career with advertising, which taught me concept development.

CM: For the artists who work with you, what training best prepares them for their roles as studio managers and assistants?

TC: We look for well-trained ceramic craftspeople. However, as important as their skill set is, we also look for people who understand Heath's philosophy and share similar values.

CM: What advice do you have for a ceramic artist who is interested in working for a company like Heath?

TC: Edith Heath's story as a self-trained potter has always inspired me. Some of our employees have master's degrees in design and art, and some are self-taught. I was trained as a designer and learned about clay as a hobby. Ultimately, we are all required to have a basic understanding of clay and how to work with it. But when starting out at Heath, we may ask newcomers to let go of what they've learned and refresh their thinking, as our clay and glaze processes are so different.

I would like to say to people who are interested in jobs like ours: master the craft however you can afford to and through whichever methods you come across, keep an open mind, and continuously learn. Attention to detail is a must for being a craftsman, but the personal reflection of an artist is also important, even in production. Edith used to walk around behind workers and ask them to loosen up to avoid making everything perfectly identical. We also look for someone who can reach a standard time and time again. Many craftsmen in our factory have been in the same position over a long period of time. What stands out is that they are eager to make pieces better each time.

Heath Clay Studio Staff's Experiences

CM: What are your responsibilities as the studio manager? What are the most interesting and challenging parts of your job?

Jay Dion, Clay Studio manager: I oversee all of the production of the Heath Clay Studio lineup. These days, that works out to be about 50% production time—throwing, slip casting, glazing, etc.—and 50% logistics. The Clay Studio is an independent department within Heath, but it ties into almost every part of the company—from raw materials and retail, to e-commerce support and ensuring the products get to the showrooms and are live online.

The interesting and challenging parts of this job often intersect. We have four showrooms in three cities and sell online, so tracking our products from the prototyping phase to the showroom display is a large task. Devising clear ways to track our goals and progress is something I spend a lot of time thinking about. Watching our team execute this and adding input to help to make the systems tighter is really exciting.

CM: As a ceramic artist, has your role at Heath since 2016 inspired or informed your work or business practices at Atelier Dion (the production studio you owned and operated with your wife, Rie Dion)?

JD: Working at Heath has opened up a window into production ceramics that we had not seen before. Of course, the techniques in some sense are the same, but when you make something hundreds of times per day (like the factory does) inevitably there are workstation tools and tricks that make work more efficient. For



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example, I love the handmade, hinged wire tool that swings around to free the handle from its mold and cuts it in a way that perfectly matches the curve of the mug. Little improvements like these all add up to a lean production model that can be implemented into smaller-scale studio settings really easily.

CM: Can you describe a few aspects of custom housewares design and the scale of production at both your own studio and at Heath that most ceramic artists may not know about, but could benefit from understanding?

JD: Creation and production are two different words, with two completely different meanings. Rie and I both came to our work at Atelier Dion as artists and began with our creations. This part is really fun and exciting and easy to communicate with others. But those early creations became our production business, and as soon as that happened those creations became products, and that changed everything. Not for the worse, but it changed. We had to learn how to run a business, including tracking our overhead costs and material expenses, learning to market and communicate our work to others, and realizing we needed employees. All of those things are not unique to ceramics, they are just regular business realities, but we didn't know any of it. Balancing what we need to produce in order to pay our bills and employees (and if there was any money left, ourselves) with what we needed to design and prototype in order to grow and move forward became a constant challenge. It's important to know that when you have a business, you're always working (or thinking about working, or fretting about emails you need to send, etc.) But, dropping off boxes of mugs to cafés or retail customers always feels great! We love seeing the crowd drinking out of our mugs as we dropped off the next order, and that feeling keeps us going.



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5 Neck Vases in indigo and grapefruit, 7 in. (18 cm) in height, wheel thrown, hand glazed. **6** Selection of bowls from *Design Series 7: Bold Interpretation*. **7** Matchstick holder in fog and shell, 3 in. (8 cm) in height, slip cast, hand glazed. **8** Bowls from *Design Series 7: Bold Interpretation*. **9** Jeff Perkins, Clay Studio assistant, standing next to various glaze mixtures made by Heath staff.



At Heath, it is similar: designing and making is at the core, and being mindful of the entire business is important, too.

CM: Could you share with us what Rie's role as a studio assistant at Heath Clay Studio entails?

JD: Rie is the most recent addition to the team and her role as studio assistant is focused solely on production. She is currently working on slip casting and glazing. Rie says, "The creative part of my job comes from being able to test new glaze combinations and applications. I can use my eye for color to search for new palettes and textures to apply to our forms."

The goal is to have all of the potters in the studio capable of creating and glazing all of the forms that we make so that the jobs can become interchangeable.

CM: What are some of the unexpected creative opportunities and challenges you get to work on as part of the team at Heath Clay Studio?

JD: Probably the thing that I love the most is the challenge of transforming two-dimensional designs from Tung into a small run of well-crafted pots. Even if we are working from a finished pot as a sample, Tung talks about thinking in two dimensions, thinking in profiles and lines. So to take that line and work out all the steps to produce it as a small-scale production run is the fun part of this job. In this way, the design and production each have their voice and each share a part of the finished product.

