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The history and development of the Ceramic Research Centre – UK

Tessa Peters

Presentation given at Humanism symposium, Clayarch Gimhae Museum, 5 April 2018

I would like to thank Clay Arch and all its staff for the opportunity to share our work and to gain a better understanding of contemporary ceramics in Korea. Special thanks are due to Choi Jeonguen, Director of Clayarch Gimhae Museum, and to Curator Kim Seungtaek for organising the exhibition to such a high standard and for facilitating this symposium. I would also like to extend thanks to Hyeyoung Cho for contributing to our research activity and for initiating our visit.

My colleagues have already told you about their individual research and art practices. I hope to be able to offer some brief historical context to the development of ceramic art in the UK during the 20th to 21st century, and to indicate how the Studio Pottery Course at Harrow College of Art (which was to become part of the University of Westminster) relates to this. I will also explain a little more about the work of the Ceramics Research Centre at the University of Westminster with which we are all associated.

- Studio ceramics in the UK has developed from a broad base, that includes traditional English pottery as well as ideas imported from many other parts of the world.

The notion of an ‘artist-potter’, as someone engaged in individual artistic expression, didn’t appear until towards the end of the 19th century in the UK. Until then the country’s ceramic production came from either small artisan workshops that made traditional pots, for everyday use or commemorative purposes, or from larger industrial potteries where design and making were separate jobs. But although the term ‘artist-potter’ seems to suggest a sense of self-determination, such a person was still working collaboratively with others, possibly within a small factory. The chief difference was that the items they made or decorated would be of their own design, and they would be signed or bear the individual’s mark or seal.

William De Morgan, who is associated with the British Arts & Crafts movement, was one of the first independent artist-potters to work outside the pottery industry. The Italian Renaissance and Turkish Iznik pottery were among his major stylistic influences.

The Martin Brothers provide another example of the art pottery of the era. Each of the brothers developed his own style but remained reliant on the special skills of the other brothers to complete a work.

SLIDE: William De Morgan, Vase. Earthenware with lustre glaze on cream-coloured slip, 1888-1898. Collection: Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

The Martin Brothers Pottery, Southall, London, c. 1900

- The British Studio pottery movement was born just a little over a century ago. What distinguished the first generation of 'studio potters' from workshop, industrial or artist-potters is that they sought to control every aspect of their craft – to mix their own clay, develop their own glazes and fire their own kilns.

This interest in craft practice is widely regarded to be rooted in the anti-industrialism of the 19th-century Arts and Crafts movement, but it gained a new focus following the mechanised destruction of the First World War.

Garth Clarke, ceramics historian and critic, notes that prime sources of inspiration for the early British studio potters were early Chinese stoneware pottery and traditional English slipwares – as can be seen in the work of Reginald Wells.

SLIDE: Reginald Wells Left: Slipware tankard, c.1910 Right: Pot with Chinese glaze, c. 1920

- Many of the pioneers of British Studio Pottery were to absorb the aesthetic standards laid down by Bernard Leach who, influenced by his close friendship with Japanese Folk Crafts scholars, such as Yanagi Soetsu, Kawai Kanjiro and Hamada Shoji, held the freedom and beauty of Korean pottery and Chinese pots from the Sung dynasty in particularly high regard. Leach's writings were particularly influential in educating British taste.

SLIDE: 18th century Korean glazed white porcelain 'full moon' jar, acquired by Bernard Leach on a visit to Korea in 1935. Collection: British Museum, London.

This 18th-century 'full moon' jar was acquired by Leach in Korea in 1935. He gave it as a present to the potter Lucie Rie in 1943 and she kept it in her studio until her death. It is now in the collection of the British Museum, London.

SLIDE: Bernard Leach, Spherical vase, c. 1927. Collection: Tate Galleries, UK

- The following phase of British Studio Pottery found inspiration in the pared-down austerity of mid-twentieth century European modernism. The potter Lucie Rie came to the UK in 1938 to escape the declining political situation of pre-World War 2 Austria. She was friends with Bernard Leach, although her work was not strongly influenced by him; she maintained her own vision, despite initially finding herself at odds with prevailing ideas about what made for a good pot.

A decade or so later, by the early 1950s, Lucie Rie and Hans Coper, another Jewish émigré to Britain, whose talent Rie had encouraged, were regarded to be at the forefront of British studio ceramics.

In 1951 works by Rie and Coper were included in the Festival of Britain exhibition. The same year they were the only two potters selected to represent Britain at the Milan Triennial in Italy.

SLIDE: Dame Lucie Rie, Porcelain bottle vase, c. 1952 & Hans Coper, large dish, stoneware, c. 1952

- In 1963, the Studio Pottery Course was established at Harrow College of Art. Other previously established pottery courses in art schools mainly trained ceramic designers or teachers, but from the outset the mission of the Harrow course was to produce self-sufficient and skilled potters.

