

Things of Beauty Growing

BRITISH STUDIO POTTERY



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If you are lucky, and if you live long enough, and if you trust your materials and you trust your instincts, you will see things of beauty growing up in front of you, without you having anything to do with it.

—ATTRIBUTED TO MICHAEL CARDEW



Michael Cardew, *Rose Bowl*, ca. 1938, earthenware with slip brush and trailed "Fountain" decoration and galena glaze, Crafts Study Centre, Farnham

preceding spread:
Jennifer Lee, *Dark, amber flashing, emerging rim*, 1993; *Dark flashed asymmetric, amber bands, tilted rim*, 1991; *Pale, fractured speckled spiral and traces*, 2008; hand-built stoneware, Collection of Jennifer Lee, London

THE STORY OF BRITISH STUDIO POTTERY begins just after 1900. Independent makers, stricken by the perceived soullessness of mass-produced industrial ceramics, set up their own studios and started making the most meaningful objects they could, bringing their own individual sensibilities to the craft. They were inspired by historic examples, particularly from China, Korea, and Japan. Their goal was to find a new approach that would resonate both with the deep past and the present day.

This exhibition explores the evolution of studio pottery through an emphasis on the vessel form, which ties ceramics to its functional origins. Tracing the major archetypal forms that have defined studio pottery, the show follows a loose chronology, as well as a trajectory of thinking: from ancient vases, and the tea bowls that the influential British potter Bernard Leach brought from East Asia, to recent monumental works that push the medium beyond limits previously imagined.

"Things of Beauty Growing," a phrase attributed to the British potter Michael Cardew, points to the organic rightness that is sought and found in these objects. While modern, they were conceived as deep wells of cultural memory. And even though they reflect a global story—pots and potters alike have traveled between England, continental Europe, Asia, Africa, and elsewhere—they are animated by the idea that a handmade vessel can symbolically center our place in the world. We invite you to look closely at these objects, not only for their beauty but also for the ideas they contain.

"Things of Beauty Growing": British Studio Pottery has been organized by the Yale Center for British Art in partnership with The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, and co-curated by Martina Droth, Deputy Director of Research and Curator of Sculpture at the Center; Glenn Adamson, Senior Research Scholar at the Center; and Simon Olding, Director, Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts, UK. The organizing curators at The Fitzwilliam Museum are Victoria Avery, Keeper, and Helen Ritchie, Research Assistant, Department of Applied Arts.

The exhibition is on view at the Center from September 14 through December 3, 2017, and at The Fitzwilliam Museum from March 20 through June 18, 2018.

Moon Jar

Great art remains stable and unobscure because the feelings that it awakens are independent of time and place, because its kingdom is not of this world.

—CLIVE BELL, *ART*, 1914

The most iconic object in the history of British studio pottery was made centuries ago, and in Korea: the moon jar, so called because of its shape. It was brought to England by Bernard Leach in 1935, after he purchased it at an antiques store in Seoul; he recalled feeling as if he were “carrying a piece of happiness.” It occupied a preeminent place in his collection, until he lent it to another leading potter, the Viennese émigré Lucie Rie. After that, it was often photographed in her showroom. For Leach, the traditionalist, it was a crowning example of the rustic beauty he found in East Asian ceramics. For Rie, it would have appealed for its understated yet monumental simplicity.

That Leach and Rie—the two leading figures of the studio pottery movement—both fell in love with the moon jar attests to its singularity as a form that has continued to inspire potters to this day. The moon jar has become a blank screen on which modern potters have projected their independent visions. The four contemporary makers seen here—Akiko Hirai, Gareth Mason, Adam Buick, and Nao Matsunaga—have all responded to the moon jar in their own way. These artists work fully cognizant of their medium’s long and complex past. As the field of studio pottery has waxed and waned in its orientation, the objects important to it have continually taken on a different aspect—as surely as the moon passes through phases, from light to dark and back again.

right:
Adam Buick, *Moon Jar*, 2016, porcelain with white chun glaze,
Collection of Adam Buick, Pembrokeshire, Wales, photograph by Jon Stokes

following spread:
William Staite Murray, *Tall Jar, The Bather*, 1930, stoneware, cream glaze
streaked pearly white with iron red bands and thin cobalt lines above
and below each band, York Art Gallery, The Milner-White Collection





Vase

Tradition, except the traditions of flawless glazes, certain soulless results, and commercial cheeseparing, seems dead perhaps, but it will surely come to life again.

