

# ***Made To Be Used: The Pottery of Ray Kahmeyer***

**Birger Sandzén  
Memorial Gallery  
Lindsborg, Kansas**

**August 30 through  
October 25, 2020**

The first piece of art I bought after moving to Lindsborg in 1997 was a vase by Ray Kahmeyer (shown at right). Fortunately in the years since, my wife Jan and I acquired more of his work – vases, bowls, plates, a lamp and more – and many of these we use on a daily basis. His works are meant for everyday use, hence the exhibition title, but each still hold something special beyond that. They have a quality that's impossible to label or categorize. His "simple" pots reflect Ray's commitment to the craft of handwork, his fondness for rustic design, beauty, and nature. Ray was unique, inspiring, and generous, and I feel very fortunate to have known him. If you also knew him I need not explain, if you didn't, I hope this exhibition will give you a sense of who he was and what he made.

Ron Michael, Sandzén Gallery Director



Bowl, stoneware with tomato red glaze, 9 x 12 x 12 inches,  
Sandzén Gallery Collection

"It is the business of art to touch people's lives; to enrich, expand and satisfy them, to offer contemplative alternatives to the spirit-numbing rhythms and objects which characterize contemporary existence."

— Ray Kahmeyer, artist statement, 1988

Growing up around Pratt, Kansas, Ray Kahmeyer (1930-2007) did not intend to be a potter or an art teacher. But, wholly dedicated to furthering the craft, Kahmeyer taught ceramics for 25 years at Bethany College (1967-92), heading the art department after his first two



Vase, stoneware, 8 x 5 x 5 inches, Brad and Marsha  
Howe Collection



Vase, raku, 7 x 6 x 5 inches, Jerry & Carol Exline Collection



Vase, stoneware, 14 x 7 x 7 inches, Rick & Linda Hanson Collection

an art elective and immediately “got bit” by the clay bug, as his sister Joy Davis described in 2016.<sup>1</sup> Looking back at her brother’s career creating pots, she stated, “It irked him if they sat on the shelf,” as they were intentionally created for everyday use.

This guiding principle, that pottery vessels were “made to be used,” shaped Kahmeyer’s practice of collecting local clays and mixing his own glazes into an Arts & Crafts aesthetic of having nothing in the home that was not both beautiful and useful. His son Larry recalled his father lecturing to students on how the Industrial Revolution changed production of handmade objects to standardized copies, and about

years and then earning the endowed position of the Mary J. Mingenback Distinguished Professor of Art in 1973. Retirement did not slow the artist down, as he continued to create utilitarian vessels in his home studio, demonstrating wheel-throwing and glazing at local festivals every chance he had.

Ray was born on September 10, 1930, to Ray and Clara Kahmeyer in Nashville, Kansas, in Kingman County. Kahmeyer graduated from Pratt High School in 1948 and had no desire to go to college. For some years he worked as a butcher and did renovation projects for homes in the Pratt and Great Bend area along with woodworking with his father. After a stint in the US Navy during the Korean War, Ray returned home and decided to use the G.I. Bill and his construction skills to become an architect. Settling in Manhattan at Kansas State University, Kahmeyer discovered his life work by chance, taking a ceramics course as

the modern attempt to recover the traditions and quality of the past.<sup>2</sup> Ray wrote in the professional journal *Studio Potter* that a well-made, hand-thrown pot “should have three features including eye contact, quality, and functionality” which could not be found in a mass-produced piece.<sup>3</sup> The artist felt that successful pots were simple and made one at a time by imperfect hands, and that their meaning would always be found in using them.



Teapot, stoneware, 9 x 8 x 6 inches, Jerry and Carol Exline Collection



Plate, porcelain, 1 x 11 x 11 inches, Joyce and Mark Peterson Collection



Bowl, salt-glazed stoneware, 7 x 11 x 11 inches, Sandzén Gallery Collection

Kahmeyer earned both his bachelor’s degree and master of Arts from K-State, finishing a thesis on the raku method of ceramic firing and glazing to graduate in 1967. The bulk of Kahmeyer’s work is wheel-thrown, high-fired stoneware, suitable for domestic use. His friendships with important American ceramists Warren MacKenzie (1924-2018) and Paul Soldner (1921-2011), with their own crucial influences of England’s Bernard Leach (1887-1979) and Japan’s Shōji Hamada (1894-1978), continued to inform his work in functional pottery throughout his career.

Kahmeyer was hired to begin teaching at Bethany in 1967 just after he completed his master’s thesis on raku firing. He was able to gain additional study at the New York State College of Ceramics

at Alfred University in New York the summer of 1969. The potter seemed to consider teaching more of a collaborative learning experience than the formal passing of instruction, which appealed greatly to college students in the 1970s.

Students Roger Jamison (BFA '70) and Tom Klocke (BFA '71) spent all hours throwing and firing pots with Ray, and assisted in building an experimental salt kiln

as well as assembling the new Mingenback facilities in 1970. They learned basic construction along with Zen principles of 'oneness with nature'

that Kahmeyer often quoted while raku firing.<sup>4</sup> Form was everything to Kahmeyer, visually pleasing but the way a vessel's shape flowed in the hand, weighted for everyday use, was the true test of a successful pot. The professor worked at perfecting glazes and brushed-on decoration, but it was the functional purpose that was of primary importance.<sup>5</sup>

Kahmeyer exhibited his pots widely throughout his career, showing in a variety of regional exhibitions each year and occasionally sending work further afield to other states across the country. He earned

numerous purchase awards and his work appears in a host of museum and private collections. The professor was also invited often to other colleges and high schools to present lectures, demonstrations, and workshops.