Pottery was already being taught at Harrow College of Art, but the emphasis of the new course on self-sufficiency meant that students were taught a full range of pottery skills, including how to build and fire their own kilns – the outdoor kiln site was an important feature of the course.

SLIDE: Outdoor kiln site, Northwick Park, 1971.

- The leaders of the course, Victor Margrie and Michael Casson, had been founding members, a few years earlier, of the Craftsman's Potters Association in the UK and this gave them a strong sense of what kind of training was required.

Both men were at the centre of the British pottery and craft world. Victor Margrie served on the UK Design Council's selection committee, and from 1971 – 1984 headed the British government sponsored organisation that was to become known as the Crafts Council in 1977.

In 1976, Michael Casson came to wide public attention with his BBC-TV series *The Craft Of The Potter*. He also served on the British Crafts Council's board.

SLIDE: Jerome Abbo, Mick Casson and Colin Pearson assessing student work, 1970s

Mo Jupp and student

- The renowned potters who either taught regularly, or who contributed as visiting tutors to the newly established course included David Leach, and his father Bernard Leach, Katherine Pleydell-Bouverie, Hans Coper, Walter Keeler, Colin Pearson, Gwyn Hanssen-Pigott and Gillian Lowndes.

Here is just a very small selection of works by some of the tutors who taught on the course over the years, including Gwyn Hanssen-Pigott, Walter Keeler, Michael Casson, Mo Jupp, Alison Britton and Richard Slee. I could also name many other respected figures from the ceramics field but, as you can see, the students could rely on a wide range of expertise.

SLIDE: Left to right: Gwyn Hanssen-Pigott, *Still life with large cup*, 2004; Walter Keeler, Salt-glaze teapot, 1990; Michael Casson, Stoneware jug, 1975

Left to right: Mo Jupp, *Standing Figure*, 2000; Alison Britton, *Standpipe*, 2012; Richard Slee, *Hill*, 1998.

- When the course started the emphasis was on the throwing, glazing and firing of functional ware, but from the mid to late-1970s more students were taking an interest in hand-building one-off abstract vessels and sculpture.

At this time, in the first week of the Harrow course, the new students were set the 'Big Pot project'.

The 'Big Pot project', 1977

- The following selection of images may offer a taste of the work of some recent past students who have gone on to build successful ceramic practices.

SLIDES: Benedict Strebel, Sonoma swimming pool tiles, 2003

Daniel Smith, Nest of 5 bowls, in production since 2004 & Alice Mara, *The Street*, 2010. From a collection of 22 ceramic urns with digital transfers.

Matt Smith, *Bulldog*, 2010

Aneta Regel, *Metamorphosis*, 2011 & Marie Hermann, *Shades of Days*, 2011

Christine Hurford, *Voreda Fort*, 2010

- The Harrow course developed in line with national Higher Education policies and eventually became a BA (Hons) degree course and part of the University of Westminster. When the course became part of a university, research also became an important activity and some years later the Ceramics Research Centre – UK came into being.
- The BA Ceramics course at the University of Westminster closed in 2012, but the work of the Ceramics Research Centre continued. The Ceramics Research Centre was born from the course and is, therefore, its legacy.

As you will have seen in the talks by my colleagues, the Ceramic Research Centre's interests span ceramic installation, ceramic history and museology, and new modes of disseminating and recording clay practices.

- Christie Brown, Edmund de Waal and Clare Twomey, the three artists who initiated the CRC-UK's recent major research project, *Ceramics in the Expanded Field*, had already been developing new ways of working within museum contexts. Through the methodology of their proposed research, they were interested in gaining a better understanding of the significance of this for contemporary art practice, and for curatorial practices within museums. They were also keen to understand what the social and cultural relevance of these developing practices might be for the museum visitor.
- Professor Christie Brown's *Collective Traces* exhibition was created in response to the collection of ancient Egyptian artefacts at the Petrie Museum, London. The main installation was shown at UCL's Institute of Archaeology in 2006, and the Institute hosted a seminar to accompany the event. The focus of the seminar was on the relationship between museums and contemporary artists. At the seminar Professor Brown discussed her interest in our preoccupation with objects as carriers of meaning and the ongoing influence of archaeology on her art practice, also raising parallels between archaeology and psychoanalysis, which would feature again in her 2012 exhibition at the Freud Museum. The seminar included further contributions from other artists, curators and museum consultants.

SLIDE: Christie Brown, figures from *Collective Traces* (2006) installed in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL, London, 2006

A section of *Collective Traces* was later installed in the Egyptian galleries in Manchester Museum from 2007 – 2012.

