

March 2018

Fitzwilliam Museum opens first exhibition to trace the evolution of British Studio Pottery through shape

Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery **PRESS DAY, 15 MARCH 10AM – 1PM**

Opens 20 March – 17 June 2018 | Fitzwilliam Museum | Free admission

'Pottery is at once the simplest and most difficult of all arts' – Herbert Read, 1931

Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery showcases the history and ongoing practice of one of the most dynamic art forms in the UK today. It is the first exhibition to explore studio pottery in Britain from 1920 to the present, through the evolution of the vessel form.

Featuring over 100 works by more than 50 artists, *Things of Beauty Growing* will display works by Britain's most famous historic potters including Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada, Lucie Rie and Hans Coper, as well as those leaders in the field today, such as Alison Britton, Julian Stair, Edmund de Waal, Grayson Perry and Clare Twomey.

The exhibition traces the changing nature of British studio pottery through eight key sections dedicated to different forms - moon jar, vase, bowl, charger, set, vessel, pot and monument.

1. Moon Jar

The moon jar, so called because of its shape and traditional white glaze, is one of the most iconic forms in the history of British studio pottery. The most famous moon jar, made centuries ago in Korea, was brought to England from Seoul in 1935, by Bernard Leach, who subsequently gave it to another leading potter, Lucie Rie. This opening section demonstrates the continuing importance and influence of this form to artists working today and includes pieces by four contemporary artists - Akiko Hirai, Nao Matsunaga, Adam Buick and Gareth Mason – who have all projected their independent visions onto this form, some made especially for the exhibition.



Akiko Hirai, *Moon Jar*, 2016 © The artist. Photograph by Jon Stokes

Press | The Fitzwilliam Museum

2. Vase

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the profit-driven ceramics industry of Victorian Britain had made hand-crafted pots economically obsolete and had caused a decline in quality. East Asian pots on the other hand, were widely regarded as the pinnacle of ceramic craft, admired for their balanced forms and hand-painted decoration. This section considers the early history of British studio pottery and demonstrates how pioneer makers such as Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada and William Staite Murray were influenced by historic Chinese and Korean ceramics, which connected the past to the present, and Britain with distant places.



Vase, Song dynasty, (960-1279), China. The Fitzwilliam Museum



Lucie Rie © Ben Boswell

3. Bowl

The bowl is central to the Japanese tea ceremony, a ritual that involves carefully using and appreciating ceramic vessels and other implements. This focus on a humble, functional, but beautiful object, inspired British studio potters. This section displays some of Bernard Leach's own collection of East Asian bowls, as well as bowls made in a similar style by British potters including Katharine Pleydell-Bouverie, Norah Braden, and Charles Vyse.

4. Charger

The charger (a large plate) provided a surface for 'painting in the round'. Potters were inspired by the highly-decorated slipware dishes of seventeenth-century Britain. Often boldly signed by their makers and bursting with vivid images of people, animals and plants, these plates exemplified the individuality that modern mass-produced industrial ceramics lacked. The technique was revived by Bernard Leach and Michael Cardew, and after the emergence of Picasso's Modernist ceramics in 1950, was taken up by a whole new generation, who harnessed this traditional technique with designs inspired by modernist painting and sculpture.



Hans Coper, *Dish with Horse and Rider*, 1954
© The Estate of Hans Coper. Courtesy of Derek Williams Trust/National Museum Wales

5. Set

Twentieth-century British ceramics existed in a constant state of tension between the handmade and the industrial. The individualism prized by studio potters became a desirable quality in the context of mass-produced factory examples. This section will juxtapose coffee and breakfast sets by Leach, Lucie Rie, and Ruth Duckworth with industrially-produced tableware designed by 'signature designers' such as Keith Murray for Wedgwood.



