CLAY : SARAH JAEGER

HANDWORK Celebrating American Craft 2026

MEET Sarah Jaeger. **WATCH** a video that features the artist at work.
MAKE an artwork inspired by the artist. **REFLECT** on your finished artwork.

MEET

MEET SARAH JAEGER, "Village Potter."

"There are certain qualities that I aspire to in my work—it's that elegant and folky thing which to me implies making work that is useful and beautiful."

—Sarah Jaeger

Sarah Jaeger, various vessels, courtesy of Sarah Jaeger and Craft in America. Sarah Jaeger, courtesy of the Archie Bray Archives.

ONE OF THE EARLIEST ARTIFACTS ever found is a drinking vessel made of sun-dried clay. For thousands of years, people have shaped moist clay and then fired it to make bricks, tiles, vessels, cooking pots, musical instruments and other objects for daily use. Pottery is probably the oldest and most widespread art. People living in communities often turned to their local potter for the vessels and cooking pots needed in daily life.

Sarah Jaeger finds pleasure in being known as the "village potter" in Helena, Montana, where she creates pots that she knows will be used in someone else's home. As her hands have gently transformed the clay into teapots, cups, and other functional vessels, Jaeger has always paid attention to detail, keeping the user in mind as she works. She finds it satisfying to get feedback from people who use her pieces as part of their daily lives. Jaeger knows that her beautiful work must have a practical function.

The artist knows how to make pots that combine her vision with the users' needs. She understands how a handcrafted cup for morning coffee or bowl for soup provides nourishment on many levels. People eating and drinking together is an important part of our daily lives, and Jaeger's beautiful pots transform the daily routine of eating from ordinary to extraordinary. She relishes the fact that her pottery can be found in kitchen cabinets throughout the country.

The artist's work in recent times has shifted due to a disease that limits her ability to turn pots on the wheel as she has always done in the past.

Now she mostly makes plates. She forms slabs of clay, cuts them into plate shapes and adds a coil of clay for the foot. Her plates showcase layers of color, applied with fluid brush strokes to create lively patterns of leaf and flower forms. As with her earlier work, these plates are not only beautiful, but functional, gracing the tables of members of her community near and far.

WATCH

SEE AND LISTEN to Sarah Jaeger talking about her life as the "Village Potter."

https://youtu.be/-I9b7Hos7Bo

After viewing the segment, consider the following:

- Why do you think people refer to Sarah Jaeger as the "Village Potter?"
- List some of the different kinds of pots you saw in the video.
- Describe what you saw as the artist worked with the potter's wheel. How does someone make pots using a potter's wheel?
- According to Sarah Jaeger, what is a benefit of talking with other artists about her work?
- Jaeger says that she wants her pots to be "useful and beautiful." Do you think her pots are useful and beautiful? Why or why not?
- How does the artist try to make her pots beautiful?

MAKE

Make your own piece of functional pottery. Your clay piece can be hand-built using slab, pinching, or coiling methods. If you have access to a pottery wheel, you may be able to enlist someone to teach you how to use it to create a functional pot.

- Consider the kind of pot you hope to make. For example, a cup.
- What would a cup need to have so that it would function as a cup?
- Does a cup require a handle?
- How large (or small) should a cup be?
- What would you need to think about if you decide to make a bowl, a plate, a pitcher, a vase, or a mug?
- Will you use the slab, coil, or pinch method to create your functional object? Refer to the CLAY: MEDIUM & METHODS sheet in your packet for instructions.
- Think about how your piece will be used.
- Will a person hold it? If so, what do you have to think about?
- How important is it that your pot sit squarely on a surface?
- What will you need to think about for it to do so?

- How will you finish your pot? If possible, have it fired in a kiln. Will you decorate the surface? Will you use glaze or paint?
- If you do not have access to clay that can be fired, consider other kinds of clay—self-drying, plasticene, salt-clay, polymer clay, for example. Follow directions available with these products.

REFLECT

LOOK at your finished product. Think about the process.

Sarah Jaeger, various vessels, courtesy of Sarah Jaeger and Craft in America.

- What did you make?
- What challenges did you face while making this?
- Are you pleased with your finished pot? Why or why not?
- What about the process of working with clay did you enjoy most?
- What will you do the next time you make a functional pot?
- What else would you like to make out of clay?