CM: What initially attracted you to working at Heath Clay Studio? What was the most challenging early on? What is your favorite aspect of the job?

Jeff Perkins, Clay Studio associate: The idea of working with clay and practicing the art form I love within a larger company is a dream. I was, and continue to be, excited about the forms we make. I love that the production run is limited, and we can decide to stop making something in order to try something new. The Heath Clay Studio is different from the rest of the company in that aspect. It makes our pieces more precious, and helps to keep the studio feeling fresh.

In the studio, there is always something to be done. Things need to be formed, trimmed to the final shape, glazed, and fired. This means there is never a slow day. We lean on the larger company for things like raw materials, but when it comes to making and finishing a product, it all happens in our studio, giving us a great feeling of pride in our work.

One of the most challenging aspects of working in the Clay Studio is becoming consistent when throwing pieces on the wheel. We don't mind some variation in our forms, but they must feel good in the hand and look more or less the same. As I have become more adept at throwing consistently, it has become

my favorite part of the job. It can still be incredibly frustrating, but there is always something to be improved upon, something to be tightened up within the form. Making incremental achievements continues to be a source of pride and joy. Having work like this at a company such as Heath makes it more of a vocation than a job.

Alexandra Corrin, Clay Studio assistant: I was initially attracted to the Clay Studio because I liked that Heath has roots in the California ceramics community, an emphasis on design as well as making, and is socially and environmentally sustainable. I also like that our team is small and we have a direct connection to the designing, forming, and glaze experimentation of each piece. We get the best of both worlds, being able to tap into the knowledge and resources of factory production, but with the freedom to collaborate and make decisions on the fly.



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10 Rie Dion, Clay Studio assistant, and Jay Dion, Clay Studio manager, trimming Clay Studio vases in the LA Clay Studio. 11 Bowl from *Design Series 7: Bold Interpretation*. 12 Left to right: small birds in grapefruit, Neck Vase in indigo, tall vase in opaque white and matte brown, box and stopper vase, pitcher with handle in aqua and barley, matchstick holder in fog and shell, Neck Vase in grapefruit, tall vase in opaque white and matte brown, Neck Vase in indigo. Tallest piece is 10¾ in. (27 cm) in height.

Learning how to work with Heath's clay blend was, and continues to be, the most challenging part of the job. The clay is much softer and smoother than what I am used to and it has taken some time to learn its limitations and how to work with it to achieve taller forms.

My favorite aspect of my job is glaze experimentation. The feeling of opening a kiln full of new glaze tests and not knowing what to expect never gets old. Heath's glaze library is extensive and ever changing, and knowing that you could be breathing new life into a piece by creating a glaze combination that no one has used before really excites me.

CM: Could you name one or two things that you find remarkable about Heath's operations, as someone who has studied ceramic art?

JP: The fact that this studio even exists is remarkable. There are not many companies that consider experimentation and allow it to play a vital part in the life of the business. The design team realizes that with the ability to make things a little more freely, the showrooms can be fresh on a consistent basis. We try not to produce such high numbers of our pieces, so we have the time to try new things. Just having more bandwidth allows for creativity to show itself.

AC: The thing that stood out to me is how systematized everything is. Glaze is sprayed on by weight and the specific gravity is measured very precisely depending on what glaze is being used and for what application. It is also remarkable to be working with so many other people who specialize in different areas of the ceramic process. There is so much organization and thought that goes into each step of production here and it is amazing to see it all come together at such a large scale. It has shown me the side of ceramics that relies on teamwork and expertise, and the organization that goes into supporting creativity.

CM: Has your work at Heath changed or affected your own artistic processes in any way?

JP: Working in the Clay Studio has drastically changed the way I make ceramics outside of Heath. Seeing the way Tung Chiang designs forms has been a great inspiration. He thinks about each line and what it would mean or how it would change the form. This has made me slow down a bit in my own process, thinking more on the front-end of making anything. The way I throw on the wheel and the way that I glaze have also been greatly influenced. I have learned to take a step back more often, to see what is actually happening, and to slow down and make sure the pot is doing what I want it to.

AC: It definitely has! I started sieving and measuring the specific gravity of my pouring glaze when I began working at Heath. I also started thinking more about how the initial design of a piece will affect the ease of production down the line—for example, designing for the glaze to stop at a specific part of the foot to cut down the cleaning time. The change is subtle, but I feel like I learn something new every day.

CM: What advice would you have for ceramic artists who are interested in working in production and design roles like yours?

JP: For the ceramic artist looking to one day have a job like this, I would say the best thing to do is practice and make things like you already have the job. There cannot be enough said for consistent practice and patience within the process. It is also important to stay humble and be ready to learn from anyone who is willing to teach you. Everyone has a different set of skills, and you never know what you might pick up.

AC: Be open to learning whatever skills are needed for the project or job at hand. Don't be afraid of learning on the job and listening to those around you for advice. Someone may have a really helpful insight that you hadn't thought of. Be confident in your abilities, but willing to compromise.

Learn more about Heath Ceramics and the Heath Clay Studio at www.heathceramics.com or on Instagram [@heathceramics](https://www.instagram.com/heathceramics).