—GEORGE J. COX, *POTTERY FOR ARTISTS, CRAFTSMEN & TEACHERS*, 1914

Industry made handcrafted pots economically obsolete in the nineteenth century, and pottery declined into a sorry state: “inappropriateness of decoration and tawdriness of form that must be seen to be believed,” as Bernard Leach put it. By contrast, historical East Asian ceramics were considered the summit of ceramic craft, admired for their balance of forms and hand-painted decoration. These ancient pots were seen as providing an irreproachable standard against which contemporary pots could be judged. As early as the 1870s, the pioneering industrial designer Christopher Dresser had traveled to Japan and brought back an enormous collection of ceramics, intent on adapting them for industry. The trio of vases shown here demonstrates his mastery of large-scale form and Chinese-inspired glazes. William DeMorgan, Bernard Moore, and Dora Billington all looked to similar sources while experimenting with their own glazes, such as a bright red “flambé” and metallic lusters.

Early studio potters embraced Asian ceramics, and particularly the form of the vase, for their handcrafted wares. Upright and implicitly anthropomorphic, the vase was well suited to the role of symbolic emblem. Among the objects made in this spirit were the large-scale vases of William Staite Murray. For him, pottery was a great connector—between past and present, form and decoration, and hence painting and sculpture.

At the other end of the spectrum stood the indigenous British earthenware tradition, exemplified here by the country potter Edwin Beer Fishley. The rough beauty of such wares became important to Leach, Michael Cardew, and others, as they sought an authentic path.

Studio pottery’s beginnings were thus eclectic, a crisscrossing of trajectories. There was remarkable unanimity on one point, though: to go forward, it was first necessary to go back.

Bowl

As I held the Kizaemon Ido bowl in my hands, many thoughts passed through my mind. . . . I shall go on pointing to the brethren of the Ido as I travel so that things of beauty and truth, even if but a few, shall adorn the world of tomorrow.

—SOETSU YANAGI, *THE KIZAEMON TEABOWL*, 1931

The bowl form is central to the Japanese tea ceremony, a ritual that involves the careful use and appreciation of ceramic vessels and other implements. This tradition was admired by western potters for the quiet focus it places on humble but beautiful objects. It inspired them to invest the bowl with their own complex associations. The round, concave form captures the energy of throwing on the wheel; the gestures that are used to make a bowl are later echoed in the way the hands fold around and hold it. That intimate connection is often enhanced by the throwing rings that remain evident on the surface, which trace the subtle rhythms by which the potter raises the clay wall.

A powerful evocation of the bowl's centrifugal energies was realized by Bernard Leach's chief rival, William Staite Murray. His compact masterpiece *Vortex*, made in the late 1920s, is clearly related to paintings of the time; its title points explicitly to the British avant-garde movement known as vorticism.

Several bowls included here are historic examples, some from Leach's personal collection. Others, like the blue celadon bowl by Nell and Charles Vyse, could almost be mistaken for ancient wares, so closely do they follow East Asian precedents. The pots of Katharine Pleydell-Bouverie and Norah Braden feature Chinese-style glazes, applied to modern forms.

Katharine Pleydell-Bouverie, 1982–83, photograph by Ben Boswell





Bernard Leach, *Charger, Tree of Life*, 1923–25, earthenware, brown slip and a galena glaze, The John Driscoll Collection, New York, photograph by Joshua Nefsky

Charger

When the Potter has wrought the clay either into hollow or flat ware. . . . they then slip or paint them with their severall sorts of Slip, according as they designe their work.

—ROBERT PLOT, *THE NATURAL HISTORY OF STAFFORDSHIRE*, 1686

British potters have been painting their work for a very long time. The best medium for the purpose is slip, a liquid mixture of clay and water. English potters in the seventeenth century mastered this medium. Their energetic designs were shown to particular advantage on large plates or chargers, so named because they were meant to be “charged,” or filled, with food.