SLIDE: A section of *Collective Traces* installed in the Egyptian galleries, Manchester Museum, 2007 – 2012.

- Reader, Clare Twomey's project *Trophy* also took place in 2006. The work was commissioned by the Victoria & Albert Museum and played with notions of value, permanence and the culture of collecting. Twomey worked in collaboration with Wedgwood to produce 4000 small birds made from Blue Jasper – a material created by Josiah Wedgwood in the 18th-century which was used for wares that referred to the then fashionable taste for antiquity and the Neoclassical style of interior decoration.

For *Trophy*, Twomey's birds were displayed throughout the Cast Courts, for one night only. The public were not formally invited to take a bird home, but most of the visitors did so, following the behaviour of others in the space.

SLIDE: Clare Twomey, *Trophy* (2006), Cast Courts, Victoria & Albert Museum, London

- Research Fellow Edmund de Waal's *Signs and Wonders* is a site-specific architectural installation comprising 425 porcelain pots commissioned for the opening of the new ceramics galleries at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 2009. It is first glimpsed from the main entrance hall of the museum - If you look up there is a dome encircled by a red metal shelf that holds the pots of De Waal's installation, which are his reflections on the early Chinese celadons, the eighteenth-century European porcelain and examples of twentieth-century modernism found amongst the museum's permanent collections. He has described the work as 'a conversation between the historic collections and the contemporary.'

SLIDE: Edmund de Waal, *Signs & Wonders*, 2009. Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

- I have also worked on a number of projects with museums and archives as a curator. In 2009, with Janice West, I co-curated an exhibition titled *Memoranda* which was held at the Crafts Study Centre in Farnham, England. For this exhibition project we invited four artists to explore the Centre's archive to discover items relevant to their creative interests. We then commissioned four new artworks for exhibition.

The photographer and filmmaker Maisie Broadhead recreated a painting by the 17th century Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer, known as *The Milkmaid*. The central figure in Broadhead's photograph, titled *Made in Britton*, is the ceramicist Alison Britton who is seen pouring milk from a medieval English jug. Once in the personal collection of potter Bernard Leach, the medieval jug is now held by the Craft Study Centre collection and archive. The pots seen on the tabletop are contemporary works by Alison Britton.

SLIDE: Left: Maisie Broadhead, *Made in Britton*, 2011

Right: Elaine Wilson, *Family China*, 2011

From *Memoranda* (2011), Crafts Study Centre, UK. Curators: Tessa Peters & Janice West

Another work by ceramicist Elaine Wilson is a modelled and decorated ceramic head, based on a photograph of Lucie Rie as a young woman in Austria – the image was discovered in one of Rie's family photo albums.

- Major funding applications take a long time to write, competition for UK government funding is especially competitive and the lengthy assessment process means that it can take a year before the recipients are announced. In the case of the *Ceramics in the Expanded Field* research project, by the time funding was secured, Edmund de Waal had left the faculty and his place as a co-investigator on the project was taken up by Dr Julian Stair.

- For his investigation Julian Stair worked with York Museums Trust and within the site of York St Marys, a beautiful medieval church which was established as a contemporary visual art venue in 2004. Titled *The Matter of Life and Death* (2013), his exhibition included a selection of works from the collections of York Museums, including Ancient Egyptian canopic jars and Roman head pots. These antiquities

were shown alongside Stair's contemporary pots that also related to the rituals of death and which ranged from small funerary urns to large jars and troughs, capable of accommodating an adult human body. As he noted 'The artefacts relating to the rituals of death can be seen as a window into the lives of our ancestors who used art and objects to help them try and come to terms with death just as we do today.'

SLIDE: Julian Stair, *The Matter of Life and Death* (2013), York St Mary's, York, UK.

- Professor Christie Brown's investigation involved working with the Freud Museum in London, the final home of the Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis. As Professor Brown has already mentioned, her exhibition titled *DreamWork* (2012) reflected on aspects of Freud's life, his theories and practice. In addition to her *Sleepover* installation sited in Freud's bedroom, her works could be found throughout the house. Her *Peter Teddy Shabtis* in a rich turquoise Egyptian faience, and based on a personally significant object from her own childhood, emerged from the darkness of Freud's study and from among his collection of Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek and Roman antiquities.

Groups of doll-like ex-voto figures made of porcelain and wax and titled *I Pray Again, Again ...* inhabited the floor and the surfaces of the furniture in the room of Anna Freud, Sigmund Freud's youngest daughter, and herself a pioneering figure in the field of child psychology and psychoanalysis.

SLIDE: Christie Brown, *Dreamwork*, The Freud Museum (2012).

Left: *I Pray Again, Again ...* and *Peter Teddy Shabtis*.

Below: *Sleepover*.