Kahmeyer taught ceramics at Bethany for two and a half decades, imparting hard science lessons in the chemistry of glaze mixing and the physics of materials under forces of motion and heat, but gave all his students much more than a typical college education. Student Loren Lukens (BA '75) wrote that, "Ray Kahmeyer taught me well. I received a good technical grounding in glaze calculation, kiln building, and processes," but the "most important things I learned from Ray were his love of the material and process, respect toward the historical consequences of pottery, and his sense of 'craft husbandry.'"<sup>6</sup> Glenda Taylor (BA'76), who took on Kahmeyer's teaching load when he went on sabbatical 1982-83, reported that Ray taught her how to tap-center a pot and construct stable bases but it was the value that Ray placed on relationships with his students that stood out during her Bethany years: "I remember his words, 'let's not talk about pots unless you want to.'"<sup>7</sup> It was Ray's conscious realization that students



Footed Bowl stoneware, 4 x 9 x 9 inches,  
Vicki Kahmeyer Collection



Mug, stoneware, 5 x 6 x 4 inches,  
Rick & Linda Hanson Collection



Jar, stoneware, 8 x 8 x 8 inches,  
Vicki Kahmeyer Collection



Vase, stoneware, 8 x 7 x 7  
inches, Sam Piper & Debra  
Schmid Collection



Bowl, stoneware, 5 x 15 x 15 inches, Sam  
Piper & Debra Schmid Collection



Shallow Bowl, stoneware, 4 x 17 x 17 inches,  
Sandzén Gallery Collection



Bowl, stoneware, 4 x 16 x 16 inches,  
Sam Piper & Debra Schmid Collection



Jar, stoneware, 15 x 13 x 13 inches,  
Ken and Marilyn Sjogren Collection

are people with complex lives of their own beyond the clay that made him the teaching model to follow. Kurt Krehbiel (BA'95) confessed that in his own teaching he often would ask himself, "What would Ray do in this situation?"<sup>8</sup>

Ray Kahmeyer was a dynamic member of Bethany College community, volunteering to lead the chapel renovation, designing campus bell towers and brick walls, directing the Bethany-in-Sweden study abroad program, and serving on student affairs committees, along with overseeing the collecting of Native pottery. The ceramics professor retired in 1992 but continued to work in his home studio – a re-constructed chicken barn rebuilt with salvaged materials, including a plethora of old windows that provided good lighting. Kahmeyer and a few other Lindsborg artists began inviting people in to view and purchase work, inadvertently establishing the annual Artist Studio Open House that continues today.



Ray at work on his treadle wheel, circa 2000

By the 2006 exhibition at the Sandzén Gallery with his former students, Ray was becoming frail and finding that manipulating heavy clay was more than he could manage. The Lindsborg artist died on November 30,

2007, leaving behind his egalitarian principles in the many lives touched during his time as a teaching potter. In 2014, Bethany College established the Kahmeyer Visiting Visual Artist Lecture Series, fully supported by charitable donations in his honor. Former Bethany colleague Nicholas Hill initiated the Ray Kahmeyer Pottery Fund in 2017 to build the permanent collection of functional pottery at the Sandzén Gallery.

At the time of his father's funeral Larry Kahmeyer received a comment from a former student who summed up Ray's impact on those around him: "He taught us about life, and along the way, we learned to make pots."<sup>9</sup>

– Cori Sherman North, Sandzén Gallery Curator

#### Notes:

1. Quoted in Carol Bronson, "Ray Kahmeyer Works Part of 'Prairie Painters and Potters' exhibit at Art Museum," *Pratt Tribune* (29 Mar 2016).
2. Ibid.
3. Ray Kahmeyer, "Ray Kahmeyer Lindsborg, Kansas" *Studio Potter* (June 1999).
4. Tom Klocke phone interview with author, 17 Jul 2020.
5. Ibid.
6. Loren Lukens, "Learning to Analyze and Think Intuitively," in exhibition flyer "Kahmeyer and Students," Sep 5-Oct 22, 2006, Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery (BSMG).
7. Glenda Taylor, Thoughts on Ray Kahmeyer, His Influence on My Life and Career," in exhibition flyer "Kahmeyer and Students," Sep 5-Oct 22, 2006, BSMG.
8. Kurt Krehbiel, "Discovery of Clay and Years of Teaching," in exhibition flyer "Kahmeyer and Students," Sep 5-Oct 22, 2006, BSMG.
9. Larry Kahmeyer email to author, 20 Jul 2020.



Spanish Hills Plate, stoneware, 1 x 11 x 11,  
Margarete Dorsch Collection



Open Vase, stoneware, 8 x 10 x 10 inches,  
Sam Piper & Debra Schmid Collection



**Birger Sandzén**  
MEMORIAL GALLERY

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The Sandzén Gallery gratefully acknowledges the generosity of lenders, interviewees, and supporters of the exhibition. Special thanks are extended to Ray Kahmeyer's family for their encouragement throughout the show's development.

Cover image: Ray Kahmeyer in the Bethany College ceramics studio, 1976, courtesy of Ray Troll ([trollart.com](http://trollart.com))