

A Short History of British Studio Ceramics in the 20th century (downloadable pdf)



Rectangular Vase by Bernard Leach, 1961
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During the 20th century Britain was at the centre of studio ceramics. Many of the best known potters such as Bernard Leach, Lucie Rie and Hans Coper lived and worked in England. Their influence on the world of studio ceramics has been immense.

Ceramics in Britain are sometimes seen as inferior to the fine arts of painting and sculpture. This stands in contrast to the appreciation of ceramics in countries like Japan where they are valued as highly as the West values old master paintings.

Despite an unwillingness to see ceramics on an equal footing with the fine arts Britain has a strong ceramic tradition. It includes the pottery factories of Staffordshire and the 'art pottery' of 19th century artists like William De Morgan. With such a tradition it is perhaps not surprising that during the 20th century Britain should flourish as a focus for studio ceramics.

British Studio Ceramics before the Second World War

East meets West

The first twenty years of the 20th century saw the start of a move away from the highly decorative, low-fired Victorian factory pottery to less fussy, high-fired pieces produced by individual artists. The ideas and writings of William Morris at the end of the 19th century had already encouraged the rejection of a highly mechanised and repetitive style of ceramic production. The change in ceramic production was signalled by potters like the Martin brothers who preferred to make the pots they wanted rather than chase commercial success.

Awareness of Chinese ceramics, particularly the simple, monochrome pieces produced in China before the beginning of European trade with the East, was greatly increased by an exhibition held in 1910 at the Burlington Fine Arts Club. The ceramics displayed here impressed many potters, who began to imitate the work they had seen and to experiment with Chinese glazes. The status of ceramics also improved and art schools, including the Royal College of Art and the Camberwell School of Art and Crafts began to teach pottery.

The real catalyst for studio ceramics in England came in 1920 when Bernard Leach set up a pottery in St Ives, Cornwall. Leach had travelled to Japan in 1909 intending to teach the printmaking technique of etching. Soon after his arrival he became fascinated by Japanese pottery and trained for many years under Japan's master potter. When he came back to England Bernard Leach was equipped with an excellent training and, perhaps more importantly, brought with him a very different attitude to looking at pots.

The pieces produced by Bernard Leach and his friend Shoji Hamada at St Ives clearly illustrated the importance which they attached to the form and function of their work and the need to use good materials. Their belief in the need for a potter to control the whole process of making a pot was clearly expressed in Leach's classic work 'A Potter's Book' (1940).

Many other potters before the Second World War were influenced by ceramics from Japan and China. These included Katharine Pleydell-Bouverie, who conducted extensive experiments into Chinese ash-glazes, and William Staite Murray who learnt much from Shoji Hamada. However, potters such as Michael Cardew found inspiration closer to home and explored English ceramic traditions like 17th century slipware.

By the outbreak of the Second World War the position of studio ceramics in Britain was strong. The work of well-known potters was accepted for show by art galleries, and their experimentation left British potters with a good knowledge of ceramic technique and form.

British Studio Ceramics after the Second World War

From Hard years to hand building

The Second World War did not help the fortunes of British studio ceramics. Very little was made by potters during the war and afterwards, few people had money to spend on buying pots. Some of the country's leading potters like William Staite Murray had emigrated and many potters turned to making domestic earthenware.

In comparison to the restrained colouring and decoration of the pre-war ceramics the earthenware produced in the late 1940s and 1950s by potters like Steven Sykes and William Newland was bold, colourful and fun. Large plates and bowls provided surfaces for lively painted decoration, showing figures, animals and birds.

The war did bring to England Lucie Rie and Hans Coper, fleeing Hitler's anti-Semitism. The influence of these two potters on British studio ceramics was just as important as that of Bernard Leach. Although Lucie Rie had been well-known as a potter in her native Vienna, when she arrived in England she had to begin all over again. During the 1950s she produced modern, sophisticated pieces which clearly illustrated her assurance as a potter. The work of Hans Coper, who began working in England with Lucie Rie, showed similar quality and techniques but the shape of his pots was very different. Coper's inspiration came largely from early Mediterranean ceramics and sculpture and contemporary painters like Ben Nicholson.

A big change of direction for studio ceramics came with the hand building of the late 1950s and 1960s. Techniques such as coiling, pinching and slabbing, in contrast to throwing on a potter's wheel, had been seen as rather amateurish. However, many potters began to resent the lack of artistic freedom imposed by throwing and explored methods of hand building.

Some of these pots, like those made by Gordon Baldwin, were particularly sculptural and helped to blur the distinction between 'sculpture' and 'ceramics'. The most important potter in the development of hand building at this time was Ruth Duckworth. Duckworth was another refugee from Germany, who was inspired to begin hand building after seeing ancient Mexican pots in the British Museum. Her work ranged from rough coiled stoneware pots to delicate pinched porcelain pieces. Her inspiration from the natural world (including pebbles, seed pods and fruits) complemented this more fluid approach to producing pots.

Many of the hand builders concentrated on producing pots with coarse textures and heavy forms. These included Ian Auld, who was particularly well-known for his rectangular pots produced from slabs of clay, Dan Arbeid and Bernard Rooke.

British studio ceramics from the 1970s to the present day

Recognition and diversity

The formation of the Crafts Council in 1971 provided studio ceramics with an organisation which could promote the work of contemporary potters through publicity, publications and collecting. Contemporary ceramics also received a boost from the growing demand through auction houses and dealers for the early work of potters like Bernard Leach. Additionally many museums revived their collecting of ceramics. The quality of ceramic training at the art schools in the 1970s was enhanced by teachers such as Hans Coper, Ian Auld and Ewen Henderson. With such a favourable environment it is not surprising that the 1970s and 1980s saw a wide range of techniques and styles.

One of the most notable potters of the 1970s was Ewen Henderson whose highly individual work would have been unthinkable before the hand builders of the 1960s. He particularly enjoyed mixing different clays together and the cracking, shrinking and bubbling which occurred during firing became part of the very form of his pots. His pieces were often so sculptural that at times they bore little resemblance to pots.

In comparison to the rough pitted surfaces of Henderson's work potters like Mary Rogers produced small porcelain pots, delicately painted in soft colours. These were as impractical as Henderson's pots but their concept and form could hardly have been more different.

Many potters in the 1980s produced exuberant sculptural pieces which complemented the bright colours then in fashion. These 'funk' ceramics have been both loved and loathed. At first they could appear to be little more than gaudy and gimmicky but many of these pieces, such as Angus Suttie's boxes or Carol McNicoll's tea and coffee sets, were entirely functional.

Although oriental inspired ceramics were not so highly favoured in the 1980s there were a number of potters like Malcolm Pepper and Poh Chap Yeap who still worked in this style. Plain glazed ceramics, based on Chinese pieces, which concentrated on form really came back into their own with the minimalism of the early 1990s.

The end of the 20th century saw the death of a number of the country's most famous potters. For many people this signalled the closing of a chapter in the history of studio ceramics. For a century Britain had been the undoubted focus for studio ceramics. While Britain still has many excellent potters working today it is now competing in a truly international world of production and selling. It will take an immense effort to rival the contribution made by the 20th century potters working in Britain.

B Discover Bucks Museum

For a more thorough history of British Studio Ceramics in the 20th century read Paul Rice 'British Studio Ceramics', The Crowood Press, 2002.