- Clare Twomey worked with Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, Devon, South West England on a collaborative engagement project with local people titled *Plymouth Porcelain: A New Collection* (2012). The Plymouth porcelain in the collection of the museum was the work of Devon-born William Cookworthy, the first maker of hard-paste porcelain in the UK. But Twomey has described her work with the public as creating 'a contemporary perspective on usage and taste and the desire to use, own and love objects in our home.' To this end, the public were invited to send in images of their most prized ceramic object with a fifty-word story about the piece. From this submission, Twomey made a selection of thirty-three objects and their owners were asked along to a casting day, where they could meet the artist, share their stories about the objects and watch Twomey and her assistants make an alginate mould of their treasured item. From these moulds new porcelain objects were cast and backstamped with the Plymouth City seal and Twomey's artist's seal. The porcelain objects were then placed on display in suspended boxes, next to the Cookworthy collection of Plymouth porcelain and above a seating area where visitors could look up at the work while browsing an iPad containing the stories about the owner's ceramic item. A selection of the original pieces, on temporary loan from their owners were displayed in adjacent showcases.

SLIDE: Clare Twomey, *Plymouth Porcelain: A new collection* (2012)

- The *Ceramics in the Expanded Field* research project also included a doctoral research project, which was carried out by Laura Breen. Her doctoral thesis covered the re-definition of ceramics through medium-specific exhibitions, contemporary ceramicists' relationship with museum collections, their responses to the museum as space and place, the communication and location of ceramic process within the

museum and contemporary ceramicists' relationship with the museum audience. Her findings provided the contextual background for the work of the three co-investigators. So far Dr Breen's work has resulted in a number of articles and conference papers and is due to be published as a book later this year.

One of our current PhD researchers is investigating the connections between ceramic objects and text through the study of Aramaic incantation bowls from 5th – 7th century AD Babylonia, and exploring their meaning and relevance to contemporary ceramic art practice.

Another is examining the relationship between contemporary sculptural ceramic practice and embodied perception, with particular emphasis on the context of audience experience.

SLIDE: Ceramics Research Centre – UK. Recent and current PhD researchers: Laura Breen, Zahed Tajeddin, Cath Roche, Sue Goldschmidt.

- More information on *Ceramics in the Expanded Field* can be accessed via the project website, including its related series of seminars, an international conference, and critical conversations and essays from international artists, writers and curators, all of which aimed to draw attention to the activities and debates surrounding contemporary ceramic practice and the museum. An anthology of new critical writing titled *Contemporary Clay and Museum Culture* co-edited by Christie Brown, Julian Stair and Clare Twomey was published in 2016.
- Phoebe Cummings and Eva Masterman joined the Ceramics Research Centre in 2017.
- Phoebe Cummings's research interests include new ways of recording and expanding clay practice. The kinds of questions she's concerned with include: can a temporary sculpture be documented and presented to a secondary audience in ways that equate to the original experience of an installation? Her artworks continue to explore sculpture as performance and the use of clay to create an evolving emotional experience for the viewer.

SLIDE: Phoebe Cummings, *Triumph of the Immaterial*, 2017

- Eva Masterman has been developing a cross-disciplinary research project that considers craft making as a form of intelligence and language, as an alternative site of learning, and for its potential for social engagement. She has initiated a seminar group to inform her research drawing on makers and theorists from anthropology/material culture and design. She hopes that the next meeting will take place in the context of the firing of an anagama kiln with close ties to the Anthropology faculty at Oxford University, with the event also coinciding with a visit by Bizen potter, Kazuya Ishida, who Eva met during a residency in Japan last year.

SLIDE: Eva Masterman, *Touch Me, Use Me*, 2017

- As I have shown, British studio potters of the early to mid-20th century often looked to the pottery of the past to provide them with examples and aesthetic standards.

Visiting museum collections has long been a source of inspiration to UK potters, as I suspect it is to ceramicists world-wide. When speaking about his *Signs & Wonders* installation at the Victoria & Albert Museum, Edmund de Waal recalls his vivid

childhood experiences of wandering through the museum's collections and connects these to the architectural installation he produced.

- Many British contemporary ceramic artists continue to have great respect for the creativity and skill of the potters of the past, but they no longer seek to emulate their accomplishments in quite the same way. Equal attention is now given to how and what objects communicate as it is to matters of form, process and skill.

The artists of the Ceramic Research Centre have been developing ways to encourage a public, especially those who may not have a specialist ceramics training, to discover a connection to their ceramic heritage and its relevance to their lives.

They are interested in audience engagement, clay as installation and new modes of disseminating and recording clay practices, including how such artworks can be most effectively presented and displayed by institutions.

They remain committed to developing strong and mutually beneficial international relationships and to building a relevant contextual framework for innovative ceramic practices.

<http://www.ceramics-in-the-expanded-field.com/researchers>

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