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Clay artists' works shine in Arts Council show

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Herald Writer

"The Emperor's Dragon" comes out of the kiln as red as a raging fire.

The creature is bold and defiant, with large scales and a wicked face. It's easy to imagine that if the dragon were real, it would surely be fire-breathing as well.

Perhaps the creature's current position in life is a bit of overkill, but one thing is certain: The dragon warns that the contents of this teapot are hot.

"The Emperor's Dragon" teapot will be on view alongside ceramic panels of swimming salmon, functional pots and intricately patterned tiles during the art show "Cascade Clay Artists" presented by the Arts Council of Snohomish County.

The show opens Thursday with a free catered reception at the arts council gallery, where visitors can feast their eyes on the work of 40 artists.

The artists are all part of the Cascade Clay Artists group, whose members range from full-time artists to part-time potters or teachers. In studios from Snohomish County to the Canadian border, these artists use porcelain, stoneware, earthenware and other clays. Their firing techniques range from high-fire reduction to midrange electric, and include raku and pit firing.

Artist Donna K. Perugini put the five-fingered Emperor's Dragon on her Asian-inspired teapot because it was the personal dragon of the Emperor.

Perugini used a raku firing process, putting the teapot in an outdoor gas kiln at a temperature of 1,850 degrees with the lid removed. Then the molten teapot is removed with tongs and placed in a barrel filled with paper. The paper catches fire and the lid is placed tightly on the barrel. The flames die out and the smoking process continues until the teapot cools in the barrel and becomes a startling yet functional piece.

Roger Cocke, who runs Camano Island Pottery, said the greatest function of functional pottery is that it can "excite the user."

"The scale I use to balance spirit and function always tips towards spirit," Cocke said in his online biography.

On display during the exhibit will be Cocke's creations of functional ceramic vessels in porcelain and stoneware, which are fired to medium-high temperatures to make them dense and waterproof.

Cocke also will display nonfood, sculptural vessels and vases with decorative glazes.

Cocke has studied ceramics since the early 1960s, but took time off to raise a large family and complete a career as an architect before returning to ceramics.

Samish Island artist Kathy Huckleberry is herself emerging as an artist after leaving behind a successful business and computer science career to follow her lifelong passion with ceramics.

Huckleberry brings to the exhibit her panels of migrating salmon and blue heron, and her pottery vessels of circling sockeye. All her pieces display her style of combining handmade tile with applied 3-D sculptural elements.

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