TAM IRVING. PROFESSOR EMERITUS EMILY CARR INSTITUTE OF ART AND DESIGN

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 BIOGRAPHY

Tam was born in 1933 in Bilbao, Spain, to English and Scottish parents. Part of his childhood was spent in Portugal where the traditional earthenwares first stimulated his interest in ceramics. This early interest was set aside for what he deemed more serious vocational matters while he studied Agriculture at Edinburgh University, Scotland, receiving a B.Sc. from this institution in 1956. That same year he emigrated to Canada and worked for seven years at Shell Canada as a chemist. Not finding any fulfilment in this work, he left the industry in 1964 and returned to his first love, clay.

Tam studied ceramics at the Winnipeg School of Art, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, and the Vancouver School of Art. Feeling that what he really needed to do was to make pots, he cut short any further academic study and established a studio in West Vancouver in 1966 where he earned a living as a production potter for the next seven years.

In 1973 Tam began to teach at the Vancouver School of Art; this matured into a full-time teaching career at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. While maintaining his studio work, Tam sustained a teaching career over a period of 23 years. During this time he insisted on a role that bridged the Art-Craft dichotomy, and respected both traditional values, and innovation. In a culture moving evermore swiftly in the direction of electronic media and virtual reality, he championed the reaffirmation of art forms with craft roots that he believed to be pivotal to the continuity of a humane society. The fact that the ceramic area at Emily Carr continues to support this ethos, and sustain a vital presence in the life of the Institute attests to his success in laying strong foundations for the department. Tam retired from the Institute in 1996 in order to return to his own practice.

Over the years Tam has done much work for the Potters Guild of BC serving as President on two separate occasions. He acted as president over a difficult period (1992-1995) of financial crisis. In collaboration with the board he was able to restructure the staffing of the organization, and renovate the Gallery of BC Ceramics (sadly now closed) that was operated by the Potters Guild. During this period he also initiated the creation of the North West Ceramics Foundation, a new, not for profit society with charitable status, to support excellence in the ceramic arts and to foster the continued evolution and vitality of the medium in Western Canada.

Tam has actively promoted a return to original sources, and pioneered, in Canada, the use of naturally occurring raw materials in clays and glazes, feeling that a closer relationship between potter and environment makes both aesthetic and economic sense. To this end, Tam has given numerous workshops throughout BC and in Alberta and Nova Scotia, dealing with methods for finding, evaluating, and processing local materials. Until recently, his own work was based, as far as possible, on raw materials that he collected from many areas throughout the province.

Over the last fifteen years Tam’s practice has shifted to lower firing ranges and more experimentation with colour. He has moved away from wheel-throwing to hand-building. Tam has adopted a more painterly approach with his most recent work consisting of paintings on clay plaques. He acknowledges the strong influences of Howard Hodgkins, and Gerhard Richter.