

## **Pattern, Form and Function in British Studio Ceramics.**

During the 1950s access to Stoke-on-Trent's museum's collections had been restricted by problems arising from their accommodation in a decaying building, constructed in the mid nineteenth century as a home for the town's Mechanics' Institute. Due to a combination of environmental problems, as a result of mining subsidence, atmospheric pollution, coupled with post war austerity, the museum was offering less than a fully functioning service. Despite our best efforts to redress these issues by the provision of lunch-hour concerts, special exhibitions and visiting speakers we were less successful in our attempts in disguising damp-stained walls, and areas of a gallery ceiling which had lost some of its cornicing, on one occasion resulting in collateral damage to a showcase and its contents. It soon became apparent that in providing what would prove to be a costly and continuing programme of repairs could only be avoided by building a new museum on what was known as the Bell Pottery site, less than a quarter of a mile from the existing museum in Pall Mall.

Funding for the project was modest, even by standards current in the 1950s, with the result that upon completion it amounted to less exhibition space than was provided in the old building. Consequently, the museum's ceramic collections and natural history department were most adversely affected by what was promised to be a short term inconvenience. In reality a newly built museum was not to materialise until some thirty years later. In the meantime we were encouraged by our museum's Committee to make temporary provision for students and others for accessibility to our reserve collections.

At this point it is relevant to what I will be saying later that the Museum owned collections formed by private owners and presented or bequeathed to us, often as a result of targeted diplomacy by Geoffrey Bemrose and continued by his successor Arnold Mountford. A particularly significant acquisition in Bemrose's time was the collection of early English Studio Pottery formed by an American academic named Dr Henry Bergen. Bergen had links with Bernard Leach, Michael Cardew and others at a period when studio pottery was at an embryonic stage in Britain. This was a time when public interest in studio pottery was virtually non-existent, for the simple reason it was largely known to a small group of often widely scattered individuals. Bergen's patronage at this time was also important when the collecting of studio pottery was limited to a very small sector of Britain's population. As for an explanation for Bergen's generosity in giving a large part of his collection to Stoke-on-Trent it possibly came about as a result of visits to the area in connection with his own interest in making pottery. He had previously made known his intention to donate studio wares by Leach, Hamada, and Cardew etc to the British Museum, fortunately also extending his generosity for the benefit of Stoke-on-Trent City Museum located in Hanley. Up to this time modern handmade non-industrial wares were not well represented in the Museum's collections. Furthermore, my own interest in ceramics had been largely focussed on periods prior to the twentieth century, a situation ultimately redressed by my responsibility for dealing with visits by none other than the above named Bernard Leach and Michael Cardew. The purpose of these visits was to see their own work in public galleries beyond those located in London and the south. There were occasions when Leach was accompanied by individuals well known for their own ceramic interests, notably Shoji Hamada and others associated with Leach's years in Japan. It must be said that up to this time my knowledge of oriental ceramics was not as informed as it became later, especially regarding pots etc associated with the niceties of cha no yu, better known as the tea ceremony. Incidentally, my appreciation of the achievements of Leach/Hamada was not enhanced by my handling of their wares. However, in defence of what may be interpreted as my own

limitations I would cite the fact that my main interests at this time were largely based upon evidence revealed by the technical and stylistic characteristics apparent in the European ceramic tradition, from periods in antiquity to the beginning of the twentieth century. In this context I interpreted the earthenwares and stonewares from St. Ives to be commensurate with skills which had existed at a period before the twentieth century, a view that was somewhat reinforced during a visit by Michael Cardew to see slipware items in the Bergen Collection, in particular to renew his acquaintance with what is known as 'Fountains', a large bowl presumably intended for the purpose of mixing and serving punch, and made by him at Winchcombe at a now uncertain date in the 1930s. It was obviously judged important and representative enough of the English slipware tradition to be included as a colour illustration in Leach's *A Potter's Book*. After handling the bowl, and in particular its patchy galena glaze, Cardew openly expressed disappointment at what since the 1930s had been chosen as suitably representative of his time at Winchcombe.

It was not until 1978 that I had reason to review my opinion on the values represented in twentieth century British studio pottery, as a result of my appointment as a lecturer at what later became Staffordshire University in the School of History of Art and Design. In addition to our own degree the School also provided courses for students in what was identified as their Complementary Studies. These were divided into areas of Fine Art, and Design Practice. All students in the studio-based components of their studies were required to attend programmes of lectures to reflect their medium's historical development.

The essentially academic component involved the submission of essays and a final year dissertation. My immediate colleague in the delivery of their required modules was a flamboyant Italian design historian named Pietro Raffo. Pietro had migrated to Britain from Pisa sometime during the 1960s. Unfortunately, our working relationship was cut short when he announced his acceptance of a new position with Christie's Fine Art Course, then (1978) in the process of being established. Apart from the loss of a valuable colleague his departure was for me a significant inconvenience. The department's Design History course had been in existence for two years hence Year III was yet to be offered. Not the least of my problems was a shortage of slides relevant to the needs of ceramic history in the department. Fortunately, Pietro's departure was scheduled to take place at the end of the summer term, which from an organisational standpoint allowed me several weeks to fill some of the gaps in our slide collection. In practice the photography involved contacting potters who were arguably the best known names currently working in studio pottery. Anyone familiar with the period will know my list might have included such names as Ray Finch, Gordon Baldwin, Bryan Newman, Lucie Rie, Hans Coper, Alan Caiger Smith and Geoffrey Swindell. In short, my predicament regarding the gaps in the department's slide collection left me with little choice but to contact them all requesting a visit their studios for the purpose of photography. With one exception my requests for cooperation received a favourable response. Due to illness Hans Coper could not receive me at his studio but very kindly made an arrangement to have a selection of his pots delivered to Lucie Rie's Albion Mews Studio.

A bonus which I had not anticipated was that some of my contributors were prepared to be interviewed for the purpose of recording accounts of their influences. Although in what followed they acknowledged that Bernard Leach had played an important role in the establishment of Studio Pottery in Britain they did not, however, share all aspects of his 'philosophy'.