For studio potters seeking indigenous sources of inspiration, early English slipwares—such as the example by Ralph Toft in this exhibition—were a compelling option. Boldly signed by their makers, and bursting with vivid images of people, animals, and plants, these wares exemplified the individuality that modern industry so conspicuously lacked.

Bernard Leach led the way in celebrating English slipware. Like an art student absorbing the methods of the old masters, he made copies of seventeenth-century pots and plates, freely adapting their vocabulary to his own purposes. His charger with the theme of the Tree of Life ranks among his greatest achievements for its expressive draftsmanship and synthesis of the British slipware tradition with a universal mythic motif.

Potters in Leach’s circle, including Shôji Hamada, Katharine Pleydell-Bouverie, and Michael Cardew, also made the slip-decorated charger their own. Cardew achieved a painterly quality as unique as handwriting, with motifs confidently disposed across the whole plate.

A new influence arrived in 1950, when Pablo Picasso’s ceramics toured Britain. His unconventional approach to the medium was enthusiastically received by young potters such as William Newland, Sam Haile, and Hans Coper. In the selection of chargers seen here, one can see a line of fracture opening up between those who adhered closely to tradition and these younger potters, who looked restlessly outward to modernist painting and sculpture.

Set

Forms capable of being multiplied without variation from a single original model cannot but have a much smaller interest than those in which each individual piece is the direct expression of the potter's instinct.

—BERNARD RACKHAM AND HERBERT READ, *ENGLISH POTTERY*, 1924

Tea and coffee sets have played an important role in the history of British pottery since the seventeenth century, when ceramics were imported from the east alongside tea leaves and coffee beans. The British quickly began making their own tea and coffee sets, and these forms have remained an important part of factory production in the twentieth century.

On the face of it, the set would seem a less suitable format for the studio potter. The creation of a large number of interrelated pieces is inherently suited to mass manufacture. Even so, many studio potters did make sets, partly to earn money, but also because it posed a design challenge. A good example is an early tea set made by the leading critic Roger Fry at the Omega Workshops, which exhibits an intentional contrast to the “dead mechanical exactitude and uniformity” that he criticized in industrial ceramics. Equally lively sets were made by Bernard Leach, Lucie Rie, and the German émigré potter Ruth Duckworth. All created lines, curves, and decorative accents that leap from teapot to sugar bowl, creamer, and cups. In making their sets, studio potters sought to balance the efficiency of repetition with the life of form, meeting industry just about halfway.

The emergence of “signature” designers such as Keith Murray and Susie Cooper, whose Wedgwood-produced sets are included here, indicates that the individualism prized by studio potters was recognized as a desirable quality among commercial firms. Murray’s designs for Wedgwood were cast in molds to enable mass reproduction while evoking the dynamics of wheel-throwing by hand.



Lucie Rie, *Breakfast Set*, late 1950s, stoneware, white glaze, and manganese oxide applied in bands, Crafts Study Centre, Farnham, Heather Tanner Bequest

following spread:
Domestic display of Lucie Rie pots, ca. 1933–90, various bodies and glazes,
The John Driscoll Collection, New York





Vessel

I suspect that pots do not have to function for cooking, eating and tea-making either, but that they can be allegorical objects in which the only essential physical function is the minimal one of containing.

—ELIZABETH FRITSCH, *POTS ABOUT MUSIC/RECOLLECTIONS OF THE ARTIST*, 1978

In the 1960s and 1970s, the ceramic scene was upended by a new generation who challenged the prevailing orthodoxy of the well-made pot. These artists tended to use the somewhat elevated term “vessel” as a way to mark their work’s separation from the realm of the everyday. They maintained a concern with the container form but began to deconstruct it and put it back together in unexpected ways, exploring expanded sculptural possibilities.

The first transformative contributions came from modernist potters such as Lucie Rie, Hans Coper, and Gordon Baldwin. They worked in an intensive fashion, committing themselves to a limited set of forms. Though they reached back into history (Rie looked at ancient Egyptian pots, and Coper at Cycladic sculptures), they did so selectively, and only as a starting point.

