

# Perspective

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FROM LEFT GRAYSON PERRY IN HIS STUDIO. GRAYSON PERRY'S SEX AND DRUGS AND EARTHWARE. JACQUELINE PONCELET'S OVOID FORM THREE. LAURA PLANT'S GROUP OF THREE.



# GOING POTTY FOR CERAMICS

Pottery classes are booming, and appealing to a much wider demographic than traditionally was the case, which in turn has led to a reappraisal of ceramics as an art form, writes *Dominic Lutyens*



FROM LEFT PABLO CARNIVELL'S WORK 1 AND AT HIS WHEEL. ALICE WALTON'S JASPER FLUTE. CLEO MUSSI'S MITOCHONDRIAL EYE. PAUL SCOTT'S PLATE FOR GARDENS OF LYSIA. YVONNE FOLEY'S BIRD FORM.





When artist Antony Gormley recently revealed that he offers dinner-party guests lumps of clay on arrival rather than an aperitif, this didn't sound as loopy as it might have done 10 years ago. Giving guests clay to manipulate, he reasoned, acts as a leveller, suppressing competitiveness, while being soothing. Perhaps this utterance by the creator of *Field* - his iconic installation comprising 35,000 terracotta figures - and *Angel of the North* was a reasonable reflection of the zeitgeist.

Indeed, all over the world amateurs eager to learn how to shape clay into well-crafted vessels are joining pottery classes and open-access studios. Studios in Britain include Turning Earth in London and The Clay Room in Leicester. In Brooklyn, New York City, there's pottery studio Bklyn Clay. And pottery is thriving in Spain, known for its heritage of experimental ceramics, epitomised by Picasso's pots and architect Antoni Gaudí's ceramic-clad architecture.

Many find pottery classes rewarding because they end up with practical pieces they can take home. Such personal mementoes offer a refreshing antidote to bland, mass-produced tableware. Another sign of ceramics' mainstream reach is the runaway success of British TV show *The Great Pottery Throw Down* in which amateur potters compete to make the best ceramics.

*"All over the world, amateurs eager to learn how to shape clay into well-crafted vessels are joining pottery classes."*

The stereotypical image of potters as middle-aged hippies no longer holds true: today, pottery appeals to a wider demographic. "In Spain, women were once more interested in pottery than men were as they were tasked with domestic skills, such as making ceramics or clothes," says Pablo Fernández-Cañivell, a 32-year-old, Malaga-based ceramicist. "Now Spanish men are embracing feminism and traditionally 'feminine' hobbies, such as knitting and pottery. When I first attended pottery studios in 2018, most attendees were women in their 50s and 60s. Now, 70% are millennials of both sexes."

#### GOING MAINSTREAM

Brad Pitt and Leonardo DiCaprio are keen potters, while actor and director Seth Rogen creates a range of pottery inspired by American ceramicist Kenneth Price. Another sign of a fascination for this craft is *The Colour Room*, an upcoming biopic of Clarice Cliff, the 20th-century, Stoke-born ceramicist whose Art Deco pieces are now highly collectible. The film will star Phoebe Dynevor, of *Bridgerton* fame. >







FROM LEFT: VANESSA HODGE'S EPIPHORESCENCE; CAROL MCNICOLL'S REMIX, 2016; MATT SMITH'S EGG HEADED ROY; ORIEL ZINABERG'S FOLDED; ORGANIC FORM; EDMUND DE WAAL.

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› Ceramics captivate people primarily because of the accessibility of clay as a medium, according to Daniella Wells, market consultant for Collect, the high-end international craft fair held at London’s Somerset House. “I’m convinced that it’s the material’s open, democratic nature which means more people, including younger people, are increasingly interested in it,” she says.

Crucially, manipulating clay in all its messiness offers an antidote to the tyranny of digital communication. “You can’t use a screen or mobile phone when doing pottery,” avers Toby Brundin, who runs the fair Ceramic Art London, a magnet for young collectors seeking affordable ceramics, which is organised by the Craft Potters Association and held at art college Central St Martins School of Art and Design. “There’s no quick way to make it. It takes a lot of preparation and patience – for example, the clay needs to be slammed against the workbench to eliminate all air bubbles, which otherwise expand in the kiln, causing the clay to explode.”

Ironically, however, social media is fuelling the craze among the young: videos of potters demonstrating their skills are an Instagram phenomenon. “Many millennials who’ve never gone near a pottery wheel before find these mesmerising videos appealing,” says Fernández-Carivell.