Lucie Rie, *Breakfast Set*, 1950s © The Estate of Lucie Rie. Courtesy of Crafts Study Centre, Farnham



Elizabeth Fritsch, *Quantum Pocket II*, 1992
© The artist

6. Vessel

Two successive generations challenged the prevailing orthodoxy of the 'well-made' pot. Their work demonstrated a declining interest in actual function and a growing desire to break apart the traditional vessel form, while continuing to refer to it. The first wave included sculptural modernist potters such as Lucie Rie, Hans Coper and Gordon Baldwin, followed by radical artists including Elizabeth Fritsch, Alison Britton, Carol McNicoll and Jacqueline Poncelet, whose colourful hand-built works are inspired by pop art and textiles.

7. Pot

Over the last thirty years, some potters have returned to more traditional forms, evoking a sense of restraint. The pots shown here by Ladi Kwali, Magdalene Odundo, Jennifer Lee, Edmund de Waal, and Gwyn Hanssen Pigott stand in contrast to the exuberance of those in the previous section. For these potters, the repeated action of throwing or hand-building pots, connects them to a grounding, natural order.



Magdalene Odundo, 2016, © Ben Boswell

8. Monument

More recently, many artists have tried to re-claim clay afresh, breaking away from more traditionalist elements of the British studio pottery movement. For many, their work has grown, quite literally, in ambition. These large pieces take the vessel form beyond the domestic, giving it a sense of presence usually associated with sculpture, or architecture. Their ceramics are no longer intimate, but commanding presences in their own right. Artists represented in this section include Julian Stair, Grayson Perry and Martin Smith. It also includes *Virtues of Unity* by Halima Cassell, a 36-piece installation that brings together hand-carved bowls made from clays collected from sites of ceramic production around the world.



Julian Stair, *Monumental Jars*, VIII, XII, X, 2011-12 © The artist. Photography Jan Baldwin

Made in China

The exhibition is accompanied by a striking and vast installation, *Made in China*, by Clare Twomey, which comprises 80 large-scale red and gold porcelain vases. All were made and fired in the same kiln in Jingdezhen, China, the historic home of porcelain and one of the few places where the skills for such an undertaking still exist.



Claire Twomey, *Made in China*, 2010 © The artist

While 79 of the vases were also decorated in the Chinese factory using decals (transfers), one was shipped to the English ceramics centre of Stoke-on-Trent and decorated by Royal Crown Derby employees using 18-carat gold applied by hand. The price of gold and labour meant that it cost more to decorate one vase in the UK than seventy-nine vases in China.

Spread throughout the permanent galleries of the Museum's internationally-acclaimed collection of world ceramics, of Korea, China and Europe, this installation comments on the international ceramics industry and the differences in labour between East and West. Chinese manufacture is dominated by efficient assembly processes, but offers few opportunities for individual creativity. British manufacture is increasingly oriented to the luxury sector, which demands high skill, but employs few people.

First shown at Yale Center for British Art, New Haven in 2017, the exhibition was curated by Simon Olding (Director of Crafts Study Centre, Farnham), Martina Droth (Deputy Director of Research, Exhibitions and Publications, and Curator of Sculpture at YCBA) and Glenn Adamson (Senior Research Scholar at YCBA), who explained, *'the show's aim has been to bring out a history of ceramic forms – to focus not on a canon of makers but on a canon of vessels.'*

Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Tim Knox comments: *'This is a perfect fit for The Fitzwilliam as the exhibition speaks to our impressive permanent collection of ceramics, ancient and modern, which continues to grow due to the generosity of donors such as Sir Nicholas Goodison. Displayed in our temporary exhibition galleries, Things of Beauty Growing has given us the opportunity to highlight this particular strength of the Museum, and has encouraged us to look at our own collections in a new light. It has also enabled us to highlight the important collections of British studio pottery held in other UK museums, who have so generously lent to the show.'*

A catalogue to accompany the exhibition has been published by Yale University Press.

-Ends-

Notes to editors:

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About the Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, funded by The Arts Council. The Fitzwilliam's collections explore world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB | Free admission

OPEN: Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 – 17.00;

CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December, 1 January, Good Friday

The Museum is supported by two 2018 Business Partners; TTP Group plc, and Brewin Dolphin