The next wave, which broke across studio pottery in the 1970s, was more radical. Alison Britton, Elizabeth Fritsch, Ewan Henderson, Carol McNicoll, Jacqueline Poncelet, Richard Slee, and Angus Suttie were a fragmentary group, whose work dipped into many pools: op and pop art, textile patterns, even the geology from which clay ultimately derives. What united them was a liberated approach, quite different from the gravitas of the preceding generation.

Despite their differences, the modernists of the 1960s and the iconoclasts who succeeded them all made works of metaphorical implication—as Britton put it, their pots had a “double presence.” Functionality was only an echo; these objects were primarily meant to be looked at.

Elizabeth Fritsch, *Quantum Pocket II*, 1992, stoneware coiled, incised, and painted with colored slips, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Pot

The idea of a reconnection to a natural order through work is strong in the studio pottery world. Indeed, it may be said to be the principal definition of studio pottery.

—EDMUND DE WAAL, *20TH CENTURY CERAMICS*, 2003

Even a simple pot can eloquently convey the idea that skilled craftsmanship is inherently worthwhile, the center of a meaningful life. The writer and potter Edmund de Waal has continually espoused this perspective. His arrangements of thrown pots, standing in close ranks, speak quietly but insistently of the value of making. De Waal's work bears comparison to that of Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, whose distinctive still-life idiom owes a debt to the paintings of Giorgio Morandi. In her tableaux, subtle gradients of color and the play of positive and negative space encourage sustained looking.

Both de Waal and Pigott throw their pots on the wheel, a quick process. They achieve effect through repetition. Other potters hand-build inch by inch, infusing single objects with remarkable concentration. A particularly inspirational figure has been Ladi Kwali, who worked closely with Michael Cardew in Nigeria. Cardew memorably described her work on first encountering it: "huge, bold, elaborate shapes but always noble." Kwali became famous in international ceramics beginning in the 1950s, and she traveled widely. One pot here records a visit to Britain with a boldly inscribed airplane.

Magdalene Odundo also employs a hand-building method based on African techniques. She sometimes leaves the pot in its natural reddish color, sometimes blackens it in the firing, then burnishes the surface to a fine sheen. Her compositions are complex and initially seem abstract but have a palpable underlying anthropomorphism.

Jennifer Lee builds her pots asymmetrically, gradually introducing mineral oxides. Sometimes she slices through and introduces a vein of color, then reintegrates the form. One thinks of geological processes when looking at Lee's work: the steady deposit of particles over time.



Magdalene Odundo, *Untitled*, 1995, hand-built, terra sigillata, polished and carbonized terracotta clay, Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Jane and Gerald Katcher



Monument

Monuments are supposed to commemorate kings and religions, heroes, dogmas, but in the end, the man they commemorate is the builder.

—JACOB BRONOWSKI, *THE ASCENT OF MAN*, 1973, QUOTED BY GRAYSON PERRY IN *THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN CRAFTSMAN*, 2011

Grayson Perry, one of the most prominent British artists working in ceramics, has made his name partly by making a joke out of the medium: “what sandal-wearing, windchime-lovers did.” By claiming pottery as if it were virgin territory, “a niche that hadn’t been occupied by anybody in the art world,” he has been able to claim it for himself.

As one might expect, many dedicated potters have watched Perry’s rise to fame with mixed feelings. Yet they know he has a point: getting rid of earnest traditionalism can be freeing rather than debilitating. Striking testimony to this fact is the tendency toward increasing scale in contemporary pottery. Ceramic artists are creating ambitious work, sometimes at human scale or even larger, across many idioms. One can find examples of potters who work monumentally in historicist styles (Alan Caiger-Smith, Clive Bowen); in vocabularies derived from modernism (Martin Smith, Nick Rena, Ruth Duckworth) and expressionism (Philip Eglin); and who propose narratives grounded in metaphor (Julian Stair, Lawson Oyekan, Felicity Aylieff).

Each of these artists has their own motivation for exploring large scale, but they all set the relationship between the body and the pot on a new footing. The ceramics they create are not intimate, useful things but powerful presences in their own right. Studio pottery has quite literally grown up over the past century; but it remains the most grounded of disciplines.

