

Josiah Wedgwood and the Meaning of Perfection

In the heart of England lies the county of Staffordshire, historic home of English pottery manufacture. In the early 18th century it was an isolated area, located between the cities of Manchester to the north and Birmingham to the south. Many of the inhabitants were involved in “the potteries” (pottery workshops). They produced simple earthenware.

Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795) came from a large family of Staffordshire potters. He was the youngest of a dozen children. When he was only nine years old, his father died. The family could no longer afford to send Josiah to school. Instead, he was apprenticed to one of his elder brothers. He soon developed an expert eye as well as clever hands. He was particularly good at “throwing” (shaping) pots on the wheel.

Then disaster struck. Josiah was twelve when an epidemic of smallpox came to his town. The family’s pottery works and home were next to the local churchyard and its cemetery. Predictably, perhaps, Josiah caught the disease. In those days, smallpox was often fatal. Josiah was badly infected: he was covered with sores; he was at death’s door. But he survived. For some time, however, he was confined to his bed, unable to work. So the invalid used his time to read. He found he enjoyed it.

Eventually, Josiah recovered enough to go back to work. But the disease had affected his right knee badly. He could not operate a foot pedal. Even if someone else turned the wheel for him he could sit only with his right leg straight out in front of him. That made it difficult to work as an ordinary pot-thrower.

However, the “disabled” boy developed other skills, such as modeling clay figures. And as he grew up, and established his own pottery businesses, he became a great thinker and experimenter. He suffered other kinds of ill health, but he persevered. After some years, he had to have his right leg amputated at the knee. He always used his time away from work to read and think. He studied the mineral composition of earthenware bodies and glazes. He investigated the processes of heating and sculpting in clay. And when he returned to work, he used his deep understanding of the scientific method to observe, hypothesize, and experiment. This application of science to the craft and art of pottery was new. It enabled Wedgwood to achieve great advances in both “ornamental ware,” such as vases, and “useful ware,” such as tea services.

Wedgwood’s passion for quality and consistency also led him to introduce methods of mass-production, including the specialization of labor and the use of