#### **MORE THAN DECORATION**

Meanwhile, well-known artist Grayson Perry and potter Edmund de Waal have helped to challenge the perception of

pottery as merely decorative or functional and unable to express ideas, and abolish the traditional hierarchy of fine art being superior to craft. “Perry and de Waal have made the public aware that ceramics are more varied than they’d perhaps assumed,” says Ashley Thorpe, author of new book *Contemporary British Ceramics: Beneath The Surface*. “And there’s been a renewed appreciation of 20th-century makers, such as Lucie Rie and Hans Coper, over the past 15 years as more of their work has emerged at auction.”

Collect itself displays a dizzyingly eclectic array of ceramics. Exhibitors include London galleries, whose roster of ceramicists include big names such as Carol McNicoll, Jacqueline Poncelet and Tessa Eastman; Joanna Bird Contemporary Collections; Cynthia Corbett; and Vessel. The latter, which opened in 1999, has been hugely instrumental in changing the perception of ceramics as fusty, recasting them as covetable and cutting-edge.

One of Vessel’s first exhibitions showcased American designer Jonathan Adler’s hand-thrown pots. While studying art history and semiotics at Brown University, Adler became utterly absorbed in making pots at nearby Rhode Island School of Design. Yet Adler was no conventional potter: sporting Lacoste polo shirts and Gucci loafers instead of clay-spattered smocks as he toiled at his potter’s wheel, his influences ranged from Coco Chanel to hip-hop.

According to Angel Monzon, co-founder of Vessel, globalisation once threatened the integrity and quality of ceramic wares produced by such iconic brands as Bitossi in Italy, Rosenthal in Germany and several Stoke-on-Trent potteries. “Twenty years ago, these companies invested in designers who created new, high-quality forms,” explains

Photography: Charred & Vessel; Corbin Griffin; Mike.com/01; Josephine Parvules; Matt J Smith; Alamy



Monzon. “Then brands began subcontracting work to factories in the Far East as they chased lower price points – and they lost talented makers at home. Yet over the past decade, a movement has sprung up of designer-makers producing hand-made, characterful work. Today we’re seeing a renewed interest in ceramics and many British makers supply both UK and international galleries. New brands are now investing again in Stoke-on-Trent.”

The British Ceramics Biennial, founded in 2009 and held in Stoke, is still going strong. Held from September to October this year, it exhibited an eclectic array of work, from Cleo Mussi’s mosaic human figures to the kitsch, quirky work of Connor Coulston, one of whose themes is his unreciprocated love for flamboyant singer-songwriter Harry Styles.

Today, Vessel sells a huge variety of ceramics, from Vanessa Hogge’s botany-inspired porcelain Efflorescence vessels that sprout dahlias and daisies, to Vivienne Foley’s minimal pots with even black or white glazes and slips that accentuate their pared-down forms. Cynthia Corbett Gallery represents Matt J Smith, whose ceramic sculptures incorporate Spode teapot spouts or 18th-century shepherdess figurines – a playful, surreal mash-up of ceramic genres. “Smith is a

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great example of a contemporary artist who uses clay to interrogate history and art history – who is celebrated and who is omitted,” says Collect’s Wells.

#### GREATER INCLUSIVITY

The gradual move towards greater inclusivity in the arts is enriching the variety of ceramics produced today. This is partly to do with a desire among many ceramicists to reference non-Western cultures and the greater recognition enjoyed now by previously marginalised BAME artists.

According to Wells: “Ceramicists today are part of a much richer mix of histories – and more ethnically diverse, challenging the focus in the past on Western fine art and its favoured medium of oil on canvas.” She cites the work of emerging, 30-something, Paris-based, Franco-Beninese King Houndekpinkon, represented by London gallery 50 Golborne. “His work references Beninese Voodoo traditions and Japan’s Shinto religion and pop culture.” Even Houndekpinkon’s raw materials reflect his pluralist approach – he blends commercial clay with earth sourced from Japan, Benin and Iowa in the US. Fusing tableware, such as cups and bowls, his pieces might seem functional at first but in fact are totemic sculptures whose complexity is enhanced by layers of colourful, richly textured glazes.

Meanwhile, Wells believes contemporary ceramics collections are evolving to reflect this greater inclusivity: “In 2004, when Collect was founded, its ceramics echoed those at the V&A Museum, which were Eurocentric, save for some Japanese work. Now, the V&A’s contemporary ceramics collection and exhibitions programme are broader. Such variety is exactly what people want to see now.”