Julian Stair, *Monumental Jar VIII*, 2011, reduced Etruria marl, coiled and thrown; *Monumental Jar XII*, 2012, carboniferous shale, coiled and thrown; *Monumental Jar X*, 2012, carboniferous shale, coiled and thrown; Collection of Julian Stair, London

Epilogue

Pottery has the reputation of being a local art form—what could be more local than clay dug right out of the ground? Bernard Leach often spoke of the “taproot” of tradition. He felt that pottery was best when it was connected to a sense of place.

Yet a key dynamic in the exhibition you have just seen, *“Things of Beauty Growing,”* is globalism. The field arose in response to historical Asian ceramics. In the middle of the twentieth century, recent arrivals from Europe like Lucie Rie and Ruth Duckworth were the most progressive potters working in Britain. Today, too, it would be impossible to take the measure of the field without recognizing the impact of global movement, both physical and virtual.

Halima Cassell’s installation *Virtues of Unity* synthesizes the opposition in studio pottery between the local and the global. In this ongoing project, the artist makes hand-carved vessels from clays that she sources on her worldwide travels to sites of ceramic production. Each pot represents the entire tradition of making that is local to that place. Cassell provides a reflection on ceramics as a “world art,” binding multiplicity into a single vision.

To further emphasize these global dimensions, *“Things of Beauty Growing”* includes a gallery of photographic portraits—in the case of many of the contemporary makers, commissioned from the photographer Ben Boswell—visually capturing all the people whose work appears on display. Each devoted their life to studio pottery and its possibilities.

Halima Cassell, *Virtues of Unity* (detail), 2009–17, thirty-six hand-carved clay bodies in a range of stoneware and earthenware, unglazed, Collection of Halima Cassell, Broome, Shropshire



Clare Twomey, *Made in China*

The red vases that currently populate spaces within the Yale Center for British Art make up the installation *Made in China*, by the artist Clare Twomey.

The work includes eighty vases, identical in shape and size. All were created using the same multipart molds and fired in the same kiln. This work was done in the Chinese ceramic production center of Jingdezhen, one of the few places on earth where the skills and capabilities exist for such an undertaking.

There is one unique piece in the group, which will take some time to find as you walk among the vessels. Seventy-nine of the vases are decorated with identical flowers, achieved in the Chinese factory using decals. One vase, however, has hand-applied decoration in eighteen-karat gold. This was executed by skilled artisans at Royal Crown Derby in Stoke-on-Trent in Staffordshire—for centuries the industrial heartland of British ceramic production. So expensive is the gilding that this solitary object cost more than the making and decorating of all the other vases put together.

Twomey's installation is a portrait of the international ceramic industry. Chinese manufacture is dominated by efficient assembly processes. These may be executed by hand or by machine, but either way, they offer few opportunities for individual creativity. British manufacture, by contrast, is increasingly oriented to the luxury sector, which demands high skill but supports only a small workforce.

The 79:1 ratio of *Made in China* is both a symbol and a tangible manifestation of this imbalance. It speaks not only to economic reality but also to cultural stereotypes concerning originality and craft.

Made in China is part of the exhibition "*Things of Beauty Growing*": *British Studio Pottery*, on view at the Yale Center for British Art from September 14 through December 3, 2017, and at The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, from March 20 through June 18, 2018.



Clare Twomey, *Made in China*, 2010, seventy-nine porcelain vases with gilt decals and one porcelain vase with gold decal, Collection of the artist, courtesy of the artist and Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, Middlesbrough

Bone China A type of vitreous clay body made with the addition of bone ash, which is white in color

Celadon A gray-green stoneware that is the result of iron additions in the clay body or the glaze, fired in a reduction kiln. Originally of Chinese origin

Che'ng-hua porcelain Porcelain made in the reign of the Ming Emperor Ch'eng-hua (1465-87)

Chun A pale blue, opalescent stoneware glaze named after a town in Northern China where it was first made in the eleventh century

Coiling A hand-building method, first used in Neolithic times. Comparable to basket making

Copper oxides (or cupric oxide and cuprous oxide) are strong coloring oxides, firing green in oxidation and red in reduction kiln atmospheres

Decal A design on a specially prepared paper for durable transfer to a glazed ceramic body

Earthenware A general term for pottery fired to a relatively low temperature, which remains porous. Earthenware requires a glaze if it is to be used for storing liquid or food

Enamel colors Low firing glaze composed of metallic oxides mixed with powdered glass, which then fuse to allow a wide palette of colors

Engobe A term often used interchangeably with slip, it is used to cover a clay form and is often fired to high temperatures

Feldspar A group of minerals used in glazes and ceramic bodies

Flambé glaze A lustrous red glaze used on porcelain or stoneware that is produced by firing a glaze containing copper in a reducing atmosphere

Flux A material that causes onglaze colors to vitrify

Galena A finely ground raw lead ore used for glazing red earthenwares, and for firing yellow on white clay bodies

Glaze A vitreous coating applied to ceramic forms to make them hold or resist water (and also to make a decorative finish)

Joseon dynasty The last imperial dynasty of Korea (1392-1910)

Kiln A structure that conserves heat and is used to fire pottery

Lead Used extensively as a fluxing agent in glazes, it is toxic in its raw state, but in recent centuries it has been combined with other materials to make it safer

Lustre glaze A glaze that has an iridescent effect

Magnesia Magnesium oxide, a constituent of bodies and glazes

Oxidation firing Firing in a normal kiln atmosphere where no attempt has been made to reduce the oxygen level, to achieve certain colors from glazes

Porcelain A hard white translucent ware made from a clay body that is a mix of china clay, china stone and quartz naturally occurring in China

Qian Long A Chinese emperor of the Qing dynasty (1711-99)

Raku A type of Japanese pottery made for use in tea ceremonies using a low-fired earthenware clay in a reduction atmosphere

Reduction firing Firing in a kiln with reduced oxygen in order to produce particular colors from clay, oxides, and glazes (for instance, producing green from iron oxide or red from copper oxide)

Salt glaze A thin glossy surface that resembles orange peel, it is created by throwing common salt into the kiln, which settles on the pots

Sgraffito Decoration scratched through slip to reveal the contrasting color of the clay body beneath

Slab building A method of constructing a pot or other ceramic shape using rolled slabs of clay

Slip casting A method for making molded forms. Liquid slip is poured into a porous mold that absorbs the moisture leaving the clay form within

Slips Mix of water and clay, used as a decorating medium or as a particular dehydrated kind of slip for slip casting hollow forms (see slip casting)

Slipware Lead-glazed earthenware decorated with slip before firing

Song dynasty An era of Chinese history from 960 to 1279

Sponging Applying a pattern or color onto a clay body with a sponge cut with a decorative motif

Stoneware Hard, nonporous ceramic made from a variety of clay bodies that mature at a high temperature and become vitreous

Studio Pottery Pottery created on a limited scale as opposed to the mass production methods used by industry. The term is usually applied to nineteenth- and twentieth-century artist potters who deliberately rejected industrialization

Terra Sigillata Pottery with a sheen derived from being covered with a thin layer of slip of very fine particle size, and burnished.

Terracotta A clay that appears red due to iron oxide in the clay body, naturally occurring

Tin glaze An opaque white glaze developed at first to mimic the glossy whiteness of porcelain on earthenware

Vitrification The change from a porous state to a vitreous (or glassy) state through the process of firing

Wax resist Liquefied wax painted onto a pot as a resist to prevent slip or glaze adhering

Wheel The potter's wheel is a rotating disc on which pots can be formed

Underglaze Painted or printed decoration applied to pottery before glazing

This glossary was compiled by Simon Olding, with advice provided by Alison Britton and Ashley Howard. The following sources were consulted:

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cover:

Akiko Hirai, *Moon Jar* (detail), 2016, stoneware, porcelain slip, paper fiber, wood ash, and white glaze, Collection of Akiko Hirai, London, photograph by Jon Stokes

right:

Grayson Perry, *The Guardians* (detail), 1998, hand-built earthenware, decals, glaze, The Diane and Marc Grainer Collection, Potomac, MD



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